

## Fractured Ethnic Space of Rabha Tribe of North Bengal

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*In recent time North Bengal is turning out to be the seedbed of social unrest as different ethnic groups are out to establish their own ethno-political space. The Rabha, a small indigenous tribal group, who inhabit the forest and non-forest villages, were a single united group in terms of their socio-cultural system in the pre-independence period, but in post-independence period they seem to be a fragmented lot. They are fragmented along political and religious lines; the entry of Christianity, in particular, has brought about boundaries within the ethnic community.*

**Keywords:** ethnic group, Rajbanshi, Rabha, forest village, conversion, Christianity, Hinduism.

### I

While a section of the Rajbanshis of North Bengal are in movements for establishing an ethnic state of Kamtapur or Greater Cooch Behar the smaller tribal groups (the Rabha, Mech, the tribes of Chotanagpur origin) seem to be indifferent to this statehood movement. The present paper explores how the Rabha, a minority tribe, define their ethno-cultural space and how do they respond to the ongoing political processes in the region.

The Rabha, one of the indigenous small tribal groups of North Bengal, belong to the Mongoloid race and are mainly concentrated in Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri districts of West Bengal. In terms of population, they have greater presence in Assam valley. In North Bengal they are concentrated in some villages (11) of Tufangunj block of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri districts. They are also distributed in some forest villages (23) of Cooch Behar and Buxa forest divisions; and in some revenue villages (13) of Kumargram block of Jalpaiguri district. As far as their population distribution

in North Bengal is concerned, they, by and large, are in the midst of two distinct ecological settings - the forest and the non-forest areas.

Earlier, the Rabhas were a matrilineal tribe. But now the non-forest section of them has already become patrilineal while the forest section is in the way to patriliney. The members of this community aspire to ascertain their own ethno-cultural distinctiveness in a larger socio-political milieu, dominated by the Rajbanshis, Bengalis and the immigrants and the tea garden tribes. In recent years several socio-religious and political developments in North Bengal have impacted upon the Rabha society making it difficult for them to maintain their unique ethno-cultural identity.

The two most important factors that have intruded into their socio-cultural space are (a) conversion to Christianity, and (b) Hinduisation. These two developments have left a destabilizing effect on this otherwise homogenous community. Historically the geographical space of North Bengal was occupied mainly by the people of Mongoloid race (like Rajbanshi, Koch, Rabha, Mech and other indigenous groups), and was ruled by the Koch kings. During the British rule and after Independence this sparsely populated tract has accommodated immigrants from different directions. A significant section of these immigrants came from Chotanagpur region of central India to work as tea garden workers. The tea garden tribes are called *Modesia* although they do not constitute a homogenous community. The other stream of immigrants constitutes the Bengalis hailing from erstwhile East Bengal/Pakistan (now Bangladesh); they are widely spread over in different districts across rural and urban areas. The Rabhas thus find the Rajbanshis, the Modesias and the Bengali immigrants as their dominant neighbours who can penetrate into their spatial and cultural territory. How do the Rabhas respond to such a situation? What kind of survival strategy do the Rabhas work out? The taking over of control of the resources, especially land and employment opportunities, has opened up the possibility of discord between the 'locals' and the immigrants. Some of the ethnic movements in North Bengal can be looked into from this perspective. The penetration of Christianity and Hinduism has also posed serious challenge to Rabha identity and unity.

## II

Conversion to Christianity among the Rabha living in forest villages (primarily the part of Western Duars) is being taken place in recent time. This is being done by the Rabha Baptist Church Union (RBCU), based in Debitola village of Parbatjowar tract of Dhubri district of Assam. Parbatjowar tract is the homeland of many Rabha people (Kocha section, also termed as Koch-Rabha) and the Rabhas who live in North Bengal also belong to the same section. This bears certain advantage to the Rabha evangelists who have been involved in proselytizing activities since late 1970s. In the initial phase (between late 1970s and early 1980s) conversion was confined to a few villages. Later, mainly between mid-1980s and early 2000s, majority of them have accepted Christianity in search of a new identity. Christianity has given the Rabhas an identity and a kind of empowerment since, prior to this process, they were relatively isolated from the neighbouring Hindu and Muslim communities and had a minimal control over resources, human and material.

Prior to conversion the Rabhas were influenced by a new faith named Janjogi (a faith spread by a Nepali monk in different forest *bastees* in 1950s). They kept that faith alive till mid '70s and certain sections still adhere to it. This faith redefined the importance of sun, air, earth and moon in human life and its linkages with their socio-cultural life of the people. Acceptance of *Janjogi* by a section of Rabhas segregated them from the non-Janjogi Rabha. Even when a section of Rabhas accepted Janjogi as its faith they were called Hindu. The Hindutva forces (the Sangh Parivar) in recent years have swung into action to drive the Christian Rabha back home. The efforts of the Hindutva forces to bring the non-Hindu masses back into the Hindu fold stem from a political motive; the main objective is to brush off cultural diversities that India is known for and establish one nation and one culture. The influences of Hinduism were more conspicuous among both indigenous and the tea garden settlers. The agencies of the Sangh Paribar like RSS, Bajrang Dal and the Banabasi Kalyan Ashram (BKA) is active in different areas of North Bengal targeting the tribals in rural areas and tea garden workers.

Although Christianity has spread among a section of Rabhas it has failed to engulf the entire Rabha population; a majority of

them are still Hindu. To counter the spread of Christianity among the Adivasis (both indigenous and immigrant) the outfits of the Hindutva forces have made their base in different forest villages and tea gardens of Western Duars. Acceptance of Christianity by section of Rabhas bears significance since they were kept out of the Hindu caste-fold or Hindu society and were not assimilated into Hindu culture for many years. Thus despite claiming to be Hindu they lived with a strong sense of isolation from the mainstream (caste) Hindus.

The Hindutva forces operate on three basic principles - (a) *samparka sthapan* (making relationship), (b) *samiti* (organization), and (c) *prakalpa* (project) when they target a community. The principal aim is to motivate the non-Hindu masses to come into the Hindu-fold. In Western Duars the Banabasi Kalyan Ashram (BKA), the education wing of the Sangh Paribar, has been working since last few years with the aim of spreading education among the adivasi children, and of course indoctrinating them with the ideals of Hindutva (according to the Hindutva forces it is not religion but a way of life). Besides education these organization do some healthcare and other welfare activities as a part of its mission.

It appears from field study that the Samparka Sthapan Kendras are active in over 50 villages of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri districts. Apart from this, 11 *Sishu Siksha Kendras*, primary schools, physical education centres (sports centre) etc. are functioning in different Banabasi villages. The Hindutva activists also organize *dharma jagaran* (rejuvenation of religious ideals) and mobilize people for installation of Hindu idols and construction of *mandirs*.

The Hindutva activists have organized the local people, which include the Rabhas, for installation of Shivalinga and Hanuman idols in different tribal villages. This step is eco-oriented and not totally alien to the adivasi cultural tradition. By their neighbours they are treated as Banabasi, meaning forest dwellers, whose livelihood and culture have a direct link with forests. The *adivasis* are by and large the nature worshippers and keeping parity with their cultural tradition the Hindu protagonists have adopted such steps. The Rabhas live in the villages of western Duars and are now divided into two religious groups, Hindu and Christian, and follow the religious practices following their respective faith.

The Rabha of this region came under the influence of one political outfit - Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Gorkha League (ABAGL) in the 1970s and early 1980s. Its activities were mainly confined to the tea garden and forest areas of western Duars. The leadership was in the hands of the Nepalis (Gorkhas) and a few immigrant tribal leaders. The Rabhas of the region have, by and large, refused to side with this political outfit and its goal.

The Rabhas living in Tufangunj and Kumargram Block areas are largely Hindu by religion. In this area the Hinduisation process started in 1930s and continued in the 1940s. In post-independence period, during 1960-1970, the process gained momentum. However, the Rabhas are well aware that they will never be a part of the caste system and will never be accepted by the mainstream Hindus. Therefore, they consciously retain their tribal identity. They are recognized as a Scheduled tribe and get the benefit of reservation.

### III

The Rajbanshis of North Bengal (at least a section of them) are demanding a separate state Kamtapur or the Greater Cooch Behar State for several decades. The movement is not confined to North Bengal alone; it is spread out to some districts of Lower Assam as well. The Rajbanshis, who lead this movement, have tried to mobilize the Rabha and other indigenous groups like the immigrant Adivasis who work in tea garden. Barring the Rabhas living in non-forest villages all groups have maintained a distance from this movement. A section of the Rabhas has extended a kind of moral support to the movement, but, at the same time, refrained from active participation in it. Stuck to their tribal identity and socio-political standing they do not want to be a part of a larger ethnic movement.

The leaders of Kamtapur statehood movement tried to mobilize the local masses against the immigrant Bengali population. The Uttarkhand Dal, came into existence in 1969, first demanded a Kamtapur state, consisting of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Malda and West Dinajpur districts of North Bengal. Later three subdivisions of Darjeeling district were kept out of their map of

the state since another statehood movement, or Gorkhaland was going on these. The Uttarkhand Dal later became the Kamtapur Ganaparishad. This political outfit could not make much headway in mobilizing the tribal inhabitants since the latter too do not want to lose their distinctive identity. In mid-1970s the Rajbanshi leaders took fresh initiatives in mobilizing all local indigenous groups including the immigrant tribals under the banner of Uttar Banga Tapasili Jati O Adivasi Sangathan (North Bengal Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Organization - NBSCSTO) for strengthening its support base. As in Kamtapur movement the leadership of this new political outfit was in the hands of educated Rajbanshi youth. But, the Adivasis of the region showed little interest. The Kamtapur statehood movement targeted the Bengali immigrants who, according to its leaders, have taken over the major economic and political capital of North Bengal. The immigrant Bengalis have also turned the local people into a minority. According to them, this has taken place under the direct patronage of the mainstream political parties. In effect, the political power in North Bengal at the level of different democratic and administrative bodies is in the hands of the Bengali immigrants. The Left parties and other national parties had strong organizational presence among all the ethnic communities in North Bengal and they undertook political programmes to retain their support base. The ruling parties in the state do not support the idea of creation of Kamtapur state and they have tried to divide the ethnic communities (the tribal communities) as well. The Rabhas of non-forest setting are not a homogenous political community; they extend their support to political parties like the CPI (M), Forward Bloc, R.S.P, Cong (I) and now Trinamul Congress and so on. The distribution of benefits of various government-run programmes (under rural development schemes), the distribution of land *patta* land etc. can also divide the members of a particular community while selecting the beneficiaries.

The Rabhas living in different locations of North Bengal and Assam (in Rongdani, Maitori, Pati, Dahuri, Kocha and many other places) are trying to be united as an ethnic group by forming an organization called the Rabha National Council (RNC) which was formed in the early part of 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In North Bengal the organization started functioning only in 1970s. However, it never gained the necessary momentum due to weak leadership and weak

organizational network. It is also possible that the nationalist ideology of the organization did not appeal to the ordinary Rabhas who took a pragmatic approach to politics by siding with the political parties that are dominant in the area. Thus the RNC failed to take off in North Bengal. With this the efforts to ethnic formation in the form of united Rabha community failed.

#### IV

From the foregoing discussion it appears that the ethno-cultural space of the Rabhas living in North Bengal and Assam has been fractured first along religious line and second in terms of political division. Both Hindu and Christian forces are active to exploit their economic and social vulnerability while converting them in the guise of welfare initiatives and religious activities. The presence of national political parties with their packages of mobilization counters their move for ethnic unity. The ruling parties in particular have enough maneuvering power to draw their support banking on its 'distribution' power. The strong presence of Kamtapur and Gorkhaland statehood movements also has left negative impact upon the unity move by the Rabha ethnic organizations.