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9. Multiculturalism and Changing Contours of the Rabhas in Assam: A Philosophical Perspective

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Abstract

This study takes stock of the changing Rabha society with the theoretical framework of multiculturalism. The idea of multiculturalism is very integral to political philosophy as it concerns itself with the dialogic relationship of culture. Philosophers such as John Dewey and William James deliberated on the idea of cultural pluralism which led to multiculturalism. Charles Taylor one of the leading philosopher, in his different works observes how multiculturalism can act in a liberal democratic system. With the rise of multicultural society this study discusses the present scenario of the Rabhas in Assam. Even though the Rabhas, as an aboriginal group of people, are continually observing their cultural practices from the very early time still they have lost some of their own traditions reluctantly in present globalised world. As a result many of new values, beliefs etc. are developing in their socio-cultural life. The present paper is descriptive as well as analytic in nature.

Key Words: *Multiculturalism, Rabhas, Culture and Change*

Introduction

Multiculturalism is a philosophical trend appeared in the 17s and 18s. It describes a society of diverse culture. "A multicultural society is one that includes two or more cultural communities. It might respond to its cultural diversity in one of two ways, each in turn capable of taking several forms. It might welcome and cherish it, make it central to its self-understanding, and respect the cultural demands of its constituent communities; or it might seek to assimilate these communities into its mainstream culture either wholly or substantially. In the first case it is multiculturalists and in the second monoculturalist in its orientation and ethos. Both alike are multicultural societies, but only one of them is multiculturalists. The term 'multiculturalism' to a normative response to that fact." (Parekh, 2000, p.6) Taylor holds, "A number of strands in contemporary politics turn on the need, sometimes the demand, for recognition. The need, it can be argued, is one of the driving forces behind nationalist

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movements in politics. And the demand comes to the fore in a number of ways in today's politics, on behalf of minority or "subaltern" groups, in some forms of feminism and in what is today called the politics of "multiculturalism." (Taylor, 1994, p.25) Will Kymlicka is one of the contemporary Canadian philosophers said, The term 'multiculturalism' covers many different forms of cultural pluralism, each of which raises its own challenges. (Kymlicka, 1995, p.10) He understood Multiculturalism as the assertion of collective rights of minority cultures that has been seen as a response to the tendency of the nation-state to inflict homogenous culture. He said that I am using culture (and 'multiculturalism') in a different sense. I am using 'a culture' as synonymous with 'a nation' or 'a people'—that is, as an intergenerational community, more or less institutionally complete, occupying a given territory or homeland, sharing a distinct language and history. And a state is multicultural if its members belong to different nations (a multination state), or have emigrated from different nations (a polyethnic state), and if this fact is an important aspect of personal identity and political life. (Kymlicka, 1995, p.18) Hence, Multiculturalism is a subdivision of political philosophy that discusses human freedom in relationship to different culture, ethnicity as well as religion. Even though multiculturalism includes its different aspects of concern, in numerous means it tackles with immemorial philosophical queries like-the nature of justice, the restrictions of liberal toleration, the importance of the secular religious division etc. From the philosophical point of view, multiculturalism teaches us an ethic to build a tolerant and sympathetic nature towards other culture as well as religion.

Located in the northeastern part of India, Assam is the homeland of different indigenous cultures. Different ethnic communities, with their distinct culture and tradition inhabit peacefully in the state of Assam. The people are the amalgamation of numerous cultural ties such as- Mongoloid, Indo-Burmese, Indo-Iranian and Aryan. The total area of Assam is 78,438 km² (30,285 square miles) with population pressure 31,169,272 (Census, 2011).

The inhabitants of Assam are called Assamese, who ethnologically belongs to both Aryan and Non-Aryan stocks. The language, culture, manners, and customs of the present day Assamese people are unique specimen of the synthesis of Aryan and Non-Aryan elements. The religious traits of the people of the land exhibit a strange admixture of elements of these two groups. The people had their faiths in various Gods and Goddesses whom they worshipped in different ways. The social customs of

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particular tribe or clan grow according to their necessity and need for a corporal life (Dutta, 1990). So, we can say that the Assamese culture is a mixture of a rich tapestry developed over a lengthy assimilative course. The Assamese life cycle ceremonies and other socio-religious festivals are celebrated following a variety of customs, traditions, rites and rituals.

Among the different tribal groups of Assam, the Rabha constitutes one of the most significant indigenous plain schedule tribes of greater Mongoloid ethnic group of Assam and North- East India, who exhibit variety in tradition, culture, and dress pattern and so on. As a part of Assamese culture, Rabha culture has contributed a lot to the wider Assamese culture. The Rabhas are the fourth largest tribal community of Assam, widely scattered both in the northern and southern part of the river Brahmaputra mainly in the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Baksa and Bongaigaon. Their concentration is also found more or less in Manipur, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, West Bengal, Bangladesh and Nepal. However, they are mostly concentrated in the South bank of the river Brahmaputra in the district of Goalpara and South Kamrup of Assam. According to the 2011 census, Rabhas population in the state is 296,189, which is 8.1 per cent of the total ST population of Assam. The Rabhas are of eight different groups having their own cultural identity. They are respectively - Rongdani, Maitori, Kocha, Pati, Dahuri, Bitalia, Hana, and Songa.

Rabha tribe belongs to the Indo-Mongoloid, Kirat group of people from the aspect of originality and ethnicity. Again, linguistically, the Rabhas belong to the Tibeto-Burman sub-family within the Sino-Tibetan family of language (Basumatary, 2010). The Rabhas are mainly agriculturalists, both men and women are expert in doing so. Along with agricultural practice some other old practices like-weaving, hunting, fishing etc. are more or less prevalent among them.

The Rabhas, as an indigenous community, are continuing their traditional social and cultural practices from the earliest time. However, it has been observed that the traditional social and cultural performances and their day-to-day life style have transformed and has taken a different shape. They have embraced diverse cultural traits of other communities and discontinued some traits of their own. The present study explores some aspects of Rabha social and cultural life and locates the changes that have taken place. The data for the present paper have been collected from both primary and secondary

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sources. Interview and observation methods have been applied for data collection during the field study.

The Changing Rabha Culture

As an ethnic tribal group, Rabhas have a very distinct folk-cultural-heritage. The Rabha culture reflects a conglomeration of features of both Aryan and Mongoloid culture through their agricultural practices, rites and rituals, customs, traditions, food habits, belief systems, dressing style etc. They have their distinct cultural origin, language, and literature. They observe different rites and rituals related to their life cycle ceremonies of birth, marriage and death. Culturally the Rabha are divided into two groups Aryanized and Non- Aryanized. Aryanized group of Rabhas are those who are highly influenced by the Aryan culture. The Non-Aryanized groups of Rabhas are still retaining their own culture and tradition. They are still practicing their traditional practices. The former includes Pati, Dahuri, Bitalia, Hana and Totla while the latter includes Rongdani, Maitori and Kocha group of Rabha people. The Rabhas are animistic from their religious outlook. They worship different kinds of stones, rocks, hills, rivers Goddess along with some other malevolent and benevolent spirits.

The Rabha oral literature is endowed with variegated folk songs from generation to generation. Such traditional songs and dances are found among the subgroups - Maitori, Rongdani and Kocha who have retained their traditional faith and dialects.

The life cycle ceremonies are different irrespective of their groups with distinct rituals. The institutions related to birth rites are - *Pachuti* (purificatory ceremony), *Namakarana* (name giving ceremony), *Annaprasana* (first feeding ceremony), *Chudakarana* and *Janmadin* (birth day).

The marriage systems as well as rites and rituals connected with these systems are also different in respect of the Rabha groups. In the present time, there are seven types of socially accepted or recognized marriage systems as mentioned in the book *Rabha Samajar Bidhi Byavasta*. These are- *Kambung Bibah* or *Pouranik Rajasik Bibah*, *Gopan Bibah* or *Jachuki Bibah*, *Sadari Ana Bibah*, *Samajik Bibah* or *Adhunik Rajasik Bibah*, *Gharjoain Bibah*, *Bidhaba Bibah*, and *Charkari* Registration or *Mondirot Kora Bibah*.

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The Rabha subgroups namely Rongdani, Maitori, and the Dahuri are continuing the characteristic traditional systems and rituals in the funeral ceremony. On the other hand, variations in respect of death rites are noticed across some clans or group. Some of the most traditional death rites prevalent among the Rabha are *Kalpani*, *Badungdupa*, *Farkanti*, *Masuani*, *Sarbajanir Sradhakriya* etc.

Following are some of the aspects of Rabha socio-cultural life where changes have been taken place in course of time under the influence of many factors:

Changes in Child Birth Rites

The Rabhas believe that the birth of a child by a woman is only the result of god's benediction. So, from the beginning of pregnancy, the expectant mother observes certain rituals and taboos. In earlier time, the Rabhas used to give birth of their child in their father's home with the help of midwives. However, now a days, the expectant mother gives birth in hospital and only a few births have taken place in home. It is observed that they are becoming conscious on the safety and health of the mother and child as well as aware of family planning.

The Rabhas observe some rites and rituals from the time of pregnancy as mentioned above. Before giving birth of a child the Rabhas perform a *puja* called '*Khetar*' by sacrificing a cock, which is however not commonly noticed among the Rabhas of urban areas now a days. *Pachuti* is a birth rite institution, prevalent among the Rabhas, observed for a newborn baby. According to the customary law of Rabha social system, *Pachuti* is performed within five to seven days. For a girl child, it is performed on fifth day while *Pachuti* is performed on seventh day for male baby. Here, a trend of change has been noticed among the Rabhas, in the name giving ceremony. Thus, now this ceremony is arranged following the advice of a *Ganak* or Brahmin. Again, the institution *Annaprasan*' (first feeding of solid food) which was not obligatory in Rabha society in the past but now it is socially obligatory for them. They have also some specific prescribed customary laws now connected to *Annaprasana*.

The celebration of birthday is noticed as a common phenomenon among the Pati Rabha people. No such type of tradition was prevalent in the earlier times in the Rabha society. Due to the impact of modernization and western market culture as well as for influences of other community such as- the

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neighboring Assamese and Bengali people, the Rabhas have started celebrating such festivals with great enthusiasm.

Changes in Marriage System

In recent times, change has occurred on the different traditional marriage systems prevalent in Rabha society. Some systems are completely disappeared while some are losing its prior popularity; similarly, some has changed to a new form to certain extent. Now boy and girl are given more relaxation in selecting their own life partner than before. The systems of marriage in Rabha society have changed itself in the passing of time. In past when the guardians used to go to look bride for their sons, the basic requirement were like –the hair of the girl should be long, she should be known cooking, weaving etc. But nowadays, these requirements are not their first priority.

Now the traditional folk song called *Bia-Geet* (marriage song) are hardly listened in marriage ceremony. New modern music systems have taken the place of *Bia-Geet*. The registration marriage system is a new marriage system accepted by the Rabha society, which is included in their customary laws as a legal marriage system. This marriage system was not prevalent in the Rabha society previously. Now both types of cousin marriage systems are avoided by the Rabha. Besides these changes, one very important recent change is noticed mainly in the Pati Rabha society, which is the celebration of purificatory marriage ceremony (the ceremony of the first menstruation of a girl).

Changes in Death Rites

Changes have also been taken place in the rites and rituals associated with death ceremony among the Rabhas. The Rabhas have different death rites prevalent among them such as- *Kalpani*, *Badungdupa*, *Farkanti*, *Masuni* and *Sarbanjanin Shradhakriya*. *Farkanti* is one of the remarkable ritualistic ceremonies related to death. This ceremony is in practice in the Rabha society from the distant past. *Farkanti* is a ceremony, which is performed to pay tribute to the souls of the people who lost their lives for the sake of their community. Now a day, it is also seen to perform this ceremony within their family atmosphere with the acquaintance of neighbors. The mode of performing *Farkanti* dance has also been changed to some extent. The performers are seen performing with a smiling face to attract the audience and to be good in the stage performance.

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According to Singh:

The Hindu funeral rites have been adopted by the Rongdani Rabha in the recent decades. The eldest son offers pinda (made of rice, betel leaves, betel nut etc.) so that his father's soul may rest in peace. The bereaved family observes the mourning period for a fortnight, which is an indication of shift towards the Hindu patrilineal principle. Traditionally, the mother's brother's daughter had the right to offer *ganthi* (*pinda*) to the deceased soul on the day of the last rites ceremony. She, along with other womenfolk, sang and danced around the *ganthi* after offering. But the role of mother's brother's daughter has now been replaced by the son of the deceased. It is clear that the Rongdani Rabha have also changed over to the patrilineal principle in this respect. (Singh, 1993, p.53)

Changes in Food Habits

The Rabha has a specific identity on their food habits. The Rabha women are very much proficient in cooking different kinds of traditional foods. Rice is the staple food and rice beer is the compulsory traditional drink. They taste different types of meat like-pork, mutton, chicken, meat of pigeons, duck etc. But more or less change has been occurred in the food habits of the Rabha. At earlier days, the Rabha used to offer rice beer to their guest but now most of the Rabha in Kamrup and Goalpara district offers tea to their guest. The Rabha used to rear pig, fowl, and fish to eat at home in past as well as for their guest. Now a day they do animal farming only for business purpose. As we know that economic condition of a family can change the way of life. So, the well to do people along with tasting different types of traditional foods also taste some other foods of other community of their neighborhood. Today's generation is now not seen giving much interest on their traditional foods like before. They are not familiar to prepare such type of traditional foods instead, they are much more interested to eat the curries made by oil and spice. The children are basically very much attracted towards the junk and fast food items, which are available nearby markets. These foods have taken the place of traditional homemade foods like- *pitha* (traditional cake), *laru* (traditional roll) etc. The factors like modernizations, globalizations have brought this type of changes on food habit.

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Changes on Dressing Style and Ornaments

As a distinct tribal community, the Rabha has their own traditional dress and ornament. The Rabha women are very expert in both spinning and weaving. They know very well how to spin and rear. It is noticed that maximum number of Rabha women in the rural areas of Goalpara and Kamrup district prepared their dresses in their own home handloom. They prepare dresses for the males also. They prepare different cloths for winter season also. The dresses used by the Rabha people are basically floral in designs. The dresses they make normally in their handloom for women are-*Riphan* or *Ruphan*, *Patani*, *Kambang*, *Khodabang* etc. and prepare dresses like *Pajal* or *Gamsa*, *Khachne*, *Pachra* etc for males. *Pachra* is a dress, worn by both male and female, prepared from *endi* yarn while the other dresses are primarily made from cotton. In the dance performances in the festivals like- *Farkanti*, *Grimbuda* etc, they wear traditional dresses called *Jama*, which is a particular kind of long shirt in the upper part, and a traditional Rabha *gamsa* in the lower part. Rabha (2002) observed:

Now a days, all groups of the Rabhas more or less use various kinds of dress worn by their more advanced contemporaries, such as dhuti, trousers, sari, blouse, riha, mekhela, petti-coat, brassier, woolen sweaters, caps and so on. (Rabha, 2002, p.41)

The trends of changes that are noticed amongst the new generation are mainly due to the spread of education. Now the Rabha youths are moving towards town or city areas for different purpose. For education purpose, they have to go to the colleges of town and city areas. As a result, everything is in the wave of change. The educated females are turning to dresses like *churidar*, *kurta*, *leggings*, etc. along with some modern stylish designable dresses. Now a day, both the educated or uneducated young Pati Rabha girl wears *churidar* in their daily life. They wear *churidar* and some more western dresses when they go to market and to other places. In their marriage ceremony too, they wears Assamese traditional marriage attire now a days. Although a gradual change in the dressing style is noticed among the Rabhas, still the traditional dresses are alive mainly among the Rongdani, Maitori and Dahuri groups of the Rabhas.

Religious Changes

The socio-religious pattern of the Rabha society is undergone a remarkable change and replacing the old socio-religious practices by the new one. The Rabha were purely animistic in their religious outlook in the past. At that time they ascribed their God and Goddess into stones, hills, rivers etc. But

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under the influence of the neighboring Hindu Assamese people, the section of Pati Rabhas began to follow both Saktism and Saivism and assimilated with them and started to celebrate the festivals of the other Hindu Assamese people. They participate the neighbouring Hindu religious festivals both directly and indirectly. Now the Pati Rabhas celebrated the festival like *Durga Puja*, *Kali Puja*, *Ganesh Puja*, *Siva Puja*, *Saraswati Puja*, *Sankardev Tithi*, *Madhabdev Tithi*, *Damodardev Tithi*, *Janmastami*, *Boudha-purnima* etc. etc. Thus, “The religion of the present day village Rabhas may be called a mixed type of religion, a mixed form of animism and Hinduism. The village Rabha religion of today is well on its way to Hinduism. They worship the deities of the Hindu pantheon. “Kali, Shiva, Kamakhya, Narayan, Sitala, Gangadevi etc., are the important deities worshipped. Besides this, there are other deities and spirits such as Rakal, Biskarma, Bishari, Masan, Bara Thakur, Surkumi, Murla, Jalman, Gabur etc” (Cited in Raha 1989). Earlier, the *Daini puja*, a religious practice, was observed when people suffers from stomach or some other pain) was often observed by the Rabhas and was very much popular among them but slowly there is a gradual decline in this *puja*.

The religious practices of obscure form, followed by some Vaisnavas of Assam, have spread rapidly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries A.D. As it is of cryptic nature, the adherents kept them confined to themselves. They started to celebrate these functions very secretly. Even some neophytes are not allowed either to attend or to witness some of the functions. Because of the fact of maintaining too much secrecy, these create curiosity to others. There are some other reasons behind currency and popularity of these practices among them. In fact, though the adherents are now assimilated within the composite fold of Vaisnavism, they retain some old social customs as the characteristics features of their community (Dutta, 1990).

The two Rabha groups called Rongdani and Maitori celebrated the greatest *Baikho* festival or *Khoksi puja* festival for wealth and prosperity during the month of mid-April to mid may. *Baikho puja* is one of the prime and greatest ritualistic festivals of the Rabha community. The *Baikho* festival, which is celebrated by the Rabhas from the past, has changed in ways with the passing of time. In early time, this *puja* was celebrated with great disciplined and systematic way after many struggles in hay and woods. They celebrated this festival with pomp and grandeur. They enjoyed a lot in this festival in the light of kerosene lamp, made of bamboo tube. But, due to impact of modernization and westernization *Baikho* festival is not practiced in most of the villages of Rongdani and Maitori Rabha. Most of the

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earlier experienced persons have died and the educated people are unwilling to practice this festival by performing their traditional rituals like before as this festival is very expensive and continues for seven days. Now the festival is celebrated in a simple way and as a result, the festival lost much of its former glory.

Conclusion

Multiculturalism is a practical philosophical notion which teaches us tolerance in respect of different world culture and religion. Despite the multicultural trait the Rabhas has managed to have an ethnically distinct cultural life. Multiculturalism creates an ethic to have a dialogic interaction with culture other than their own. As discussed in this paper, there are certain challenges for example, adoption of the traditional Assamese marriage attire for women that multiculturalism in the Rabha community has brought about. Multiculturalism is inevitable considering the increasingly globalized world. There are further questions with regard to safeguard the essential community cultural values integral to keeping a distinct Rabha identity. Philosophical take has enabled us to analyze these aspects.

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