

Folklore and Ethnicity: A Study among the Rabhas of Assam

Dr. Faguna Barmahalia

UGC, Senior Post Doctoral Fellow,
Department of Modern Indian Language and Literary Studies,
University of Delhi

Abstract: Folklore is playing a pivotal role in propagating the ideas of ethnicity and identity in the world. By referring the value of folklore every community of the world try to glorify their past and present in modern times. In India, the role of folklore towards ethnic and identity movement is taking remarkable place especially in North Eastern India. The main aims of this paper are: i. to highlight how the Rabhas of Assam using the folkloric element in the political movement, ii. to study the role of folklore in integrating diverse groups and iii. to explore the role of folklore towards serving the ethnic unity and nationalism among the Rabhas.

Methodology

The study was based on amalgamation of primary and secondary method. For the primary method, interview method was conducted for collecting relevant data. A few printed books, magazines and others materials published by the distinguished publishers and the reception committee of conferences were used for the secondary sources.

Keywords: Folklore, ethnicity, identity, politics, movement

Introduction:

The Rabhas are one of the scheduled tribes living mainly in Assam, West Bengal and foreign country like Bangladesh. Linguistically the Rabha belongs to the Indo Mongoloid group of people. According to F. Buchanan and Hamilton, "the aspects of socio-religious and material life of the Rabhas have similarities with those of the Pani-Koch."¹ E. Dalton on the other hand, argues "The Rabhas and the Hajongs are the branches of Kachari race and connected with the Garo."² According to B.H. Hodgson, "The Rabhas belong to the Great Bodo or Mech."³ Presently, there are 11 sub-groups in the Rabha tribe namely Maitoria, Hana, Dahori, Pati, Sunga, Rangdani, Bitola, Kosa, Totala, Mohadi and Dumesha.

After the decades of independence, the Rabhas along with other ethnic groups of Assam like Bodo, Karbi, Tiwa, Dimasa etc. remained backward economically, educationally and even politically. The tribal people feel that they are exploited and suppressed by the greater Assamese society who has been the dominant community in Assam. Hence, the emerging educated people and the middle-class elite wanted to organize the community for its all-round development. The tribal became conscious of their distinct identity and this led to the socio-political and cultural movement to assert group identity among the various sub-groups belonging to different language and culture. By this conscious movement, the tribal have gradually started launching their movement to get their cultural, economic and political status raised Tribal league in 1933. On 20 March 1947, under the leadership of the Congress leader late Gopinath Bordoloi demanded complete ruling power for the plains. But the then government of Assam rejected the demand as the schedule tribe was considered as a part of the greater Assamese community. As a result, in 1950 the constitution of India came into effect, with a provision for an autonomous district for Karbi Anglong and North Kachar again, district councils for the ethnic groups of Mizoram and Meghalaya. Another important reason for demanding self-autonomy was the flow of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh to Assam went on increasing and occupied most of the land of the state and the government was also not interested in protecting the reserved tribal belt and block lands. It is unfortunate to say that the belts and these belts were transferred to non-tribal people by disobeying the land and revenue act passes in 1856. The historic movement for driving out the foreigners from Assam was started under the guidance of "All Assam Students' Union" in 1979 and an accord was signed between the Government of India and AASU. As soon as signing the accord the leaders of AASU formed a political party called Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and came to the power. Though they paid attention in politics to solve the foreigner problem the government failed completely to solve the illegal immigrants' problems along with other major tribal problems in Assam.

1 https://wikivisually.com/wiki/Folk_dances_of_Assam

2 Dalton, E.T. 1872, Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal, Calcutta, Govt. Printing press

3 Hodgson, B.H. 1880, Reprint 1947, "On the Aborigines of India. Essays on Koch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes" in Miscellaneous Essays Relating to Indian Subjects, Vol. i & ii, Turner and Co., London.

Such kind of activities of the government touched the heart of the tribal people and compelled them to think and do for the protection of their language, culture and land.

The Socio-literary organisations of the Rabhas of Assam were formed in different times. These are Assam Rabha Sammillon (1926), Nikhil Rabha Sahitya Rabha (1971), All Rabha Students Union (1980) and All Rabha Women Council (1993). Consequently, many other socio-cultural and political organizations were formed and later, all these organizations joined together to support and strengthen the Rabha movement to fight for their socio-cultural development and political rights. Among the Rabhas, All Rabha Students Union is the strongest and pioneering organization that was demanded for the first time to introduce Rabha language as a medium of instruction in the educational institutions in the Rabha dominated areas of Kamrup and Goalpara district of Assam. Several other Rabha organizations also played a vital role in their movements. The other indigenous people of Assam started demanding autonomous council just after the creation of Bodoland Autonomous Council in 1993. As a result, the Sonowal, the Thengal, the Mising Autonomous Council accord was signed. The Rabha Autonomous Council accord was also signed on 10, March 1995 during the congress government led by Chief Minister late Hiteswar Saikia. Again, the Rabhas, Mising, Tiwa, Thengal, Sonowal Kacharis have been demanding for the acquisition of the sixth scheduled status as soon as the formation of Bodoland Territorial Council in 2003. For creating a Territorial Council all the nationalist organizations of the Rabhas are jointly agitating a democratic movement with various programmes like a strike, mass rally, train and high way blockade, motorcycle and bicycle rally etc.

Folklore and Ethnicity

Different scholars have defined about folklore differently. According to folklorist Alan Dundes, a folk group is a group made up of two or more people with at least one thing in common. For example, there are religious folk groups, which are made up of people who belong to the same church or share the same beliefs; occupational folk groups are made up of people who do the same kind of work or work at the same place; and regional folk groups, who share an identity that is tied to place.⁴ Folkloristics Y.M.Sokolov says, "Folklore is an echo of the past, but at the same time it is also the vigorous voice of the present."⁵ The influential definition about folklore said by Dan Ben Amos is that "Folklore is an artistic communication in a small group."⁶ Martha C. Sims and Martine Stephens, "Folklore helps us to form and express identity in the midst of an always complex, sometimes confusing social context, in which our sense of who we are is frequently questioned and challenged."⁷ It is indeed to say that folklore is one of the best means of communicating the people with their culture and reviving the lost culture of the society.

According to John and Anthony, "Ethnicity is socially constructed and people have the ability to cut and mix from variety of heritages and cultures to form their own individual or group identities." Cohen says "ethnicity is a political phenomenon rather than the product of cultural affinity. Culture is not fabric element of ethnicity rather it becomes the sources of conflict when it comes into clash with political interest."⁸ Ethnicity stands for a group's way of conceptualising and relating to society. It welds together people who share a history, culture and community, who have an amalgam of language, religion and regional belonging in common and perhaps most critical of all; they feel that they come from the same stock.⁹ (Wilson and Frederiksen 1991: 2). Though the term ethnicity is of recent origin, its idea has been present since long. It's probably first used by David Reisman in 1953 only renamed an already existing and recognized phenomenon. People have identified themselves with particular cultures through processes like acculturation, integration and assimilation. Ethnic identity, on the other hand, is an affiliative construct, where individuals view themselves and others view them as belonging to a particular cultural group.¹⁰ The growth of the spirit of ethnicity or ethnic self-assertion among various group leads to the aspiration for a distinct identity for themselves.

Different scholars have defined about folklore differently. According to some scholars, it is the meeting place of ancestors. Folkloristics Y.M.Sokolov says, "Folklore is an echo of the past, but at the same time it is also the vigorous voice of the present."¹¹ It helps in connecting the people with their culture and reviving the lost culture of the society. Folklore is used as a symbolic resource for communicating identity. The use of symbols in the reinforcement of ethnic boundaries has been noticed long back (Barth 1969; Cohen 1989). But folklorists should pay attention to the process which accentuates the presentation and articulation of identity in a given historical context. In the inter-group communication process, folklore is used for negotiating, communicating and contesting cultural identities. The role of folklore and expressive culture in communicating ethnic identity is significant (Bendix/Klein 1993). Whatever it may be, since 90th century onwards folklore is being used for strengthening the ethnic and nationalistic ideas of the people the relationship between culture and ethnic identity

4 See Alan Dundes, <http://folklore.missouri.edu/whatis.html>

5 Dorson, R.M., 1972, *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, University of Chicago, New work, p.1.

6 See Dan Ben Amos <http://folklore.missouri.edu/whatis.html>

7 Martha C. Sims and Martine Stephens (<http://www.nyfolklore.org/tradarts/folklore.html>)

8 Quoted from Dhananjay Biswas, "Ethnic Groups and Ethnicity: A Theoretical Understanding", *Journal of Advanced Research: Vol I, Issue I, April 2013*, p10

9 Wilson Flona and Bodil Folke Frederiksen, 2000; *Ethnicity, Gender and the Subversion of Nationalism*, London: Frankcass & Co Ltd. in association with The European Association of Development, Research and Training Institute, Geneva, p.2

10 Trimble Joseph E. and Ryan Dickson in C. B. Fisher & Lerner, R. M. (edit) *Applied developmental science: An encyclopedia of research, policies, and programs*; Thousand Oaks: Sage, in press

11 Dorson, R.M., 1972, *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, University of Chicago, New work, P.1

was always close and effective. The growth and development of Folklore as an academic discipline emerged all over the world. "In the late 1920's folklore became an important academic discipline in various universities, often being an obligatory course, or an adjunct to a broader course in German Kultur kunde or Landes kunde." 12 The first national state to make political capital of folklore studies was the National Socialist Government of Hitler. During 1930's a massive literature of folklore was published in Germany, documenting the Nazi concept of a Herrenvolk united by mystical bonds of blood and tongue, culture and tradition."13

In establishing the folkish state folklore had been the central point of Hitler political thought. By the Nazi folklore was used to the fullest possible extent to serve the purpose of nationalism, politics and ideology, in that period folklore was the main means to restore the values of the traditional society. Hitler wanted to keep their folklore with its widest possible meaning to serve the greatest end it itself. Folklore was re-shaped to adjust their national and political situations. Within Germany, the nationalistic aspect was further emphasized during the Nazi era. In the United States also it was seen that the government gave pressure on the scholars, market and publishers to make the folklore to fit its ideology. In the 1930's, the line of depression the leftist singers aroused the sense of social injustice and political radicalism through singing of protest songs in the United States. In Soviet Russia, folklore was used as a powerful force for the advancement of communism."14 Famous Irish literary personalities used folk traditions in poems and plays. They fought for the revival of the Gaelic tongue and heritage against the shifting cloak of English culture. In Greece political and cultural nationalists utilized folklore to get an advantage over other European scholars.

Folklore and Ethnic Identity Movement among the Rabhas

The Rabhas are multi-ethnic groups that have their own language and culture. Despite folklore plays a great role in making aware and unifying their ethnic groups. Oral literature is the most important genre of folklore. The Rabhas are very rich in oral literature. Most of them are collected and published. Though the Rabhas did not have written tradition and discourse, they have their rich oral traditions like myth, legend, tales, songs, ballads and mantras which have been functioning as their oral history since immemorial times which recount their family history, origin, migration and settlement. The mythical tale recounting the oral history about the origin of *Baikho* worship, dance and related musical instruments have a tremendous role in asserting the cultural and religious identity of the Rabhas by validating their religious and ritualistic celebrations or worships and related dances. Anil Boro says "the elements of Bodo folklore, as well as their oral history embedded in the oral tradition, have proved to be effective assets of the ethnic and cultural identity of the Bodos. These assets have strengthened their nationalistic cause and prolonged demand for autonomy." 15 Like the Bodos it is seen among the Rabhas that the authors and folklorists and organizations have started publishing books on language and folklore. They are also documenting and publishing the songs that are orally transmitted, ballads, myths, legends which are helpful in asserting the ethnic pride and glory of the community. As for instance, the legend found among the Rangdani and Maitori Rabhas is that of "Dadan". Dadan is still regarded as the first king of the Rabhas. It is woven round the exploits and predicaments of king *Dadan* and his illustrious general *Maru Khetri* who is believed to have flourished at some remote past and lead the community through series of most momentous vicissitudes. Thus, folklore as strong weapons for reconstruction of political and social histories are the best evidence, the historian can use for understanding the people and their way of life and world view. They convey messages, the information about events of the past, but the intention in them may not be directly historical. In addition to narrative, Rabha folk song associated with *Farkranti* and *Baikho* worship, such as, in *hoymaru* song, there is a story of recounting the creation of the universe, existence of deities, history of the Rabha legendary Heros, blessings and hymns. Such kind of folk music can create ethnicity that helps to propagate the ideas and experiences of the wise and learned to village people who cannot read and write. In this regard it can be cited, "Music is a powerful means of communication. It provides a means by which people can share emotions, intentions, and meanings even though their spoken languages may be mutually incomprehensible. It can also provide a vital lifeline to human interaction for those who's special needs make other means of communication difficult. Music can exert powerful physical effects, can produce deep and profound emotions within us, and can be used to generate infinitely subtle variations of expressiveness by skilled composers and performers."16

Since time immemorial verbal art has been used for continuing and stabilizing culture, even used for political change. Myths and legends have been used to promote ethnic unity, regionalism, and nationalism and anti-nationalism. The use of folklore to explain the message or ideology of the cult is very prominent among the movements such as Chinese communism. Generally, most of the folk dance is performed with the music. Both song and dance are inter-connected with each other. In the case of the Rabhas also this is the same. In *Baikho* worship there is a theatrical fighting called *Killa dibikay* (breaking fort). It starts between the two groups. This is the symbol of the ancient king named *Dadan*. This is the one of the fascinating dances of the community that recounts their past histories. The dance attracts audience since the tunes are generally feet tapping and very well liked by the local crowd. This is physically close to the people. The dances are performed in a close range of public gathering.

12 Dorson,R.M.op.cit,p.16

13 Ibid,p.16

14 Ibid,p.16

15 <http://oxfordindex.oup.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198529361.001.0001>

16 See Dorothy Miell, Raymond MacDonald, David J. Hargreaves

https://books.google.co.in/books/about/Musical_Communication.html?id=nmpfYH4-7wwC&redir_esc=y

Theatre is the most powerful means of communication and it has been a vital means of communication during the ancient times owing to its interpersonal and interactive appeal. Man utilized this talent in folk arts and theatres not only as a mode of entertainment but also as a source of conveying information. We are aware that during the freedom struggle, folklore played a great role in spreading the message of patriotism. *Paala, Ujapali*, a traditional form of ballad singing was used for spreading awareness on various social issues by the government of India. Prof. Dr. Upen Rabha Hakacham says, "There were some Rabha educated people those were written some dramas based on Rabha legends such as Parsuram and Dadan kings that were performed by themselves to make aware their people specially among the Rabha populated areas of Assam. These dramas were greatly influenced by the Rabha people of Assam.¹⁷ Sukracharja Rabha, one of the dynamic dramatist of North East India who belongs to the Rabha tribe. He is the recipient of many awards such as Bismilla Khan Yuva Puruskar from Sangeet Natak Academy, Pratima Pandey Baruah Silpi, is trying to explore their rich culture through his theatres. He has performed different types of theatres based on Rabha folk tales and legends. As oral traditions helps in recounting the history of a particular community or group of people there is no doubt that Sukracharja Rabhas theatres are also influencing on the Rabha people to understand about their tradition and history. Apart from Rabha folk stories, he has been performing different types of dramas since 2008 by using Rabha's traditional costumes and musical instruments through Badungduppa Kalakendra situated at Rampur village, Agia, Goalpara, Assam.

It is noteworthy to mention here that during the freedom movement of India, Mahatma Gandhi started using the (Swadeshi) home-made local items. This movement had been used to decolonizing the minds and establishing the consciousness of nationalism to the people on the one hand and on the other hand, this led to encouraging the indigenous folk materials producers and Indian cottage industry as well. It has been already said that the Rabhas has their ethnic dress. The traditional dress of the Rabhas is called *rufan*. Actually this dress is worn by the Rangdani and Maiteri group. Other ethnic groups like Pati and Totala Rabhas worn *chador mekhela, Dhuti*. Earlier the Rabhas paid less attention in respect of wearing their traditional dress. Now, the organisations of the Rabhas have brought certain changes and taken necessary initiative to collect, preserve and practice the Rabha folk culture through its further study for socio-political and cultural development of the ethnic group. Some scholars observe, "If the organisation does not pay attention to the traditional costumes the Rabha cottage industry and the weaving culture gradually would be dying out. Indeed, the wearing of the traditional dress brings unity and integrity among the people. So, the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council and other Rabha organizations are trying to make the Rabha traditional dress mandatory to wear to all the groups of Rabha. Now, it is seen that most of the Rabhas have started wearing their traditional dress in the meeting, conference and even during the demonstration.

Festival is one kind of strong agencies of the socio-cultural communication in our society that are very close to the hearts of every community because it is in their person or simply speaking, it turns in their blood. Whenever, it is performed or enacted by anyone in a society or place, most of the people feel like joining it and enjoying it to the maximum. In this regard, Kristin Kuutuma, an Estonian scholar says in her article entitled "*Festival as Communicative Performance and Celebration of Identity*", "a festival provides opportunities to observe the communicative system of the culture, conveyed through semiotically complex performance events. Although a festival enfolds large-scale social units, there obviously occurs small-scale social interactional communication, performance which constitutes face-to-face interaction."¹⁸ The *Baikho* is the greatest religious festival in the Maiteri and Rangdani group of Rabhas which is celebrated during the spring season to satisfy the goddess of wealth to get mercy. Now, this festival is accepted as the national festival of Rabhas and has become the symbol of their unity and identity like the *Hornbil* festival of Naga ethnic different groups and *Wangala* of Garo tribes. In the *Baikho* festival, *Hui-Maru* songs are sung and performed. In these songs, the stories of the past heroes like King *Dadan, Maru Khetri* are recounted and glorified. These legendary heroes of the Rabhas are considered very important in so far as the oral history of the community.

In respect of naming it is to be mentioned here that the Rabhas kept their sons and daughters name with their own Rabha words. But, in the first decade of 20th century, after the conversion to Neo-Vaishnavism and Sanskritisation the Rabhas started taking education through Assamese medium schools which influenced them greatly. The non-Rabha teachers of the school who couldn't pronounce the Rabha's names changed their name and gave Hindu names. As a result, they used to keep Hindu names like Ganesh, Bijoy, Durga and the Christianity were John, Abraham, Michel, Entina etc. Further, few Rabhas also got actively involved in politics and took the name of the politicians and the great political philosophers like Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Roosevelt etc. This case is not only among the Rabhas but also found among other communities in Assam. "Going back to the Bodo names happen after the ethnic movement for the creation of Separate State Bodo Land launched by All Bodo Students' Union from 1986. But it was not seen very much during the movement of Plain Tribal Council of Assam. The Bodo people started taking Bodo names in place of the Assamese or Aryanised names mostly during the Bodoland movement launched by ABSU."¹⁹ Like

17 .Informant: Prof. Prof. Dr Upen Rabha Hakacham, Department of Assamese, Gauhati University, Jalukbari, Gauhati, Assam

18. See Kristin Kutuma, <https://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol7/festiva.htm>

19 .Faguna Barmahalia, 2007, Impact of Neo-Vaishnavism on the Bodo Society: A Study on the Bodos of Sonitpur District, an unpublished Phd Thesis, Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University, Assam, p.192

the Bodos ethnic movement launched by the ARSU the Rabhas have also started to change and give ethnic names to their sons and daughters now.

In modern times demonstration of folklore is the strongest mode of publicity. The Rabhas have been applying this technique to support their cause of socio-cultural and political development since the formation of the Rabha Nationalist organizations. In the cultural rallies the organisations showcase their folklore genres which are one of the supporting systems to politics and vice-versa. On the other hand, Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council has organized and tried to focus and explore their folklore materials in collaboration with other institutions through various cultural programmes in different places of Rabha dominated areas of Assam. It is indeed to say that the organization of such kind of cultural festivals either in the public space or government institution has a distinct purpose to showcase the distinctiveness of one's folklore items to the others.

Conclusion

By using the folkloric symbols the communities protesting against the government is an old phenomenon. The tactics used in ethnic movements rely on the presentation and some time on the re-construction of cultural symbols to show ethnic unity. In fact, folklore can create ethnicity; it touches the heart of the people and creates nationalistic feeling and sentiments about their language and culture. It is indeed to say that the socio-cultural life of the Rabha people is widely guided by their folklore. It helps in identifying and unifying the diverse ethnic groups of Rabhas. Once the Pati and Totla Rabhas discarded their language, tradition and culture and embraced and assimilated linguistically and culturally with the Assamese society. Now with the advancement of education, they have also become aware of their own language and folklore. By organizing various meetings, conferences, workshops and cultural programmes the nationalist organizations try to explore their folklore. Most probably it helps them to unite the community on a common socio-cultural and political arena. So, the trend of ethnicity is a quite strong among the various sections of the Rabhas living in different regions.

References

- [1] https://wikivisually.com/wiki/Folk_dances_of_Assam
- [2] Dalton, E.T. 1872, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Calcutta, Govt. Printing press
- [3] Hodgson, B.H.1880, Reprint 1947, "On the Aborigines of India. Essays on Koch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes" in *Miscellaneous Essays Relating to Indian Subjects*, Vol. i & ii, Turner and Co., London.
- [4] See Alan Dundes, <http://folklore.missouri.edu/whatis.html>
- [5] Dorson,R.M.,1972, *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, University of Chicago, New work, p.1.
- [6] See Dan Ben Amos <http://folklore.missouri.edu/whatis.html>
- [7] Martha C. Sims and Martine Stephens: *Living Folklore* <http://www.nyfolklore.org/tradarts/folklore.html>
- [8] Dhananjay Biswas, "Ethnic Groups and Ethnicity: A Theoretical Understanding", *Journal of Advanced Research: Vol I, Issue I, April 2013*, p10
- [9] Wilson Flona and Bodil Folke Frederiksen,2000; *Ethnicity, Gender and the Subversion of Nationalism*, London: Frankcass & Co Ltd. in association with The European Association of Development, Research and Training Institute, Geneva,p.2
- [10] Trimble Joseph E. and Ryan Dickson in C. B. Fisher & Lerner, R. M. (edit) *Applied developmental science: An encyclopedia of research, policies, and programs*; Thousand Oaks: Sage, in press
- [11] Dorson,R.M.,1972, *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, University of Chicago, New work, P.1
- [12] Dorson,R.M.op.cit,p.16
- [13] Ibid,p.16
- [14] Ibid,p.16
- [15] <http://oxfordindex.oup.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198529361.001.0001>
- [16] See Dorothy Miell, Raymond MacDonald, David J. Hargreaves https://books.google.co.in/books/about/Musical_Communication.html?id=nmpfYH4-7wwC&redir_esc=y
- [17] Informant:Prof.Prof. Dr Upen Rabha Hakacham,Department of Assamese,Gauhati University,Jalukbari,Gauhati,Assam
- [18] See Kristin Kutuma, <https://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol7/festiva.htm>
- [19] Faguna Barmahalia,2007,*Impact of Neo-Vaishnavism on the Bodo Society: A Study on the Bodos of Sonitpur District*, an unpublished Phd Thesis, Department of Folklore Research,Gauhati University, Assam,p.192