



Cultural Transformation and Continuity among the Totla Rabhas of Udalguri District: A study of Modern Influences on Indigenous Identity

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Abstract

The Rabha community of Assam, a prominent Schedule Tribe with deep ethnic and cultural roots in the region, represents vital components of the state's socio-cultural mosaic. Belonging to the Mongoloid racial stock and speaking Sino-Tibetan languages, the Rabhas are primarily concentrated in different districts of Assam like Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Udalguri, Baksa, Nalbari, Sonitpur, Bongaigaon, Dhubri, and Kokrajhar. The Rabha community is organized into clusters, and they are further divided into eight sub-groups. Among the eight sub-groups, the Totla Rabhas of the Udalguri district are particularly notable due to their long established settlement and evolving socio-cultural dynamics. This research paper aims to examine cultural continuity and transformation within the Totla Rabha sub-group, with a focus on how modern influences such as education, technology, economic change, and increased interaction with mainstream society have affected their traditional lifestyles, language, beliefs, and customs. Hence, this research adopts a qualitative approach, using ethnographic field work based on purposive sampling method and secondary data have also been collected from government reports and academic literatures. This multi-method approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how indigenous identity is being negotiated in the face of rapid change, while also highlighting the resilience and adaptability of the Totla Rabha Community.

Key words: Totla Rabha, Modernism, Transition and Continuity.

1.1 Introduction:

The Rabha community of Assam is one of the prominent Schedule Tribes of the region, with deep roots in the ethnic and cultural fabric belonging to the Mongoloid racial stock and speaks languages from the Sino-Tibetan family. They are predominantly found in the northern and southern regions of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, with major concentrations in districts like Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Udalguri, Baksa, Nalbari, Sonitpur, Bongaigaon, Dhubri, and Kokrajhar. The Rabhas also maintain close ties with neighboring regions of Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan, where smaller populations of Rabhas reside. The Rabha community in Assam, according to the 2011 Census, has a population of 2,96,189 people, making up 0.95% of the state's total population and 7.63% of the total Scheduled Tribe (ST) population in Assam. The community's population distribution is highest in Goalpara district, which houses 35.03% of the Rabha population, followed by Kamrup (R) with 30.73% and Udalguri with 10.42%. (Statistical Handbook of Assam, 2016)

The Rabha community of Assam has a vibrant culture that is deeply rooted in their history, traditions, and connection to nature. Their cultural heritage encompasses language, rituals, festivals, music, dance, arts, crafts, and a distinct way of life. In the Census Report of 1911, J.E. Friend Pereira, as an anthropologist and ethnographer, provided a detailed and poetic description of the physical features of the Rabha tribe in these words, “In general appearance the Rabhas show all the characteristics of the Mongoloid stock: a round face, flat nose, prominent cheekbone, obliquely set eyes, sallow complexion, coarse hair, scanty beard and well-developed lower eternities” (Tribes of Assam, Part-I, p.130). In this way, Pereira described the Rabha people as having a distinctive appearance, one that marked them as different from other ethnic groups in Assam. However, the physical characteristics as mentioned above may not be found in the same degree in every section. Hence, the Rabha community is organized into clusters, and they are further divided into eight sub-groups, such as: 1. Rangdani Rabha, 2. Maitory Rabha, 3. Kocha Rabha, 4. Pati Rabha, 5. Hana Rabha, 6. Bitla Rabha, 7. Dahori Rabha and 8. Totla Rabha. Each of these sub-groups has its own identity, based on various factors such as ancestry, traditional occupations, dialect, and some unique social customs. Despite the division into sub-groups, the Rabhas are united by a common language, customs, festivals, and social practices. Notably, the Totla Rabha subgroup holds significant importance in the present study of the Rabha community, especially in the context of the Udalguri district, because the Totla Rabhas, predominantly settled in the Udaslguri district since inception. In recent decades the Totla Rabhas like many other indigenous communities have experienced significant transitions. These changes stem from increasing exposure to mainstream society , education, Modern technology, and economic shifts.. As a result, traditional life styles are being altered, language use is declining , and customary dress and ornaments are being replaced by modern alternatives. This study seeks to explore these dynamics through the lens of cultural continuity and change.

1.2. Objectives of the Study:

- i. To study the traditional language, and traditional attire of the Totla Rabhas in Udalguri District.
- ii. To examine the socio-cultural changes and modern influences on the Totla Rabhas of the area.

1.3. Methodology:

The research study employs a qualitative approach, combining both primary and secondary data. The primary data are collected in the area of Udalguri district. During field study, field visits and observation method have been conducted based on a purposive sampling method to understand cultural practices, the general differences in cultural practices and perception of the Totla Rabhas of the district. Formal and informal interviews were also carried out with the villagers of the selected areas. Group discussion was also conducted during the field work. Besides, the secondary data have been collected from a range of online resources, historical texts, census and government reports, academic articles, etc.

1.4. Discussion:

Social Structure and Rituals:

Sidney Endle mentioned in his book, "The Kacharis" (p. 83): "The name of this tribe (Rabhas) is of uncertain derivation, and in this district (Darrang) the people themselves are sometimes called Totolas, which may perhaps be a nickname." This sub-group, though often less studied, presents a rich tapestry of traditional knowledge, language, and cultural practice. Totla Rabha society is patriarchal, with social life centered on the household and community based rituals. Marriage customs, death rites, and agricultural festivals reflect a rich cultural continuity, though many rituals have been simplified or modified. Ritual specialists (Ojhas or village priests) still play a role in community ceremonies, though their influence has diminished. The slight differences in rites, rituals, and socio-cultural practices among the Totla Rabha group further highlight the diversity within the larger Rabha community. These unique practices could reflect adaptations to local environments, cultural exchanges, or specific historical events that shaped their identity. However, the Totla Rabha of the area is primarily an agriculturalist community like the other groups of the greater Rabha community and that is why maximum numbers of fairs and festivals are related to agriculture. One of the greatest religious and agricultural festivals of the Rabhas mainly practiced by the Maitori and Rongdani groups of Rabha people. Noteworthy, the Totla Rabha tribe celebrated the Assamese national festival Bihu, which is regarded as a vital part of the greater Assamese culture and some other pujas in spring time along with Baikho festival. When it comes to music, while the Rabha tribe traditionally uses instruments like Karha-Nol, Badung Dunga, Kham, and Dhak, they also use instruments such as the Dhol (drum), Pepa (wind instrument), Tal (cymbals), and Khool. Rabhas from ancient times are the followers of their core Hindu culture. Presently, it has been witnessed that a good number of the Rabha population have diverted from

their core Hindu ethnic adopting Christianity, Vaishnavism, or Krishnaguru beliefs. Religion is not only a spiritual belief but also a core aspect of Rabhas.

Language use by the Totla Rabhas in Udalguri District:

The Rabhas traditionally spoke the Rabha language, a distinct Tibeto-Burman language. However, in Udalguri district, the Totla Rabhas have transitioned to using patois Assamese (a local variant of the Assamese language) in their everyday conversations. The adoption of Assamese as the primary language of communication has largely been influenced by social, economic, and political factors over the years. Assamese is the dominant language in the region, and patois Assamese has become more prevalent in the daily lives of the Totla Rabhas due to factors like inter-community interactions, access to education in Assamese, and integration into the greater Assamese society. As a result, the Totla Rabhas no longer speak their mother tongue, which has led to concerns about the loss of their distinct Rabha language. This linguistic shift has raised concerns about the preservation of their cultural identity and linguistic heritage.

In response to the decline of the Rabha language among the Totla Rabhas, several Rabha based conscious organizations and community groups (Bebak Rabha Kraurang Runchume, All Rabha Students Union, Rabha National Council, Rabha Bhasha Parishod) have recently made significant efforts to revive and preserve their traditional cum racial Rabha language. These efforts may include standardizing the Rabha language, ensuring consistency in its grammar, vocabulary, and usage, implementing mother-tongue-based education at the primary school level, appointing Rabha language teachers, promoting language revitalization programs, including language classes, workshops, and the creation of learning materials among Rabhas, etc. As a result of these initiatives, a small but growing number of Rabha people in the Udalguri district have become proficient in the Rabha language, especially those who are part of the language revival efforts or have been educated in mother-tongue schools. These efforts are helping the young generations of the Totla Rabhas to learn and speak their traditional language, ensuring that it is passed down to the next generation. Despite these efforts, the Rabha language still faces significant challenges in being fully revived. The majority of the community, living in urbanized or rural areas, continues to use Assamese or patois Assamese in daily communication. Thus, while the Totla Rabhas of Udalguri have increasingly shifted to Assamese or patois Assamese language in their everyday life, efforts to revive and preserve the Rabha language are ongoing. These language preservation efforts are not only crucial for the cultural identity of the Totla Rabhas but also for maintaining their unique heritage and ensuring that future generations can connect with their ancestral roots.

Traditional Attires and Ornaments worn by the Totla Rabhas of Udalguri:

The Totla Rabha of Udalguri, with its rich cultural heritage, has long been known for its unique traditional dresses and ornaments. These include the *Patani*, *Kambung*, *Pajar*, and other items that are deeply embedded in their identity. The *Patani* is often a traditional wrap-around dress, while the *Kambung* is a type of shawl or headpiece, and the *Pajar* is typically worn as a shawl or muffler. In terms of ornaments, the Rabha women's jewelry is equally significant. The *Bri*, *Bola*, *Nambri*, *Nakarputi*, and *Nakbali* are traditional nose ornaments, each carrying cultural meaning and often made from gold, silver, or other locally available materials. However, the major concern is that although having rich traditional attire and ornaments, the majority of the Rabha community, especially the Totla Rabhas, are highly influenced by non-Rabha culture, such as their clothing, jewelry, festivals, house-building styles, and marriage traditions and habitual towards Assamese traditional clothes and jewelry, particularly those made from Muga silk and Pat thread. This change in outlook is significantly affecting the future of the Rabha community and the preservation of ethnicity.

Challenges and adaption:

Thus it has been observed that the Totla Rabhas have been facing numerous challenges such as loss of language, identity dilution, and limited documentation of their unique customs. This has affected their society, culture, and religious practices. It may raise questions about the potential dilution or loss of traditional practices, language, and other cultural elements. It is natural for traditions to change over time, but it is important that the core traditions of the Rabha people remain protected. The Rabha intellectuals, the Rabha organizers, and the entire Rabha community should be mindful of this aspect, and they must consider strategies to safeguard their traditional language, garments, and ornaments, ensuring that future generations understand, appreciate, and continue to speak and wear them with pride.

1.5. Conclusion:

Thus it has been observed that the Total Rabhas of Udalguri district represent a microcosm of indigenous identity negotiation in a rapidly modernizing world. It has been observed that the traditional practices of the Rabhas especially language, attire, and rituals are under pressure due to drastic socio-economic changes. The community's response to these challenges reflects both adaptation and efforts toward preservation. Future initiatives must focus on cultural documentation, education in mother tongue, and community based cultural revival strategies to ensure that the heritage of the Totla Rabhas is not lost in the tides of change. In this respect some conscious Rabha social organizations have been seen to step forward to revive and promote the use of traditional Rabha dress. These organizations are playing a vital role in reasserting the importance of cultural preservation and identity reinforcement among the Rabha community. The efforts of conscious Rabha organizations to revive and promote the traditional Rabha language and traditional attire are commendable. However, it is essential for all the members

of the Totla Rabha subgroup, in collaboration with various Rabha-based organizations, to step forward with an open mind and heart to preserve their traditional Rabha language and traditional attire. By embracing their responsibilities sincerely and diligently, they can ensure that the rich traditions of the Rabha people continue to thrive for generations to come. Last but not least, it must be appreciated that nowadays, the Totla Rabhas have become increasingly conscious of preserving their traditions and customs, and it is evident by the fact that Totla Rabhas are now resorting to their original belief of animism, widely celebrating the Baikho puja. Recently it is seen that like the other groups of Rabhas, the Totla Rabhas are also in a way to celebrate and continue their traditional Baikho festival along with celebration of Bihu festival in majority Rabha inhabited villages of the area.

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