

Vol 4 Issue 3 April 2014

ISSN No : 2230-7850

International Multidisciplinary
Research Journal

*Indian Streams
Research Journal*

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RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2230-7850

Indian Streams Research Journal is a multidisciplinary research journal, published monthly in English, Hindi & Marathi Language. All research papers submitted to the journal will be double - blind peer reviewed referred by members of the editorial board. Readers will include investigator in universities, research institutes government and industry with research interest in the general subjects.

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CONTINUITY AND CHANGE OF BAIKHU WORSHIP

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Abstract:- The paper attempts to highlight the traditional beliefs associated with the *Baikho* worship among the Rabha community. Through this paper the study emphasizes and analyses the reasons behind the continuity and change of this traditional worship in modern times.

The study is based on the primary and secondary sources. To unearth the authenticity of the tradition of *Baikhu* worship, the field work was conducted at Nadiyapara, Goalpara, Assam and Pahem in West Garo hills in Meghalaya. For secondary source few printed books, magazines and souvenirs, published by the distinguished publishers and the reception committee of conferences such as Rabha Sahitya Parishad, All Rabha Students' Union, All Rabha Women Council etc were referred.

Keywords: Worship, Tradition, modification, adaptation .

INTRODUCTION

The Rabhas are one of the Schedule tribes living mainly in Assam and West Bengal. But they are concentrated on the south bank of the river Brahmaputra, basically Kamrup, Goalpara district and Tikrikilla of West Garo hills of Meghalaya. Linguistically the Rabhas belong to the Indo Mongoloid group. According to F. Buchanan and Hamilton, the aspects of socio-religious and material life of the Rabhas have similarities with those of the pani Koch¹. E. Dalton on the other hand, argues that 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 The Rabhas of West Bengal and Assam generally speak the local Bengali and Assamese dialects.

There are 11 sub-groups in the Rabha tribe namely Maitoria, Hana, Dahori, Pati Rabha, Sunga, Rangdani, Bitola, Kosa, Totala, Mohadi and Dumesha. Amongst these groups, the Rabha language is spoken by very few tribes belonging to the Kosa, Maitoria and Rangdania groups.

Purpose of Baikho worship

The *Baikho* festival is the greatest religious festival in the Maiteri and Rangdani group of Rabhas which is celebrated once a year during the spring season since time immemorial. This worship symbolises hope and desire.

The main purpose of the worship is for public welfare. According to some Rabha scholars, the worship is observed in order to please the goddess for a good harvest. As agriculture is the main source of their livelihood they need good weather, environment etc. to get more produce. Moreover, the villagers worship the Baikho so as to get relief from different epidemic diseases and bring in peace, unity and prosperity to the society. The Rabhas observe the Baikho worship as they believe that the principal deity only can help them. .

Origin of the worship

Different scholars have defined the term *Baikho*. According to Rajen Rabha, the term bai means deity and kho means great, i.e. the principal deity. According to Rajen Rabha, the *Baikho* is the goddess of crops who appears to be the principal deity of the Maiteri group. In the past, all groups of the Rabhas worshipped the Goddess. Now this worship is not found among

other groups.”⁴It needs mentioning here that there is much feasting and drinking of rice-beer. At the time of worship several numbers of pigs and fowls are sacrificed to the goddesses so that there may be plentiful crops, copious rains, good health, prosperity and no earthquake. The Rabha people believed that if a big heavy pig is sacrificed to the Goddess there may be a plentiful crop at the time of harvest. Sometimes it is also seen that a second and smaller ceremony of the worship is performed after a bad season for agriculture.

Whatever it may be, the *Baikho* festival is an agricultural related festival of the Rabhas. The Baikhu worship in Garo hills of Meghalaya is held on the full moon (Purnima) of June with their traditional rites and rituals. It needs to be mentioned here that the term Baikho in Assam is called Baikhu in Meghalaya.

Presently the *Baikho* is worshipped in different places of Assam and Meghalaya. According to Prakash Rabha, “Panishali, Bar Batapara and Kadmshali, Maladhara, under the Goalpara district as well as Paham, Kaem Batapara, Phatamati and other places under the Garo Hills district.”⁵

Generally there are seven deities of Baikho worshipped such as-Susari, Nakkati, Tamai, Daduri, Dahari, Rongbud and Champai. According to Rajen Pam-Susari is worshipped on the bank of Ghagua river near Tikrikilla and Hatshila village. Nakkati is worshipped on the bank of 'Sat-benka' river as well as Tikrikilla village”⁶. Presently Nakati is worshipped at Kadamshali, Tamai at Pahem (Meghalaya), Dahari at Maladhara, Rongbudi at Bamundi, Daduri at Phatamati, Panishali, Batapara and Champai at Bhedadoba etc.

Different symbols are used in the name of these deities earlier—susari-chandra har (a kind of silver necklace), Nakkati-hancha (a kind of silver solid necklace), Tamai-Nakphul (silver flower). The symbol of the respective form of each deity is placed on the stone-altar all the year round. A big flat stone is used as altar of each deity. The Rabhas believe that in the past the deities were the national heroines, *Baikho* being the supreme heroine, represents them. It is an interesting fact that though the worship is performed in the name of Baikho she has no altar, symbol and no sacrifice is made.

Preparation and observation of first worship

According to the Rabhas, all groups of the Rabhas worshipped this Goddess in the past. But now the worship of *Baikho* is found among other ethnic groups like Rangdani and Maiteri only. With an objective to collect the authentic data on the *Baikho* or *Baikhu* worship, we visited and did field work at Pahem village of West Garo hill in Meghalaya. The Rabhas have fixed worshipping place which is situated far from the village. It is needless to say that before the worship each of the community clean their houses and wash their shirts, dress and other things. Generally every householder undertakes a purificatory ritual by plastering their houses, courtyard with cow dung, washing their cloths, cooking utensils etc. on the first day of the *Baikho* worship. The Oja and Pali and his assistant visit every household of the village after sun-set. Interestingly the visitors sing ceremonial songs and sprinkle rice powder on the roof of each house. It is called nok jumkay. The house holder offers them rice beer. As soon as the nok jumkay ceremony is over, they directly come to the house of the chief priest and start singing hoymaru song.

Hoymaru is the longest song. There is a story of recounting the creation of the universe, existence of deities, history of the Rabha legendary Heros, blessings and hymns. This song is sung step by step throughout the whole night. One example regarding the creation of the world can be cited:

O nang rang muluk ba
Rong-rong, rang rang se
Towa-gok...ahyam ha
Biba kundini para se
Phri phrao-phri phrao byrbajok
Byrbajok: Ahyam ha.....

English rendering

There is nothing, everything was empty,
Empty before creation of universe.....
And suddenly a loud noise is heard
And the sparkle of light came down to exist
And the world came into existence.....

Another example can be cited regarding the existence of the deity:

Owan bysai dyma-maibai
Towa-gok daduri aya daduri ha,
Owan Aphe jyksai hadamni
Dyma maibai.....
Towa gok daduri aya daduri ha.....

English rendering:

When the earth is existed: Grass, plants, water,
corns and couple of stars were created.....
There is Goddess *Daduri*.

They drink, sing and dance in the courtyard with other villagers until sun-rise. After beginning the *hoymaru*, songs of heroes and heroines and wars of the Rabhas are sung. These songs may be termed as ballads describing the ancient heroes and heroines. No boy or girl can participate in this performance The function of the first day is called *Nok-khitharkay*. (purification of house).

Observation of the main worship

Just one day earlier, the villagers come and clear the jungles where the deity is to be worshipped and place the altar here. Next morning some villagers along with the priests go to the appointed place. They bring pigs and fowls for sacrifice, pitcher (*jonga*) of rice beer and other offerings to the deity. One male member from each family goes to the *Baidum* (altar place). There they decorate the altar with *Rongjumukh* and offer different items like *fok-chak* (one kind of food), rice beer, betel nut and betel leaf etc. After finishing all the rituals “*baibras*” (people going to the *baidum*) are allowed to eat and drink. In the afternoon other villagers join with the *baidras* for the feast.

Women are not allowed to participate in the worship. The men those who take part in the worship have to fast until the completion of the worship. They dress traditional *gamocha*: but no shirt is dressed during the worship. There is no any discrimination between the literate or non literate, rich and poor people in taking part in the worship. The villagers do not work in their paddy fields during the worship.

The *Baikho* worshipped in Pahem is purely traditional. Numerous animals are sacrificed and rice beer is offered to different gods and goddesses. After completing all the rites and rituals, different items of food are cooked with the leaf of *Sajana* (one kind of tree) and powder of rice and meat already offered in the worship. All the items are collected and put into a bamboo pipe to be burnt in the fire place. As soon as the worship is over, rice beer is offered to the thirsty people. It needs to be mentioned here that initially the people are silent and follow the instructions of the priest or *ojas* of the worship. After some time, the people start talking and crack jokes after being intoxicated with rice beer.

During this time, the people certain masks and costumes with the branches of trees and plants near the worshipping place such as cap, spear, row, gun etc. After completing all the rites and rituals the village people are ready to dance. The villagers make different kinds of colors and paint their bodies for the theatrical performance. The men make the costume of wild animals. Some of the villagers start dancing and sounds of ha hoi. People crack jokes. Though the dance and performances do not adhere to any structured format, the performances are very interesting.

The villagers not participating in the rituals at the place of worship make a temporary fort with the branches of the trees on the outskirts of the village. Later, while destroying the kila they sing a song. There is a mock fight held between the parties- the participants of the ritual worship and the villagers. It starts when the groups of worshippers arrive near the fort. Other groups try to prevent them from the opposite side of the fort so that they cannot enter the village. This is a dramatic performance. This traditional theatrical fighting is called *Killa dibikay* (breaking fort). Finally, the group of worshippers is defeated. This *killa* is a symbol of the ancient king *dadan*. It is important mention the hymn sung just after breaking the *killa* by the people assembled. The hymn is as follows:

*Arehung arehung aya,
Nama naychung chayachung aya arebung,
Her jama charea aya,
Nama naychung chayachung aya arehung*

Free translation:

Oh mother! See our armed force
We are victorious heroes. Give us light and
Force so that we can win the world

Just after the *killa bhanga* there is a tradition of rope fighting between the two parties. It is called *leoa bikay*. Plays and martial art dances are performed. Young and senior musicians of both sexes participate.

After this ritual the villagers gather at priest's house and pray to mother *Baikho* to forgive them for their tress passes and invoke her for prosperity and peace. In the centre of the courtyard, an earthen mound is made; a wick-lamp is lighted and placed on the altar (mound) along with the resin. The main priest offers rice beer and other food items and articles in the name of the deity *Baikho*. At the same time two persons, *sutala-sutuli* dance and the singers sing *Hoymaru* to praise Goddess *Tamay* (Goddesses of wealth). The mother goddesses occupies the central place in the *Baikho*.

There is a belief among the Rabhas that the *Hoymaru* song can be sung on the day of Baykho worship and not otherwise. In *Hoymaru* songs, heroic deeds and spiritual thoughts are conveyed. No written record has been found of the songs and they are handed down orally from generation to generation. According to R.Rabha, "These songs may be termed as memorial description of the ancient heroes and heroines like ballads. No boy or girl can participate in this performance."⁷

On that day a separate barricaded platform is arranged a little distance away from the priest's house for adult unmarried boys and girls. Then they sing and dance *Baykho-Trakkay*. These songs are love songs. There are several love songs of different tribes or non tribes like *oinitom* (Mising) Bihu (Assamese) *Gwswthwnai methay* (Bodo) etc. The songs sung during the Baikho worship are different from other love songs. Upen Rabha is of the view that "the songs may be compared with the Assamese love song."⁸ In these songs, R.Rabha says "Though these may be called love songs they are not similar to those of Assamese Bihu songs and dance. There are no erotic overtones in the songs and gestures in the dances. Generally the songs are ironical; one group asks questions in songs. While other group gives a quick repartee in the same tune. They come willingly for singing and dancing with their musical instruments and dresses. No married women and aged persons can participate and observe this function."⁹ N.Rabha says "while singing *hoymaru*, special importance is given on purity i.e. singers as well as all the villagers should keep their mind, body and heart pure. It is believed that otherwise they have to suffer from dangerous situation. Such belief helps a person to purge and control his mind and also to sacrifice himself for the greater interest of human beings."¹⁰

Further he says, "There is a restriction in respect of singing and dancing. In the party there will be a leader who will be the good singer and dancer. Generally a boy's party has revelry with a girl's party and vice versa. No competition is held between same sexes i.e. there will not be from the same family or relatives. A group of judges are appointed for this function. No boys and girls can participate in this competition with their desired partners. It is decided through a lottery. If the leader of a boy's party is defeated in singing and dancing till the early in the morning, then the girls' party arrest him and forcibly bring him to the house of the girls' leader and celebrate their marriage as per social custom. In the same manner the girls' leader also must marry the boys' leader. Thus in between the other boys and girls, marriage ceremonies may be performed on that day after their mutual agreement. No parent, guardian or relative (baray-buri) can obstruct this function. Otherwise they will be fined accordingly"¹¹.

There was a strong belief in the Rabha society that this system of marriage ceremony among the boys and girls on the occasion of Baykho on that day is/was divine. Sometimes the parents, guardians or relatives of the boy or girls try to bring him or her forcibly with the help of his or her friends. If the marriage ceremony is solemnised with a function of the *To Thakay*, it is legal. Occasionally it leads to a quarrel between the two parties but a compromise is made.

In Assam, the *Baikho* worship is being observed for last 15th years consecutively by the Rabhas in the month of *Saitra* as the date Assamese calendar i.e. on the full moon in Anchalik basis at Nadiyapara, Goalpara. They have given up the traditional system of *Baikho* worship since 20 years. There is a committee for celebrating the festival. In this worship the people readily help the organizing committee economically and physically to make the celebration a grand success.

No animal sacrifice is offered but *leao bikay* is observed. They perform the *killa bhanga*. Instead of animal sacrifice flowers are offered. There is a similarity with the traditional worship like construction of artificial fort (*kila*) with the branches of the trees.

In Nadiyapara, after *kila bhanga* (fort), the worshippers leave the place and go to the temple. This temple is a permanent structure called *risi*. The temple has a number of Hindu idols such as Kali, Durga, Swaraswati, Siva, Parvati and even legend king Dadan. During the worship, they light the earthen lamp and offer *flower, prasads* and other offerings to each of them. No sacrifice is offered during *Baikho puja*. Generally there was no idol worship. Hinduism introduced idol worship.

Wearing white shirt and *dhoti* a red cloth is tied around the waist. They go to a nearby field. In the field a seven storey high pyre is built with the *Krangsi bamboos*. The worshippers arrive singing and dancing till midnight. After their arrival, the chief priest worships the god near the pyre and lights it. As soon as, the pyre ignites, the worshippers begin to sing and dance, encircling it. This dance is known as *Barkha-nak-kay*. They dance over the burning coal to the rhythm of musical instruments such as *khram, Branchi and daidi*. There is a belief that if a dancer commits a mistake or wrong deed, he is scalded, indicating a bad omen.

After pyre is reduced to ashes, the ashes are arranged in a long line and every worshipper must cross this line bare foot, singing and dancing simultaneously. At the other end of the line, unmarried girls keep pitchers full of water. The girls pour water on the feet of the worshippers coming across the burning ashes one after another. If the legs of any one of the worshippers are burnt, he is considered impure and is fined a big *jonga* of rice beer. Thus the *Baikho* festival is concluded.

CONCLUSION

Due to impact of modernization and westernization, the *Baikho* worship observed by the Rabhas has changed over a period of time. Many experienced performers have died. The worship is very expensive. So, the educated people are unwilling to observe the *Baikho* with all pomp and splendour. They keep it simple. Now the Rabha Nationalist organization is trying to celebrate this festival publicly and has declared it as the national festival of Rabhas. As the informant furnished, "All Rabha Students Union organized its 2nd biennial conference and annual *Baikhu* festival together on 9th and 10th June, 2007, at Dudnoi public play ground of the Rabha Hasong area."¹²

This *Baikho* festival is the symbol of their identity and unity. In the *Baikho* festival, after the main *puja* offerings, *Hui-Maru* songs are sung. The stories of the past heroes like King *Dadan, Maru Khetri* are recounted. These legendary heroes of the Rabhas are considered very important in the oral history of the community. The Rabhas living outside the districts of Rabha Hasong Council such as Bagsa, Udalguri, Sonitpur etc. have also started celebrating the annual conference of the All Rabha Students' Union and All Rabha Women's Council. The initiative taken by the Rabha nationalist organizations for preserving and documenting the folklore items are laudable.

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