

Perspectives of Rites and Customs in Rabha Society

*¹ Dr. Neeva Rani Phukan

*¹ Associate Professor, Discipline of Assamese, Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University, Resham Nagar, Khanapara, Guwahati, Assam, India.

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Abstract

A society is known by its distinct cultural elements. The social rites, customs, traditions and beliefs preserved and practiced by the people of a society gives the society its distinctiveness. In regard to the Rabha society, though an integral part of the greater Assamese society, it has its own distinct rites and customs which mark the Rabhas as a unique people. Whether be it funeral or marriage or other social function, the Rabhas have a unique way of celebrating those occasions where they showcase their beliefs, rites and customs. It has been seen that with the onslaught of time features of many an indigenous people are losing their cultural identity as they are not able to preserve their age-old beliefs, rites and customs. In view of this trend there is a need to preserve and promote distinct features of ethnic people like the Rabhas. It can also be observed that distinct social functions and ceremonies always project a live culture. In the Rabha society there are numerous such occasions where the entire community participates in a befitting manner. Some of these have social relevance while some others have religious relevance. Rites and customs are nothing but ideal elements which identifies one group from the other group. This Research Paper is an attempt to showcase various rites and custom of the Rabhas.

*Corresponding Author

Dr. Neeva Rani Phukan

Associate Professor, Discipline of
Assamese, Krishna Kanta Handiqui State
Open University, Resham Nagar,
Khanapara, Guwahati, Assam, India.

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Introduction

The Rabhas are an ethnic people of Assam. Linguistically they belong to the Tibeto-Burman language group which is a sub-division of the greater Sino Tibetan language group. Scholars specialized in this field of study are of the opinion that the Rabha language is a homogenous language of the Chinese language which has developed at the rising spot of the river Howang-Ho and the river Yang-Sikiyang in China. The Chinese language boasts of illustrations of written literature written back in 1200 B.C. Migration is one major factor playing a prominent role in the expansion and development of a certain culture and civilization. In the long run the Rabhas, as like other sister groups, migrated to the North Eastern part of India and settled in Assam. In the course of time changes affected their language and differences crept up to the language they have been speaking. This, on the other hand, influenced their speech and creative thinking as well. This significant change opened up new horizons in the cultural life of the Rabhas and in this context, literature was that important field which has been greatly influenced. (Phukan, 2016, p.12-13) ^[2].

As per census of 2011 the Rabha population of Assam comes to 296,189. When we delve into historical documents in regard to the origin of the word “Rabha” we get to know the following-

“So long as the word Rabha is concerned, it is still a matter of research as to who introduced this word and in what context. We can find the word Rabha in Baharistan-I-Ghaibi written in the Persian language by Mirza Nathan. This book was written during the reign of the Mughal emperor Jahangir. The time of writing this significant document has been denoted as 4th February 1628, 22nd January 1666, 27 May 1632 and 10th June 1641. Within the above-mentioned time span this significant historical document has been recorded. In Mirza Nathan’s record it has been quoted 700 Rabha desert Nathan. The word Rabha was first written in Persian script. This implies that the word Rabha was in oral use earlier to this. (Phukan, 2016, p.11-12) ^[2].

In this Paper an attempt has been made to throw light on the rites and customs of the Rabha society. When we look at the definition of the word rite it will come to our mind that rite is a formal or ceremonial act or procedure prescribed or

customary in religious or other solemn use. So also, in Rabha society the people has been adhering to certain norms with hope for a better tomorrow. Whereas custom means a traditional and widely accepted way of behaving or doing something that is specific to a particular society, place or time. The Rabhas now, are a part and parcel of the greater Assamese cultural mosaic. The Rabha community has retained its distinct cultural features. This gets reflected in the rites and customs followed by the Rabha people.

Objectives

The main objective of this Research Paper is to showcase the rites and customs prevalent in Rabha society to highlight how rites and customs has relevance as far as the preservation of a certain cultural group is concerned.

Methodology

This Paper is based on written information and data. Henceforth, the methodology used here is descriptive and analytical.

Results & Discussion: Rabha Social Rites and Customs

A society is known by its distinct cultural elements. The social rites, customs, traditions and beliefs preserved and practiced by that society gives the society this distinctiveness. In regard to the Rabha society, though an integral part of the greater Assamese society, it has its own distinct rites and customs which mark the Rabhas as a unique people. A peep into the mundane life of a Rabha household, their social ceremonies and functions- all these depict some distinct rites and customs which makes the study of the Rabha people interesting.

When we talk of rites in Rabha ceremonies and functions we can take into consideration the solemn death ceremony. Rabha death ceremonies are elaborate in nature. Numerous rites and customs are being followed and practiced down through the ages. One such rite is playing of the musical instrument Daidi. During the death ceremony held to commemorate the deceased, the closest kith and kin of the deceased has to play the daidi.

"Daidi is a cymbal like musical instrument exclusively found in the Rabha society. It is played during death ceremonies in Rabha society. The traditional belief associated with the playing of this musical instrument is this that during Pharkanti ceremony it is the privilege of the closest kith and kin of the deceased to play the daidi. Here closest kith and kin refers to the nephews and nieces of the deceased. It is worth to be noted that culture as a whole, in inclusive of all rites and customs, beliefs and realizations of a community. The Rabha community is no less different from this particular aspect.... More over the term daidi is also applicable when we talk about the common addressed term for blood cousins in Rabha." (Phukan, 2015. P.24-25) [1].

A special preparation named Romper is made as an offering to the deceased. The Romper is prepared from dry rice powder which is kept in a special container. As per custom a fortune teller is invited to explain the mystery of death to the deceased and the liberation of his or her soul.

"There is relevance of a fortune teller in a Rabha's death ceremony. Dry rice powder prepared through a special process is offered to the deceased. This preparation is known as Romper. This dish is kept covered and elegies are sung in memory of the deceased. After this the Romper is uncovered from the container.

In accordance with the marks observed in the powder, the fortune teller explains the mystery of death to the deceased and the liberation of the deceased soul as well." (Phukan, 2015, p.29) [1].

It is worthwhile to note that the womenfolk belonging to the ethnic communities of Assam play a dominant role in the execution of customary rites, rituals and beliefs. The Rabha community is no less different. Initially the Rabha society evolved as a Matrilineal society. Gradually it changed from Matrilineal to Patrilineal society. In spite of this change there are still some distinct features of the matrilineal society intact in Rabha society. One such prominent feature is continuation of specific ethnic title inheritance which is known as Barai in Rabha.

"For instance, if the mother happens to be from the Pam Barai, then her sons and daughters are recognized to be from the Pam Barai." (Phukan, 2015, p.15) [1].

Marriage between girl and boy of the same Barai is a taboo as members from the same Barai are treated to be of brother-sister relationship.

Marriage in the Rabha society is not a personal affair or bonding between two families only. In fact, it has some socio-cultural implications too. There are six types of marriage in Rabha society. These are-Monogamy marriage, polygamy marriage, levirate marriage, sororate marriage, cross cousin marriage, parallel cousin marriage. Marriages are also categorized as per the customs and practices followed during the marriage ceremony. Such as-

- i) Kambung Jursini (Marriage performed following ancient scriptures)
- ii) Borichikai or Borichingkai Jorsini (Marriage performed with pomp and show)
- iii) Nokdhangkai Jorsini (Marriage where things are bartered)
- iv) Bori Bhoribikai, Kaibikai or Tokon Jorsini(Marriage by force)
- v) Jangoi Dhankai Jorsini (Marriage where the groom comes over to stay at the bride's residence)
- vi) Krangsiburi/bori Jorsini (Marriage between widower and widow)
- vii) Mekhokai Jorsini (Marriage by elopement)
- viii) Bitol Jorsini (Intercaste marriage)

Feasts are an integral part of marriage ceremony in the Rabha society. Such a feast is known as Pakaros. The society treats the marriage as below standard which is Kasaros i.e. marriage without a feast.

"The practice of Mahari System i.e. bride price is prevalent in a traditional Rabha society. The groom's parents have to pay bride price to the would-be daughter-in-law's parents while moving ahead with the marriage alliance. The traditional Rabha society strictly adhere to set social norms, customary laws and moral conduct. Breach of moral conduct, customary laws or set norms call for stringent punishment in Rabha society." (Phukan, 2015, p.13-14) [1].

If the marriage alliance breaks midway due to some callous attitude of the boy's family, then the boy's parents have to compensate for the monetary as well as emotional damage done to the girl's family and the girl. That the boy's parents have to do before the village council. This particular aspect of Rabha society has relevance in modern times. If observed closely it can be seen that the boy's family may have dishonored the self-respect of a girl (The would be bride) for no fault of hers. If seen from the modern point of view it can be termed as a defamation case. The remedial measure

adopted by the village council in such cases is to slap penalty fee upon the wrongdoers for their moral crime committed and seek forgiveness from the oppressed publicly as per custom. More over this instance points to the fact that the Rabha people treat their womenfolk with dignity. Society ensures that their self-respect is not violated in any way. It signifies that the woman's position in Rabha society isn't inferior.

Reports ETC

1. Language-wise Distribution of Population in Assam, 1991 (A handout circulated by the Director of Census Operation, Assam)
2. Census of India, 1991, [7, Languages, Table C-7, Part B (i)]

Acknowledgement

1. Rabha, Prakash, Dudhnoi, Goalpara
2. Rabha, Binod, Dhoopdhara, Goalpara
3. Rabha, Bani, Krishnai, Goalpara
4. Rabha, Binoy Rungdung, Dudhnoi, Goalpara
5. Rabha, Kushadhwaj Patgiri Rongkhow, Krishnai, Goalpara
6. Rabha, Asok, Chandubi, Kamrup

Conclusion

Portrayal of diverse aspects related to rites and customs of an ethnic people as the Rabhas is a formidable task. Keeping this in view we have limited this Paper to a few aspects of Rabha life where rites and customs are prevalent. These are the aspects related to death and marriage which we have brought into discussion. How-ever it is worthwhile to note that other aspects related to Rabha life and society are intertwined with the rites and customs related to death and marriage. The Rabha society, being a close knitted society, abide by all social norms and biddings. This gets reflected in their mundane activities, their culture and literature.

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