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Impact of Christianization on the Rabhas of Kodalbasti, West Bengal, India

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ABSTRACT: *The Rabhas are the native tribe of the village Kodalbasti in West Bengal, India. Kodalbasti falls under the Mendabari Gram Panchayat of Kalchini Block in Alipurduar district of West Bengal. Alipurduar is one of the 18 duars or “gateway” to Bhutan which sustains its culturally diverse population economically by tea industry, tourism and timber. Whole dooar region is considered as the melting pot of India as people from diverse culture have come here in search of employment since the establishment of tea industries. So, it is only natural that due to constant social interaction with such a heterogeneous population, the native of the region will get influenced. And so, have been the case with the native Rabhas of Kodalbasti. Originally, they were animist by religion but since the beginning of 20th century when Christian missionaries came to the region, and with the constant interaction with diasporas Rabhas of Kodalbasti has gone through some serious transition. This paper aim to highlight their exposure with Christianity which over years had proved to be both advantageous and disadvantageous for them. This paper is based on the micro study of Rabhas of Kodalbasti which has been conducted through fieldwork using relevant techniques for data collection.*

Keywords: Christianization, Rabhas, Impact, Kodalbasti, Animism

I. INTRODUCTION

The Rabhas are the native tribe of the village Kodalbasti in West Bengal, India. They are the mongoloid tribe having Sino-Tibetan linguistic affinity. Kodalbasti village is in the Kalchini Block of Alipurduar District. As whole dooar region of the North- Eastern India is a humble abode of various tribes, both the natives and diasporas, so is the Kodalbasti Village, where native Rabhas have Oraons of Chotanagpur as their neighbor who are the diasporas constituting a part of the total population. With the advent of 20th century several Christian missionaries came to the North – East India whose impact on the life of the natives have been remarkably observable. Traditional Rabhas believe in animism. They believe in spirit worship for which several elaborate rituals are conducted. In Kodalbasti this has been the prime reason for conversion to Christianity which will be discussed below in further headings.

II. OBJECTIVES

- To know about the Traditional Rabhas of Kodalbasti.
- To know about the impact of Christianization on Rabhas of Kodalbasti.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Fieldwork of 20 days has been executed in the Kodalbasti Village of Kalchini Block of Alipurduar district, West Bengal. During fieldwork, techniques of Observation, Schedule and Interview were employed for data collection. Through random sampling 50 Rabha families in Kodalbasti were thoroughly studied.

IV. THE TRADITIONAL RABHAS OF KODALBASTI

The traditional Rabhas are animist by nature. Their highest deity is Risik but other spirits are also worshipped. Rumtuk and Basek are the female deities who are worshipped fervently. The traditional rabhas believe in both benevolent and malevolent spirits. Batangi Hadang is the sacred centre where at the time of worship no outsiders are allowed. The spirit “Lanju Batang” is worshipped for pregnant woman so that the birth of healthy child can be ensured. For the worship of this spirit various rituals are followed which involves the use of banana, leaf, trunk, arhul flower etc. This ritual is performed inside the house. Similarly, “Makalbaba Batangi” is worshipped so that safety against elephants can be ensured. This deity is also called as haathi baba. Rutuk Batangi is the deity who ensures health, peace and prosperity in the house. Jharbatangi is worshipped to ensure safety from wild animals of the forest. Sacred place of worship keeps on changing. “Huji” is the main sacred specialist of the Rabha who perform all the rituals. The Huji is chosen by whole Rabha society. This post is not hereditary. He is one of the most important people of Rabhas who is looked upon by fellow members with utmost reverence. “Shranga” performs the rituals of Rumtuk Basek. In this

ritual only hen and pigs are used. Dhami and Dayasi are the religious head of the village. With the impact of Hinduization, the animist Rabhas have adapted Hindu rituals for their own spirit worship. This is why they now believe that their highest deity Risik is a form of Shiva who is a Hindu God. Due to the impact of Hinduism now the traditional Rabhas are sometimes referred as 'Hindu Rabha' in the village.

V. IMPACT OF CHRISTIANIZATION

Rabhas were animists by origin. They worshipped several spirits taking abode in forests and different areas of villages. But due to conversion to Christianity now only 26 families are left in Kodalbasti who are animists and call themselves as Hindu Rabha because they perform elaborate rituals. At present time conversion to Christianity has accelerated at a rapid rate. Hindu Rabhas now are converting because their elaborate rituals seem to be very expensive for them. They have to sacrifice animals which have a good economic value. And if Hindu Rabhas fails to perform any rituals then they start living in constant fear of the wrath of the spirits, hence now Hindu Rabhas are preferring to convert to Christianity as this religion gives them a sense of security and mental peace. Originally the Hindu rabhas used to sacrifice pigs but now swan or koda are sacrificed instead. The reason might be the good economic value of the pigs. Previously, when most Rabhas were animist then number of capable sacred specialist or the Huji were more too. But at present only 2 hujis are there giving hint of the transition occurring within Rabha society in terms of religion.

There are three churches in Kodalbasti. One is Baptist Church; second one is Seventh Day Adventist Church and Third one is the Roman Catholic Church. There are only two primary schools in the village. One is Governmental and another one is private. The private primary school was established by Seventh Day Adventist Church. As the language of Rabha is 'Koch Kro' which doesn't have any script hence the primary education to children are given in English. This has become one of the factors which creates the problem of identity crisis among Rabhas. Due to classical preachment of Christianity to the native Rabhas the patrilineal form of society is being encouraged and hence now several Christian families has a patrilineal form. Also, the impact of westernization accelerated since the missionaries decided to enter Kodalbasti. So, we can say that the transitional phase of the contemporary Rabhas is definitely influenced and encouraged by Christianity. As now majority in Kodalbasti is of Christian Rabhas hence the impact of Christianization can be seen in their ideologies which now are different from their traditional ones.

VI. CONCLUSION

Conversion to any other religion in any society poses a threat to its own cultural preservation. We can't argue with the fact that Christianity has brought about several beneficial changes for the Rabhas but we also can't deny that it has led to the degradation of their native religion in Kodalbasti. Undoubtedly conversion to Christianity has provided both economic and religious security to Rabha. As now they are not bound to any fear of the wrath of the spirits for whom expensive rituals needed to be performed hence now, they are at peace and believe Jesus has warded off all the evil spirits and is protecting them. This is their primary belief which has taken a strong hold in their heart. This psychological support from adapting a new religion is definitely the main reason for conversion of so many Rabhas in Kodalbasti. The economic condition of Rabhas are not satisfactory at the moment due to various restrictions imposed on them by Forest Department which forbids them to have any right over their own land and forest. Amidst all these economic insecurities, the pressure of performing elaborate expensive rituals for the Traditional Rabhas is just too much and hence the conversion to Christianity has emerged as the solution. But the loss of their traditional belief system will further fuel the loss of their own cultural identity and in future their new culture will just be the byproduct of compromises that they have made due to need of the hour.

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