

Rights of the Rites: A Case Study of Rabhas of North Bengal



Literature

KEYWORDS : Culture, Tribes, Displacement

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ABSTRACT

Human rights are commonly deemed as universal, indivisible, inalienable and intergenerational. This particular paper proposes to examine the notion of human rights with regard to the Rabhas. Koch or Kocha or Kocha/Rabha people have a discrete ethno-linguistic and cultural heritage and thus a separate ethnic identity in the 'Ethnic Museum' of North East India, North Bengal and Sikkim included. This paper is a study of the displacement of their customs under the vectors of development, globalisation and social inclusion have a generalising tendency that affect their unique ethnic identity

Koch or Kocha or Kocha/Rabha people have a discrete ethno-linguistic and cultural heritage and thus a separate ethnic identity in the 'Ethnic Museum' of North East India, North Bengal and Sikkim included. According to Indian Constitution 275 they have been defined as 'Scheduled Tribe, Plain' in Assam and West Bengal, and in Meghalaya as 'Scheduled Tribe, Hills'. On the other hand according to Indian Census, 1961 they are described as 'Forest and Hills Tribe'. As a Mongoloid ethnic group, Rabhas are part of the broad Bodo family.

It is now known that they had their origin in present day China and most probably well before 1000 BCE they migrated to India. Dr. Rebati Mohan Saha has mentioned a matrilineal 'mainchi' (mantra) while researching on the origin of the Rabhas. It has been transmitted through the ages from one generation (mother) to the next (female heir), and its use in public was traditionally restricted. The 'mainchi' being:

*Hulun lunga hachung
Chandung Bandung
Kocha mniya chiou
Kocha amar nam prangou.*

Dr. Saha explains that they came from Hulun situated in exterior of Mongolia and north-east China. They then made their westward journey to Chandung (present Chamdo) and Bandung (Bamda) by the banks of Mekong River; made their way through hills ('hachung'); crossed Sangpo/Bramhaputra River and entered through the north-east border to Assam and Meghalaya. In Ramayana and Mahabharata the 'Golden Colour of the Kiratas' is mentioned. The present nomenclature of their ethnic identity is most commonly the 'Rabhas' in the stead of the 'Kochas': Indian Census has taken the name "Rabha" to identify them.

Their origin is further testified by the similar socio-political practices of most of the minority groups in pre-revolution China. The migrated mongoloids, the Rabhas included, had strong social compartmentalization with regard to slavery and slave trade just like Chinese society. Almost thirty million people from thirty minority groups were badly entangled in the exploitative land-centric feudal system of pre-revolt China. Even reciprocal exchange of labour was the mode and slash-and-burn was the method of farming in both side of the border. Both these communities initially had a community property sense but gradually they developed their personal/family property sense, a step that is commonly considered as a cornerstone of capitalistic mode of life. Their production system was crude that produced in scanty to meet their needs. They were therefore largely dependent on the forest for meat and fruits and on rivers for fishes.

Even after dispersion an ethnic group, according to its specific ethnic habit, searches for a bio-ecological zone similar to its area of dispersion. The Rabhas have chosen naturally the high lands of North Bengal and Assam that were surrounded by forest and grassy fields; there existed an ecological continuity. They, in precolonial India, mostly were habituated in shifting cultivation and migratory life. After 1865 (Indian Forest Act VII) the British have drastically changed the ecological landscape of Duars.

In Jalpaiguri plantation fields are increased by the reduction of forest areas. Ethnic groups like the Rabhas were forced to leave their natural habitat since the forest areas are now under the tag of "Reserved Area". Even in Assam the Rabhas were forced to live in settled villages. They started their east-ward dispersion to Bhutan and adjacent hilly areas in order to get back to their migratory life style.

In order to understand the socio-cultural dynamics, it is necessary to know the existing ramifications of the Rabhas. They are basically divided into eight distinct groups or "Khel(s)":

- i. Rangdani
- ii. Maitari
- iii. Kocha
- iv. Pati (petit)
- v. Dahari
- vi. Bithaliya
- vii. Hana
- viii. Totala

Koch Rabhas in West Bengal prefer to call themselves "Koch" according to Vishnu Rabha. A large number of Kochrabhas of West Bengal live in forest villages. By 1870-1871 Forest Division established itself in North Bengal. Therefore, the recruitment of permanent labourers was a necessity. Then in 1894 Tangia Law was passed in order to fulfil the vacancies for labourers. Tangia is a process of plantation in which it is done in between two rows of forest trees, due to the lack of land. When tangia system came into effect, in exchange of labour land for plantation was offered. A lot of Rabha families came under the agreement of tangia system and started living permanently in the newly set up forest villages. They finally got the veto to live in their natural habitat, and it is their heirs that we now know as the Forest Rabhas of West Bengal. There are almost 120 forest villages here in North Bengal and these villages are grouped under two heads:

- i. Mono Ethnic Forest Village &
- ii. Multi-Ethnic Forest Village.

Until recently these forest people had a matrilineal base. They are in a state of transition from matrilineal to patrilineal social system. On the other hand the Mono-ethnic villages are becoming cosmopolitan day by day due to the loopholes created by the lack of governance. These forest people as a whole do not have a satisfactory economical condition right now. These forest villages in general are still far away from the light of so called education and civilization. After the establishment of these villages in more than a hundred and twenty years, nothing has changed except their population. The sphere of their real labour, i.e. cutting of trees, has been choked due to the newly arrived forest laws: Forest Division has marked them as 'extra'. Most of these villages are now under the jurisdiction of Joint Forest Management Committee, Eco-development Committee and the Panchayati System. But these measures at their social inclusion have proven to be futile due to the lack of proper policy making and due to the lack of necessary land. As a result poverty has become their constant companion.

In different governmental papers there is the mention of an ethnic group called 'Panikoch'. But these people are also part of Rabha community. They were migratory tribes and practiced jhoom or shifting cultivation. The only difference that lies in between the Panikoch and other Rabhas is that Panikochs were much more dependent on their ecological zone. But their production system and its tools were so age old that there existed no possibility of ecological imbalance. Panikochs were forest dwelling tribes: "pan" or "fan" in their language means tree and by extension forest.

Apart from the Panikoch we also have the mention of Mahangkoch and Garmi-koch. The modifier "Mahang" is the name of a place in Nagaland where in distant past King Ahom recruited 352 Rabhas to produce salt. On the other hand in 1972 census report 2416 Kochs were separately included as Garmi-koch. They are presently known by their occupational identities.

Patiravas are the major group amongst the Rabha people with regard to population. They have formed 12 distinct Mahari or Gotra or clans to identify their social stature:

- 1.Chunga
- 2.Chilan
- 3.Nafa
- 4.Nangdo
- 5.Diya
- 6.Dagam
- 7.Fakho
- 8.Rangrong
- 9.Kachhu
- 10.Varu
- 11.Nongbag
- 12.Dabathal

Jalda or Jaldha is a separate group originated from Dabathals. Due to the biological growth of a community at times social control mechanisms lose their shackles: Jaldhas are expelled by all other Maharis due may be to some aberration or deviation on their part, but they have not changed their ethnic habit of habitation. Moreover, in the tribes of North East India slave trade was a common practice. Some tribes used to buy slaves: a person used to become a slave by selling himself as a remedy to his economic misfortune. But it involved maligning one's identity: to relate themselves with other slave families as a result of their estrangement from their own people. In this way in a social community a separate class was made; in the long run and according to the change in spatiality they even came to be known as a altogether different ethnic group. It has also been noticed that in order to hide their 'fallen identity' and to get back to the mainstream they have changed their surname/ title. Jaldapara Reserve Forest in Jalpaiguri District and Jal-

lapara in Bodaganj forest area are for instance still bearing the memory of Jaldas in their names. Alipurduar and Valka village were once frequented by Jaldas. In a Bodo village near Jaldapara once four Jaldha families were living. But they have changed their surname and declined to reveal their real identity. According to Census, 1961 Jaldas are categorised as "Forest and Hills Tribe, Group-6", and their population in Assam was 6,311. But it did not document their socio-economic condition or practices. In order to hide their 'fallen identity' they have taken the surname, 'Sutradhar'(wood worker) whereas mostly working as peasants.

This tendency of changing the surnames is not new amongst the tribes. Kochas had once swapped their surname with the local Rajbangshis. Some of them even had embraced "Singh" as their surname, in order to associate themselves with the dominant class of the society. In 1935 a religious swami, Sri Jiten-dranath Goswami, had conferred the surname, "Kol-karmakar" on the local Kole tribes and thus converted them to Hindu cult. In the same manner Jaldas in Assam and Meghalaya had taken "Sutradhar", "Viswakarma" as their surnames.

But these religio-cultural changes have given almost nothing to them except miseries. The Kol-karmakars of Naxalbari area, in spite of being part of the ethnic community called the Koles (Santhals), are not recognized by the government as people belonging to the Reserved Category yet, and thus they are discarded of the facilities they actually deserve as part of the social inclusion process. In the same manner the Jaldas, because of their surname, share a dubious ethnic status and not always recognized as people of an ethnic community.

The Rabhas of forest villages on the one hand and the Jaldas on the other are thus victims of blind generalization. A social inclusion process does not merely mean identification of a group only on the basis of their surname, honest research and effort to reach out to the people who need the attention and aid of the so called civilized and developing society and by extension the Government, are still living behind the fringes of massive paperwork. Again, blind generalizing tendency is discernible while the eco friendly Forest Acts act their way out in the name of environment. It is now a responsibility on each of our shoulders to think about the burning issue of global warming and therefore the Reservation of our natural resources. But are we not an intricate part of this broad landscape? And are we not negating the root of these ethnic groups and violating their right to live as humans? All we, the people, know is a rule is a rule. Thus the dream of bringing these people to the centre of the society through social inclusion processes is still a utopian one. Basically they are constantly getting estranged due to these blind policies: for them development, globalisation are just another name for their displacement, a dystopia.

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