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MANISH KUMAR RAHA, MATRILINY TO PATRILINY: A STUDY OF THE RABHA SOCIETY, GIAN PUBLISHING HOUSE, NEW DELHI,1989

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The book adds freshness to the existing anthropological as well as historical domain in India. Whenever a discussion on the specific indigenous community, there are a few empirical issues have appeared unexpectedly, such as their geographical location, ethnicity, socio-economic, socio-cultural features and they are static or not. Getting a vivid landscape of the particular community you have to locate from Colonial time (especially in 19th century) to post-Independent India. This phenomenon has based on because of, quite early in the course of colonial rule in India, British officials had to the forest fringe dwellers (community) as same status ‘tribes’ on the basis of their physical appearances and socio-cultural solidarity all over India. An un-aculturated ‘Primitive’ tribe as marked by ‘Ecological isolation’, ‘Backward food producing technology,’ ‘communal solidarity’ and a through ‘interpenetration of social relation and aesthetic and religion’. In this context Rabhas of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar are ‘tribe’ which are the same attribute to on earlier mentioned. Manash Kumar Raha has succeeded in getting information to construct the Rabha’s ‘mobilization’ one culture to another, as well as his text while theorising ‘changing’, though they were static in ancient time. Everything in this Universe changes. Likewise, “all cultures are in a constant change”. The change of culture in a society based on numerous factors. The main factor is contact; contact in various spheres. When two societies or cultures inhabited to closely since long times, it is expected that the weaker culture will borrow elements from the advance culture one. The fundamental processes of cultural changes are associated with the modification in the knowledge, attitudes, and the behaviours of the concern society. This book definitely ushers in the realm of social history as well as Anthropology to know the acculturation of a particular community.

Rabha, a small (in respect of West Bengal) belong to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group of the greater Indo-Mongoloid ethnic stock is found to settle in ‘Western Duars’(Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Cooch Behar district) in foothill regions that has covered with jungle(presently it has degenerated both in length and dense). Raha, has successfully depicted on the Rabhas ‘transformation’ through two discrete ecological groups; forest dwelling Rabha and village dwelling Rabha towards ‘changing’. This ‘changing’ has been considerably accelerated in village Rabha, then that of forest Rabha. The Rabha society in West Bengal had a matrilineal base in past, started changing when they came in constant contact with different matrilineal people, particularly Rajbanshis and various other factors like the heavy influx of the refugees, modern education, smooth communication, market and cash economy.

The book is divided into eleven chapters of which the first one, titled ‘The backdrop: The people and their environs’ deals with the Rabhas and their physical and ethnic environment (p.21-40). The author has mentioned that in the state of West Bengal the Rabhas have predominantly concentrated in the districts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar. In ancient time, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar had historically lucrative region. That time Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar were included in the kingdom of Kamatapur or Kamarupa and Husain Shah of Gaur invaded this kingdom and secured its downfall. Later it became known as Koch kingdom. The Koch king established this kingdom. The name of this state is Koch behar, as associated with the name of Koch race. The state of Bhutan was located northeast of Cooch Behar. King Deo of Bhutan captured the King of Cooch Behar in the seventies of the eighteenth century on the occasion of internal disturbances in the kingdom of Koch Behar. The north-western part of the state of Koch Behar is occupied by Bhutan, which is known as ‘Duar’ or ‘Dwar’. The East India Company defeated Bhutan in 1865 and the Dwar region came under British rule. On the other hand, the author has mentioned the tribes like Rava, Garo, Mech etc are the original inhabitants of this region. later the peoples of Orao, Munda, Ho, Santal, Malpahariya etc, came this area due to tea gardening industry was smoothly running. The author also has presented that after the partition of India in 1947, a large number of people from East Bengal migrated and settled in the region. This was one of the major causes that led to change in the matriarchal Rabha society, which has the central theme of this book. Simultaneously, he has shown culturally the Rabha society in two parts, namely; village Rabha, who resides at village and the forest Rabha who resides in the jungle or forest. Although, these two communities are originally similar but their cultural differences are noticeable. This chapter highlights the influences of modernity, inception and growth, and prevalence of Rajbansh is community on two Rabha communities which are mentioned above.

The next chapter ‘The Husuk (clan) Bond: The wider Kingroups’ deals with the origin, development of Husuks(clan) which is exogamous as well as origin and variety of Totemism (pp.43-65). In this chapter author has depicted the origin of Husuk(Clan) which are culturally distinct as the basis on environment. Marriage between the same Husuk is completely forbidden. In this chapter he has traced the origin of Hisuk and its sub-division.



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The third chapter, i.e ‘The Juku and the Ningosa: The network of Relations’ focuses on the two type of Kinsman, these are the Ningosa(members from mothers blood) and Juku(members from father blood), unalienable descent of this two groups(p.70-106). The fourth chapter named ‘The Nogou Organisation: The structure and Process’ reflected on house (Nogou) structure and its inner pattern(p.109-54). In the chapter fifth ‘The crises of life –I :birth &infancy’ focuses on after the birth cultural ceremony among this tribe(p.157-69). Likewise, 6th chapter ‘The crises of life-II: Marriage’ gives information about Rabhas endogamy rule, Marriage system(p173-212). Simultaneously, chapter 7th ‘The crises of life –III: Death’ deals with the death ceremony of Rabhas (p.215-30). Chapter 8th titled ‘the living hood pattern: inter and intra community linkages’ vividly explores their traditional occupation and its changing, Land-Tenure system and allocation of land, uncomfortable condition of forest dwellers(p233-66). In chapter 9th ‘the social control: pattern and activities’ express to the council system, activities of headman, social norms and jurisdictions(p269-76). The chapter 10th ‘the world of supernaturals: the beliefs and practices’, probes into the Rabhas belief in Animism, Animism is stated to be the attribution of a soul to the natural objects and phenomena. But Rabha showed their inclination towards Hinduism, Christianity (279-303). The last chapterlike. ‘The Summing up: The Rabha’s march for a new tradition’ reveals Rabhas have been changing in various pathway(p.307-20)

To Raha,(author) the Rabha of West Bengal are changing and has theorised in the rhetoric term ‘Matriliney to Patriliney’. They have progressed from little to the greater tradition, from Tribalism to Hinduism. The wave of ‘Kshatrization’ movement among the Rajbanshis have accelerated to changing processes towards the patrilineal culture among the Rabhas. Author, Manas Kumar Raha has presented in the changing Rabha society, which has the central theme of the book, but does not reflect overall picture, i.e. I think there is a lot of inconsistency in it. Because any society changes according to certain ways of moving, such as economy, employment, education and technology. The basic structure of any society is determined by its economy. There is no history without economics. Rabha’s lives in remote areas, which are completely isolated from the so-called developed society. The economy of the Rabha society was nomadic. Along with agricultural work, they made a living by collecting forest fruits, wood, honey and river fish. It is natural that people of such financial structure do not get to eat twice a day in stomach full. As Rabha have been lived in the forest area, their lives were largely controlled by the forest department. When the colonial government protected the forest area by forest law, the tragic consequences came down to the daily life of the forest dwellers of Rabha’s, which the author of this book almost never mentioned. They seemed to have remained as strangers in their own land. Because they did not have the minimum amount of cultivated land they needed for their livelihood. Almost all the land belonged to the forest department. The forest department gives them very little land temporarily for cultivation. But for him the Rabha tribe had to do various forest work without pay.

Rabhs, even though got land without proprietary right or ownership, there was not much opportunity for cultivation. Because at the time of cultivation season or when they have to work in the fields, the forest department almost forcibly takes them to the forest. In other words, even if they get land, it remains uncultivated. As a result, poverty was a constant companion with them. That is why Rabha’s got organized and started a movement for “Jal, Jungle O Jamir Adhikar Aendolon” (water, Forest and land rights movement). While conducting this movement, five revolutionaries of Gosairhat basti (slum) were martyred in the firing of the forest department. On the other hand, they themselves were responsible for their financial misery. The people of this community, immersed in total poverty, were always addicted to drugs called ‘Chakat’. Another reason for their economic weakness is their religious observances. Ravara was a real example of how blindness of religion can weaken people. The religious head is called Huji in their language. As a result of this huji practice, the people of the rubber community are forced to perform costly worship. In many cases it is done by force. As a result,as much of the simple Rabha’s savings as possible are exhausted for the puja. They traced the cause of their economic misery that is to said unrestricted Hinduism and leaned towards Christianity. And by 1980, about 90 percent of Rabha’s had converted to Christianity. Due to the strict adherence to Christianity, they prospered financially in a small later. So, the financial aspect was the main reason for the change that Rabha were going through in the society, which the author almost forgot to mention.

How much a community will be interested in its own culture depends largely on employment. Simply put, the more employment opportunities a community has, the more people in that community will be interested in its culture. But in a backward and isolated society like the Rabha community, there is very little chance of surplus money, so there is a lot of job uncertainty. Because of this they are forced to look beyond their own boundaries and the influences of outside culture are affected. There was no doubt that Rabha society was lagging behind in terms of education. Where there is no education, the technology is absolutely inferior. In many cases this is expected to be zero.

The culture of a community without education, technology cannot last long; it will be influenced by the surrounding progressive culture which M.N Srinivasan called ‘sanskritization’. An example is the attachment of the surrounding majority Rajbanshi community to the culture and by joining the movement led by them they also tried to gain momentum, this is common mater.



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However, less acculturation tendency among the Rabhas made them weaker. In Post-independence era, Rabhas are identified as Scheduled tribe in Assam and West Bengal. As a result, Government were eager to progress their living standard by offering job security, various schemes, and reservation policy.