

**A Study of Ritual and Social Control: An Analysis of Religious practices  
among the Rabha Community of North Bengal in West Bengal**

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**Abstract**

Religion becomes the important part of the human society since the dawn of the civilization. The *Rabha* is a scheduled tribe community belonging to the Indo-Mongoloid group of people. In West Bengal, they mainly settled in Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Cooch Behar district. The *Rabha* community has magnificent traditional beliefs and social practices. With selected structured questionnaire, field survey and interactions with the inhabitants of the community the present study partakes to understand the actual form and position of the religion along with the transition and trends of changes in religion of the *Rabha* community in the segregated parts of the west Bengal. It is observed that their traditional religious philosophy is mainly based on Animism. But the influence of Hinduism and Christianity has a far reaching impact on the religious tradition and structure of the Rabhas. Besides the *Rabha* society have also constantly changes in the process of *Hinduism*, *Sanskritisation* and *Christianization* (Singha, 2004). These changing trends have effects on their socio-cultural, economic, political life, social institution etc. There is a need of sensitive careful understanding to recognize the effects of religious changes on their daily life and social interactions.

Key words: Religion, traditions, Rabha, ritual

**Introduction:**

Religion is a complex phenomenon. Religion being one of the earliest institutions is also one of the oldest subjects in the human history. The English word 'Religion' has a Latin root, religion meaning to bind together. Religion is the root of rites and rituals, which means the system of faith and worship. Rites and rituals are one of the most important institutions of human culture, which relates people to each other on special occasions. All societies have

some beliefs, which can be grouped under the term religion. The Rabhas of West Bengal believe in Animism. They have the concept of attributing living soul to inanimate object and natural phenomenon. Since, the early days the Rabhas are used to worship spirits presumed to stay on stone, trees and others natural objects. They did never offer incorporeal worship but now-a-days they participate on community idol worship influenced by neighbouring communities. In this way, they take a part on worships of Goddess *Durga, kali, Saraswati* and others. They also perform many Hindu religious occasions like *RasYatra, BijayaDasami* and so on. As a result there occurred cultural admixture of a number of people irrespective of any religion, caste and locality. These factors are automatically mobilizing them to get more *Hinduized*. Though the present day beliefs externally seem to be simple but it is really complex when we learn in its totality. Rabha religion not only reinforces the social structures but also contributes to social cohesion and community building based on natural trust and benevolent give and take. This also instills in them an element of confidence in their day to day transactions.

**Objectives:**

This study has been taken with the following objectives are given below;

- To understand about the traditional religion of the Rabha community of West Bengal.
- To find out the affecting factors from the other communities in the religious world of the Rabhas.
- To shape out the transformation and dimensional change in the religious life of the Rabhas and its impacts on their society.

**Materials and Methods:**

For this study primary and secondary data are collected. The primary data were collected using the methods of observation, in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, case study and survey method like the household survey and field survey. Most of the quantitative data are collected in secondary data sources like census data, various Government documents, Reports of village Panchayat office in Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Cooch Behar district, District Gazetteers, District Census Handbook, survey of India, published journals, books, newspapers and others.

**Perspectives of Traditional Religion:**

The Rabhas are very conservative in their religious practices and beliefs. So they also maintained the traditional beliefs and values, customs and rituals with great care. The Rabhas believe in animism. They have the concept of attributing living soul to inanimate objects and natural phenomena. Traditional Rabhas used to worship spirits presumed to stay on stone, trees and other natural objects. All those worship are occurred in betterment of their daily livelihood conditions. They have also various rituals and beliefs connected with agricultural activities, hunting, fishing and also their treatment of disease and ailment. Their clan based totemic objects like different plants and animals were related with forest but gradually lost their impressions along with the ecological disturbances. Totemic objects played an important role in their socio-religious life which maintained their social unity and solidarity but it is now getting converted in to atomic in nature.

The traditional Rabhas are in different times having been organizing different religious rites related to varieties of deities. The puja offering and deities associated with religious rites are grouped as given below: The various religious worships are mainly *Rantak puja, Hasang puja, Kancho puja, Baikho puja, Mairabai puja, Khokshi puja* and others. The various worships based on folk beliefs and customs are mainly *PauraDeo, Lakhardeo, Bahalideo, KuberDeotar puja, Khelaram puja, BeraHasubai puja* etc. The major deities of Rabhas are discussed in below:

***Hasang:***

*Hasang* is combination of 13 deities, these deities are-*Langachara, Koinang, Fedor, Langgacha, Tura, Darmang, Kolaka, Pajamba, Burabadi, Khuchuri, Tray-nang* and *Chari*. In this worship a special *Bhog* or *Phok-chak* curry is prepared with *Dekhia* (a fern) and some meat of fowl, pork mixed with rice powder.

***Langa:***

*Langa* , literally means Mahadeva one of the greatest deities. This deity is worshiped in jungle or in the bank of rivers. It is offered in the month of *Baishak* or *Jeth* an object to have a good harvest.

## **Baikho:**

In the ancient times this Goddess was worshiped by all section of the Rabhas. The meaning is that Bai means 'deity and khoi' means great. In *Baikho* four Goddesses are worshiped like- *Susari, Nakkati, Tamai and Daduri*. In this worshiped in the fixed date and place song is sung. The song is sung are the chief priest house and when the song begins no one can sleep at night.

## **Moirabi:**

The Rabhas are practiced in *Moirabi* when there are any ailments like sudden loss of consciousness, dumb, frightening and abnormality. The priest begins puja with mantra and offering of a pigeon fowls.

## **Khusumbia:**

This *puja* is offered when spread of diseases like allergy, skin ailments, swelling of bodies etc.

## **Koncho Deity:**

It is worshiped in order to save the granary from insects, mouse etc and keep livestock intact.

## **Dainy Deity:**

This worship is protect crops and to prevent people from diseases. Some other important deities are also found in traditional religion in Rabhas. *Bay-Ma-Bay* (Benevolent deity), *Darmang Bay* (God of good health), *Bero-Hachu-Bay* (Protector of domestic animals), *Khaisam-Bay* (sacrifice to cure height blindness), *Achka Bay* (Goddess of water), *Budha Bay* (household deity), *Biswali Bay* (to cure pain), *Singra bay* (to cure fever), *Khclaram Bay* (to save crops) and others (Narzary, D. 2014).

## **Social Change:**

The social change occurring to the Rabha society appears to be multi-dimensional in character as we see them through their social-religions, social cultural and socio-economic

perspectives. The adaptation to the Hindu ways of life and assimilation to its culture more particularly by the Pati section of the tribe is a distinct phenomenon of social change noticed during the recent past. The conversion of a sizable section of the tribe to Christianity is another phenomenon reacting sharply to the continuation of old traditional socio-religious rituals or the sociocultural traits of much ethnic importance. Even what have been left out have undergone curtailment with the passing of times due to various factors including economic factor. 'Farkranti - the death ceremony of the Rabhas is now very rarely celebrated with its full quota of ritualistic details as it was done in the earlier days. The Langa Puja in the Pati villages or the Baikho (alternatively of Khoksi) puja in the-Rangdani villages have lost much of their former glory. The loss of the indigenous technology of manufacturing Buburenga -an intricate musical instrument by the women section of the Rabha society and virtual disappearance of Dighalpeti Kham another musical instrument of much traditional importance remind us about the gradual erosion of the cultural heritage of the tribe

**Results and Analysis:**

Influence of Others Religious Groups and Societies: Today, the Rabhas of West Bengal are more often follow a faith which is a blend of some animistic and others religious rituals. The religious life of the Rabhas gives the picture of a mixture of different elements.

**Hinduism:**

The plain land Rabhas are living with the people of caste Hindus from a prolonged period, naturally a lot of cultural traits can be observed of the Rabhas. The influence of Hinduism has a far reaching impact on the religious tradition and structure of different groups of the Rabhas. Since the early Forties there has been a widespread movement of Hinduism and a larger section of the Rabhas have adopted Hinduism. They believe that is the supreme creator of in various forms. Beside *Rishi*, the Rabhas worship two female Goddess named *Rungtuk* and *Basek* who are actually the two daughters of *Rishi*. Hindu Rabhas are considering *Rungtuk* and *Basek* as *Lakshmi* and *Saraswati*. They also worship *Kamakshya Devi* during *Ambabachi* that is a Hindu Holy festival related to *Kali* Goddess. The *Kamakshya puja* of *Kamakhyaguri* under Alipurduar district is a big festival of the Rabhas. Earlier days they use of *Trishul*, prayer flags, bells etc but now a days they have purchased many calendars and photos of popular Gods and Goddesses like the Hinduism.

## Christianization:

The advent of Christian Missionaries in the Rabhas inhabiting areas of West Bengal and preaching of doctrine of Christianity and publication of such doctrine by the British foreign and Bible society (1909) first in Rangdani dialect in 1909 had to be said as the process of *Christianization* among the Rabhas. Various changes are occurred with the contact of Christianity. The Church have been providing education, medical care and to some extent orientation for the youth. However it has a motivating force which gives greater leadership in orienting peoples to become socially minded and taking up challenges of modern societies.

## Conclusion:

The acceptance of Hindu and others religion beliefs, practices and festivals have altered their traditional cultural practices and adopted a number of new social customs in the life of Rabha peoples. With the application of modern knowledge now they were grow up their economic life and on the other hand with the acceptance of modern education and Hindu and Christian rituals in their daily life they are reaching in Hindu social strata. They also are trying to gain equal social prestige along with the local Bengali Hindus and Rajbanshis. These changes are gradually taking them towards modernization and now this Rabha community is on the way of a better society.

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