

Rabha Speech Community - In Colonial and Post-Colonial Eras

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Abstract

Rabha, one of the endangered Mongolian Linguistic communities migrated to India long before the establishment of British colonial empire. This Sino-Tibetan group of people migrated to North-Eastern part of India and occupied especially in North Bengal, the history of which is associated with the Kirata civilization.

The present study will look back to the gradual shifting status of this speech community in different socio-economic and political era in this land of multilingual hub.

Keywords: Mongolian tribes, Sino-Tibetan Language, Forest regulation, Church Christianity, Multilingualism, Language identity, Rabha and Koch

Introduction

Long before the pre-colonial era the Rabhas had come to North Bengal. They are here even before the 'Koch' empire was established. They arrived at the Bhamhaputra Valley of Assam from Tibet along with other Mongolian groups. From here one group migrated towards the far eastern part of India via moving towards south and another group moved towards Dooars and Cochbihar, the opposite side of the river Brahmaputra (Saha, Reboti Mohan, 1983).

Rabha adopted the socio-cultural life in Indian Multilingual, cultural, ethnological environment under the precolonial, colonial and even in the postcolonial era. Initially they were associated with agriculture and an adventurous forest life. But when the Britishers introduced new local laws and restrictions regarding forest and wild life the Rabha communities of North Bengal visited a unique problem. They used to live their forest life and had to move towards the new professions by the rules of Britishers. The British noticed the Rabhas indulgence towards

forests and wild life and that had made them to recruit these Rabhas as plantation labors and forest guard's assistance. They started to compromise their identity and livelihood in order to survive and settle in this era under the British Empire. They took beneficiary efforts from then masters in form of education, living lessons, and even religious lessons which interns influenced their own language.

Rabhas of North Bengal in Pre-colonial Era

Rabha is a well-known and renowned community of North-east and eastern parts of this country. There is a great confusion regarding the origin and social identity of this community. And this is because there is not much history available for the tribes.

The name *Rabha* itself is not original. They believe that others or outsiders had given them that name. They believe that they are 'Koch'. From research we can find that "Kocha is the silenced muted identification and publicly recognized identity of the community" (Karlson, 1997). We can draw a conclusion that both Rabha and Koch are same by comparing the exact similarities of their anthropological characteristics, religious beliefs, social customs and traditions and other aspects.

Conversion of Rabha Name in the Colonial Era

Now the question is how Kochs became Rabha. The Rabha themselves feel proud to introduce themselves as Koch. From field survey I clearly see that they believe and identify themselves as Koch. Evidently use of such identify is found in their own daily life. They introduce their language as **Kocha-crau** (crau- language), song as **kocha-chaе** (chaе-song), culture as **kocha-alekachar** (alekachar-art), and dance form as **kocha-baumani** (baumani-dance). (Saha, Reboti Mohan, 1983).

Evidently a lot of their social forms are named as Kocha which is strongly and proudly associated with every possible thing. Now the name 'kocha' means 'ancient'. The name 'Rabha' means 'invited person'. A folklore story about the name Rabha is that when Garo community was ruling this part of India, King Huiseng of Garo invited Koch community to their kingdom to cultivate their land on behalf of them as they were not well versed with agricultural cultivation.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:8 August 2017

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On the other hand, Koches were well known and trained cultivators. King Huiseng was very impressed with Koches as they were pretty successful in their venture of cultivation. Thus, the wise king invited some Koch people to permanently stay with them so that they can learn the process of cultivation from Koch. This invitation in Garo language is called as 'Raba'. This is how Rabha migrated to Someswari valley from low lands of Garo hill and Bhramputra valley. Raba means invited. And later on 'Raba' became 'Rabha' because of the evolution of utterance. This is between 1450-1460 AD. The above said folk story has strong historical evidence that the name Rabha is given by others. (Saha, Reboti Mohan, 1983).

One 17th century Persian writer Mirjanathan in his book Baharistan-E-Ghaibi (B. Majumder, 1990) mentioned the name Rabha. This signifies the change in Raba to Rabha. In pre-colonial era this is probably how Koch of low Bhramputra Vally and North Bengal became Raba and later Raba became Rabha.

Change of Monolingual Rabha Life to Multilingual Complex Life in Colonial Era

Though this community migrated to India long before the Britishers come to India, the colonial era puts a strong evolutionary measure to put the Rabha community in a typical situation which they are facing for a long time now.

When Britishers came to India, they implemented new laws and regulations across the territory. First they started the population counting by 1872. When the result came out by 1901 we could not find any Rabha there. But in 1911 British India the census report showed 722 Rabha which was significantly the first time Rabha name was mentioned in a government official document. This is how the Pre-British Indian Koch became Rabha in colonial era.

In Post-independence era, Rabhas are identified as Scheduled Tribe in the Plains in West Bengal and Assam and Scheduled Tribe in the Hills in Meghalaya. The 1961 census report of Goalpara shows that Rabhas are identified as Hill and forest tribes. But the Koches were identified as a Scheduled Caste in the same report. Thus the distinction between Rabha and Koch was created in the colonial era by identifying them separately and in Postcolonial era they became separate identities. Institutionally Koch themselves wanted to be identified as Rabha.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:8 August 2017

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This is to enjoy the government facilities associated with Scheduled Tribes. This is why now-a-days we can find that though the Father may be named as a Koch, the Son may take the surname Rabha.

Change in Social Outcast Position

The Rabha community went through a drastic change in the colonial period. Basically the Rabha people were forest dwellers in North Bengal. They used to live in forest and served their living based on agriculture.

When Britishers came to this part of India, they identified the possibility for Tea plantations in this part. They identified that the soil and land are best for the Tea Industry to grow. Thus they identified versed areas to cultivate and maintain tea plantations. When they started to implement their plan, they also introduced new laws in order to protect their interests. They introduced new forest laws and cultivation laws like Tea Plantation Law under which cutting trees and cultivation of other sorts were banned. The original inhabitants of this land, Rabha people, lost their right to cultivate crops they traditionally planted and harvested to maintain their livelihood. They were restricted from cutting the trees as well as cultivating other plants including Tea.

The autochthonous people of the Dooars such as the Koch-Rajbanshis, the Bodos, the Lepchas and specially the Rabhas were wholly dependent on their traditional economic system. They showed repugnance in responding to the allurements of work as labourers in the growing and expanding British tea gardens. The Britishers then had no other option but to bring labour from outside. The majority of the people of southern and eastern Nepal were very poor; and after the treaty of Sagauli in 1816 the Gorkhas were recruited in the British Indian Army. In the same way, when the addition of labour became essential for the burgeoning Tea industry, the British authority identified the poor half-fed people of southern and eastern Nepal as possible source of labour for the Tea industry. After the treaty of Sinchula in 1865 the British government also encouraged the immigration of Nepalese in order to populate the sparsely inhabited zones of the Dooars down the Bhutan hill. But as the Nepalese were not adequate in number to meet the demand of labourers in the Tea industry in the Dooars, the Britishers decided to bring labourers

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from the Santal Parganas and Chhotanagpur plateau of Bihar where large number of tribal as well as poor people namely Santals and Oraons lived without fixed and settled economy. The Rabha people were one of the most affected communities since traditionally they used to live a forest life. But the British rule and their laws prohibited felling trees in reserved forests and declared such acts punishable by law. This deprived them of their traditional ways of living in the forest enclaves.

Britishers established Forest Law in 1865. Rabhas lost their livelihood in forest and were forced to work as buffer or 'Faltu' labor for the Britishers. But majority of these people moved towards villages to live along with other tribes and localities. One interesting thing is that there are no villages or places found where it can be said that Rabha lives here as a majority population of a village. It is always seen that some numbers of Rabhas live with several other tribes or community people within the same village. (Saha, Reboti Mohan, 1983).

Change in Religious Front

When the foreign ruler established their colonial roots, they brought trade, invention, social justice and even legislation. But they also brought Christianity with them. The Church was responsible to educate local inhabitants of these places. The Christian missionary church introduced English and started to educate the people in remote places of North Bengal. It had an enormous impact on the Rabha language. The main aim was to bring this tribal society to the main stream, but in this process changes took place which resulted in losing certain elements of their original culture and institutions.

One major impact of colonization in India is the establishment of Christianity missionary Church. Forest dwellers Rabha were greatly impacted by this. Even in my field survey it was evident that Christianity had a great impact. Basically Rabhas are worshipers of nature god. But in colonial and postcolonial era it is seen that they are more in Churches rather than in their own temples. (Majumder Bimalendu, 2008)

Traditionally Rabha was a society where it was seen that women were the leaders of the family. The maternal influence was greater in a Rabha family. In due course it gradually changed and Rabhas adapted to men as leaders of family as in other communities in India.

Based on the Tea Industry, there was already a partition in the Rabha society in North Bengal. One section stayed in the forest by agreeing to the condition brought forward by the colonial empire and the other section moved towards plains of north Bengal for cultivation and agricultural life. The forest dwellers could have retained their original heritage and culture and norms as they were in the deep into the forest which was completely protected by the forest itself. Their contact with Christian missionaries gave them education, importance and other social values, but it also changed the originality of the tribal group. Western culture was introduced to the Rabha society because of which a lot of religious migration took place among Rabha forest dwellers. Thus the social customs, norms and basic social identity of old Rabha community became obsolete.

On the other hand, the Rabhas who adopted cultivation and agriculture as their primary way of living in the plains developed strong association with Hindus in the plains of North Bengal. This also made them to learn and speak other language like Bengali. Thus the way of life made these Rabha speakers bi-lingual /multi lingual. (Majumder Bimalendu, 2008)

A lot of other factors may be contributing to the fact that Rabha is an endangered language and society, but it seems very clear that colonial rule was an important factor.

Effect of the Colonial Era in Rabha Life

In the postcolonial era the impact of British colonial raj was quite evident in every aspect. Like the way they used to build their home has changed in multi –lingual culture. They used to build houses facing east or west only. Bamboo, grass, leaves and other materials were used to build it. But colonization and its effect actually abolished this process of house building. Now even the grandson has never seen such a house where as the great grandfather in the same family used to live in one.

In north Bengal though the clothing got a drastic change in the community, it has a modern touch to it. Not too long ago the Rabha women used to make their own traditional clothing which covered from knee to neck. The lower part of this garment was used to be called as 'Loufun' and the upper part was called 'Kambangh'. An additional cloth they used to wrap in their west was called 'Fakchek'. The men used to wear clothing named 'Sakok'. But now men wear shirt, pants, Dhoti, Kurta and women wear sari, churidar, etc. The forest dwelling Rabhas still wear their traditional clothing but the village Rabhas left wearing their traditional garments.

The Rabha community was unable to take advantage of formal education in post-British era till 1986-87. There may be many reasons for this. Government inefficiency is one of the reasons. But even today the literacy problem is more acute in Rabha compared to other communities, especially in forest dwellers. It is seen that the forest dwellers are very hard to convince regarding formal education.

The Koch and Rabha identity crisis is also one of the results of the pre- and post-colonial eras. In independent India, the Rabhas are identified as a Scheduled Tribe whereas the Koch are identified as a Scheduled Caste. Now for benefit of concessions in government exams, job interviews and other government facilities Koch of this area name themselves as Rabha. From the Census reports it is also seen that there is confusion between the names of 'Koch' and 'Rabha'. The Census Report of 1961 shows that the population of Rabhas in West Bengal was 6053 and in 1971 the report showed 2466. Accordingly the 1961 census showed that the Koch population was 3522. In 1971 this increased to 17257. This unnatural growth leads to a confusion of identifying the community. Probably the counting has been done for the same tribe twice. Now, to lead on from this point I discovered that from the social-cultural anthropological side both Koch and Rabha are of the same origin because it is found that both the communities worship the same god; they have the same food habits, same basic social fundamental values regarding rituals, festivals and marriages. Both the communities have similar social value where women are considered as head of the family.

Both Koch and Rabha communities decided to come together to overcome political and social differences and emerge as one united community. Both the communities came together in

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:8 August 2017

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1973 in the month of January when in the 1st, 2nd and 3rd of January they gathered in Dhubri District of Assam and subsequently in March 8th, 9th, and 10th in Konkrajhar district of Assam. Leaders, socially recognized people, teachers and representatives from both the communities of Koch and Rabha came together to resolve all differences and made the first attempt to emerge as one big community to overcome social and political disadvantages. They announced that both Koch and Rabha are same and uttered ‘kouchan Rabha, rabhaun kouch’ means Koch is Rabha and Rabha is Koch. They tried to connect or merge Koch and Rabha and gave them one name as Rabha. In this pursuit they formed “Bebak Rabha Crouang Rouchum” means “Nikhil Rabha sahitya sabha”. (Rabha, Rajendranath, 2002).

There are bi-lingual, tri-lingual or rather multi-lingual effects on Rabha. Here we observed how socio-political aspect has actually influenced this group of people to leave their own language, cultures and even surroundings. The multi-lingual surrounding (Bengali, Ranjbanshi, Sandri) dominated the use of ‘Kochacrau’ which is the mother tongue of the Rabhas and that is very much evident till now. Another reason of the endangerment of this language, according to Dr. A. S. Koch of Assam, is that the “civilized” regarded ‘Kochacrau’ as “uncivilized, uncultured and vaguer language to speakers”. The super strata people of North Bengal marginalized them as Slang language speaking people which is very unfortunate and has deepened the endangerment.

I have done some linguistic analysis of their language; it can be used to preserve the Rabha language. My findings are based on field survey. The discussion is as follows.

Descriptive Properties of Rabha Language

The descriptive properties of the Rabha Language are available sporadically here and there, but there is no such study done on the Kochcru community of the Rabha Sub Groups. The present study will try to provide this missing study while identifying the common tendency of the population towards their mother tongue.

A) **Phonology:** The following presents the phonemic contrast.

Example: /e/: /u/ ening – /e/ning (this) uning – /u/ning (that)

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/p/ : / ph/ par - /p/ar (flower) phar – /ph/ar (night) etc...

B) Morphology: Like other languages, Rabha has also derivational and inflectional systems. The vocabulary shows that it has monomorphemic and derivational words. The mono-morphemic words which are free in use are known also as simple words. It has also the derivational process. Therefore the words from both these groups can be identified considerably. Words in compound structure are also there. Therefore the words in Rabha language can be categorised structurally as Simple, Derivational and Compound Words.

i) Simple word: Consists of one morpheme and those are free in use.

Eg: dan – bed

phang – tree

mik– man

ii) Derived Word or Derivational Morphology

Several derived words have derivational inflections. Words containing a free morph + bound morph.

Eg. (by adding derivational inflection)

pir (free morph) + ae (bound morph) > pirae (up)

nam (free morph)+ sha bound morph) > namsha (daughter in law)

Like this Noun + suffix = New word

Eg. nam + sa = namsa (daughter in law)

coplak + sa = coplaksa (handle)

micik + sa = miciksa (female child)

cham + i = chami (be wounded)

Derivational word (by adding prefixes) i.e., Prefix + Base = complex word.

‘nang’ means relatives; related with husband or wife’s family.

Eg. a - nang + sa = anangsa (brother of wife)

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au - nang + sa = aunangsa (sister of husband).

Here the prefix 'a' represents wife's family and 'au' represents husband's family.

Words are also formed by adding a suffix to the root forms, namely, root + suffix = new word

Eg. $\sqrt{\text{tan}} + \text{tini} = \text{tantini}$ (keeping on behalf)

$\sqrt{\text{tak}} + \text{tini} = \text{taktini}$ (doing on behalf)

iii) Compound Word: Besides the derived forms Rabha has also the compound words which consist of more than one free morph. These are compound in structure to generate a new word.

Eg. $\text{chika} + \text{baulang} = \text{chikabaulang}$ (white water, local liquor)

$\text{chika} + \text{tungtung} = \text{chikatungtung}$ (hot water)

iv.) Inflectional Morphology: The inflectional system is a little different which has seen new development after the migration. Some inflectional features can be noted.

Eg. Root + suffix = complex word

$\text{fai} + \text{ta} = \text{faita}$ (come)

$\text{fai} + \text{auno} = \text{fai auno}$ (should come)

$\text{fai} + \text{rauno} = \text{fai rauno}$ (will come) etc.

c) Syntax: In Rabha language the word order is very important. The tendency of Kochacru in simple sentence is towards SOV pattern.

Subject comes first then object and then verb...

Eg. $\text{tepsi} \quad \text{mae} \quad \text{saya}$

S O v

$\text{tepsi} \quad \text{mae} \quad \text{saya}$

$\text{tepsi} \quad \text{rice} \quad \text{eat}$

$\text{tepsi} \quad \text{eats} \quad \text{rice.}$

In Rabha sentences, there are two parts, which are the Subject and the Predicate, though the absence of subjects can be noted in the sentences.

Eg: Interrogative sentence (Imperative)

biyoug loia – ‘where are (you) going?’

The subject is absent here which is also similar to Bengali.

i) Simple sentence of Rabha language:

Saksa haboi-marapni mik bri swa toya.

A farmer male four children had.

A farmer had four male children.

Like this the compound and complex sentences of Rabha language may be described.

i) Compound sentence of Rabha language:

a. lai nateng cugraia.

Give neither die.

b. u gasa duphu nekei tana sa:m taukau tana.

He a snake saw and killed.

He saw a snake and killed (it).

Conclusion

The Rabha community people of North Bengal migrated to this particular part of West Bengal in 2000 BC. This Sino-Mongoloid group of people was one of the first to established their empire and rule this part of the world. They have strong ethnic heritage of culture and customs. In the pre-colonial era, they were settled in their forest life and were building their own strong social life.

In the colonial era the Britishers could not provide them the necessary social upbringing and even the required social justice.

The division of the original Koch community into Rabha and Koch, then the division of forest dwellers Rabha into Forest dwellers and village dwellers happened in this colonial era and because of colonial laws.

The migration of forest Rabha people into plains of Brahmaputra and North Bengal happened in this era, which eventually forced these people to live with multi-lingual and multi-ethnic culture. This eventually forced them to lose several aspects of their original culture and identity as a community.

And the language of Rabha, 'kochakru' itself is now endangered as Rabha and Koch both are dominated by strong communities surrounding them.

The Bengali and Rajbangsi languages have a large influence on the Rabha Language. Especially in the village this influence works more prominently. But now this influence is found among the forest dweller's language also as they are moving towards the villages for better social life. As a result their language is getting changed due to the language contact with Bengali, Rajbangsi, etc. The features of original Rabha are in the process of disappearing. Because of speaking many other languages, their mother tongue is becoming obsolete gradually. The new generations are unfamiliar with their mother tongue. Inter-caste marriage with Rajbangshi also has become one of the causes of infiltration from other languages. The existence of the language is now a matter of question because of all these infiltrations.

Rabha language did not have inflection as a grammatical feature of their language. But now they are adopting/have adopted inflectional system. Thus the originality of Rabha language is getting obsolete day by day.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:8 August 2017

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