

## **Tribe in Transition: A study of the forest Rabha Society of Dooars**

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### **Abstract**

Present research paper is an attempt to study the Rabha society of Western Dooars (Alipurduar District of North Bengal) especially emphasizing their form of society which is in transitional stage between matriliney to patriliney. Once Rabha society had a full-fledged matrilineal base but in due course of time gradually started moving towards patriliney. Rabha are forest dwellers and matrilineal tribe since time immemorial. This research paper is highlighting how Rabha societies are becoming patrilineal and sometimes why they practice both matriliney and patriliney in order to maintain the social structure and fulfil the need of the society. Present research paper is throwing light on some issues and challenges of Rabha society, their social structure, female ownership and dominance, property inheritance law and identity which are resulting into many changes either due to oscillating nature of Rabha society from matriliney to patriliney or transformation from matriliney to patriliney. In this research paper, researchers have tried to examine the theory of double descent system of Claude- Levi Strauss to a great extent. At the same time the belief system and religious life of the forest Rabha is also in transition between tradition animistic form of belief system and Christianity. Forest Rabha are converting into Christianity only because to escape themselves from high expenses underlying in their traditional animistic form of belief system. It is seen that in a particular one forest village few families are still following their age old traditional animistic form of belief system and worshipping various spirits and deities for ingratiating them but few families have converted into Christianity and in doing so they feel that now they can easily afford this religious life without much expenses as they had earlier in their traditional animistic form of belief system. Now it is evident from the field work that forest Rabha very easily at any time converting into Christianity these days and oscillating between their age old traditional animistic belief system and Christianity. This resulted into various changes in other domains of forest Rabha to a great extent which has been dealt in this research paper. In addition to these, forest Rabha society are also in transition between isolation and inclusion or assimilation as far as their development is concern. This research paper is also highlighting their transition between isolation and inclusion or assimilation and how this has influenced forest Rabha society at large. This research paper is based on field work and empirical experiences of the researchers and well-shaped in an ethnographic structure by using primary source of data collection techniques especially observation, interview and schedule. Secondary sources of data have also been incorporated to complete this research paper.

**Keywords-:** *Tribe, Transition, Rabha, Dooars, Social Changes, Transformation, Development*

## **Introduction**

Many attempts have been made in anthropology to define and characterize on – tribe, but there is no consensus on defining characteristics. Territorially race, economy, animism, political autonomy etc have been variously used. In fact, it appears that the dozens of definitions and characteristics of – tribe floating around in anthropological literature are as diverse as the field situation encountered by those proposing the definitions. The Tata Institute of Social Science has made following comments on this issue – *“A tribe could be a collection of families without the existence of community in the scientific sense of the word. A tribe as a social organisation is able to decide upon its own function or the need or otherwise of independence between its different components, units or groups. Economic backwardness is very relative.”* On the basis of certain universal characteristics contained in various definitions, Majumdar (1958) proposed a definition of tribe claiming that some of it would define a tribe anywhere – *“A tribe is a social group with territorial affiliations, endogamous, with no specialization of function ruled by tribal officers, hereditary or otherwise, united in language or dialect, recognising social distance with other tribes, caste, without any social obloquy attaching to them as it does in the caste structure following tribal traditions, belief and customs illiberal of naturalization of ideas from alien sources, above all conscious of homogeneity of ethnic and territorial integration.”* In Indian context, too, the term is a British legacy. They classified tribe as such people who were beyond the pale of Hindu Varna system occupied inaccessible hills and forests and were of dark complexion. Neither Hindu nor any other Indian language has a corresponding term with exact connotation as ‘tribe’. This in itself is a proof enough that Indian language have never conceptually set these people apart from the rest. In contemporary India, the word ‘tribe’ has thus little cultural or social implications. It has become the watchword of the political consciousness of a particular group of a people in the country. Like caste consciousness or regional consciousness, tribal consciousness is fast developing to be a political tool which have become symbolic of privileged treatment, separatist tendencies and in a place a barrier to national integration. The tribal as man is simple, humble and possesses a great amount of feeling for his co-villagers and kins man in particular and community member in general. They grow in the intimacy of the social atmosphere of his community. His close association with nature inspires him to lead a carefree life. They feel pleasure in roaming about hills, forests and fields. Nature

makes him intimate with the environment. He often meets friends and visits his own relation on different festive occasions and in periodical new relations and association with people. Purely for sake of classification and enumeration, the British Government in India introduced the category of – ‘tribe’ (with occasional qualifying prefixes like – ‘hill and jungle’, ‘aboriginal’, ‘indigenous’) to designate these people.

India constitutes 8.61% schedule tribe population of its total population as per census 2011. There are about 550 tribes in India and as a matter of fact, different tribal societies, at present moment are also going through the critical state of transition. The historical isolation of primitive people, particularly during the past two centuries, has been broken by the diffusion of greater civilization and the process of modernization. It is not mere acculturation, of adding new items to a system but of modernization, its revolutionizing ways of life, beliefs and adapting new political and legal institutions, that have been at the root of changing the society from primitive to modern, from agrarian to industrial or from backward to progressive. Against this backdrop, the transition of tribe has become a fascinating subject compelling the anthropologists and sociologists to explore deep into its ever-widening scope and significance. Time has come to realize the relevance of these social dynamics for analysing the present status of tribal community. The way our country is passing through the period of transition in its roller-coaster ride towards modernization, the tribals are slowly but surely becoming aware of and assimilating some of the modern values while continuing their traditions and conventions. Since time immemorial the history of tribal identity has encountered and witnessed number of changes as well as challenges. Starting from Elwin’s perspective of “loss of nerve” to the contemporary “pseudo mainstreaming” approach, has only gifted the enigma of alien identity at once outside and now within the society. As a result, on the one hand, tribals are inept to continue their identity in their walk of life and on the other hand, they failed to integrate with the so-called mainstream society. In the name of development and mainstreaming they are the serious victims without any meaningful gain in material sense. The forces of globalisation which entered in the tribal world with active state patronage have added miseries in the life of the tribes. The encroachment of the businessmen and traders in tribal areas and the several imposed government plans and policies for tribal development have also victimised tribes at macro level and simultaneously excluded them from policies meant for human development. The transition of tribal society in this contemporary time is very crucial as its direction is not clear. So, a critical evaluation of the

term tribe and their problem is the need of the hour from anthropological and sociological perspective. Against this backdrop, the researchers of this research paper have tried to critically address the transition of forest dweller Rabha society of Dooars and accordingly suggested how policy measures for apt inclusion of forest Rabha in the national development process would be fruitful.

Bodo group of tribes of North Bengal, Assam and North-East India comprises many tribal communities in which Rabha or Rava is one of them. Rabha are the little-known tribal community and mostly confined in the region of North Bengal and in the states of Assam and Meghalaya. Rabha are sub-divided into so many types such as Rangdania Rabha, Pani Rabha, Pati Rabha, Maitori Rabha and Koch Rabha and so on. Their various sub divisions are mostly found in the bodoland areas of Assam whereas the entire Rabha concentration extended in North Bengal especially in Dooars (eastern part of Jalpaiguri District and Alipurduar district) belongs to *Koch Rabha* hence they are also known as *Koch*. *Koch* or *Rabha* is one of the sub groups of Bodo sections. Divergent opinions have been proposed in connection to the nomenclature of the term *Koch*. Anthropologists and historians opined that *Koch* asserts them from Cooch kingdom of Coochbehar, therefore they are known as Koch. One another view says that they followed *Kachari* River in course of their historical migration from *sinkyang* province of China to Tibbat and entered and distributed in the *Kachhar* plateau of Assam region and from Kachhar Region they migrated to the Dooars region of North Bengal hence this bodo section obtained the nomenclature *Koch*. The term *Rabha* in place of Koch came into existence during colonial period when British government was surveying and settling the area, British government enlisted their name as *Rabha* in their official documents since then they are known as *Rabha* but still *Rabha* of Dooars (North Bengal) use to call themselves *Koch Rabha*. But due to recent controversy regarding reservation benefits in the state of West Bengal, they prefer to call themselves only as Rabha because as per Govt of W.B. reservation list only Rabha term is recognised as Schedule Tribe as colonial documents witnessed this term but those who are using title Koch will not be considered as S.T. in West Bengal, hence entire Koch Rabha distributed in Dooars (North Bengal), used to call themselves as Rabha only. This is leading towards identity crisis among the Rabha or Koch Rabha of Dooars (North Bengal) and a question arises that *whether Koch is Rabha or Rabha is Koch?* Rabha are little known tribal community in North Bengal and on ecological basis they are sub-divided into two types of ecological sections namely forest Rabha and village Rabha.

Forest Rabha are those who inhabit inside the forest and forest villages and majority of the Rabha populations are inhabiting inside the forest of Jaldapara wild life sanctuary forest, Buxa forest, Chilapatta forest and other forest covers of Dooars, therefore this ecological section of Rabha is considered as Forest Rabha or Forest Dwellers. And Village Rabha are those who inhabit in the country side along with local Bengali population are considered as Village Rabha. The total population of Rabha tribe in West Bengal is 27820 as per census 2011 which constitutes 0.53% of the total population of West Bengal. Rabhas are known for their age-old matriliney. Their descent is traced from mother line. As the society was matrilineal so clan/totem name, descent and property was inherited by daughters from their mother. Due to matriliney, a Rabha groom after marriage mandatorily stayed in the house and village of Bride. As per matrilineal norms, son has no claim over property of their father hence after marriage a groom has to stay with his bride's family. It is found in course of this research work that present day Rabha are in a transition phase between matriliney to patriliney. Majority of the forest Rabhas still seen practicing their age-old matriliney to a great extent whereas village Rabha transformed into patriliney few decades ago due to culture contact and acculturation. However, forest Rabha largely practice matriliney but in recent time due to cash economy, development of transport and communication, acculturation, culture contact and Christianity, Forest Rabha are in transition and oscillating between matriliney and patriliney. Forest Rabhas of Dooars is segmented into number of Totemic clans which is locally known as *Husuk*. Rabha *Husuk* system is quite interesting. The important types of forest Rabha *Husuks* are namely, kantrang, mahji, banda and so on. Marriage in same *Husuk* is strictly prohibited among the forest Rabha, therefore their *Husuk* system considered as at par - excellence marriage regulating units. Forest Rabha of Dooars morphologically belongs to Mongoloid racial stock and speaks *Kochkrow* dialect of Tibbeto-Burman linguistic family. The economy or the livelihood of forest Rabha is completely based on forest, hence their economy is known as forest economy. Forest provides them food, fodder, shelter, medicine, clothing, entertainment and every need of the forest Rabha, hence there is a symbiotic relationship exists between forest Rabha and forest. Paddy cultivation inside forest land is their prime source of livelihood along with collection of forest produces and fishing. Forest Rabha were the plantation labourers inside forest during colonial period and used to plant trees inside forest land free of cost and in place of remuneration they were allowed to live inside forest and cultivate paddy, collect food and fodder inside forest. Even today, when fund permits forest department use them as plantation labour and for cleaning the forest and

these days, they get wage payment/remuneration as well but it is seen that these days very few families get wage payment and wage labour in forest works. On the contrary, forest department have imposed so many restrictions on the forest Rabhas over using forest and forest resources which is depriving them from their age-old forest rights. Rabha women are known for their traditional cottage textile industry and used to weave their traditional dresses *Koch Kambang* (upper garments), *Koch Lufung* (lower garments), *Mapla* (traditional towel) and *camlet*. Present day, forest Rabha girls generate income from their traditional cottage textile industries. Rabha earlier used to cultivate paddy twice in a year which they called “*Aus dhan*” and “*Aman dhan*”. Rice is their staple food. They used to cultivate paddy in the allocated forest land for paddy cultivation these days however earlier they used to cultivate paddy in plantation field by using pre-agricultural technologies and slash and burn agricultural method, in between two *sal* saplings (trees) but due to the strict forest laws and banned of such paddy cultivation in plantation field from the forest department, Rabha gradually lost their age-old right to cultivate paddy in their plantation field which resulted into severe food crisis among the forest Rabha these days. In such a way they are compelled to cultivate only in the little allocated paddy field inside their forest bastees. Rabha cultivate paddy in allocated paddy field which is low land locally known as *Dholha* and in upland locally known as *Hat-hanga* normally situated in their house yard, they used to cultivate jute (*patua*), vegetables and fruits such as banana (*latai*), Jackfruit, coconut, papaya and areca-nuts (*guwa*). Rabha during autumn when there is severe food crisis used to dig *kanda* or *hann*, a kind of wild potato collected from the forest land for put out their hunger at large. Fishing is the lifeline of forest Rabha livelihood especially Rabha girls and women are largely involved in catching fishes from the nearby water sources and rivers hence Rabha women are considered champion in fishing, they catch fishes by using traditional fishing implements made of bamboo locally known as *Jhakoi*, *Burung* and *Tapei*. Rabha males used to catch fishes by using traditional fishing implements namely *Dosko*. These days, forest Rabha used to sell fishes to the fish merchants and earns cash. Due to their dependency on forest, forest Rabha worship various deities and spirits inside forest which forms animistic belief system. In such a way forest shapes the deep-rooted belief system and religious world of the Rabha too. *Rishi* or *Mahakal* is their chief deity along with two more supreme household deities namely *Rungtuk* and *Basek* considered as goddess of wealth and prosperity. Rabha pantheon of deities has no any morphic figure. ‘*Huzi*’ or ‘*Shranga Huzi*’ is their village priest who used to worship their spirits and deities by chanting *kocha mantras* (hymns),

sacrificing fowls, offering indigenously prepared *Chokot* (rice beer) and fruits & nuts for propitiating their deities and spirits. The post of *Huzi* is not hereditary, it is believed that one who becomes *Huzi*, obtains this traditional knowledge from bestow of supreme power. *Huzi* is also recognised as medicine man among the forest Rabha. It is believed that the *Huzi* is having traditional knowledge to identify herbs and shrubs for medicinal use. *Huzi*, sometimes seen curing the patients by means of magical rites too. It is believed that *Huzi* is having power to act both white magic and black magic as well. In addition to that, every Rabha forest *bastees* is having one village headman locally known as *Mondal*, as this post is officially created by the forest department during colonial period for looking after the plantation works of forest. Forest department used to select an able, fit and honest Rabha male person as *Mondal* for looking after and leading the plantation work and in addition to this *Mondal* were empowered to look after the village affairs matters for mitigating the disputes of the *bastees*. Still today *Mondal* holds the respectable position in a Rabha forest village although members have been elected through modern panchayati raj elections. Field work reveals that before colonial period Rabha were having a strong traditional panchayat known as *Marab Son or Sengiri*. This traditional panchayats and council of elders were look after the village affairs and disputes and in such a way social control mechanism was in exercise. As far as present-day governance system is concern there is a conflict in the views and viewpoints clearly seen among forest department, their traditional *Mondal* or council of elder's system of governance and newly elected members elected through modern panchayati raj elections. As far as Rabha rituals, festivals and entertainment are concern, music and dance (*Baisini*) keep great importance. Rabha marriage ceremonies and annual worshipping of *Rungtuk* and *Basek*, their household deities, cannot be completed without dance of the Rabha women and without flute (*kal bonsi*), and drum (*debdi & hem*) playing by the Rabha males. In addition to that, *Bak-kan* (Pork) and *Chokot* (Rice-beer) also plays a pivotal role in all Rabha rituals and occasions. They use to offer it mandatorily to their deities and as well as to their guests and village mates during every holy and auspicious occasions even on final rites *Chokot* (rice- beer) and *Bak-kan* (Pork), *Tau-kan* (chicken) or *Puran-kan* (meat) served to the guests, matri- kins (*Ningosa*), and village mates & groom relatives (*jog-juku*).

Present research paper is an attempt to study the Rabha society of Western Dooars (Alipurduar District of North Bengal) especially emphasizing their form of society which is in transitional stage between matriliney to patriliney. At the same time the belief system and

religious life of the forest Rabha is also in transition between tradition animistic form of belief system and Christianity. In addition to these, forests Rabha societies are also in transition between isolation and inclusion or assimilation as far as their development is concern. This research paper is also highlighting their transition between isolation and inclusion or assimilation and how this has influenced forest Rabha society at large.

### **Aims & Objectives**

The main aim and objective of this study is to explore the transitional phases of the forest Rabha of Dooars and to know its causes and consequences as well.

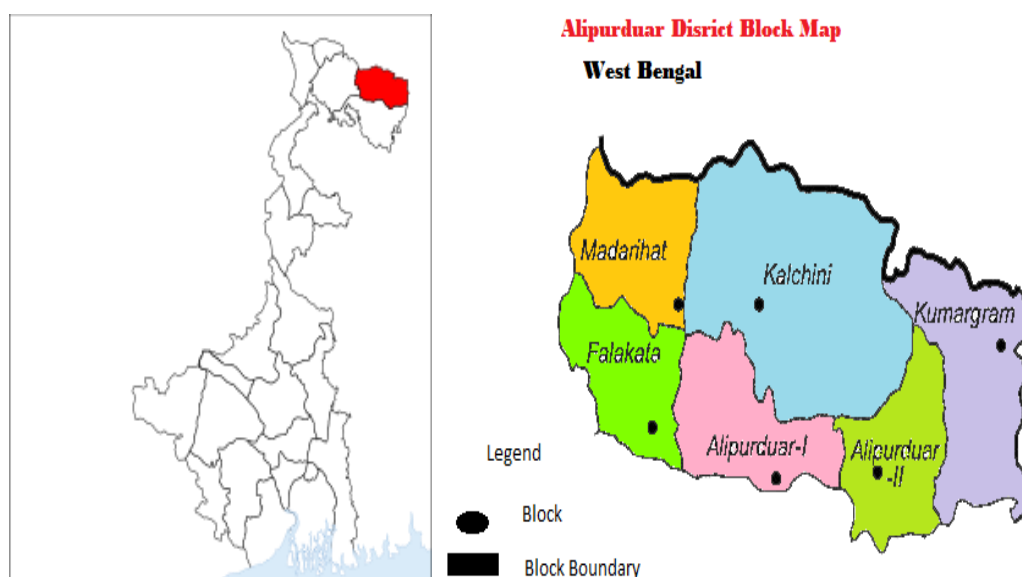
### **Materials & Methods**

Present study is the outcome of anthropological field work and empirical experiences of the researchers in the Rabha forest *bastees* of the Dooars. Purposively forest Rabha and forest villages were selected and extensively studied in order to obtain data for this study. This research paper is purely based on qualitative data. In order to know the historical account and changes took place among forest Rabha over the period of time, baseline data were utilized. Dr. M.K.Raha's work on forest Rabha of North Bengal i.e. "*Matriliney to Patriliney: A study of the Rabha Society (1989)*" have been utilized as baseline data for this study. Primary data were collected during field work by applying anthropological techniques such as observation, interview and schedule. At the same time case studies were also collected from the field. Secondary sources both published and unpublished are also supporting this research paper.

### **Study Area**

This study is mainly confined in the *Dooars* (North Bengal). Etymologically, the term "*Dooars*" means Door (entry point) to Bhutan both in Bengali and Assamese languages. The entire geographical area (whole eastern and western *Dooars*) where these entry points are located is called *Dooars*. Two forest *bastees* namely "*Kudalbaste*" (Kalchini Block) and "*Rajabhatkhawa*" (Chillapatta forest Range) comes under Kalchini block of Alipurduar district of *Dooars* (North Bengal) have been extensively studied. However, there are eleven such forest *bastees* of Rabha are found in *Dooars* but my study is based on the empirical experiences of two above mentioned forest villages hence our conclusion best represents the

entire Rabha forest villages of *Dooars*. Both the forest villages are the part of Jaldapara wild life sanctuary and reserved forest comes under Cooch-Bihar Forest division. Both the forest villages are itself a forest beat under Chilapatta forest range. Total 204 Rabha families are living inside these forest villages respectively 101 families at *Kudalbastee* and 103 families at *Rajabhathkawa*. Total population of these two villages are 776 respectively 381 at *Kudalbastee* and 395 at *Rajabhathkawa* as per household census.



Map:- Study Areas in West Bengal map & in Alipurduar District Block Map

## Result and Discussion

### (i)

*In Dooars, the Rabhas are segmented into two sections namely forest Rabha and Village Rabha. The forest Rabhas are those who live in the forest and village Rabhas are those who live in the country side. The village Rabhas lives along with the Rajbanshi, Mech, and Bangalee caste hindus and have a lot degree of change in their day-to-day life. And among the forest Rabha, traditional systems and customs prevail even till date. The forest Rabha mostly depends on natural resources, particularly on forest and rivers since time immemorial*

(Das & Raha, 1967).<sup>1</sup> The Rabha are well known for their matriliney even today whereas this community is in a transitional stage between matriliney and patriliney still mark respect are seen towards female line. Earlier studies suggests that Rabha used to live in joint family in the states of Assam and Meghalaya but in Dooars, we found that nuclear family structure is existing even earlier records explain the same in respect to forest villages of Dooars. The Rabha community, as *friend-Pereira* sees, once had a full-fledged matrilineal base but now “they are in a stage of transition from matriarchal form of life (*friend-pereira, 1912:142*). This tribe which was once matrilineal, has imbibed patrilineal features, and is now in the process of Patriarchization. *Dr. Manish Kumar Raha (1989)* made a tremendous account on the Rabha society and opined that Rabha society is in transition between matriliney to patriliney. Here through this present research, the researchers are of opinion that present day forest Rabha have not fully transformed into patriliney because still female line gets mark respect among the forest Rabha and children obtain ‘*husuk*’ (clan) from their mother line but in case of property transformation now sometimes forest Rabha used to trace their identity from father or father line. As their society is in transitional stage between matriliney and patriliney and sometimes matriliney hence their unilineal descent system is changing towards double descent system as proposed by great French social anthropologist Clau-de-Levi-Strauss (1949).

Now it is often seen that sometimes the descent of *husuk* /clan is traced from female line i.e., the children married or unmarried, receive their mother’s *husuk*, and the married children continue to use this even after marriage and so long they remain alive. The same rule was prevalent among the forest Rabhas of earlier days (*Sunder, 1895:72; friend –Pereira, 1912:142*). This rule is similar to what is found among different matrilineal ethnic groups of India. The father’s *husuk* is of no importance to their children so far as the descent is concerned. When a forest Rabha marries a non-Rabha or vice-versa and the couple lives in the Rabha society, the descent is reckoned the female line and one such case has been reported during field work from *Kudulabastee* forest village. Rabha of forest *bastees* enjoys rights, duties and privileges from mother / matrilineal line or sometimes from patrilineal line. The females trace the matrilineal line to enjoy the movable property such as cattles, grains and also for religious functions. However sometimes they trace their relationship with father / patrilineal line for enjoying the immovable property and for some religious functions. One

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The Rabhas of West Bengal’- (Special Serial No.9), C.R.I, Calcutta, 1967(Introduction)

other reason behind following Patriliney is due to recruitment as wage laborers in the forest department. Forest department recruits the son who is heir of their father who is already working as wage labour in forest department from earlier on. Therefore, being registered as plantation labour, now Rabha society follow patriliney too. Due to Transition stage between matriliney to patriliney, this double descent rule exists among the forest Rabha of Dooars. Matri kins or *Ningosa* relatives (we are one and same) are those who are related to each other with same husuk that mean they comes first when any death took place and matri kins (*Ningosa*) offers *Jalphena* (to offer water and food into the mouth of diseased by chanting a *kocha* hymns and citing *husuk* name as performed for final rite), this is yet another important hallmark of their matrilineal base even today it is continuing. Hence this is evident from this present research work that it cannot be claimed or said that forest Rabha have transformed completely into patriliney, in fact they are oscillating between matriliney and patriliney.

**(ii)**

At the same time the belief system and religious life of the forest Rabha is also in transition between tradition animistic form of belief system and Christianity. Forest Rabha are converting into Christianity only because to escape themselves from high expenses underlying in their traditional animistic form of belief system. It is seen that in a particular one forest village few families are still following their age old traditional animistic form of belief system and worshipping various spirits and deities for ingratiating them but few families have converted into Christianity and in doing so they feel that now they can easily afford this religious life without much expenses as they had earlier in their traditional animistic form of belief system. Now it is evident from the field work that forest Rabha very easily at any time converting into Christianity these days and oscillating between their age old traditional animistic belief system and Christianity. This resulted into various changes in other domains of forest Rabha to a great extent. Field work reveals that forest Rabha in recent time gradually converting into Christian religion from their age-old animistic form of belief system. It has been found at Village *Kudalbaste* that 50% of the forest Rabha families adopted Christianity, interview with the forest Rabha informants suggests that due to high expensive worshipping of their spirits and deities, they are becoming Christian. The forest Rabha of Dooars are following the two types of Christian missionaries namely Seventh Day

Adventist Mission and Rabha Baptist Mission. Seventh Day Adventist Mission had established their church inside village *Kudalbastee* at earlier in year 1978 and Baptist Mission came very late around one decade ago. Now the existing prevailing situation says that almost only 50% of the forest Rabha families still continuing their age-old traditional animistic form of belief system. But the fact is that those who have adopted Christianity they still connected with their age-old traditional nature and spirits and deities. Even today, whenever they face any misfortune or danger, the Christian Rabha used to propitiate their traditional deities such as *Rungtuk* and *Basek* and so on indirectly with the help of *Huzi* or *Shranga Huzi* (Village priest) or other animistic family members. Still, they used to offer *Chokot* (rice beer); considered as holy water, *Chika* (water), *Maye* (rice) and *Bak-kan* (pork) to their spirits indirectly through their village mates who are still following traditional animistic religion. This they do whenever they fall in any danger. Even it is very commonly seen that a Christian Rabha happily take participate in the annual worshipping of their traditional deities and spirits organised in the month of *Chait* (April-May) by their animistic village mates. Though a Christian Rabha perform their marriage rites in church although still perform majority of their traditional form of marriage rituals as prevailing in their traditional animistic form of religion and as existing in their matrilineal form of life. Likewise animistic form of society, a Christian Rabha prohibits same *husuk* (clan) marriage and brought groom from outside village. Bride stays in her mother house and receives *husuk* name and property from her mother. In such a way, on the one hand Christian Rabha are still following their age-old animistic rituals but to a limited extent and on the other hand converted Rabha are encouraged to leave their traditional way of life and superstitions under the shadow of cross so that they become rational to a great extent. Now a day, it is Christianity which affecting forest Rabha and changing their traditional belief system and age-old socio-cultural systems as well. Simultaneously, due to formation of Rabha Development Council (RDC) and its active role in motivating forest Rabha of Dooars for retaining their traditional identity and retribalisation, forest Rabha denying to adopt Christianity these days and encouraging their traditional form of animistic belief system and rituals with their traditional dress, ornaments, dances, musical instruments, food and drink. On the whole, it is apparent that present day forest Rabha are in transition between animistic form of belief system and Christianity.



Fig- Rabha village priest (*Huzi*) worshipping spirits & Rabha girls holding bible in front of church

**(iii)**

In addition to these, forest Rabha society are also in transition between isolation and inclusion or assimilation as far as their development is concern. In the *Dooars* (North Bengal), forest Rabhas are confined inside the dense forest since time immemorial and fully adapted in the forest ecology and economy therefore they are living in isolation since beginning and even today forest Rabha enjoys their lives inside thick forest. However, when policy makers, planners and social scientist talked about the tribal isolation, then of course forest Rabhas are in geographical isolation from main stream population and due to their isolation, still they are lagging far behind from development as developmental plans and policies reached at their doorstep very slowly and very late due to lack of communication. On the other hand, their villages are forest village and governance of forest villages are under control of forest department as per forest laws and forest protection acts. Due to the restrictions imposed on the forest Rabha to use forest and forest resources as they did it from earlier on has deprived forest Rabha from their age-old forest rights. Hence developmental schemes cannot be implemented as such as it implemented in revenue villages and ultimately this affected forest Rabha a lot as far as their development is concern. On the other hand, it is fact that in 21<sup>st</sup> century several factors have changed the lives of the Rabha of *Dooars* too and

tried to connect them with main stream. Undoubtedly cash economy, acculturation, culture contact, modern education, transport & communication, christianity, globalisation, information technology, panchayati raj and governmental initiatives have tried a lot to assimilate forest Rabha with main stream population. These all above factors have certainly played a vital role to include forest Rabha in developmental frame. As a matter of fact, forest Rabha came much closer to the main stream population, they regularly visit local markets and weekly *hats* and interact with others to a great extent. Due to frequent visit of the tourists in their wild life sanctuary forest, they came much closer with the outside world and culture which influenced their way of life and culture a lot. Development of road, transport and other communication mode from nearby township centres up to their forest *bastees* have also assimilate them with outer world. After converting into Christianity, forest Rabha motivated a lot towards obtaining education and Christianity taught them for saving concept for the future, in addition to that due to Christianity, forest Rabha during Christmas season visits different places of outside state especially Assam for participating in cultural programmes organised under the banner of church, this also helped forest Rabha to come out from so called isolation. Several governmental plans especially MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) and formation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) also brought forest Rabha (their men and women both) into interaction mode. In spite of the above factors, it is fact that forest Rabha are living their way of life by adopting so many modern means of apparatus and admitting the cultural practices of outside world too but at the same time still they love to inhabit in isolation in forest as they are deeply connected with their forest, ecology and deep-rooted belief system inside forest and nature. Therefore, keeping these discussions in mind, it is clear that forest Rabha are in transition between isolation and inclusion or main stream assimilation even in this 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Conclusion**

By virtue of the above discussion, it is apparent that forest Rabha of Dooars are in stage of transition in many ways these days. Undoubtedly, the dramatis persona i.e., forest Rabha of Dooars have undergone through many changes due to several factors in different course of time, such as cash economy, acculturation, culture contact, modern education, transport & communication, Christianity, globalisation, information technology, Panchayati raj and governmental initiatives. Their transitions between matriliney to patriliney, between animism to Christianity, between isolation to inclusion or assimilation and so on so forth, are raising

some vital issues such as whether forest Rabha will be able to preserve their age-old tradition, culture and heritage? or will they face identity crisis in coming future? On the whole their development is lagging far behind even in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. Therefore, it is opined that the policy makers, the planners and the governmental officials engaged in their development should frame and implement such policies keeping Rabha's transitional scenario and cultural background in mind so that forest Rabha of Dooars can be developed in true sense as per their felt needs.

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