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## THE PRESSING PROBLEMS OF RABHAS OF KODALBASTI, WEST BENGAL, INDIA

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**ABSTRACT:** Every society in this world is somewhat dynamic in its nature and which is why this dynamicity is something which becomes one of the attributes of any society. The dynamic nature could be considered synonymous to the gradual Change occurring within. Empirically speaking, no society can remain static forever hence change could be considered as the inevitable part. This change is sometimes favorable and other times pose a threat to the sustainability of the native culture. This change is the fact which has become the base of this research work in the context of the Rabhas and hence the topic -“The Pressing Problems of Rabhas of Kodalbasti, West Bengal, India” of this paper aims to highlight various changes occurring in the Rabha society and problems emerging due to such changes among contemporary Rabhas of Kodalbasti in West Bengal, India.

**KEYWORDS:** Rabhas, Pressing, Problems, Culture, Change, Contemporary

### I. INTRODUCTION

The Rabhas are tribal people of West Bengal, Assam and Meghalaya states of North Eastern Region of India. Majority of their population is found in the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. The Rabhas in this district are the forest dwelling tribes and are dependent on the forest for their livelihood. Dooar region of Eastern and North Eastern India is often referred as the native land of the Rabhas. The term “Dooar” means “Door” in several languages like Bengali, Assamese, Maithili, Bhojpuri and Magahi language.

The Rabhas are the mongoloid tribes having Sino-Tibetan Linguistic affinity. The language spoken by them is called as - “Koch Kro”. There is no definite script of this language. Kodalbasti is a village which comes under Mendabari Gram Panchayat of

Kalchini Block in Alipurduar district of West Bengal. It is a forest-based village which itself constitutes the part of Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary and comes under Cooch Behar forest division. Further Kodalbasti is itself a forest beat in Chilapatta forest range. The whole area is richly surrounded by forests. Two main rivers, Kulti and Torsha flows within this village and holds religious significance for native tribe, The Rabhas and diasporas from Chotanagpur, The Oraons. On one side there lies their home and on the opposite side of the road lies their agricultural land where Rabhas and Oraons grows crops like dan, bhunji, kookar, betel nut but they do cultivation seasonally and grow seasonal crops. Off season they work on Haizra (daily wage work). These two tribes in Kodalbasti could be considered as neighbors who belong to different ethnicity but maintain harmony in the village.

### II. OBJECTIVES

- To know about the problems prevailing among Rabhas of Kodalbasti.
- To know about the cause of changes and occurring within Rabha society.
- To know about the impact of changes and emerging problems of the contemporary Rabhas of Kodalbasti.

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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

## V. THE PRESSING PROBLEMS OF THE RABHAS

### 1.0 The Forest-

The Rabhas of Kodalbasti has a forest-based economy. Ever from the beginning they have been dependent upon forest for livelihood. They make their house deeply surrounded by forest with timber which could be found in abundance in nearby forests. But at present Forest Department of Kodalbasti has implemented strict norms which prohibit the tribal from going inside the forest and collecting woods and other forest produces. The view of forest department is that it is the Rabhas who harm the forest by cutting down trees and adopting unconventional measures for getting forest remains. But due to implication of these strict norms it has become very difficult for the Rabhas to get woods which is used by them for variety of purposes. Though Forest department has given land to the Rabhas but the condition is that it shouldn't be sold or bought anymore. It is only the land of the Government. Hence, Rabhas and Forest Department stays in the matter of constant dispute.

### 1.1 Non- Implication of Forest Laws-

As mentioned above the Rabhas and the Forest Department of Kodalbasti are always in the matter of constant dispute. This is because of few key points- the first and foremost being that the native Rabhas do not have any ownership over their own age-old land. Now they are given land on "Patta" which basically means that Rabhas can use their land for cultivation and living but they can't buy or sell or construct over any land because Government has the full ownership of the land of Kodalbasti and Hence Forest Department supervise over the land and its uses by the Rabhas. Further Rabhas can't cut timber from the forest and use it for house construction, if they do so then it will be considered illegal as it goes against the newly prevalent norms. They are also forbidden to go inside the forest for collecting minor forest produces. These heavily imposed restrictions on Rabhas creates livelihood problems for them as much that now they don't have basic amenities. From being a self-sustaining society to now being a completely dependent society, This transition for Rabhas surely have been too harsh.

### 1.2 Flood-

Kulti and Torsha rivers flows within Kodalbasti. Both these rivers support the secondary occupation of the Rabhas which is fishing. Though these rivers are one of the sources of earning livelihood but the degradation of land by the Torsha River is quite observable. On the nearby banks of the river, it could be observed that it is actually cutting the land, making it dangerous or rather harmful for the nearby flourishing land of crops where fertility is at risk. The water level of Torshi River in Kodalbasti is comparatively more than the river Kulti. At times of excess rainfall, the water level of Torshi river increases at an alarming rate. As there are no dams or any other obstructions hence the excess water flows freely causing flood in the whole area during rainy season. Due to flood the nearby soil is loosening up causing erosion of the land and excess cutting of river bed making the nearby land less fertile. Hence flood has been one of the pressing problems of Rabhas as it causes lots of destruction and loss of crops and livestock. And further flood moistens up the wooden pillars base of the house of Rabhas which ultimately leads to destruction of whole house and leads to resettlement.

### 1.3 Animal Attack-

As Rabhas lives in forest richly surrounded by flora and fauna hence it is very natural for them to encounter wild animals from time to time. Numerous time they have been attacked by wild animals like- Elephants, bears, wild dogs etc. The fear of elephants seems clear by the rituals they perform which goes by the name of "Makalbaba Batangi" in which they worship hathi baba who ensures safety against wild elephants. Rabhas fear growing crops like muji, dan, bhunji or kookar because they are at constant risk of destruction by elephants. Hence, Rabhas construct their house in such a way that the first storey house is approx. 7 ft above giving pathway for elephants to cross. Rabhas also worship forest every year to ensure the safety of crops and everyone from wild animals.

### 1.4 Problem of Identity Crisis-

Due to the impact of Hinduization acculturation and Christianization the problem of identity crisis is gaining inertia among Rabhas. As there is no script of Koch Kro language hence primary education to children in their own language can't be given which leads to loss of awareness about their native language. The traditional panchayat system of Rabha referred as "Marab Son" is now at the point of disintegration hence posing threat to the Rabha's cultural identity. Christianization led to the degradation of Rabha Religion. Also, acculturation and Hinduization, Westernization, Modernization to an extent are the cause of cultural loss and identity crisis.

### 1.5 Health and drinking water-

Amount of iron in water resources of Kodalbasti is way more than it should actually be. Increased amount of iron intake is harmful for human health. Many people are confronting diseases like Jaundice, Dysentery. As filtered water is not supplied in the whole locality hence the chances of an individual to encounter such diseases is more. Hence availability of pure, non-contaminated drinking water Is one of the basic necessities of Rabhas and a pressing problem. Further, there are no health centers or sub-centers in Kodalbasti. The medicine man Vinod Rabha is the only option for the locals when any misfortune event occurs. In the situation of emergency people has to go to Hasimara, Alipurduar and Cooch Behar where hospitals are present.

### 1.6 Education-

Education is one of the most important factors that signifies development. Among Rabhas the literacy rate is approx. 32% There are only 2 educational institutions in Kodalbasti. One is located at the entry path and another one is being run by seventh day Adventist church. For middle school or higher secondary education children go to Mendabari, Hasimara or Alipurduar town. As primary level of education is not given in their native tongue hence the overall development of the child is not possible. The process of second language acquisition takes time so the instant desired result can't be obtained till the child learns the language in which knowledge is being imparted. Also, the fee of schools and overall cost of education pose a problem for the parents. In poor family parents can't afford education of their children as they have to pay a lot for school and its other necessities. Rs 40-50 is the average daily expenditure when children go to school hence financially weaker sections after a point can't afford education and hence teaches their child the native occupational activity.

### 1.7 Conversion to Christianity-

The conversion to any other religion in any society poses a threat to its cultural preservation. Among Rabhas the impact of Christianity is observable quite clearly. Though the Christianized Rabhas are at peace now from being free from execution of elaborate rituals and then

suffering from the wrath of spirits if not succeeded in actually performing those rituals. The culture loss is palpable in Kodalbasti. Only around 25-26 families are left who are traditional Rabhas and are animists to an extent. 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.

### 1.8 Agriculture-

The Rabhas cultivate crops like munji, dan or kookar which are cultivated seasonally. Earlier the Rabhas were the shifting cultivators but due to imposing of new norms and ban of shifting cultivation in the area by the forest department the Rabhas had no other option than to become settled seasonal cultivators. Beside these, Rabhas do fishing, domesticate animals, gather minor forest products and works as laborer for earning their livelihood. Their cultivating land is of black soil and doesn't have much water holding capacity. They depend upon monsoon for good harvest. Initially the Rabhas were occupied in gathering edibles from the forest but ever since the arrival of British each family as given approx. 14,400 square ft. of land which now has reduced to 1.2 hectares per family due to disintegration of joint families. Further the production is now for self-consumption more, if surplus is excess then only it is used for selling and other commercial purpose. Also due to lack of availability of modern means of cultivation production is less and more emphasis is on self-consumption.

### V. Recommendations and Suggestions-

The pressing problems of the Rabhas need a conscious effort by the Government to be resolved completely. The problems are basic and is not that much complex as it seems. It just needs the right implications of the constitutional provisions in the area. Like the ongoing dispute between forest department and the Rabhas can be sorted out if the Forest Right Act 2006 will be implemented in a proper way with keeping the need of Rabhas in the mind. Further the problem of flood can be checked if a dam would be constructed keeping the topography of Kodalbasti in the mind. The problem of education and health can be sorted out by opening new schools and health centers, hospitals and dispensaries in the area. Further the education at primary level shall be imparted in the native language. The problem of agriculture can be sorted out by spreading awareness about new advanced technology and providing proper training to the locals, the problem of identity crisis and cultural loss can be sorted out by developing reverence for their own traditional culture by encouraging the native culture of the Rabha.

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