

BIRTH AND INFANCY RITES AMONG THE RABHAS

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The Rabhas, a Scheduled Tribe of West Bengal numbering 2,466 according to 1971 Census, are mainly concentrated in the districts of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri. Their congeners are found large numbers in the adjoining districts of Assam, namely, Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang.

In West Bengal these Rabhas are found inhabit either in forest settlements (*Bastees*) within or outskirts of the Reserve Forests (Forest Rabhas) or in the villages (Village Rabhas). While their *Bastees* are inhabited by the Forest Rabhas only, the Village Rabhas live in the neighbourhood and in close contact with a large number of Hindu castes, Muslims and other tribals. Of these the Rajbansis are dominant. While the Forest Rabhas are forest labourers and agriculturists, the Village Rabhas are agriculturists and daily labourers. The Forest Rabhas still bear matriliney to a great extent in their culture, the Village Rabhas have moved much towards the patrilineal society. As regards religion, the Forest Rabhas adhere to their own traditional animism while the Village Rabhas have adopted the local Hinduism to a considerable extent.

It is an old Rabha belief that the marriage

leads to pregnancy and child birth. To a Rabha the birth of a child is an important event of life. While the Forest Rabhas like the Garos¹, pray for a female child, the present day Village Rabhas like the Rajbansis, desire more for a male child. But none of these show apathy to the child of opposite sex. Infanticide is not dreamt of. The Forest Rabhas seek for a female child because their daughter (and her husband) would live with them and look-after them in their old ages. The son, on the contrary, would go to his parents-in-law, soon after marriage and deprive them (parents) of his earnings.

The Village Rabhas, on the other hand, hold the opposite view, and say that the female child will go to her husband's house after marriage and will not look after her parents in their old age. But a son will stay with them even after his marriage are feed them when they will be old and maintain their property.

Among both the Forest and the Village Rabhas child-lessness is considered as disgraceful. A married woman without child is always looked down in contempt. "A barren woman is called 'Panmadwa'. She is looked down by the com-

munity."² The husband of a barren wife often goes for divorce and subsequently remarries.

The birth of a child is not only necessary for the salvation of the parents after their death (a Village Rabha belief)³, and maintaining the continuity of the family-line but also for the economic stability of the family and the maintenance of the parents in their old age. One of the most important factors connected with the birth, is the inheritance of the property. All parents expect that their property should be inherited and enjoyed by their child/children and not by others. Social prestige is also connected with the birth. A childless couple has much less prestige.

The first pregnancy and the birth of the first child, are significant and joyous events to a Rabha couple and their family. Among the Forest Rabhas in the first pregnancy, a chicken is offered to the deities, *Pertani*, the child catcher, the *Maitani* and the *Michik bai*, the two deities for child welfare, on 5th, 7th or 9th month of pregnancy. No offering is made in the successive pregnancies. The Village Rabhas celebrate no particular ritual in connection with the first or successive pregnancies and childbirth but sometimes make vow to Goddess Sasthi (goddess of child welfare) for a safe delivery. But in Assam, among the Rabhas a sacrifice has to be made to *Bai-Ma-Bai*, the creator, if the wife becomes pregnant.⁴

Among the Rabhas of West Bengal, the couple goes by certain restrictions when the wife is pregnant. The restrictions and rigidity thereof are imposed more on the wife than on the husband. The latter refrains from killing certain living creatures, and is prohibited from taking active part in a funeral ceremony.

The wife, on the other hand, abstains from "going to any burial or cremation ground, or the house where any pollution (death or birth) has taken place, or crossing a laveller or ladder or a rope with which is tied a cattle or a goat."⁵ She is also not allowed to go alone to "any jungle or lonely pond or some unearthly place, riverside etc., nor can she take active part in some socio-religious ceremony (birth or funeral), nor allow-

ed to bring water with pitcher taking in her waist. She is also not allowed to stay outside the house after dusk in dishevelled hair, nor can she take food from a stranger or give anything to any outsider."⁵ Sex-life during pregnancy is also restricted, and as such the husband does not indulge in with the wife when the pregnancy is sufficiently matured (usually 7th month and onwards).

When a pregnant woman in the Forest Rabha society, gets sick, the *Huji* (medicine man) is called in to treat her by some magical means or by offering something to the deities and spirits.

In case of the Village Rabhas, the *Kabiraj* (medical man) or the local quack, treats the patient by magical means or by prescribing the decoction of certain herbs and roots etc. In recent years with the advantage of the easy availability of the doctors and modern medicine, both allopathic and homoeopathic, some enlightened and well-to-do Rabhas take help of these for the treatment of their pregnant woman if her condition is critical or if her illness cannot be cured by the local quacks.

It is also seen that a Village Rabha woman wears *Jap* (a kind of sanctified black thread) or amulet given by the *Kabiraj* or *Ojha* for protection from the evil spirits. The pregnant woman also keeps a piece of iron as a prophylactic charm. In the Forest Rabha society the pregnant woman does not wear *Jap* or *Dhap* but keeps a piece of iron to get rid of the evil. In case of any evil action, the *Dhami* or *Huji* wards off the evil spirit or appeases it so that the woman gets cured soon.

When the labour pain starts the expectant mother takes shelter in the main room as for child-birth no extra living-in room is constructed and the birth takes place in the main room (*Nu*). She usually remains there till the end of the pollution period. From the day the labour pain starts till the end of the pollution period (*Subodu*), her companions are some experienced elderly women (relatives or non relatives) who do the nursing and take care of her during the period of confinement. One of them acts as the midwife.

These women must be married. No unmarried

woman is allowed to do these.⁸ Any stranger or non-Rabha is forbidden from attending or seeing the child-birth because of the fear of the evil action.

No midwife from other community is employed by the Forest Rabhas nor any medical practitioner (allopathic or homeopathic) nor the trained nurse is called in. Similarly hospital delivery is also not heard of. Some professional midwives (untrained but experienced), who, in some cases, work for the Village Rabhas and the Rajbansis⁹ never go to the Forest Rabhas for midwifery. The Forest Rabhas, in their turn, rest content with their own community women. A few enlightened Village Rabhas have started sending their women for delivery to the Health Centers or hospitals.

When the labour pain starts, the attending women take care of the parturient woman. If the pain becomes acute, the attending women gently massage the belly and the abdomen of the pregnant woman with some luke warm oil to reduce the pain. The *Huji*, or the *Dhami*, or the *Roja* also tries to relieve the woman of acute pain by magical means. Worship of several deities and spirits, especially, the *Michik-bai*, *Perthani* and *Mai-tani* for the relief from pain and safe delivery is also done by the Forest Rabhas. Sometimes, for the quick and safe delivery the *Dhaini* (midwife) performs some magical rites, known as *Jalkasa* when she sanctifies some water by some magical means and gives it to the expectant mother to **drink**.

After the start of the labour pain but before child-birth in case of the Village Rabha woman, the *Dhaini* performs the *Solamatrika Puja* for the safe, and quick delivery and also for the welfare of the Child. "After the *Puja*, the *Dhaini* gives her patient a little sacred water to drink and also keeps some flowers of the *Puja*, on her bed. After child-birth all the articles used in the *Puja* even the flowers in the patient's bed, are thrown away."¹¹

Just at the time of birth the pregnant woman remains in the kneeling or squatting position till the delivery. As soon as the child is born, one

of the attending women cuts the umbilical cord with small dirk or bamboo knife as is done by the Assam Rabhas.¹² Among the Village Rabhas, the child is allowed to touch the ground first in order to get the blessings of the Mother Earth as among the Rajbansis.¹³

After cutting of the umbilical cord, the attending women wash both the mother and the newborn with luke-warm water. The midwife who cuts the umbilical cord, takes the placenta (*Par*) in a *Kalar-donga* (plaintain-bark container) and buries it outside close to the wall of the same room. The area is fenced with some reedstick to prevent the malevolent spirits and animals from doing harm. Sunder, on the other hand, reported that the Rabhas used to keep the *Parr* (placenta) in an earthen pot (*Matak*) and to bury it in the ground at some distance and to fence the place.¹⁴

When the fragment of the naval (*Atpai*) dries up and falls down after a few days, it is buried either within the main-room (i.e. at present lying-in-room) or in the kitchen (*Phankar*).

After birth, the attending women take bath.

Among the Forest Rabhas the birth pollution (*Subodu*) is observed for five or seven days. Sunder also marked the seven day pollution for the Rabhas and seven to nine days for the Rajbansis, when the woman becomes 'outcasted'.¹⁵ But among the present day Village Rabhas this period lasts for 30 days as among the Rajbansis.¹⁶ According to Friend-Pereira, the Rabhas (in Assam) observe birth pollution till the navel string is dropped.¹⁷ But Chaudhuri is of opinion that the Rabhas do not observe any unclean period after birth.¹⁸

During *Subodu* period both the forest and the Village Rabha mothers observe almost similar restrictions as mentioned earlier.

On 5th or 7th day of the pollution period, the *Subodu pareni* or final purification among the Forest Rabhas is done. In this day the brother or any male relative of the woman belonging to her *Husuk*, cuts a lock of hair from the head of the new-born and buries it within the lying-in-room. Then all male relatives and also the mother and the new born purify themselves by par-

ing their nails and shaving (only by the male relatives) and then taking bath. But no barber (Napit) is employed by them for this purpose.

Among the Village Rabhas like the Rajbansis pollution period ends with the *Chhua Kaman* (final purification) ceremony. A former 'First shaving' ceremony (*Ek-Kaman*) of course, is done on the 7th day of pollution when a barber (Napit) cuts a lock of hair from the head of the new-born baby which the mother buries under some tree (plaintain or jack fruit). The male members of the family inclusive of the father of the new-born baby, pass through some purificatory rites. No other rite takes place on that day. While the mother goes on observing the prohibitions of the unclean period till the day of the final consecration (*Chhua-Kaman* or *Do-Kaman*) ceremony, other family members including the father of the new-born, are exempted from observing the *Chhua* from the day of *Ek-Kaman* ceremony. They are then allowed to do their normal duties excepting the celebration of any social or religious ceremony in the house or attending such festivities.

On the day of 'Final Purification' ceremony (*Chhua Kaman* or *Do-Kaman*) a barber (Napit) performs the shaving ceremony. The Rajbansis also perform both *Ek-Kaman* and *Do-Kaman* or final purification in a similar way.¹⁹

Sunder also mentions the *Sudaparani* (*Subodu pareni*) ceremony among the Rabhas. It is observed after the 7th day of pollution when, "a cock is killed by the Huji or priest inside the house in which child may be born and he repeats various mantras there to satisfy Rishi."²⁰

Among the Forest Rabhas, the *Dhami* after taking *Chakat*, accompanies the family members and some other neighbours and goes to the *Husuk-Jampiri* (clan-altar) situated in the nearby forest to worship several deities and spirits such as, *Jaga Thakur*, *Metri*, *Pertani*, *Maitani*, *Kaltani*, *Birsali*, *Michikbai* and others, with offerings and sacrifices.

When the worship is over, the mother with her new-born comes to this place of worship where she is permitted to come only when the

worship is over. The mother then takes a little of the food (*Mave*) prepared with rice, vegetable and meat of sacrificed bird there and touches a little of it in the mouth of the new-born and then takes herself. The priest then blesses the child.

The *Mave* and *Chakat* are then distributed to all. This ends the *Lengju* ceremony.

When the purification ceremony is over, the Village Rabhas call the *Adhikari* for performing the *Balarampuja*. The *Adhikari* after celebrating this *Puja* near *Tulsi-mancha* by offering several articles to the deities, puts a mark of the mud of the Basil altar (*Tulsi-Mancha*) on the forehead of the child (if the child is a male) or mark of the vermilion of the *Puja* (in case of a female child) and blesses the child.

The *Puja* ends with the distribution of *Prasad* to the assembled persons.

NAME-GIVING CEREMONY

The "name-giving" or *Mung-tanniga* ceremony takes place in the same day with *Lengju* ceremony or one or two days after in case of the Forest Rabhas section, while among the Village Rabhas, it takes place on the day of *Chhua Kaman* (i.e. 30th day of pollution) or a little later but in no case after three months. Sunder on the other hand, states that the name-giving ceremony among the Rabhas takes place one week after the birth along with the *Sudaparni* ceremony.²¹ While Friend-Pareira reports that among the Assam Rabhas it is held a fortnight or a month after the birth.²²

In the afternoon, the *Deosi*, after worshipping the *Rungtuk* and *Basek* with offerings, asks the assembled persons to select the name. The mother of the child finally selects one name from among those suggested. The *Deosi* then holds a cock and ascribes the left leg of the cock in the name of the new-born and attributes the right leg to the name of the *Rishi*. He then cuts its head and holds the cock horizontally. If the right leg of the cock attributed to *Rishi*, gets up on the left leg symbolized in the name of the new-born, then the name selected is very good

and auspicious. If it is reverse, the name is considered to be omnius. It is rejected and a new name is selected, though in this case generally the result is not determined by such sacrifice.

When the name is thus given, the *Deosi* under the *Zerphak*, propitiates *Rishi* by some offerings and sometimes with the sacrifice of a fowl for *Rishi's* blessings to the new-born child.

Among the Village Rabhas the burden of selecting a suitable name for the new-born rests on the shoulder of the priest (Brahmin or *Adhikari* as the case may be) who selects a name after consulting the *Panji* (almanac) or some mythological book. There yet is another means of selecting a name. This was once prevalent among the Village Rabhas. Now only a few families observe it. This ritual is performed on a suitable day selected by the Brahmin or *Adhikari* after consulting the *Panji*, when the child's mother's father or mother's brother drops some rice within water contained in a pot while uttering the name to be selected. "If the rice floats, then this name is considered to be selected for the child. If it sinks down, another grain is taken, another name is selected and the same procedure is repeated. This process is continued until a rice floats and a name for the child is selected."²³ This method is surprisingly alike to what is found among the Oraons of Sunderban (southern part of West Bengal).²⁴

"The name-giving ceremony does not take place in the months of *Jaistha* (May-June), *Vadra*, (August-September), *Pous* (December-January) and *Chaitra* (March-April) and a day like Friday and Saturday as these are considered inauspicious months and days."²⁵ Likewise new-moon and full-moon days are also avoided. If this ceremony takes place during the above-mentioned days or months, the priest performs an expiatory rite before the ceremony.

When the ceremony is over in case of both the Forest and the Village Rabhas, the assembled relatives and others are given a feast.

Sunder in connection with the name-giving ceremony of the Rabhas of Jalpaiguri district stated that the *Huji* ascertained the name of the

child by killing a cock and declared the name of the child which he had selected.²⁶

Sometimes the mother of the child selects the name and very curiously, she is often influenced in her choice of name by incident in her own life.²⁷ McSwine in the Census Report of Assam has described a peculiar way of giving the names of the Totla Rabhas of Assam. "On the fifth day, after performing the necessary purification ceremonies, a number of relations and kinsmen are called and a fowl is given to the kinsmen or Dewri, who with the stem of a plantain leaf goes on striking the fowl uttering names in each stroke. The name which is uttered with the stroke that kills the fowl, is given to the child."²⁸

FIRST FEEDING OF RICE CEREMONY

Among the Forest Rabhas the 'First feeding of rice' ceremony is celebrated along with *Lengju* or *Mave Naeva* ceremony on the fifth or seventh day of the pollution period.

The *Mukke-Bhat* or *Bhat-chhoa* (the first feeding of rice) ceremony among the Village Rabhas, is not observed by all but by some comparatively well-to-do families. In their cases this ritual is observed when the child is 9 months old (for the male child) or 7 months old (for the female child). Among these people, this ritual is observed in the same way as among the Rajbansis.²⁹ The significance of this ceremony is to give cooked rice ceremonially to the new-born child for the first time. The father of the child arranges this ritual and some Brahmin or *Adhikari* performs the *Balaram Puja* in the same way as is done in connection with the child-birth. At the end of the *Puja* the mother's brother of the child taking him (the child) on his lap, feeds him a little of the *Payes* (rice boiled with sweet and milk). Throughout the feeding ceremony musical instruments are played. Lastly, a feast is given to the assembled relatives and villagers.

Some Village Rabhas think that the rice, being the staple food of the people, cannot be given to a new-born child unless it is first touched by the deity or deities. Once this *Prasad*,

which was offered to the deity, is taken by the child, it acquires the right of taking every kind of food.³⁰

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3. This is probably a Hindu belief borrowed by the Rabhas from the local Rajbansis. Both the Rabhas and the Rajbansis of Madhya and the Dakshin Manasi have this belief. This is also present among many other Hindu castes.
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19. Sunders, D. H. Op. cit.
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ON SOME BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF THE TOTOS

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The Totos, a small tribal community having a population 675 reside in a village named Totopara in Jalpaiguri, the district of West Bengal. The village is situated in a sylvan surroundings of the Himalayan foot hills.

They are a Mongoloid people having a similarity with the neighbouring Bhutias. The Totos possess no script of their own. The social and cultural development of the tribe still bears a testimony of a pristine form and the persisting traits are documented in various folk beliefs and practices. Like other fellow tribals they still maintain the traditional practices and their daily activities are still controlled by the prescribed norms.

During tours to Totopara at the last quarter of the year 1979, some interesting data were collected by interrogation and those were recorded in narrative form. These narrations relate to some religious beliefs, concept of evil omen, preference for digits and colours and some does and do nots etc.

The beliefs and practices which are prevalent in that society are vastly influenced by their traditional concept about religion. According to them, their material and non-material surround-

ings are all animated. They strongly believe in evil spirits and attribute all their misfortunes due to those spirits.

After a birth of a child a thread (made from *Karpas* cotton) coloured with turmeric is tied around his wrist, that thread is named as *Sungdi*. A garland made of grass (*Durba*) is also placed around the neck of the child. All these are done to avert the influence of evil spirits.

There is a practice among the mothers to carry their new born baby on their back and it is done by placing the baby within a fold of a cloth, the ends of the cloth is tied around the neck of the mother. There is a practice among the Totos to offer prayer to the *pischu* (household deity) with offerings, they pray for blessings in using the cloth. A brief ceremony is held in this connection which is known as *Boudi Longmi*. It is done to protect the child from an unforeseen incidence.

Before first ploughing of the season a red fowl is sacrificed in the field and the blood is sprinkled over the soil. This is done to get rid of any illness or any accident during ploughing and agricultural operations. Similarly and after harvest prayer is offered with the sacrifice of a fowl with

the expectation to get rain water for the next sowing.

There is an encloser for the *chima* at the North Western corner of the room. That encloser of the house deity is tabooed for the women members and others cannot enter there without clothes worn over night, a male member will have to change his clothes for entering into that encloser.

In offering sacrificial birds they prefer to select red coloured birds. On their journey elsewhere from the village if they meet a white coloured fowl then they take it for an evil omen and they prefer to abandon the journey and came back to the village. On the other hand, if they meet with a red patched tiger in the forest then it will bring a good fortune. Similarly, white coloured *Punti* (Fry) fish is good sign. A white horse is preferred to red brown one for good luck. Though they purchase black coloured birds and animals but they would prefer for red coloured ones for good luck.

There is a preference for odd digits. In transaction of money odd figures are preferred. If some one calls from outside the house at night no inmate will respond to that until the name of the person called for is repeated thrice. For better yield an aricanut sapling is transhifted thrice. Leaving one's house on the first day of the month is not allowed.

Going out of village and taking a journey for a distant place is not a daily occurrence to a Toto. One may meet several unforeseen adversities, so any sign or symbol suggesting misfortunes and good luck is closely observed. During journey if anyone looks into a waterful pitcher then it is a good sign, if on the way some one is met with an empty pitcher but going for filling it up with water then even it is considered a good sign.

Besides, turmeric and betel leaves are considered as sacred objects.

It has been attended here to highlight certain beliefs and practices prevalent among the Totos, a tiny tribe living in an isolated village, cut off from the mainstream of the modernisation. Some important features emerge from the descriptions which help us to reconstruct ecological and to some extent social environment of the tribe. As for example, the reference to certain animals like elephant, jackal, tiger, deer, cat and punti fishes suggests their presence in the fauna of the locality. We also get some observance of taboos and certain forbidden sights and symbols and certain objects are also invited well being of an individual and the society. All these portray the social and mental horizon of the people concerned. Their preference to certain colours, digits and day may be helpful for an outside agency to communicate with them successfully and these may in other way be helpful to organise development work.

AGRICULTURAL WAGES IN THREE DISTRICTS OF WEST BENGAL A CASE STUDY

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West Bengal, is primarily an agriculture oriented state and agriculture is the sole occupation of the vast majority of the rural folk. More than 75% of the people are still dependent on agriculture. About 18 million acres of agricultural land in this state, nearly 13 million acres of lands are under cultivation and 7 million agricultural labourers are still engaged in agricultural work. Rice is the staple food of the Bengalee people. According to 1971 census out of 7 million agricultural labourers near about 3.3 million of the agricultural labourers are landless. They are mainly dependent on agricultural work for their mere subsistence. But surprisingly enough, the agricultural labourers—the main pillar of the agrarian society are compelled to live a life of perpetual poverty. They do not get the job throughout the year. During the lean season of agriculture, they live on starvation due to lack of agricultural works and others. The agricultural wages are very much lower than the actual wages fixed by the State Government at various times. At present the Government have fixed the agricultural daily wages of Rs. 8.10 per adult. But the big land-holding groups or 'jotdars' with an

opportunity of law were not in a position to give the fixed wages to the labourers in this State. Before the decision of the court, the Chief Minister of West Bengal decided to give the agricultural wages at the rate of Rs. 6.63 to the agricultural labourers which have been fixed earlier by the State Government.¹

Another factor, contrary to agricultural wages, is that most of the land-holding groups or jotdars depend on immigrant labourers as they are cheaper than their own local labourers in many times. As a result, the poor agricultural labourers due to their pervading poverty are forced to go for work in other regions or forced to go for work in their locality with minimum agricultural wages. Due to their economic condition they are dependent on debt to the 'mahajans' after the agricultural season. The 'mahajans' with an opportunity of poverty amongst the labourers give the loans either in cash or in kind with a heavy amount of interest. Sometimes they give the money with the help of mortgage. The poor agricultural labourers, as a result,

1. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 4th December, 1977.