

The Spring Time Festival 'Baikho' in Rabha Culture: Continuity and Change

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Abstract – Assam the north-eastern state of India is the land of a huge number of fairs and festivals. Among the different fairs and festivals of Assam, Baikho is one of the most auspicious enchanting spring time festivals prevalent among the Rabha people of Assam. Baikho is an agricultural as well as religious festival. Rabhas considered Baikho as the Goddess of wealth and Crops, so in order to propitiate Goddess Baikho for a good harvest and to get relief from diseases as well as to bring peace, unity and prosperity to the society the Rabhas celebrate this festival joyfully during the spring time in the Assamese month of Bohag and Jeth (Mid-April). Baikho festival is also known as Khoksi puja. This festival takes place after weeks of ideal preparations. Baikho festival is celebrated by the Rabhas from the early time and still it is continued but the pomp and dedication has abridged and also the mode of celebration has changed in some aspects from that of the earlier time. The proposed study is an exploratory one. The main stress of proposed study is to bring light on the Rabha traditional cultural festival Baikho and on the recent changes occurred in the system of its celebration. Nevertheless, at the same time, the study is also an attempt to observe the process of social change through this puja. The study is based mainly on the primary data gathered from field. The field study has been carried out in Goalpara district of Assam.

Key Words: Rabha, Rabha Culture, Baikho Festival and Social Change.

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INTRODUCTION

One may be defined culture as the totality of behavior, experience, belief, ideas, customs, tradition, knowledge, values, thinking, skills, artifacts, and a set of rules constructed by a large group of people. Culture is the way of life that covers all aspects of human life. But, the Fairs and festivals are the mirror of culture of all indigenous group of the world which replicates societal harmony, faith, tradition and different religious customs that formed an important part of in every province of social and cultural life of community people. The spring time festival Baikho is one of the most ritualistic festivals prevalent among the Rabhas of Assam. The present study is an effort to bring light on the progressively modifying and disintegrating traditional Rabha Baikho festival.

The Rabha tribe is one of the most distinguished primitive scheduled plain tribe of Assam and North-East India which placed fourth major scheduled tribes of Assam. Rabha tribes belong to the Indo-Mongoloid Kirat group of people from the aspect of originality and ethnicity. Among the four different language family (Indo-Aryan, Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian) the Rabha tribes linguistically belong to the Tibeto-Burman sub family within the Sino-Tibetan family. This tribe is basically scattered

in different parts of India but mostly concentrated in the southern bank of the river Brahmaputra in the undivided district of Goalpara and Kamrup and north bank of the Brahmaputra in the district of Nalbari, Darrang Kokrajhar, Bongaingaon and the BTAD of Assam. The Rabhas are of eight groups. They are respectively-Rondani, Maitori, Pati, Dahuri, Kocha, Bitolia, Hana and Sunga.

As a primitive aboriginal tribes or inhabitants of Assam, the Rabha tribe has its own multi-faceted, colourful cultural heritage. Like the other tribe of Indo –Mongoloid tribal community the Rabha culture is also follows the Indo-Mongoloid culture from different aspects. The Rabha tribal community is very distinct and attractive in their rich socio-cultural heritage. They have their distinct language, literature and culture. Their culture include oral literature, traditional costume, ornaments, weapons, religion, rites and rituals, performance, festivals, musical instruments etc. The Rabha are animistic in their religious character. Rishi is the supreme God of the community. They perform different types of seasonal, agricultural and religious festivals.

The Rabha community is prissily an agriculturalist community that's why maximum numbers of fairs and festivals are related to agriculture. 'Baikho' is

one of the greatest religious and agricultural festivals of the Rabhas mainly practiced by the Maitori and Rongdani groups of Rabha people. The others groups of Rabhas celebrated the Assamese national festival Bihu and some other pujas in spring time instead of Baikho festival. The preparation for Baikho festival starts mainly in the beginning of the Assamese month Jeth. This month is called as Baikho Rangre by the Rabhas. The day of full moon is considered as the perfect day to celebrate this auspicious festival. But the rites and rituals associates with this festival are not same in everyplace. There can be seen a little difference in performance of this puja in different place. In some Rabha villages this puja is celebrated before the day of *Purnima* (full moon) or after the day of *Purnima*. But the day of *Purnima* is considered as the main day to celebrate this puja by all the Rabha groups. In this way they started to celebrate this festival from the first week of Jeth month basically and continued it till the end of the month. It can also be mention here that the worshipped deities are not same everywhere. This puja is generally practiced in Jungle and hill which a bit far from their home shades. Regarding the place of Baikho puja celebration Charomahon Rabha in his article Rabha sakalar Baikho Utsab aru Porampara mentioned that for the first time the Baikho puja was celebrated at Athiabari under Habraghat area of Goalpara District by the relatives of the King Dodan and his courtier came with him.¹³

Recently it is seen that the other groups of Rabha people namely- Pati, Dahuri, Bitalia are also in a way to celebrate and continue their traditional Baikho festival instead of Bohag Bihu celebration in some Rabha inhabited places of the state. This festival is celebrated continuously for three or seven days in the Assamese month of *Jeth* (Mid- April) once a year. Generally, this festival should be start on Monday, Wednesday or Friday according to the eminent people related to this festival. It is a very expensive festival in comparison to other Rabha religious festival. As mentioned earlier Khoksi puja or Baikho is the festival related to agriculture. So, the Rabhas worship Khoksi in order to please the Goddess for good crop, sufficient rains and good health. The persistence to celebrate this festival is also to get release from illnesses and to bring harmony, unity and prosperity to the society. So, through this festival they pray for the wellbeing of the society from all sides. In Baikho festival the Rabha placed following deities in alter of Baikho - *Susari*, *Nakkati*, *Tamai*, *Daduri*, *Dahari*, *Rongbad* and *Champai*. The symbols used for the respective deities are like- a kind of silver necklace, a kind of solid silver necklace, silver flower etc. The role of *Oja* (the main person who performs the rites and rituals) and *Pali* (the assistants of oja) are very important in

this puja. The second day of the festival both the fowl and pig are sacrificed in front of the deities. After the puja the villages start to drink rice bear. The song sung in this festival is known as Hoymaru, which is a longest song. The mode of practicing Baikho puja is not same in every Rabha villages and among every group of the Rabhas. The system of celebrating the Khoksi puja by the Maitori Rabhas is similar to the Bihu Festival of the neighboring Assamese people. In this festival the young boys and girls enjoyed a lot by singing and dancing freely together. There is also a very old tradition related to this puja is to choose their life partner during this festival. Baikho puja is worshiped by the Maitori Rabha can be broadly divided into three sections viz.-Pre Baikho, On Baikho and Post Baikho. In the first day of the festival they performs some purificatory rituals like –washing cloth, washing utensils, plastering houses and courtyard as well as some other domestic stuffs. They perform this puja by performing different rituals on the mentioned three days.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN BAIKHO TRADITIONAL FESTIVAL

The Baikho festival which is celebrated by the Rabhas from the past is changed in its various ways at the passing of time. In early time this puja was celebrated with great disciplined and systematic way after many struggles and preparations in hay and woods. They celebrated this festival with pomp and grandeur and hold it splendidly. They enjoyed a lot in this festival in the light of lamp of kerosene which is made of bamboo tube. But at the middle time due to impact of modernization and westernization Baikho festival was not practiced in most of the villages of Rongdani and Maitori Rabha. The place where it was celebrated is observed in a changing form apart from some inner rites and rituals. Most of the earlier experienced persons are died and the educated people are unwilling to practice this festival like before as this festival is very expensive and continues for seven days. Now the festival is celebrated in a simple way and as a result the festival lost much of its former glory. Instead of Baikho festival an amount of Rabhas started to celebrated Hachang puja in a specified place called Hachang *than*. We know that this festival is only celebrated by the Non Aryansed Rongdani and Maitory Rabha people in their specified place of the village. Again, instead of Baikho festival the Pati Rabhas celebrates Langa puja where they worshiped their supreme deity Mahadeva and placed the Khoksi deity in the alter of worship with such other deity like Dhan-kuber, Thakurani, Dudhkumar and Phulkumar. Here, noticeable change is observed that from the last few years the Pati Rabhas of Dudhnoi area of Goalpara district and Loharghat area under South kamrup district started to celebrate this Baikho festival at the month of April or Assamese month Bohag with

¹³ Rabha, C (2016). Rabha sakalar Baikho Utsab aru Parampora, In souvenir *Manchalengka* C, Chakravarti (eds.) Kamrup: N.P. p- 103

great joy and merriment instead of celebrating the Ronggali Bihu stage function. In this festival the Baikho puja committee organized several programs. The Rabha folk dance groups are invited to perform out there. Among different programs organized in Baikho festival the most new conspicuous program is the beauty contest. The committees organized beauty contest where the girls from 18 to 25 years old can be participated. Here, mention may be made about the name of the program Rasong Sini Doray held in Dudhnoi Baikho festival under Goalpara district meaning the lucky one. This kind of modern fashion show can be seen in other district of Assam too during the time of Baikho festival. Again, today's famous local or state level singers and dancers are also invited to make the function more attractive and enjoyable at the cost of demanded prices in this festival. Previously Baikho festival took place for either seven or three days. But in present time it may also celebrated for only one or two days. I observed a one day Baikho festival during my field study at Dabili organized by the Lela Dabili ARSU (All Rabha Student Union) in Goalpara District. The inhabitants of this area are mainly Pati Rabha people. They are celebrating this Baikho festival since 2005.

I acquainted with a Pati Rabha Baikho pujari group named Hatigaon Sri Sri ma Baikho puja committee in Damra anchalik Baikho utsab on 27th may 2017 held in Majubargum Jubak Sangha Prangan, Damra, Dudhnoi. The group performs the Baikho festival in different places of Assam basically at the Assamese month of Bohag and Jeth. They are invited to perform in many places of Assam. They take a fixed price to perform this puja. Baikho festival in general is known as the festival of Rongdani and Maitory Rabha people. According to Nabakumar Rabha, the general secretary of Pati Rabha Baikho pujari group, the Baikho festivals practiced among the Rongdani or Maitory Rabhas are different in some aspects from the Baikho festival practiced by them. The Rongdani and Maitory Rabha don't perform this festival in stage. They are completely restricted to stage performance. The original traditional Baikho festival is practiced in either forest or in hill. Again, the Baikho puja performed by the Rongdani Rabhas are not bound to sacrifice animals or birds everywhere, the tradition of sacrifice is place specific. Sacrifice of birds and animals are compulsory in Baikho festival practiced by the stage performer groups. They have 40 to 45 members in their group to perform this puja. They are trained to practice this festival with the aim to perform it in the stages of different places. In their group generally they need four women to help in performing the rites and rituals related to Baikho puja but they brought some young girls with them too to different places to train them in practicing the festival. The main intention to bring the girls with them is to establish respect and create awareness amongst the younger generations about the value of their traditional festival Baikho and to handed down this tradition to the new generations and to preserve traditional rites and rituals and make charming the festival among the others caste and communities as

well. They worship those benevolent deities according to them who never give any trouble. They don't worship the malevolent deities. The deities whom they worship in sequence are- Shiv Darmang, Baikho or Khokshi, Bahubali Marukhetri, Lakhi Ai, Lakhor Thakur, Rakhi Devota and Konso Thakur. Shiv Darmang is the supreme God in Baikho alter who is worshipped by sacrificing a pig, it may be she pig. Baikho or Khokshi is worshipped by sacrificing a he-goat. Bahubali Marukhetri is worshipped by offering a cock. Lakhi Ai is worshipped by scarifying a hen. Lakhor Thakur is the fifth number deity worshipped by offering a red fowl. Rakhi Devota is worshipped by a cock and the last number of deity called Konso Thakur who is worshipped by scarifying a white cock.

For these seven God and Goddess seven members is selected. One member is for one Deity. Every deity is worshipped separately by the selected priest of the group. Again every priest has their one personal helper to worship the God and Goddess. According to them this process is followed not occur any mistake at the time of worshipping the Deities. The priest who sacrificed the animals and birds are also selected by the group and he also has an assistant to help him in his work. He has a chance to become the next main priest. Four women are selected to prepare *faksak* (traditional offering). These women also used to turn off the fire by giving water on it after completion of the ritual *Barnakkay* (fire dance). These four women also serve *mad* (rice beer) to the menfolk present in Baikho festival. The language of mantra is mainly Rabha language but there is no restriction to use Assamese language. This group performs the Baikho festival only for two days. There is also a recent change noticed that in the early time women are not allowed to take part to perform the rituals. But the acquainted Pati Rabha Baikho group has female members with them for their help in performance.

LIST OF CELEBRATION OF BAIKHO FESTIVAL IN ASSAM

Baikho festival is now a day getting more important than that of middle age. To make the Baikho festival more wide and eminent the Nikhil Rabha Student Union in association with Rabha jatiya Sanggathan started to perform this festival in stages in different places outside of the Rabha remote villages too of the district of Assam. The following is list of the place of Baikho festival celebration:

For the first time in 2000 the Dudhnoi Anchalik Rabha Student union organized Baikho festival at Dudhnoi under the district of Goalpara, secondly at Bhergaon under the district of Odalguri organized by ARSU, ARWC, BRKR, ARNC with the villagers where the festival was held and at Dhekipota under Baksa district in 2005, Thirdly in 2005 at Lela Dabili

under Goalpara District by Lela Dabili Anchalik Student Union, fourthly at Tokonkata of Odalguri District organized by Tokonkata Anchalik ARSU, ARWC and the villagers in 2009, in the same year stage Baikho festival is also organized by the Damra Anchalik Student Union at Bargum.¹⁴

THE BAIKHO FESTIVAL CELEBRATION AT SOUTH KAMRUP DISTRICT

For the first time the Baikho festival is celebrated in 2011 at Boko Gandhi Moydan by the Rabha Student Union of Kamrup District. In this festival the Goalpara Hatigaon pujari group was invited to perform the puja at the cost of 42,000.0 rs. In this celebration the performance were presented namely-*Leoa tana*, *Killa bhanga*, *Bar Nakkay* and *Bogejari* dance. In the next year the Baikho festival is celebrated in 2012 at Boko Gandhi Moydan organized by the Rabha Student Union of Kamrup District. In this festival the Goalpara Nadiapara group was invited to perform the puja at the cost of 50,000.00 rs. In this celebration the performance were presented in front of the audience namely-*Leoa tana*, *Killa bhanga*, *Bar Nakkay* and *Bogejari* dance. In the third year this festival is celebrated on the bank of the lake near to the office of Saygaon Anchalik Rabha Student Union on 31st May of 2013. In this year also Hatigaon pujari group was invited to perform the rites and rituals related to baikho festival at the coast of 45,000.00 rs. The performances were presented –*Bar Nakkay*, *Leoa Tana*, *Sathar* song and dance by hundred girl and boys. The main performance of this season was the Rasongsini competition of the girls. The place Rani was selected to celebrate the Baikho festival in South Kamrup District for the fourth year in 2014. The Goalpara Hatigaon pujari group was invited in that year also. The performances presented in that year like the previous year. In the fifth year in 2015 this festival was celebrated at Loharghat M.E. govt. school where the same group was invited at the coast of 55,000.00 rs. and performances presented are-*Leoa Tana*, *Killa Bhanga*, *Bar Nakkay*, *Sathar* dance and the most attractive performance was Karmi Sri Pabitra Rabhas cultural program. Sixthly in 2016 the Baikho puja is celebrated at Hahim by the Goalpara Dayrong group at the coast of 65,000.00 rs.¹⁵

The traditional Baikho festival was celebrated by the Rongdani and Maitori Rabhas was taking place in jungles in past. But now days this festival is mainly seen to practice in stage in front of the audience by the new trained groups who formed the group with the motivation to famed and flourishing Baikho amongst the people through their stage performance. From being perform by a minority it has now become

a common festivals. Fashion shows, fairs and commercial entertainment has entered bringing in a mood of the carnivalesque. Baikho festival is the burning example of the social and cultural change of the tribes

CONCLUSION:

The socio-religious pattern of the Rabha society is undergone changes in certain extent due to influence of modernizations, westernizations, Christianization and some other factors like acculturation and diffusions and replacing the old socio-religious practices by the new one. Many experienced and knowledgeable person associated with fairs and festival has died. But still the traditional rituals are practiced and also trying to preserve and flourishing their culture and tradition to the outer world by taking different steps. The celebration of Baikho festival is one of the most auspicious festivals among them that have continued to serve as a tool of cultural negotiation and has improved collaboration and union among the Rabha people of Assam and within their neighborhoods.

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¹⁴ Rongkho, K (2017). Dorayotang- Gaburotang Aaro Baykho Dera, In souvenir *Baykhoni Ramper*, H.J Rabha(eds.).N.P:N.P. p-4.

¹⁵ Rabha, B (2017). Kamrpot Baikho Utsab. In *Manchalengka*. C, Chakravarti (eds.) Kamrup: N.P. p-17-18

Pictures:



The performers in the field of Baikho festival.



Preparation of Faksak.



Baikho alter



Fashion show related to Baikho festival.

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