

An outline of the trend of change: a case of an indigenous Rabha tribe of India

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Abstract

The unique feature of indigenous Rabha tribal community in West Bengal is somewhat different as regards to the other indigenous tribal community in West Bengal. The Rabha society is of two ecological groups with strange co-existence of two different social systems, like, one group live in the reserve forest, and another group in rural revenue village. These two Rabha groups not only live in two ecological settings, but also there exist positive cultural and linguistic differences between these two groups. The purpose was to accentuate the present trend of changes over years among indigenous matrilineal forest Rabhas of West Bengal, India. The objective was to find out the trend of changes in today's Rabha society in forest villages. Both the primary and secondary sources of data were used. The quantitative method was adopted. The interview technique was applied for data collection besides observation.

They are now experiencing the changing situation of progress, development and modernity. They have adapted to the significant changes in their exposure to the outside world beyond their community and villages; literacy and higher educational attainments; diversified economic activities, traditional cultural pattern, traditional political institution; and also emergence of a subtle differentiation in family status in society.

Keywords: Education, Economy, Culture, Health care, Political institution.

INTRODUCTION

The unique feature of indigenous Rabha tribal community in West Bengal is somewhat different as regards to the other indigenous tribal community in West Bengal. It is much interesting that the Rabha tribal society is of two ecological groups with strange co-existence of two different social systems in the state of West Bengal. For instance, one group of Rabhas who live in the reserve forest, and another group live in rural revenue village. It may be convenient to term these two Rabha groups as 'forest Rabhas' and 'village Rabhas'. Moreover, these two Rabha groups not only live in two ecological settings, but also there exist positive cultural and linguistic differences between these two groups (Raha, 1974:72).

The forest Rabhas while retains their traditional Matriliney to a great extent, the village Rabhas shows the mobility towards patrilineal form of the society borrowed from the local Hindus (Raha, 1989: 5, 17). Over time, though the village Rabhas acculturated with Hindu patrilineal form of society to a great extent, the forest Rabhas maintains their matrilineal form of society.

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The above revelation draws the curiosity of knowing the trend of changes in today's society of indigenous matrilineal forest Rabhas, which is the pertinent theme of this study.

Csonka and Schweitzer (2004:45) emphasized that "Change does not necessarily lead to cultural extinction; however, by the beginning of the 21st century, the persistence of identities and the re-creation of traditions show that indigenous cultures can thrive in the modern world". Acharya and Kshatriya (2014:75) viewed that "Tribes and tribal societies in contemporary India are heading towards a paradigm shift concerning their increasing exposure to development and related changes, leading to a substantial transition in their socio-cultural, economic, and lifestyle patterns".

Keeping into consideration the given above, it may be presumed that the social situation of a particular community is in the process of change over time. It is more interesting to look into the trend of key changes in today's forest Rabha society. Given the above, the purpose was to accentuate the trend of changes in today's society of the indigenous matrilineal forest Rabha tribal community in West Bengal, India, that happened over the years.

Objective

The objective was to find out about the extent of key trend of changes in today's indigenous matrilineal Rabha society of forest villages over time. The following specific research questions were derived from the objective:

1. What about the extent of present-day exposure to the outside world?
2. What about the change in literacy rate and present scenario of educational attainment?
3. What about changes in the present situation of the economy?
4. What about the changes in the traditional culture?
5. What about changes in the situation of a health concern?
6. What about changes in the situation of the political institution?

Material and Methods

The quantitative and qualitative data were derived from primary sources and also secondary sources of published materials and websites.

The quantitative method was adopted. The interview technique was adopted during the field survey. The field survey was conducted in September-October 2021 among the adult of total 149 Rabha families living in two forest villages, namely 'Andu' and 'Baniya,' located in Chilapata Reserved Forest Range of Alipurduar District of West

Bengal, India, including observation besides collecting information about the past situation. The purposive sampling technique was adopted in which the sampling trait was adult one of each of all Rabha households.

The Rabhas of West Bengal, India

Before exploring the changes in today's society of indigenous matrilineal Rabha tribal community living in forest villages, it may be pertinent to glance over their brief ethnic background.

There are varied views on the origin of indigenous Rabha matrilineal tribe. According to different scholarly opinions, for instance, Buchanon-Hamilton (1820) found their relation with Pani-Koch as cited by Mitra (1954: cxxxviii). Dalton (1872:87) and Endle (1911:83) and some others trace their affinity with the Kacharis. Porter (1933:597) found Rabhas to belong to the Great Bodo or Mech family. Friend-Pereira (1912:142) believed that the Garos and the Rabhas descended from two sisters, and they were related. Gait (1892: 232) affirmed that Rabhas belong to the Great Bodo family, but it is not equally clear that the Rabhas are more closely allied to anyone tribe of that group like Garos and Kacharis. Although some Kacharis and Garos may have become Rabhas just as others have become Koches, it seems probable that the Rabhas are a distinct tribe.

Ethnically, the Rabha tribe belongs to the Indo-Tibetan group. They are found mainly in three states, namely, Assam, West Bengal, and Meghalaya. Das and Raha (1967: 1) viewed Rabhas are a little-known Scheduled Tribe community of West Bengal. Raha (1989:33) mentioned that since 1959 the Rabhas of West Bengal had been recognized as the Scheduled Tribes.

The Rabhas are most concentrated in the northern parts of West Bengal (94.1 percent). They are concentrated in the districts of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts (52.1 percent), Uttar Dinajpur district (18.7 percent), and Cooch Behar district (13.7 percent), Dakshin Dinajpur (4.9 percent), and Maldah (4.6 percent) (Census of India, 2011). Over a two-decade period, the Rabha population increased by 516.5 percent, from 2,466 in 1971 to 15,204 in 1991. The reasons for their rapid growth were unknown or unavailable. Again, their population increased to 27,820 in 2011, constituting 0.53 percent of the total tribal population in West Bengal. Their population increased by 85.3 percent from 1991 to 2011 (Census of India, 1971, 1991, 2011).

Findings

Total Rabha families in Andu and Baniya Forest villages together are 149. They numerically dominate both the forest villages. The total population is 624 persons with 4.2 average family sizes.

Change in exposure to the outside world

In the beginning, the Rabha forest villages or colonies was constructed by the Forest Department of State Government.

These villages were situated within or on the outskirts of the Reserved Forests. The Rabhas either wholly or mostly occupied forest villages. Resultantly, the Rabhas in forest villages were living amid their environment. Besides, the forest protection and preservation rules also usually kept the outsiders away from their localities. Moreover, the lack of accessible communication is another reason for maintaining these settlements somewhat isolated. Further, the forest Rabhas were not everyday visitors to neighbouring towns, villages, and market areas. Consequently, their contact with the outside world was not very intimate (Raha, 1974: 71-72). It gives that they did not have exposure to the outside world in the past, and their day-to-day life was restricted and centered among them only.

Nowadays, there are significant changes in the situation of the indigenous matrilineal society of the Rabha tribal community in forest villages as consequences of their continuous exposure and interaction with the other communities beyond their forest village, exposure to the infrastructural development and related progress, policies, and welfare for them, and the processes of gradual modernization that have been happened so far over the years. In consequence, they have gradually succeeded in setting foot in mainstream society at a certain point over time. All these have helped them change their outlook regarding their lives and allowed them to accept the changing situational facts and proceed accordingly to an extent.

(Note: N= 149 families.)

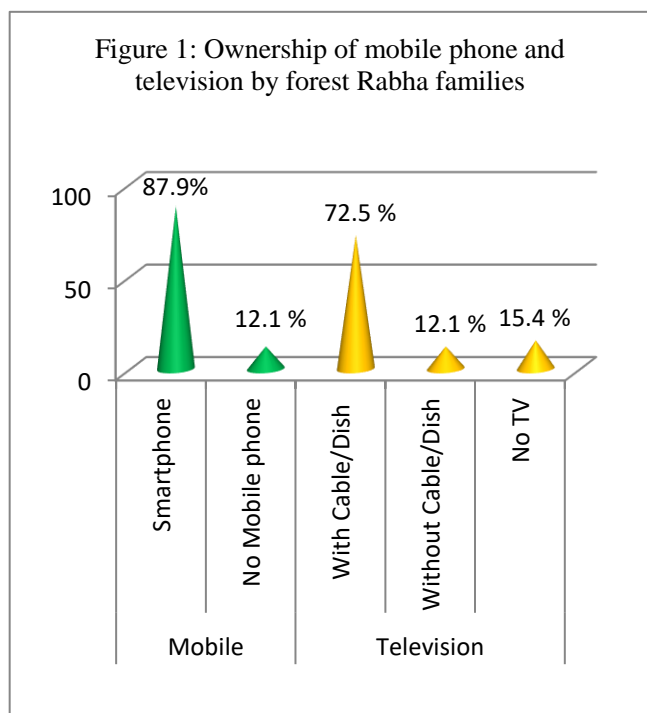
(Source: Field Survey 2021.)

Simultaneously, access to the internet, mobile phones with internet, mass media like television, and the use of social media have played an essential role in increasing awareness and exposure to the outside world among today’s forest Rabhas. It is found that 87.9 percent of respondent families own smartphones, and 84.6 percent own television sets in their houses (Figure 1). The use of smartphones has become popular among both the male and female Rabhas in the recent past. They have now been able to connect with the outside world easily. All these helped them to become interested, accept, and adapt to the modern trends and developments in their daily need and lifestyle.

Moreover, today’s Rabhas in forest villages, especially their youths are more active in using social media usage like Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube platforms. These also have helped them gain more knowledge and information not only about regional, and national but also at the international level i.e., the outside of their community and the world. For instance, they are now fascinated to watch Korean Drama, Chinese Drama, Thai Drama, and Hollywood movies apart from Bollywood movies. This was not so in the past, specifically in their parental and forefather generations.

The Rabhas, especially their young generation, are now comparatively on the path of progress in the spheres of education, educational aspiration, acceptance of modern trends in daily lifestyles, and advancement in technology and other products. These have broadened their mindset, leading them towards rational thinking and exploring the outside world beyond their forest villages and community.

Figure 1: Ownership of mobile phone and television by forest Rabha families



Change in literacy and education

Table 1: Literacy rate among All Rabhas of West Bengal, 1991, 2001 and 2011

| Year | Literacy | | | Gap in literacy to West Bengal Total Literacy | | | Gender Gap |
|------|----------|------|--------|---|------|--------|------------|
| | Total | Male | Female | Total | Male | Female | |
| 1991 | 30.4 | 39.8 | 18.7 | 27.3 | 28.0 | 27.9 | 21.1 |
| 2001 | 64.9 | 73.3 | 50.8 | 3.7 | 3.9 | 8.8 | 22.5 |
| 2011 | 73.6 | 79.8 | 67.3 | 2.7 | 1.9 | 3.2 | 12.5 |

(Note: Below 7-year population is excluded.)

(Source: Author’s calculation of percentage using census data of Census of India, Government of India, 1991, 2001 and 2011.)

The literacy rate among all Rabhas of West Bengal is substantially increased from 1991 to 2011. The overall percentage of literacy is comparatively higher among males than females. The gender gap in literacy percentage is declined significantly from 2001. The gap between the total literacy of Rabhas and West Bengal declined rapidly during the period 1991 to 2001 and 2001 to 2011 (Table 1). It reveals the significant growth in the literacy rate of Rabha tribe in West Bengal.

Ray Chaudhury (2007: 8) cited the “the standard of education of the Rabhas was inferior. There are hardly a few who were at the school level, and none had crossed the primary school level of education and beyond. Only two or three families where a few souls (all male) read up to class VIII’s standard”. It reveals that the education was very low among the Rabhas.

In the earlier past, the forest Rabhas used to face complex constraints to get admission and continue schooling due to not availability of schools either within or nearby villages due to their location in dense reserved forests. Even after getting admission in distant school, they used to face difficulty due to lack of road and communication facilities. For instance, they had to go to school either by cycle or by walking even through dense forest endangering their lives and fearing attack from wild animals. All these had affected them adversely to get admission as well as to continue schooling, and it was so difficult for the Rabha girls. Consequently, there had been immense low education spread among them. But with the gradual passage of time, today, they have now the easy access to avail schooling in various schools due to their availability from primary to high and even secondary schools either within or nearby forest villages, and other nearby/distant areas besides having improved road, communication, and transport facilities.

Consequently, it has become easy and convenient for them not only to get admission in schools but also continue schooling and continue education even in school/college located in distant places. Apart from these, there is a provision of scholarship/stipend for Scheduled Tribe students during their educational career in school, college, and university, which also have contributed to the progress in educational spread among today’s Rabhas of forest

villages. Therefore, it is relevant to look into the today’s situation of educational attainment by Rabhas in forest villages.

Table 2: Educational attainments of literate Rabhas in forest villages

| Educational Category | Educational Attainments | |
|--|-------------------------|------------|
| | No. | Percentage |
| Class I - IV | 125 | 28.1 |
| Class V - VIII | 141 | 31.8 |
| Class IX - X | 78 | 17.6 |
| Secondary | 32 | 7.2 |
| Class XI - XII | 25 | 5.6 |
| Higher/Senior Secondary | 20 | 4.5 |
| Under graduate Student (1 st year - 3 rd year) | 14 | 3.2 |
| Graduate | 6 | 1.4 |
| Post-Graduate | 1 | 0.2 |
| Diploma in Education | 1 | 0.2 |
| Diploma in Engineering | 1 | 0.2 |
| Total Literate | 444 | 100.0 |

(Note: 1. Secondary indicates the level that passed out final Class X examination.

2 Higher/Senior Secondary indicates the level that passed out final Class XII examination.

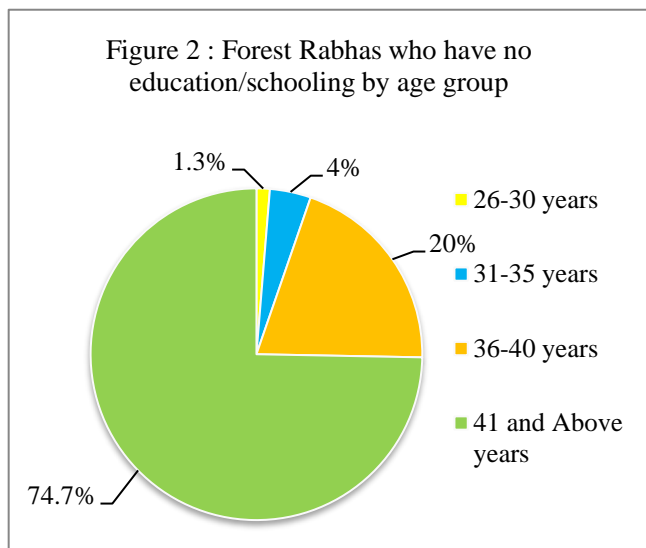
3. Undergraduate indicates those who are 1st, 2nd and 3rd year student in college.

4. Excluding below 7-year population.

5. Students are included in literate category.)

(Source: Field Survey, 2021.)

In forest villages, 74.8 percent of the Rabhas are literate and attained a different level of education. There is now an educational progress and better spread among the forest Rabhas specifically its young generation in the purview of their educational attainment of secondary, higher secondary, graduation, and above including diplomas in education, and engineering (Table 2). It is evident that those Rabhas have no education/schooling, almost all (94.7 percent) are in higher age groups mainly 41 and above years of age, followed by and rest in 36-40 years of age (Figure 2).



(Note: N = 150 persons who are illiterate and have no education/schooling of 149 families)

(Source: Field Survey, 2021.)

At present, the more exposure to the outside world beyond their forest villages and community, and their increased awareness about the necessity and benefits of education along with aspiration of getting better employment opportunities have also contributed to a significant spread of education in comparison with the educational situation not only in their forefather but also parental generations.

Education among the today’s forest Rabhas has contributed to a change in two ways. At first, the education has helped to increase awareness and outlook about their situation in and outside of their Rabha tribal society. It has encouraged to aspiring the attainment of higher education as well as competitive to gain jobs and services to both in government and private sectors. At the same time, it has helped them to understand and get equipped for adaptation to carry way the trends of modernization and changes.

Change in economic activities

Raha (1974:71) stated that the traditional economy of Rabhas was based on agriculture, forest-based activities, and weaving. The Rabhas are closely linked with nature, and thereby their economy was largely forest-based. They were familiar with hunting and also practiced shifting cultivation. However, colonial rulers later forced them to leave the

forests as the forest lands were being restricted and protected legally. Resultantly, they took refuge in forest villages as plantation laborers. Indian Government, after independence, more or less sustained the same legal system of forest management, and the Forest Department of State Government employed Rabhas living in forest villages to do the forest works prescribed by the forest authority for a period of 80 to 120 days in a year. Besides, they cultivated the land they got from the Forest Department during the remaining day.

Table 3: Livelihood pattern of Rabhas in forest villages

| Type | Total (N=414) |
|---|---------------|
| Farmer | 29.7 |
| Housewife | 32.4 |
| Labour work | 19.0 |
| Service (both Government and Private) | 5.1 |
| Business/Shop keeping | 2.2 |
| Teacher (both Government and Private Schools) | 1.0 |
| Private Tutor | 0.5 |
| Motor Driving | 2.4 |
| Carpenter | 1.2 |
| Gram Panchayat member/Political worker | 0.5 |
| No work | 6.0 |

(Note: 1. Excluding students and minors.

2. No work denotes for those who are very old aged and do not perform any gainful work.)

(Source: Field Survey, 2021.)

Besides agriculture, nowadays, the Rabhas are involved in diversified occupations, like service, business-cum-shop keeping, school teacher and private tuition, carpentry, motor driving, labor work, political worker, etc. (Table 3).

These forest villages are located in the Chilapata Reserved Forest Range, and due to their location, there is a growth in forest and wildlife tourism. As a result, there has been an influx of tourists traveling from various parts of the state and country for Forest (Jungle) Safari to watch wild animals in the deep forest besides resting and enjoying the pleasant, natural, and scenic beauty of the forest throughout the year. There are now several ‘Forest Guesthouses-cum-Homestays’ established in Rabha forest villages for staying tourists. This tourism contributed to employment opportunities for the Rabhas in the guesthouses/homestays and employment related to ‘forest safari’ and involvement in ‘shop-keeping’ business in the localities.

Today’s Rabha women in forest villages are found as members of different Self-Help Groups as general members, treasurers, and presidents in forest villages. These Self-Help Groups are playing an essential role in making them

empowered to meet their emergency financial and family needs for their own families by utilizing the amount of loan/grant received through their Self-Help Group for different purposes like medical treatment, the marriage of girls, house repairing, construction of houses/living room, paddy business, shop repairing, purchasing animals for domestication and earning, investment in the trade and business, etc. Such opportunity which was not available in the past has brought a notable change in the situation and position of present-day Rabha women in forest villages.

Change in cultural tradition

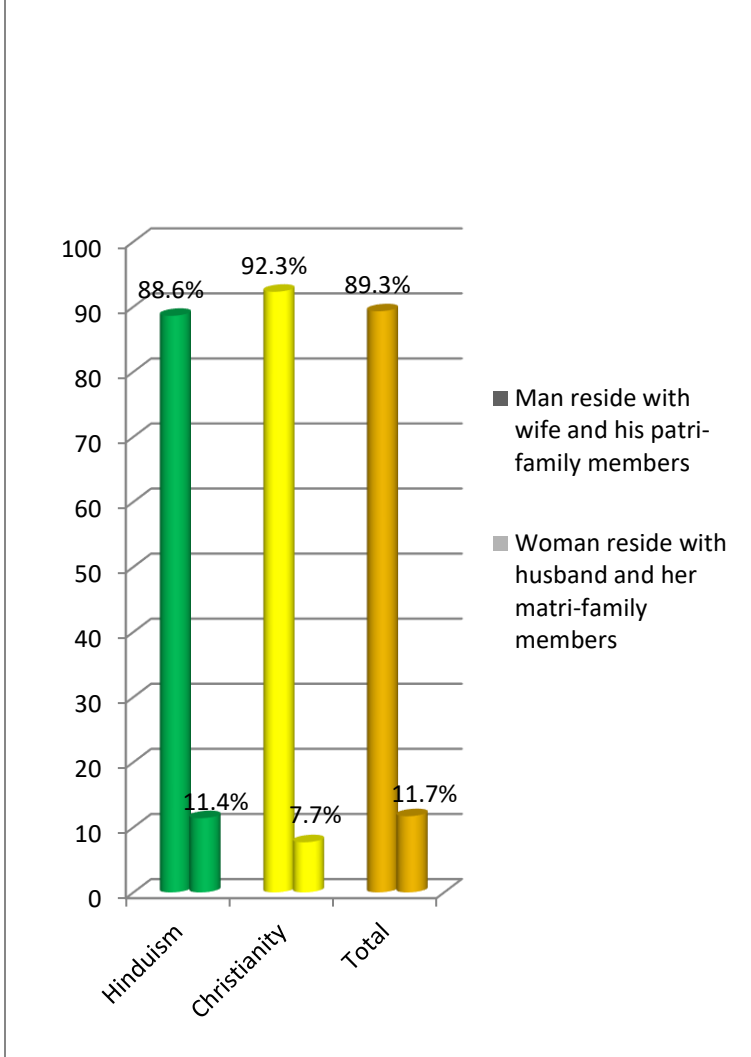
Marriage pattern:

Raha (1974:76) indicated that the “Rabhas are an endogamous tribe and generally practice monogamy. Forest Rabhas strictly follow monogamy and does not approve marriage with another ethnic group while among village Rabhas it is no bar”. At present, the occurrence of marriages of forest Rabhas with Hindu castes, Nepalese, and other tribes like Mech, Oraon, etc., is found in forest Rabha villages, which was not prevailed in the past. Besides, interfaith marriages between Rabha Hindus and Christians are common in forest villages.

Moreover, Das and Raha (1967:104) observed that the arranged/negotiation wedding was traditionally found among the Rabhas. These trends of tradition in weddings had prevailed in the past. However, now inter-ethnic marriages have been occurring mainly due to love affairs and other compulsions. Nowadays, love marriages, to some extent, are also prevailed apart from the continuity of traditional types of arranged/negotiation marriages in Rabha forest villages.

"The rejection of ‘Janjogi’ religion by Rabhas of Forest villages helped restore their matrilineal tradition” (Raha, 1989:303). Thereby, the matrilineal tradition of the residential pattern after marriage continued among forest Rabhas; for instance, a man lived with his wife and her matri-family members after marriage.

Figure 3: Residential pattern after marriage among forest Rabha families by religion



(Note: N = 149 Families.)

(Source: Field Survey, 2021.)

There is a trend in today’s forest villages that family members prefer the patrilineal pattern of residence after marriage in place of matrilineal tradition. It is evident that in significant cases the forest men after marriages are living with wives and their patri-family members (Figure 3). Therefore, the patrilineal residential pattern of marriages has become more common in place of matrilineal tradition in present-day forest Rabha society; though the matrilineal tradition has also been continued in a lesser extent but gradually in decline.

Traditional dance and music

Traditionally, cultural dance and music in the past had played an essential part in the lives of the forest Rabhas. Indeed, after every worship, ritual, and celebration they usually performed various dances to ingratiate their deities. Most of the Rabha women used to perform singing and dancing

during such occasions. The Rabha women of all ages used to take part in such dance performances wholeheartedly.

In today's forest Rabha society, their traditional cultural dance and music, particularly the 'war' songs and dances, has become a cultural profession and a source of earning a livelihood. For instance, there are now three dance and singing groups (registered under the Department of State Information and Culture, Government of West Bengal) in Andu and adjacent Kurmai forest villages, namely 'Rabha Jagaran Sanstha', 'Deepsinghee Rabha Sanstha', and 'Kurmai Banabustee Rabha Sristi Dal'. These groups perform the Rabha traditional dance and song in front of tourists who visit the popular Jaldapara Wild Animal Forest Sanctuary, and other Sanctuaries in the Chilapata Forest Range throughout a year. It is usually held in collaboration with the Department of Forest and Tour Packager Entrepreneurs. Significantly, today the traditional Rabha dance and singing has become a source of monetary gains as well as a viable profession. These groups also perform traditional dance and singing whenever they are invited to do so by the state governments in different places and other parts of the country. Simultaneously, it also help to keep uphold and perpetuate their traditional cultural identity.

Besides, their traditional cultural dance and song, they are these days, especially the young generation also fond of Indian Bollywood and Bengali music and movies. Even now they have a growing interest in Korean Pop Music (K-pop) and Western songs. Interestingly, this younger generation of forest Rabhas use to upload Bollywood and Bengali songs translated into Rabha language. Apart from these, they also uptake modern Bollywood, western, and other countries dance styles in their dance performance learn from YouTube videos, as well as upload their dance performance on YouTube and share it on social media.

Dress pattern and weaving

There are changes in dress patterns from traditional to modern among forest Rabhas over the years. The availability of varieties of dresses like maxi (nighty), salwar/kameez suits, Kurtis, jeans, tops, hoodies, jackets, and sarees are usually preferred to wear by today's forest Rabha women. At present, the young generation of forest Rabha women use to wear modern Indian and western dresses. Gold ornaments are now more popular, while in the past the silver ornaments were mostly preferred by forest Rabha women.

Similarly, today's Rabha men wear modern dresses like trousers, t-shirts, jeans, coats, and jackets in place of their traditional attire. These are mainly due to their exposure to modern trend of dress patterns on television programmes, movies, and videos. Adaptation to modern dresses by forest Rabhas is found more conspicuous among their young generation, while the very old-aged Rabhas are continuing with their traditional Rabha dresses in forest villages.

The weaving of traditional dresses and clothes in the past was a part of Rabha woman's ordinary household duty. It was commonly known that the Rabha woman, in general, is

an expert weaver. They had to depend upon themselves to use clothes by preparing independently. Moreover, the Rabha traditional dresses and clothes were not easy and readily available in markets. The lack of road and communication facilities to go to distant markets from their forest villages was also lacking. Moreover, like today, they did not have many dress options apart from their non-exposure to the outside world and concentration on life mainly at the forest village level.

Over the years, the reasons like today's more exposures, awareness, availability of varieties dress options, and knowledge in modern dress patterns; improved communication of road and transport facilities to go to distant markets in towns for purchasing; no demand of their woven products in local and or nearby markets for selling; etc. have created the situation of no more interest in general for weaving of traditional dress and clothes among Rabha women of each family in forest villages. However, barring a very few women who have the 'sitting handlooms' have been continue weaving for a time in forest villages. Therefore, there is a change in the present situation of forest Rabha women, for whom the weaving is no more a household duty like in the past.

Inheritance of family property

The forest Rabhas traditionally followed the matrilineal inheritance rules. After the mother's death, the movable property was inherited by the youngest daughter. In contrast, immovable property, like, land (both cultivable and homestead land) and houses, were owned by the Forest Department, Government of West Bengal. These were allotted in the name of the individual forest labour. The nominee used to be the husband of his youngest daughter provided his name was forwarded by the village headman and approved by the state government (Raha, 1974:76).

In today's Rabha society of forest villages, both women and men share the family property according to the necessity of a family. According to the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, the private lands of the tribal, on which the tribal people possess the government record of ownership ('Patta' land) is now awarded to a Rabha man, including maintaining the spouse's name (women). Inclusion of the spouse's name did not prevail in the past whenever the land was granted to Rabha men by the Forest Department. So, there is a change to some extent in the situation of inheriting family property by forest Rabhas, and the inheritance of family property according to matrilineal rule of descent is no more strictly followed like in the past.

Change in health care

For a long time, the forest Rabhas like other tribes, were largely dependent upon the forest and natural resources to meet their nutrition and health care requirements. In cases of illness and diseases, they were in the past, usually dependent largely upon treatment by the traditional spiritual priests known as 'Huji'.

The forest Rabhas whenever necessary called the Huji (priest) to detect the cause of the disease in illness as soon as possible. This is because the Rabhas believed that an evil spirit took shelter in the body of an ailing person. The Rabhas were very much afraid of the deity and evil spirit. Therefore, even when the babies suffered from fever, cold and coughing, dysentery, vomiting, etc., they called Huji. Huji then performs the 'Puja' (worshipping) to satisfy the deity, including other ingredients of the 'Puja' with the belief that the ailed one would be recovered. Moreover, they believe that performances of such 'Puja' satisfy the harmful deities for recovery, and all the diseases and danger would be driven out the evil spirits from the village (Paul, 2001:40) and (Nath 2008: 36-38).

The then situation of fearing and belief in evil spirits and deities, lacking proper medical and health care facilities, road and communication facilities, and above all isolative and restricted living within the community and village level along with consequent lack of exposure to the outside world, etc., the role of the traditional spiritual priest (Huji) might have been crucial in the treatment for curing illnesses and diseases in Rabha forest villages.

But with the passage of time, there is a rapid change nowadays, for instance, 73.8 percent of the respondent forest Rabha families initially prefer first either private medical physicians/practitioners or hospitals to undergo treatment of any health problems and illness. Furthermore, 26.2 percent of them also initially prefer 'Kabiraj' (Ayurvedic doctor) to treat illness. However, in case of major illness, they all prefer to undergo treatment either in Government or private hospitals.

Given the above, it may be relevant to point out that from 2008 to 2020, the situation related to health awareness of forest Rabhas had improved to a great extent. For instance, childbirth primarily happened at home until 2014-2015 besides at hospitals to some extent during this period. Today, the delivery of a child mainly happens at Hospitals. In the past, the health assistant had to visit door to door for counseling and check any case of illness in Rabha families, for vaccination of kids, look after pregnant women for prenatal counseling, and post-natal counseling for new mothers. They usually did not visit the health center and consult with a physician for illness due to their conservativeness. Whereas, now the forest Rabhas visits the health center for their kids' vaccination and a blood test for Malaria disease, etc. The malaria cases had been more in the past, and the last malaria case was found in the year 2016 in forest villages, while at present, no malaria cases are found in forest villages.

Moreover, they earlier were not aware about the vaccination for new born and other child, but now they ask health personnel when they have to come for the next vaccination dose. They now visit the health center to avail of any medical care as per requirement. Therefore, there is a significant change among present-day forest Rabhas, who mostly prefer

and undergo modern and advanced modes of professional treatment for health problems and illnesses (Source: Informant of a health sub-center in a forest village).

The factors like easy access to modern medical and health facilities, availability of private medical practitioners and medical shops, along with improved communication and transportation other related developments, and better educational spread, etc. are the reasons for their increasing awareness, outlook, and change to make use of the advanced modern medical and health facilities and undergo treatment.

Change in political institution

Tribes are autonomous social entities. Territorially and linguistically, tribes are more homogeneous. Raha (1974:76-77) emphasized that Rabhas lived in both forest villages and revenue (non-forest) villages, there was a traditional Council of Elders known as 'Marab Sen' (Marab means man and Sen mean aged). The Council was headed by a traditional chief called the 'Pare', and the priests, namely 'Deosi' and 'Dhami', were also members of this council by their positions. The Council was empowered to judge social and religious offenses. The council used to look after all affairs of the village. Moreover, an inter-village Council had jurisdiction over several forest villages that form the member forest villages. The 'Pare' (headman) of all these villages used to represent their respective villages.

Besides, Raha (1974: 77) again referred that the forest Rabhas has retained their traditional council of elders to a great extent. In contrast, their traditional council of elders has almost been replaced by the statutory Panchayat system in the revenue (non-forest) villages. Moreover, Pal (2001:179) cited that the Council did not have female representatives though the structure of the Rabha society was based exclusively on the matrilineal principle.

The forest Rabha villages were administratively controlled by the forest authorities (Sengupta (2001: 178) till the enactment of the 73rd Amendment Act of 1992. Even after the enactment of the Forest Rights Act 2006, the forest villages were not declared as revenue villages (Choudhury, 2015). The first Gram Panchayat election in forest villages was held approximately in 1996-1997 as informed by a Panchayat member of a forest village, which has brought a change in the situation of political institution of the Rabha forest villages.

This has created better scopes for both Rabha men and women to participate and contest the election of their forest village Panchayats. For a few instances, it is found that Rabha women and men of forest villages are elected members in different Gram Panchayats of forest villages. Therefore, there has been a change over time in the political institutions due to the replacement of the traditional council of elders by Gram (village) Panchayat in today's Rabha society of forest villages. There is now representation of forest Rabha women in Gram (village) Panchayat, while the Rabha traditional Council did not have the women's representation in the past.

Emergence of social differentiation

The tribal society is considered egalitarian in the sense that except for the village headman of the clan or tribal chief, all other members of a tribe enjoy equal social status. The traditional Rabha society like other tribes had been egalitarian. The significant economic pursuits had been mainly forest-labour work and agriculture with the very little spread of education in the past.

The important observation encountered during field survey that at present, there is now emerged a subtle social differentiation between the forest Rabha families based on the present situation of varied attainments of better educational, livelihood, and economic well-being which have contributed a trend of differentiated family status within their society in forest villages.

Conclusion

The Rabhas in forest villages are no longer isolated and restricted to living within them only like in the past. They are now experiencing the changing situation of progress, development and modernity. It is evident that they have been experienced and adapted to the significant changes in their exposure to the outside world beyond their community and villages; progress in literacy and higher educational attainments; their economic activities are now more diversified and not restricted to agriculture and forest labour only; there are changes in their traditional cultural pattern like in marriage pattern, traditional dance and music, traditional dress pattern and weaving, inheritance of family property; change in their traditional political institution like replacement of their traditional Council of Elders by Gram Panchayat; and also a subtle differentiation in family status is emerged in their today's society of forest villages which was not existed in the past .

Footnotes

1. The northern part of West Bengal is also known as North Bengal constituted by eight districts namely Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Cooch Behar, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Maldah, Uttar Dinajpur, and Dakshin Dinajpur.

2. According to the Census of India, the Literacy rate is the percentage of the total population of a given community who can read and write only. The percentage of literacy rate was calculated based on the Census figures of total illiterate and literate population excluding below 7 years of age.

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Conflict of interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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