

CHAPTER II

Ethnic Identity of the Tiwas and the Rabhas

As stated in the preceding Chapter, historians argue that the tribes of the North East India are predominantly of Mongoloid origin. Most of them entered the region through various routes at different times. Though they differ from each other in respect of certain traits of physical feature, culture and language, yet basically they are grouped under a broad heading of Tibeto-Burman linguistic family.

It is believed that the upper courses of the Yangtse Kiang and the Hoang-Ho in north-west China were the original homelands of the Tibeto-Burman peoples. At a certain period of time, it is believed that a group of the Tibeto-Burmans migrated towards South and somewhere in north-eastern part of Burma and eventually it split into two groups: one migrated towards further South, while the other moved westwards along the foothills of the Himalayas to reach Bhutan, Tibet and Nepal from where at later dates they migrated in successive waves to the south to enter into the hills and plains of Assam. They established themselves in different regions and in later period they came to be known by various names like the Rabha, Kachari, Bodo, Tiwa, Karbi, and Dimasa and so on.

Linguistically, the Tibeto-Burman groups as a whole are divided into two main branches: North-Assam and Assam Burmese. The North-Assam branch is formed by the various Arunachal Tribes; Abors, Akas, Daflas, Miris, and Mishimis. The Assam-Burmese group includes three groups the Bodos, Nagas and Kuki-Chins. The Bodo race encompasses a large number of people, i.e. Garo, Boro, Rabha, Kachari, Koch, Mech, Hajong, Lalung, etc. who speak Bodo languages. These Bodos (greater Bodo family) proved themselves to be very demographically prominent. They occupied a large part of the Brahmaputra Valley. They extended their area of occupation even to Northern Bengal. In the South, they not only occupied the Garo hills but also spread over Northern Mymensing in the present-day Bangladesh. From the district of Nagaon in Assam their territory extended to Cachar, Sylhet (now in Bangladesh) and further South to Tripura.

Thus, from these historical facts it can be stated that the Tiwas and the Rabhas originated from the greater Tibeto-Burman Bodo linguistic family.

2:1 Origin, Migration and Settlement of the Tiwas and the Rabhas

2:1:1 The Tiwas:

The Tiwas are one of the prominent Scheduled Tribes of Assam. They are also called Lalungs. The Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribe Act (Amendment) 1976 enlisted 14 tribes in the two Autonomous Hill Districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills and 9 tribes in the plains districts of Assam. The Tiwas are one of the prominent plain tribes living in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam¹ (Goswami Mahidhar, 1996). The Tiwas have settlements in the districts of Morigaon, Nagaon and Kamrup. There are some Tiwa villages in the Dhemaji, Jorhat and Sonitpur Districts of Assam. The Tiwas in Assam can be divided into two groups, i.e. Plain Tiwas and Hill Tiwas, basing on their habitat. The Hill Tiwas are living in the district of Karbi Anglong in Assam and in some areas of Khasi and Jaintia Hills districts of Meghalaya. In the Hill areas of Assam and in other states, the Hill Tiwas are not recognized as the Scheduled Tribe. Although the Tiwa octogenarians have considered both Hill and Plain Tiwas belong to the same race. However, the difference in certain aspects of their socio-cultural life is also discernible.

As it is already stated, the Tiwas have origins in the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family with Mongoloid stock. According to Rev. Endle, the Tiwas belong to the greater Kachari race. To him, the tribes who belong to the greater Kachari race are - Bara (Kachari) or better known as Boro Kachari, Rabha, Mech, Dimal, Koch, Solanimiyas, Mahaliyas, Phulgurias, Saranias, Dimasas, Hojais, Lalungs, Garos and Hajongs. He divided these groups into Northern and Southern groups taking the river Brahmaputra as dividing line. (Endle R. 1997 Reprint; *The Kacharis*, p. 5)

It is noteworthy that no systematic study of the Tiwa (Lalung) tribe was undertaken by any ethnographer or administrators during the British rule, although Assam has been fortunate in having a number of ethnographic accounts of other tribes by the administrators and missionaries during this period. Even during the Ahom rule, only occasional references were made about the Tiwa tribes in Assam by the Ahom historians. In the Buranjis references

¹ The Nine Schedule Tribe Plains Groups are- Barmans, Boro Kacharis, Deoris, Hojais, Sonowal Kacharis, Tiwas, Rabhas, Mishings and Meches.

made about the existence of the Lalung principalities on the border of the Ahom Kingdom which were under the tutelage of the Jaintia King. Thus, to ascertain their ethnic identity in Assam we have to depend entirely on the prevailing folk culture and oral history available in the Tiwa society.

2:1:2 The meaning of the name Tiwa and Lalung:

The Tiwas are also known as the Lalungs. The Tiwas considered that the name Lalung was given by the non-Tiwas or the other tribes. According to the Tiwa traditions, the Karbis called the Tiwas as Lalungs. By Lalung they referred to the people who live in the bank of the river Brahmaputra. In Karbi language ‘La’ means water, ‘Lung’ means rescued. The river Brahmaputra gave ‘shelter to these people, hence they were known as the Lalungs. (Bordoloi B.N.,Sharma Thakur G.C., Saikia M.C., 1987; *Tribes of Assam*, part-I, p-83).

Another legend about the Lalungs is that, there was a branch of the river Daiyang in the Karbi Anglong called ‘Nilalung’. During the reign of Kamata Kings, the Lalungs had to leave their original habitat and established villages on the bank of the river ‘Nilalung’. In course of time, the people living on the banks of the river were known as Lalungs. (B.N.Bordoloi, G.C.Sharma Thakur, M.C. Saikia, 1987, p-80).

The hill Tiwas hold that the name ‘Lalung’ is derived from the word ‘Libing’ or ‘Libung’ which, over the years, got phonetically changed to ‘Lalung’. The word ‘Libung’ means ‘man’ in the same way as the word ‘Arleng’ means ‘man’ in Karbi Language and this term is also used to denote the entire tribe. (Gohain B. K., 1993; *The Hill Lalungs*, page-2)

Another popular legend about the name ‘Lalung’ is that originally the Lalungs were ruled by the Demon king Bali who was a faithful devotee of Lord Vishnu. The king wanted that all his subjects should adhere to the royal religion. A section of the Lalungs refused to accept the religion and as a result the king’s fury fell heavily upon them. As a punishment for their misbehavior, they were compelled to bear a red imprint (Lal) on their forehead and turned out of the country. Later on those bearers of red mark on their forehead came to be known as Lalungs. (Bordoloi B. N., Sharma Thakur G.C., Saikia M.C., 1987, p-80).

2:1:3 Origin of the name Tiwa:

Like the name Lalung, there are also some legends prevailing in the Tiwa societies about the name Tiwa. According to the Hill Tiwas the name Tiwa has its origin in the word ‘ti- phar-

wali' meaning 'a clan living near water', which carries the same meaning of 'Lalung'. According to them the first Tiwa Sotonga Raja was born out of water, and hence, the entire tribe is called as Tiwa. It is noteworthy that Sotonga is now the name of a place in the Jaintia Hills in Meghalaya. The relationship between the Tiwas and the Jaintias will be discussed in a relevant section. (Gohain B.K., 1993, page-2)

It is quite probable that 'Tiwa' derives its origin to the term 'Tibbatia' meaning people hailing from Tibet. In course of time this 'Tibbatia' might have changed into 'Tiwa'. It is believed that in ancient times, the three great divisions of the Bodos, namely 'Tipra', 'Tiwa', and 'Dimasa', living along the banks of a lake near Tibet. They entered Assam through the north-east passes. The local people could not pronounce 'Tifra', and thus, in their tongue 'Tifra' became 'Tippera'; the 'Tiwas' introduced themselves as the 'Tiwa Libing' or 'Tiwa Libung'. At a later phase, the prefix 'Tiwa' was dropped and in place of 'Libing' or 'Libug' the 'Lalung' came to be used. The 'Dimasa' got suffix to its original name and it came to be known as 'Dimasa Kachari'. Traditionally, the Tipperas, Tiwas and Dimasa Kacharis have close affinities. The Tipperas use 'Ti' for water and 'Fra' for father. The Tiwas too, use 'Fra' for father. The Tiwas of Nagaon district address their supreme God as 'Fa Mahadeo'. Again both the Tiwas and the Kacharis worship Lord Siva as their supreme God. (Bordoloi B.N., Sharma Thakur G.C., Saikia M.C., 1987, p-82)

2:1:4 The Mythical Origin of the Tiwas:

Several mythical stories are prevalent among the Tiwa (Lalung) peoples regarding their origin. It is believed that Lord Siva, created a God whose name was 'Lungla Mahadeo'. 'Lung' means a steam of juice, arising out of Lord Siva and 'La' means the formation of a living being out of that juice. The union of Lord 'Lungla' and 'Jayanti Devi' (Goddess Durga) produced three daughters. From the eldest the Karbis were originated, while Boros and Tiwas had their origins from the second and the youngest daughters respectively.

Another mythological story about the origin of the Tiwas is that once Lord Mohadeo got heavily intoxicated with rice beer and when he was lying unconscious and a stream of saliva (lal) came out from the mouth of the Lord Mohadeo. The Lord created two human beings from his saliva and they came to be known as the Lalung being created out of Lord's 'Lal'.

A similar story with slight variations is also prevalent among the Tiwas (Lalungs) that once the Lord Mohadeo and his consort Parvati were enjoying the scenic beauty of Manas-Sarovar Lake. The soothing beauty of the lake area enchanted the Lord so much that he soon fell asleep on the bank of the lake. As he woke up he saw five drops of saliva at the place where he was resting. The Lord created five human beings out of those five drops of saliva. As these five human beings were created out of divine saliva they came to be known as the Lalungs. (Bordoloi B.N., Sharma Thakur G.C., Saikia M.C., 1987, p-80,81)

2:1:5 The Migration of the Tiwas:

As already mentioned, there is lack of clear historical records about the origin and migration of the Tiwas to the present place of their habitat in Assam. Different beliefs, oral histories and explanations are prevailing regarding the original abode and migration to the present places among the peoples of the Tiwas of Assam. Some such social traditions and legends, collected by some contemporary investigators, writers are given below-

A) G. C. Sarma Thakur, former Joint Director, Tribal Research Institute, Assam has attempted to make a scientific study about the Tiwas of Assam and published a book '*The Lalungs (Tiwas)*' in 1985 published by Tribal Research Institute, Assam, Guwahati. In that book he narrated a popular belief that the Tiwas migrated from Tibet to the bank of the river Jamuna near Allahabad. But they were pushed out by the Aryans from their original habitat near Allahabad and came towards east following the Himalayan passes. They reached Pragjyotisha, where they established a principality and ruled for several years. In old scriptures, they have been mentioned as the *Kiratas*, where as the peoples called themselves as 'Tifras'. Then the 'Tifras' were pushed out of Pragjyotisha by the king Narakasura and were compelled to move towards east. They reached the Kapili Valley and established a principality known as 'Tribeg'.

B) Another legend describes that the Tiwas originally hailed from the *Jaintia Hills (Joyota Khairam)* in the present state of *Meghalaya*. Grierson, in his book '*Linguistic Survey of India*' (1967) stated that the Tiwas (Lalungs) migrated from the Jaintia Hills to the plains of Assam. According to the traditions prevailing in the Tiwa society, it is believed that the Tiwas moved to the plains of the Nagaon District (Khagarijan) from the Jaintia Hills, because they disliked the matriarchal and matrilineal as well as the culture of the human sacrifices of the Jaintia societies.

According to an oral history prevailing in the Tiwa society that during the reign of the Ahom king Rudra Singha, the Jaintia king Ram Singh was defeated by the Borphukon of Jagi, the Ahom General who is the Officer-in-charge of the Ahom outpost at Jagi. In 1708 the Ahom King Rudra Singha issued an order to produce Tamradhwaj the Kachari King and Ram Singh the Jaintia King before him. Ram Singha succumbed to an attack of dysentery. His son, who was also a captive, gave two of his sisters in marriage to the Ahom king. Ahom king Rudra Singha prepared for an attack of the Mohammedans. The Kachari and the Jaintia kings joined his army by providing soldiers. The elderly Tiwas tells that their forefathers were fleeing away from the Jaintia kingdom, because the Jaintia king was utilizing the Tiwas as soldiers to the Ahom army. The Tiwas, thus, came down to the plains of the Brahmaputra Valley. After reaching the plains, they sacrificed one ‘*water gourd*’ (Komora) symbolizing their cutting off the relation with the Jaintias once for all. Since then the place is known as ‘Komorakata’. Even today a particular clan of the Tiwas does not eat this vegetable following this tradition.

Yet another legend about the migration of the Tiwas from the Jaintia Hills to the Plains of Assam is that they disliked the tradition of human scarifies of the Jaintias. Many Tiwa families left the Jaintia kingdom out of fear of losing their only son. Maneswar Deuri, a prominent scholar on the society, culture and language of the Tiwa community, who published a number of books on this community, narrated in his *Asomiya Jati Aru Sanskriti Gathanat Lalung (Tiwa)*, (2011) about the legend regarding migration of the Tiwas from the Jaintia kingdom due to the clash on the acceptance of the tradition of matrilineal system. Referring to some elderly Tiwas, he stated that there was difference of opinion between the leaders of the two sections, namely, Tangara and Hura regarding acceptance of the matrilineal tradition followed in the process of the selection of a social portfolio called as *Jela*. One group demanded to follow matrilineal tradition, the other to follow patriarchic tradition. Finally, the two leaders decided to resolve the issue in a fight. In that fight, the Hura killed the Tangara and as a result of that the followers of the Tangara fled away from the Jaintia kingdom and they reached a place called *Tiwa Jong Thong* (meaning border post) near *Nongpu* of the present Meghalaya. In that place the Tiwas sacrificed a water gourd, symbolizing their cutting-off relations with their counterparts remaining in the Jaintia Hills. After leaving the Jaintia kingdom, these people moved towards the plains of Assam. As they crossed cross a river, many of them drowned in the river. Others were rescued by the people of that locality, mostly belonging to the Karbi community. When the local Karbis did not

understand the language of the rescued people, they called them as ‘*Lalung*’ meaning ‘people rescued from the water’. These migrated Tiwas established several villages in the foothills of Jaintia Kingdom which were in a later period transformed into their own principality. However, these principalities remained as the tributary to the Jaintia King. (Deuri Maneswar, 2011; *Asomiya Jati Aru Sanskriti Gathana Lalung (Tiwa)*, pp. 38-40).

G. C. Sharma Thakur stated that the Tiwas, after fleeing away from the Jaintia kingdom, they reached the Ahom territory through Jagi. The Ahom officer Jagial Gohain sent them to the Rahial Baruah who settled them in the different areas of Nowgong. The Tiwas established Five principalities in the Nowgong known as ‘Paacho Rajya’, (five principalities), namely Topakuchi, Barapujia, Mikir Gonya, Phulaguria, and Khaigoria under the present Raha Administrative Circle. Later on, another seven principalities was established known as ‘Sato Rajya’ established under the Jagi Administrative Circle. These principalities are Kumoi, Tarani, Baghara, Tetelia, Kacharigaon, Sukanaguri and Ghagua. The chiefs of these principalities were designated as ‘Powali Raja’. These Tiwa chieftains paid taxes to the Ahom King (Sharma Thakur G.C., 1985; *The Lalungs (Tiwas)* pp. 5-7).

C) Maneswar Deuri, collecting various information's from different sources, mentions about a legend regarding the origin and migration of the Tiwas, believed by the Tiwas, living in the Dhemaji District of Assam. According to it, the Tiwas (*Lalung*) originally hailed from the Tibetan region. They entered the plains of Assam, through the North Eastern corner of Assam and settled in the Sadia and Dhemaji. Subsequently, two brave young brothers of the community organized their people settled these areas and established a principality called as the *Khola*. But the Tiwas of the *Khola* principality had to confront with the neighbouring Abors and Daflas, with whom they had to fight on many occasions. In a fight with the Abors, the Tiwas were defeated and the Abors looted the properties and kidnapped the Tiwas. As a result, the Tiwas of the *Khola* principality fled away, following the course of the river Subansiri towards west. They entered the modern Sonitpur and Nowgong district where they established a new principality known as the Hillali kingdom. Gradually, the Hillali kingdom started growing prosperous and become a significant kingdom of the Tiwas. But their prosperity became a cause of envy for the neighbouring kingdoms. As a result, the Tiwas had to face several attacks from the neighbouring principalities. It is believed that when the Kamata king attack the Hillali kingdom, the Tiwas fled away by crossing the river Brahmaputra towards the northern bank and scattered into the remote areas of the Karbi Hills and the Jaintia Hills.

B. K. Gohain gives a reference to the migration of the Tiwas to the Ahom kingdom by narrating the Ahom Chronicle ‘Deodhai Assam Buranji’. He narrates ‘during the reign of king Jayadhvaj Singha, (1648-1663 A.D.), outposts were set up in Raha and Jagi in order to stop incursion of the Kacharis into the Ahom Kingdom. The king’s father-in-Law, Teleka Sandikai, was deputed to Raha as the Rohial Barua i.e. the Ahom Governor of Raha with four trusted nobles and a host of other people. One day, Teleka Sandikai noticed a fire on the top of the neighbouring hills and sent his officers to survey the place. The officers discovered several villages there. They asked them about their identity and customs. The inhabitants there reported that as per to their social custom, a son was debarred from succession and instead the daughter was granted inheritance of her ancestral property. When asked why they had migrated to Ahom territories, they replied that it was only to escape from the operation of the matrilineal law of inheritance. The Ahom officials assured them a better law of inheritance in which a son would inherit the property of his father, on the condition that they would have to submit themselves to the rule of the Ahom king. As a result of this negotiation, twelve families of Lalungs (Tiwas) and twelve families of the Mikirs migrated to the Ahom Kingdom (Gohain B.K.,1993; p. 17).

From these historical notes it is clear that the Tiwas (Lalungs) migrated from their place of origin to the plains of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam during the Ahom rule in order to get rid of the matrilineal custom in their society.

In various historical documents it is clearly mentioned that there are some small provinces like Gobha, Nelli, Khala and Sahari under the Ahom rule in Assam, which were called as dantiolia kingdoms. These actually belonged to the Jaintia kingdom but administered by tributary chiefs belonging to the Tiwa (Lalung) tribe. “In 1658, *Pramatarai* rebelled against his grandfather *Jasamattarai*, the Jaintia King and called upon the Chief of Gobha to help him. The latter refused and an enraged *Pramatarai* destroyed four of his villages. The Gobha Chief applied for help to the Kachari king, who was preparing to come to his assistance but the local Ahom officials intervened and said that as the Ahoms were exercising the paramount powers, it was imperative for them to seek protection from the Ahom king. The Gobha Chief accordingly went with seven hundred men to Ahom king Jayadhvaj Singha and begged for help. The Ahom king ordered Barphukan to settle them in Khagarian, corresponding to the modern Nagaon district and this was accordingly done” (Gohain B.K.,1993, page-17)

2:1:6 The Tiwa Kingship and Principalities:

According to the prevailing traditions among the Tiwas, supported by various secondary sources of history, such as, copper plates, bark of Sanci Tree (Sanci Pator Puthi, i.e. books written on aquilaria agolacha bark) that before the advent of the British, during the Ahom rule, the Tiwas had their own principalities having their Kings. Dumura, Gobha, Khola, Nelli and Suhuri these were the Kingdoms of the Tiwas (Lalungs) under the suzerainty of the Jaintia king. These kingdoms were tributaries under the Ahoms and not directly controlled by them. They were named as the Dantiolia kingdoms. In addition, there were two other types of Tiwa kingdoms, (Seven Kings) and Pansorajas (Five Kings), as mentioned earlier. Among all these small principalities of the Tiwas, the Gobha was the prominent one. From the various historical references it can be ascertained that these principalities were extended up to the middle part of Assam, especially in the present Nagaon, Morigaon, parts of Kamrup and Karbi Anglong and in some parts of the state of Meghalaya. The concentration of the Tiwa people in these areas even today bears the testimony to this fact. In 1833, the British East India Company had taken over the Gobha principality, the last principality of the Tiwas and after that the Tiwas had lost all their principalities, became the subjects of the British rule.

In 1861, the Tiwas had raised a strong protest against the unjust rules and policies of the colonial rulers, which is today known as the ‘Phuloguri Dhewa’. Amalendu Guha wrote in his book ‘Planter Raj to Swaraj’ that “the increase in land revenue on the dry crop lands in 1861 was much resented to in Nowgong, and as in the three other affected districts. However, it was the 1860 ban on the poppy cultivation that affected the present economy of Nowgong most, for it was the largest opium producing district of Assam.....This led to an agitation in Nowgong, mainly in Phulaguri area inhabited by tribal people (Lalung), Narasing Lalung and eight other peasant leaders, mostly tribals, were punished with long term imprisonment or transportation.” (Guha Amalendu, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, pp.6-7)

2:1:7 Demography and settlement of the Tiwas in Assam:

According to the 2011 Census report, the Tiwas have the population of 1, 82,663 constituting 4.7% of the total Schedule Tribe population in Assam (Source: Census Report 2011, Office of the Director of Census operations, Assam, Bhangagarh, Guwahati-781005) The population growth trend between 1872-2011 of the Tiwa population according to the Census record are shown below-

Table- 2:1 Population growth trend of the Tiwas between census years 1872-2011:

Census Year	Population
1872	34,859
1881	47,650
1891	52,423
1901	35,513
1911	39,213
1921	41,033
1931	43,448
1941	51,308
1951	52,352
1961	61,315
1971	95,609
1981	No census in Assam
1991	1,43,746
2001	1,70,622
2011	1,82,663

Source: *Birendra Kumar Gohain, The Hill Lalungs (1993); ABILAC, Guwahati, p. 5 and Census Report 2011, Office of the Director of Census operations, Assam, Bhangagarh, Guwahati-781005.*

From the above census records, it is clear that since the first census of 1872 the Tiwas had a steady growth in their population for three decades. During 1872-1891, their population had increased from 34859 to 52,423. But in the next decade (1891-1901), their population declined from 52,423 to 35,513. Scholars, working in these areas, have attributed such sudden decrease in the population to the toll of lives owing to the *Kalazar* epidemic. Subsequently, there was increase in the Tiwa population but the rate of their growth did not remained uniform. Between 1911 and 1931, the growth rate of the Tiwa population had an incremental trend of 5% to 6% in each decennial period, but during 1931 to 1951, a sharp rise of about 18%. However in the next decade (1951-61) the rate of increase was declined to 2%, but in the next census in 1971 it suddenly leaped to 17%. The escalation trend was attributed to the cultural shifts taking place in the Tiwa populations (Gohain B.K.,1993, p. 6). Due to their close proximity with the caste Hindu Assamese society they have adapted to the Assamese way of life and identified as the '*Koch Asomia*'. Even they have changed their

titles, accept various titles of the caste Hindu Assamese society and also instead of their own languages they speak Assamese language.

2:1:8 The Tiwas Settlements:

The Tiwas are mostly inhabited in the Morigaon, Nagaon and Kamrup districts of Assam. In Nagaon, they are mostly concentrated in the revenue circles of Nagaon Sadar, Kaliabor, Lanka, Raha and Kampur. In Kamrup, the Tiwas were concentrated in the Sonapur revenue circle. A few Tiwa villages are found in the Dhemaji and Jorhat districts of Assam. As already mentioned, some Tiwas are living in the Karbi Anglong and in the Jaintia Hill Districts of Assam and Meghalaya respectively. It is noteworthy that there is a clear difference in the socio-cultural life of the Hill Tiwas and the Plain Tiwas. The Plain Tiwas are not living in the exclusive villages in Assam rather they are living in close proximity with the non-Tiwas, as a result of which they have fully adapted to the caste Hindu Assamese way of life. On the other hand, the Hill Tiwas are still maintaining their culture and traditions. At present the typical Tiwa culture and other social traditions are preserved and practiced only in the Hill Tiwa society.

As per the 2011 census report the major Tiwa inhabited areas (district wise) in Assam are as follows-

Table- 2:2 District wise population of the Tiwas as per census data 2011:

District	Total S/T population	Total Tiwas Person	Male	Female
Kokrajhar	304985	03	03	00
Dhubri	32523	01	01	00
Goalpara	131800	05	03	02
Bongaigaon	110696	25	13	12
Barpeta	123266	08	04	04
Kamrup	250393	5618	2798	2820
Nalbari	202577	02	02	00
Darrang	249861	16	12	04
Morigaon	120730	102070	51394	50676

Nagaon	89394	56247	28423	27824
Sonitpur	195083	122	59	63
Lakhimpur	208864	451	231	220
Dhemaji	270496	5491	2722	2769
Tinsukia	67234	245	130	115
Dibrugarh	88337	55	31	24
Sibsagar	41533	37	22	15
Jorhat	123134	14	06	08
Golaghat	93920	188	94	94
Cachar	18631	07	05	02
Karimganj	2901	15	09	06
Hailakandi	821	-	-	-

Source: *Census Report 2011, Office of the Director of Census operations, Assam, Bhangagarh, Guwahati-781005.*

From the above observation of the district wise Tiwa population in Assam as per the 2011 census report, it is observed that the Tiwa tribe is basically dominant among the total tribal population in the district of Morigaon (84.54%) and Nagaon (62.92%). Moreover, majority of the Tiwa people of the state are living in these two districts (Morigaon-59.82%; Nagaon-32.96% of the total estimated Tiwa population in the state).

2:1:9 The Rabhas

The Rabhas can be described as one of the earliest indigenous tribal ethnic communities of Assam. There is a lack of clear-cut historical record, considered to be authentic documents on the origin and migration of the Rabhas to the different parts of Assam and India. There is a difference of opinion among the writers regarding their origin and migration to the present place in which they are living now. Yet it can be assumed from their writings that they belong to the greater Tibetan-Buman linguistic ethnic group having Indo-Mongoloid origin. Some of the observations about the Rabhas by the different writers are explained below.

According to Hodgson, the Rabhas belongs to the great Bodo family. (Hodgson, 1880; *Miscellaneous Essays relating to the Indian Subjects*, p. 105)

Dalton, on the other hand, is of the opinion that the Rabhas and the Hajongs are branches of the Kachari race and connected with the Garos. (Dalton E.T., 1872; *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, p. 87)

R. S. Endle identified the Rabhas as the Kacharis, who are also called as the Datiyal Kachari (Border Kachari); their original habitat was the region bordering on the northern slopes of the Garo Hills. The supposition is confirmed by the fact that the words in their language to express North and South respectively are Bhota-Hi- Chu means Bhotan Hills (Bhota means Bhotan, Hi means Earth, Chu means High) and Tura; their physical horizon being apparently limited by the two localities. Moreover, the Rabhas in somewhat large numbers are still found at the base of the northern slopes of the Garo Hills. (Endle R., 1997, Reprint p. 83)

Waddel also remarks, “The Rabhas (Totla or Datiyal Kacharis) are an offshoot of the Kachari tribe which adopted a thin veneer of Hinduism, thinner than the Koch.” (Waddel L.A., 1900; *The Tribes of Brahmaputra Valley, J.A.S.B. Vol. LXIX, pt. III.* p.65)

There are some scholars who considered that the Rabhas have a close affinity with the Garos of the present-state of Meghalaya.

Allen is of the opinion that the Rabhas are a section of the Bodo race and appear to be an offshoot of the Garos. (Allen B.C., 1903; *Assam District Gazetteer, Vol.III* Goalpara, p. 49)

Major Playfair by pointing out the linguistic and cultural similarities between the Rabhas and the Garos states that “while I class all other Garo divisions with the Kacharis and believe that they represent the primitive Bodo, I think that the Atongs and the Rugas (divisions of the Garos) are a different stock and have a common origin with the Rabhas and the Koches.” He continues to state that, long before the arrival of the Garos in the present day Garo Hills, the Rabhas and the Koches were in occupation of the Garo Hills wherefrom, they had to come down to the plains. (Playfair A., 1909; *The Garos*, p.22)

Stating about the origin and migration of the Rangdani groups of the Rabhas Friend Pareira writes: “...the Rangdani Rabhas have a tradition that in earlier period of their history

they dwelt in the Garo hills and after many conflicts with the Garo tribe they were finally driven down to the plains which they now occupy. The Rangdanis say the cradle of their race was at the Sumsang, which is the Garo name for the modern Someswari River.” (Friend-Pereira J.E., 1911; *The Rabhas in Census of Assam, Vol. III, pt-I* p.145)

Friend-Pereira referred to a folk tale which is prevalent in the Garo society that “the Atongs (a section of the Garos) are the kinsmen of the Rangdanis, both of them being descendants of two sisters ‘Sae-Bonge’ and ‘Bonge-Kate’. The elder sister (Sae-Bonge) married a Garo and was the mother of the Atong clan. But the younger one (Bonge-Kate) had a liaison with her own brother and the guilty couple being driven away by their people became the progenitors of the Rangdani Rabhas”(Friend-Pereira J. E.,1911, p.145). In course of time the group descending from ‘Bonge-Kate’ came down to the northern plains of the present Garo Hills while the group descending from ‘Sae-Bonge’ stayed on the Garo Hills. Today, although the Atongs lives in close proximity with the Garos, they have many similarities with the Rabhas especially in their dialects and social organizations.

2:1:10 The Rabhas and the Kochas:

Some scholars argue that the Rabhas belong to the ‘Kocha’ race. They considered both the Rabhas and the Kocha belong to the same race.

According to Robert Montgomery Martin “They (Rabhas) are akin to a branch of the Kocha tribe known as Panikoch who are thinly scattered over all the parts of Assam and lower parts of Bhutan” (Martin Robert Montgomery,1838, *The History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India, Vol.III, Chap. V.* p. 545). He is of the opinion that “the Rabhas are not Kachari but the Rabha-Kochowa and the language spoken by the Rabhas and the Kocha was the same before the reign of the Kocha King Biswa Singha.” (Martin M., 1836; p. 408)

Martin also stated that, “the Rangdani Rabhas have retained their original language having some similarities with the original language of the Kochas.” (Martin M., 1836; page-546)

Noted litterateur of the Rabha community Dhananjay Rabha is of the opinion that both the ‘Kocha’ and the ‘Rabhas’ are same race of Mongoloid origin. They inhabit in the state of Assam, Meghalaya, West Bengal, Bihar, Sikkim, Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan. Somewhere these people are identified as the Rabhas, in some other places they are also called as the ‘Kochas’. Mostly in the Dhubri, Bongaigaon and Kokrajhar districts of Assam

these people were taking the title of ‘Koch’. (Rabha Dhananjay, 1998; *Rabha Janajatir Chamu Itihas*, p.33) According to him, the Koch Rajbongshis are the Hinduised section of the Mongoloid Kocha race. They acquired the title of Rajbongsi to mean the superior status or pride from the original Kocha race (Rabha Dhananjay, 1998, p.33).

Assamese cultural icon Bishnu Prasad Rabha in his address delivered in the Assam Rabha Jatiya Sewa Sangha’s 3rd annual conference held on 28.2.1948 in Boko stated that “the Rabhas are the prominent indigenous plain tribal group of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. They are inhabited in the Southern part of the Goalpara district of Assam. People know lesser about this community. The Rabhas of Jalpaiguri, Darjiling district of West Bengal and eastern part of Nepal are called themselves as the ‘Koch’ or ‘Kocha’. Those, who don’t know the Rabhas, they think that the Rabhas and the Kocha are the different race. But the Koch or the Kochas are the original race of the Rabhas who speak same language. These Kochas are not the ‘Sarania Koch’ of Baisnavite tradition but are the non-Baisnavite Koch who has their own language and identity. The Rabhas and the Kochas have followed the similar social traditions, dialects and social organizations.” (Rabha Dhananjay, 1998, p. 35)

2:1:11 Folk Tales about the origin and migration of the Rabhas:

There are many legends prevailing in the Rabha society regarding the origin of the ‘Rabhas’ and their migration.

One such legend is that their forefathers (awamig) ‘Koches’ family was brought to the earth from the heaven (Rang Krang) by their worshipping God ‘Rishi’. Since the family of the ‘Koches’ was brought to the earth from the heaven they are called as the Raba > Rabha. In Rabha language ‘Raba’ means ‘to bring’. Since they are the kinsmen of the ‘koche’ they are known as the ‘Kocha’ or ‘Kosa’. (Rabha Dhananjay, 1998; p. 26)

There is another legend prevailing in the Rabha society that, “When Husheng was the chief of powerful Atong clan, he brought the Rabhas into the *Sumsang Valley* which is the Garo name for the modern Someswari River and Valley (now located in the Goro Hills, Meghalaya) to till the land because at that time the Garos being nomads were not acquainted with the settled method of husbandry. The Garos called these people as Rabas which means ‘to bring’. Thus in later stage they came to be known as the Rabhas.” (Friend- Pareira J.E., 1911, *The Rabhas in Census of Assam. Vol.III*, Part-I, p.145)

Renowned anthropologist Dr. Bhuban Mohan Das collected a traditional story of the ‘King Dadan’ prevalent among the Rabha communities which reveals the migration of the Rabhas. According to that story, the King Dadan was a very powerful king of the Rabha community. Originally he was at Sonitpur, the modern Tezpur. At that time he was not a king, but the leader of a group of people. Ban, the mythological Hindu king, ruled that country and Dadan was a General of the king Ban. After the death of Ban, Dadan had to fight with the peoples of the East and of the South of Sonitpur. He won the first battle, but being defeated in the second had to leave that place with some of his followers belonging to Churchung, Rungdung, Tentong and Pam clans, and proceeded to Bhutan for shelter. But the king of Bhutan however, refused.

Dadan, accompanied by his wife Toba Rani, sister Sosh, sister’s daughter Jhano, moved from Bhutan towards the Brahmaputra Valley via Doangiri (modern Dewangiri) through northern Kamrup and arrived at Bakbua Hill near Barpeta. There from they proceeded along the bank of the river Chaulkhowa entered the Goalpara district. Near Jogighopa they crossed the Brahmaputra and reached Pancharatna near which was a ‘beel’ called Hachila. Dadan and his followers spent a brief period there, after which they moved towards south following the course of a rivulet named Duldunga and reached Dubu hill near Lakhipur. Dadan established his kingdom in that area. He made Maru Khetri his General and gradually tried to bring the surrounding areas under his rule.

Dadan established his fort at Tikrikilla. In nearby Nokornong forest he trained his soldiers. Even today, ruins of the thrones, where king Dadan and his wife Toba Rani took their seats and watched the training of the soldiers are seen.

Dadan was a very brave warrior and he had to resist the aggression of various kings, such as Kashi Raja, Breek, Bruk, Mermer, Murmur, Chamtrong. In every battle Maru Khetri was the right hand of Dadan.

As narrated earlier, Maru Khetri was not a Rabha but a Khyatriya by caste. He was the only son of his widowed mother. So when his mother came to know that her only son was going to marry a Rabha girl, she tried to stop the marriage but could not. She cursed her son that, “My son, you are a brave young man. One day you will be a warrior. You will win many battles. But remember you are my only son, you have hurt my sentiments; so I curse you that you will lose the seventh battle.” The seventh battle was fought between Dadan on one side

and Arimatta, Birchand and Chikrong on the other. Dadan's General Maru Khetri was killed in that battle, as a result of which Dadan lost the battle.

Dadan tried to organize a new force. For that purpose he had to roam about in that area. Unfortunately, he had no weapon with him. In the meantime, Arimatta sent some soldiers in disguise to find out Dadan. One day two of them met Dadan and third soldier came and from a distance he released an arrow which penetrated the body of Dadan.

Dadan fell down and died. On that spot, later on a 'beel' (large water body) was formed which is known as 'Dadandubi Beel' the outline of which is just like that of a man lying on the ground. Dadan's descendant and his followers are the Rabhas of South Goalpara of the present day." (Das Bhuban Mohan, 1960; *Ethnic affinities of the Rabha*, p.119)

2:1:12 Absence of an authentic history of the Rabhas:

From the above observations it is clear that there are lots of confusions about the origin of the Rabhas in Assam. Without any authentic written documents, it is natural to find difference of opinions among the Scholars regarding the origin of these indigenous tribal peoples of Assam. According to E. A. Gait "There seems to be a good deal of uncertainty as to what these people (Rabhas) really are. In lower Assam, it is asserted that they are an offshoot of the Garos, while in Kamrup and Darrang it is thought that they are Kacharis on the road to Hinduism. That they belong to the great Bodo family is certain, but it is not equally clear that the Rabhas are more closely allied to any one tribe of that group than to another. On the whole, therefore, although some Kacharis and Garos may have become Rabhas just as tribe." (Gait E.A., 1891; *Census of Assam*, Vol.- I, Report Part-II, p.232)

2:1:13 The Different Rabha Clans (Groups):

In the Rabha community, they have different clans and sub-clans. There are various legends and stories prevailing among the Rabha community about the emergence of these clans and how they got their name. Dhananjay Rabha mentions that "when the king of the Rabhas Dadan held the 'Bayukh Puja' for the first time at 'Athiyabari' the Rabha peoples were entrusted to carry out different work for the 'Puja'. Later on, each group of people carrying out specific responsibility was named accordingly and subsequently they become a clan. Prior to that there were no clans or sub-clans in the Rabha society. In that way, there are six clans emerged in the Rabha society which are - Rangdani, Maitari, Dahari, Sunga, Pati, and Bitalia." (Rabha Dhananjay: 1998, p.37-38)

On the other hand, Rajen Rabha collected some other stories about the emergence of different clans in the Rabha society. He mentions the Rabhas has eight different groups such as – Rangdani, Maitari, Dahari, Totla, Hana, Pati, Bitalia and Koch. (Rabha Rajen, 2002; *The Rabhas*, p.-23)

2:1:14The Rabha Population:

According to the census report of 2011 the Rabhas has the population of 2, 96,189 constituting 7.6 % of total ST population in Assam. (Source: Census Report 2011, Office of the Director of Census operations, Assam, Bhangagarh, Guwahati-781005)

The population figures of the Rabhas in Assam from 1881 to 2011 are given below.

Table- 2:3 Census data of the Rabha population since 1881-2011 in Assam:

Census year	No. of population
1881	56472
1891	69774
1911	79072
1921	70000
1931	69000
1941	86249
1951	88748
1961	108029
1971	138630
1981	No census data
1991	2,36,931
2001	2, 77,517
2011	296189

Sources: Dhananjay Rabha, 1998; *Rabha Janajatir Chamu Itihas*, pages 67-75, Rajen Rabha, 2002; *The Rabhas*, pages4-8 and Census Report 2011, Office of the Director of Census operations, Assam, Bhangagarh, Guwahati-781005.

From the above census data it is clear that the growth of the population of the Rabhas is not constant. During the census years from 1911 to 1931 there is a decreasing trend in the Rabha population growth. From the 1911 census to 1921 the decrease of 9072 population had shown. Again from 1921 to 1931 census the decrease of 1000 population had shown.

Scholars have attributed such decrease in the Rabha population to the incorporation of the Rabhas into the Hindu fold through conversion. Normally such peoples give up their tribal surnames and accept Hindu surnames and are not recorded as tribal in the census. It is noteworthy that since 1961 census report the population figures of the Rabhas in the Garo Hills and other parts of the Meghalaya has been omitted from the total Rabha population in Assam because, the process of creation of Meghalaya a separate state had started during that period. Moreover in the census report of 1961 and 1971 a sizeable number of the Rabha population was recorded in different districts of West Bengal.

2:1:15 Major inhabited Areas of the Rabhas in Assam:

Although the Rabha people are found in different parts of Assam and its adjacent states like Meghalaya, West Bengal, Bihar, Sikkim etc they are largely concentrated in the Goalpara, Kamrup, Bongaigaon, Kokrajhar and Darrang districts of Assam. The particular distribution of the Rabha people in Assam are - “the *Pati* group are inhabited in the whole of the Kamrup district in the south bank of the river Brahmaputra, nearly half of the Goalpara district in the south bank of the river Brahmaputra, covering from Sonapur (Kamrup) in the east to Krishnai (Goalpara) in the west and it extends to the Thapa (Garo Hills in Meghalaya) towards South from the southern boundary of the Goalpara district. The Rangdani Rabhas are inhabited in the western and north western part of the Goalpara district in the south bank of the river Brahmaputra and over the northern part of the Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. The Maitari group extends over the south-western part of the Goalpara district as well as over the northern part of the Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. Villages of the Dahari group are scattered among the areas inhabited by the Rangdani and Pati groups in the southern part of the Goalpara district and northern part of the Garo Hills district. The Totla and Hana Rabhas are found in certain regions of undivided Darrang and Kamrup districts. The Bitalia group inhabits some villages in the southern part of the Goalpara district. The Koch group is found in the western-most areas of the undivided Goalpara district and the adjoining areas of North Bengal especially in the Cooch-Behar and Jalpaiguri districts. Some of them are found in the Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. Now, some Rabhas are scattered in the Midnapur, 24-Parganas, Burdwan, West Dinajpur, Purulia and Bankura district of West Bengal also. (Rabha Rajen, 2002 p.2-3)

As per the census report of 2011 the major Rabha inhabited areas (district wise) in Assam are as follows-

Table-2:4 District wise Rabha population in Assam as per the 2001 census report:

District	Total S/T population	Total Rabha Person	Male	Female
Kokrajhar	304958	13012	6530	6482
Dhubri	32523	10133	5078	5055
Goalpara	131800	93912	47217	46695
Bongaigaon	110696	6700	3333	3367
Barpeta	123266	4144	2128	2016
Kamrup	250393	88191	45177	43014
Nalbari	202577	17563	8908	8655
Darrang	249861	32331	16358	15973
Morigaon	120730	66	28	38
Nagaon	89394	2363	1196	1167
Sonitpur	195083	4256	2130	2126
Lakhimpur	208864	175	89	86
Dhemaji	270494	1878	976	902
Tinsukia	67234	830	429	401
Dibrugarh	88337	830	429	401
Sibsagar	41533	108	58	50
Jorhat	123134	132	68	64
Golaghat	93920	1307	681	626
Cachar	18631	37	22	15
Karimganj	2902	01	01	0
Hailakandi	821	07	05	02

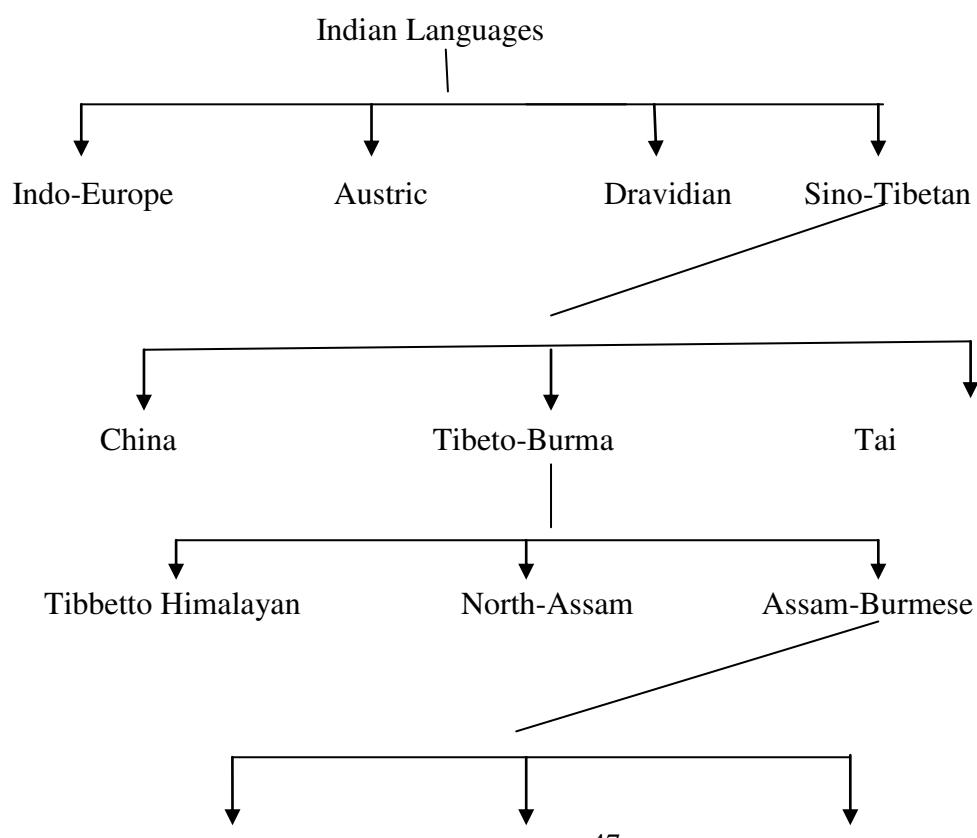
Source: *Census Report 2011, Office of the Director of Census operations, Assam, Bhangagarh, Guwahati-781005.*

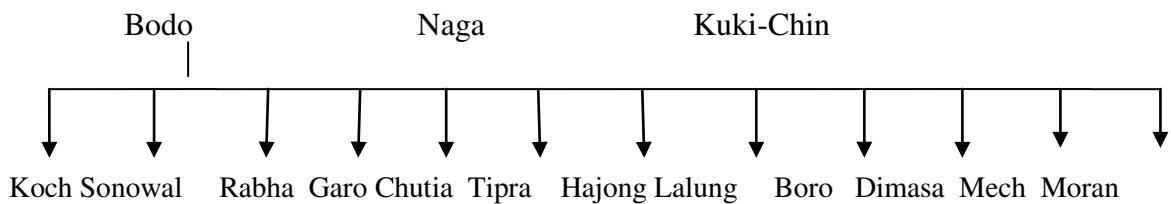
From the observation of the district wise data of the Rabha population in Assam as per the 2011 census report, it is observed that the Rabha tribe is basically dominant among the total tribal population in the district of Goalpara (71.25%) and Kamrup (35.22%). Moreover majority, of the Rabha people of the state are living in these two districts (Goalpara-33.84%; Kamrup-31.77% of the total estimated Rabha population in the state).

The Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council is constituted by encompassing the villages mainly situated in the Goalpara district and Southern part of the Kamrup district with headquarters in Dudhnoi in the Goalpara district of Assam.

2:2 Distinct socio-cultural Identity of the Tiwas and the Rabhas:

The philologists have categorized the Indian languages into four linguistic groups namely 1) Indo-European 2) Austric 3) Dravidian 4) Sino-Tibetan. The Sino-Tibetan linguistic peoples are living in the North East India and South Asian region. Considering the language structure and specific features the philologists have divided the Sino-Tibetan linguistic groups in three sub groups namely 1) China 2) Tibeto-Burma 3) Tai. Again the Tibeto- Burma sub-group is further divided into 1) Tibeto-Himalayan, 2) North-Assam, 3) Assam-Burmese groups. The Assam-Burmese groups are further divided in to 1) Bodo 2) Naga and 3) Kuki- Chin. The greater Bodo linguistic group is composed of many smaller linguistic divisions i. e. Bodo Kacharis, Mech, Garo, Lalung (Tiwa), Chutia, Tipra, Dimasa, Karbi, Barmans, Hojai, and the Rabhas. It is noteworthy that in Assam today, the Bodo ethnic groups have mistakenly considered as the progenitor of the greater Bodo linguistic group. In fact they are only a part of the greater Bodo linguistic family like the Rabhas and the Tiwas.(Rabha Dhanajay: 1998, p-59) The language based classification of the ethnic groups of N.E. India can be presented in the following ways:





Thus the Tiwas and the Rabhas have own languages although not in clear written form.

2:2:1 Tiwa Language and Literature:

As mentioned above, although the Tiwa community belongs to the greater Bodo linguistic family, yet, they have their own language. Most of the plain Tiwas today, do not speak their language. Rather they speak Assamese language. But the Hill Tiwas of the Karbi Anglong district still used to speak their own dialect. However, with the emergence of the Tiwa sub-national consciousness among the plain Tiwas, conscious efforts were made to revive and establish the Tiwa language among the Tiwa peoples living in Assam. Tiwa books, dictionary and grammar are published. The Government of Assam has decided to introduce the Tiwa language in the schools at the primary level, in Tiwa dominated areas of Assam.

2:2:2 Distinct social and cultural life of the Tiwas:

The Tiwas of Assam are very proud of their distinct socio-cultural life. They have their own system of social life which makes them unique from other communities of Assam. One such special characteristic of the Tiwa social life is the institution of ‘Dekachang’ or called in the Tiwa language is the *Samadi*, which is usually built in the middle or at end part of a village from where the people of the village can easily view the entire village. This *Samadi* of the Tiwas is an institution where the Tiwa cultural elements were practiced and preserved. Basically in the *Samadi* the Tiwa youths were living together, where they were trained on the matters of social harmony and responsibility as well as to respect and practice Tiwa socio-cultural life.

While the Hill Tiwas are matrilineal, the plain Tiwas are following patri-lineal system of society. According to the legends of the plain Tiwas, the group of Tiwas who left the hills and came down to settle in the plains did not like the matrilineal system of inheritance and the system of human sacrifice which started when they were under the subjugation of the Jaintia King *Banchere*. For this reason, the Tiwas were divided into two groups - one group under the chieftain Hora and the other under the chieftain of Tongora.

There was a battle between these two groups in the hills of Jaintia Kingdom and the Hora was killed in the battle. Tongora and his followers came down to the plains below into the Ahom territory and approached *Jagia Gohain*, the Ahom governor for a plot of land to settle with his group, and accordingly *Rahial Barua* of Raha camp of the Ahoms settled them at Topakuchi, Barapujia, and Mikirgaon and three headmen were made tributary kings.

For the Tiwas, the most sacred religious institution is the *Thans* where they worship and presiding deities for the good of man. Even today the *Thans* like *Mahadeosal Than*, *Basundhari Than*, *Deosal Than*, *Kumoi Than* in the Morigaon district of Assam are considered as very sacred. In these sacred religious places, it is not only the Tiwas who come and worship Lord Mohadeo but the people of other communities also come and offered prayer to lord Mohadeo Siva.

The Tiwas have their social festivals like *Sagra Misawa* (spring festival), *Langkhun Puja*, *Wansua Miswa* etc. which gives them a unique blend of cultural identity.

2:2:3 The Rabha language and literature:

Like the Tiwas, the Rabhas also have their own language, although not in clear written form. It is prevailing only verbally from generation to generation. They preserve and practice their language through various songs of different festivals and religious hymns. The Rabha language is basically confined among the Rangdani and the Maitory groups. However, the Kocha groups also speak their language but their word structure and phonetics differ slightly from the Rangdanis and the Maitories. Other minor Rabha groups like the Dahurias, Songhas, Tintekias and the Chapras speak their own dialects and the dialectical variations between them are remarkable. The groups like the Paties, Hanas, Totlas and others have already lost their language and speak fully the Assamese language.

Efforts have been made to standardize the Rabha language in Assam. It was in 1909 the British and Foreign Bible Society had published a book *Jisuni Namkay Markani Saikani Katha* in Rabha language in Bengali script. In 1973, the ‘Bibek Rabha Kraurang Runchume’ (Nikhil Rabha Sahitya Sabha) the Rabha literary organization was formed which tried to standardize the Rabha language as well as to popularize it among the Rabhas. For the standardization of the Rabha language, they had accepted the Assamese script in 1975. In 1988, the Assam Government has recognized to the Rabha language and introduced it in 70 primary schools as “Rabha Subject”, where 100% students are belonging to the Rabha

Community. The Government of Assam on February 20, 1987 passed an order with effect from 1991, to introduce the Rabha language as the medium of instruction at the primary level in the schools, where 100% students are belonging to the Rabha community. However, till date the decision is not implemented by the Government. (Rabha Dhananjay, 1998, p. 62)

Now-a-days, a sense of consciousness has arisen among the Rabhas in Assam to revive their language and literature. In this regard, various Rabha cultural and literary organizations have been formed. Organizations like ‘Rabha Bhasa Parisad’ of Dudhnoi, ‘Sadou Rabha Kristi Sangha’, etc. have made some pioneering efforts in this regard. Subsequently the ‘Rabha Sahitya Sabha’ took up this challenge and has made efforts relentlessly to establish the Rabha language in Assam in general and among all the sections of the Rabha community in particular. (Bordoloi B.N., Sharma Thakur G.C. and Saikia M.C., 1987, p. 148)

2:2:4 Social Life and Institutions of the Rabhas:

The Rabhas have its own customs and traditions, governing their society. The customary laws constitute an institution, which enforces faithful observance of the rules of conduct approved by the society. These laws are meant for maintenance of social order and harmony. Some examples of the Rabha customary laws are (particularly customary laws of inheritance):

1. All sons are entitled to get equal share of father’s property. A daughter inherits no property, unless the father makes arrangements for her share before his death.
2. A widow is not entitled to inherit property of her husband, even though she is encumbered with issues. Of course, her male children will automatically come to inherit their father’s property on attaining maturity.(Bordoloi B.N., Sharma Thakur G.C. and Saikia M.C., 1987, p. 135)

There are other customary laws of the Rabhas in every sphere of life i. e. matrimonial customs, divorce, widow/widower, death customs, religious customs, adoptions, etc.

The Rabhas have the matrilineal system. They have the custom of reckoning descent from the female line and the practice inducting a children into the ‘Barai’(clan) of mother.(For example if the father’s Barai is happen to be ‘Rongkho’ and mother’s ‘Charchung’, then the children will identify him from the mother’s Barai ‘Charchung’)

Festivals

The tribal societies of Assam celebrate their own festivals, cultural as well as religious, which were followed as their tradition from generation to generation. The Rabhas of Assam also observes some festivals as their tradition. The Rabhas do not have any national festival of their own. The different groups celebrate their ritualistic festivals, which relate more or less to their own religious beliefs.

The Rangdani and Maitori groups celebrate ‘Baikho’ or ‘Khoksi’ puja in the month of ‘Baisakh’ (mid April to mid May) just before the starting of agricultural season with the intention of propitiating of ‘Baikho’ the Goddess of wealth and prosperity. Now-a-days, the ‘Baikho’ puja is substituted by ‘Hachangpuja’, which is organized at a specified place called as ‘Hachang Than’. The folk song of the Hachang puja is known as ‘Sathargeet’ or ‘Khoksigeet’ which is sung by the Rabha youths to convey the feelings of love and affection to their beloved.

The ‘Langapuja’ of the Pati Rabhas is another important festival of the Rabha community. The word ‘Langa’ means in Rabha language the lord ‘Mahadev’. Apart from Lord ‘Mahadev’ the other deities such as *Dhan-Kuber*, *Thakurani*, *Dudhkumer- Phulkumer* and goddess ‘Baikho’or ‘Khoksi’ also find place in the alter of worship among the Pati Rabhas.

Another religious festival of the Rabha community is the propitiation of ‘Kechai-Khaiti’- the deity presumed to be the protector of all humanity. It is believed that the ‘Kechai-Khaiti’ is the only competent deity to keep control the evil spirits and witches that might be haunting the village.

In the month of *Chaitra*, the last month of Assamese almanac, the Rabhas have been organizing a ‘Mela’ at the foot of the *Dadan hills* near *Baida village* in *Goalpara* which came to be known as ‘Dadan Mela’. The Mela is organized with the twofold objects of obeisance to ‘Sri Sri Risi’ who is described as the creator and protector of all the lives of the universe and also to pay homage to the valour and courage of *Dadan*- the first hero of the Rabha tribe and his able *General Marukhetri*. (Bordoloi B.N., Sharma Thakur G.C. and Saikia M.C., 1987, p.137 and 140)

2:3 The Tiwa and the Rabha ethnic identity during recent times (changing trends):

Thus, the Tiwas and the Rabhas in Assam can be identified with their distinct socio-cultural identity. But at the present juncture, because of their close contact with non tribal caste hindu Assamese society, these socially and culturally rich societies of the Tiwas and the Rabhas have been facing a steady trend of conversions to the mainstream Assamese nationality, adversely affecting their rich identity. Such conversions are multi-dimensional, which can be noticed in their social, religious as well as cultural life.

In recent times, while the Hill Tiwas still maintaining their traditional life and culture including the language intact but the Plain Tiwas due to their close attachment with the non-Tiwa people of Assam are losing much of their traditional traits. Most of the Plain Tiwas do not speak their language. A large number of the Tiwa people followed the Vaisnavite tradition. The overall living pattern of the Plain Tiwas is the same with the caste Hindu Assamese people. But in spite of that, these peoples remained socially and economically backward. Therefore, a group of educated Tiwa people took the initiative to preserve their glorious heritage. Efforts have been made to revive their language, their traditional socio-political institutions. (Symbolically the institution of kingship of the Tiwas is re-established in the Tiwa dominated areas). Along with the trend of socio-cultural revivalism, a new trend of political awakening has emerged - to have their political right for self-governance to preserve, to protect their cultural heritage as well as to ensure development as set forth under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

On the other hand, the different Rabha groups stand at different levels of acculturation as a result of interaction with Hinduism. (Rabha Rajen 2002, p. 18). The adaptation to the Hindu ways of life and assimilation to its culture is more discernable particularly among the Pati section of the Rabhas. Instead of their traditional religious ceremonies it is found that some of the Pati, Bitalia and Totla Rabhas have established ‘*Namghar*’ - a Neo-Vasinavite social and religious institution. They also celebrate *Janmastami*, *Douljatra* and other Hindu rituals and occasions like *Ambubasi*, *Boudha-Purnima* etc. and the birth and death ceremonies of *Sankardeva*, *Madhavdeva*, *Damodardeva* and so on, recitation of *Bhagavata*, *Gita*, *Namghosha* etc. like the caste Hindu Assamese people. The Pati Rabhas of South Kamrup district, Totla of Darrang district, Dahari and Bitalia of Goalpara district practice the Hindu customs in their marriage ceremonies. (Rabha Rajen, 2002, p-20 & 21)

It is noteworthy that attitudinal changes could be observed in the Rabha society of late. Due to expansion of modern education, improved means of communication and due to the impact of the process of globalization, the new generations of the Rabha society are less inclined to their tradition and culture and more towards modern values and practices.

Owing to these shifting winds of change, a section of the educated Rabhas felt the need to address the issue of the socio-cultural identity of the Rabha people.

Accordingly, there emerged a movement for ethnic revivalism for the Tiwas and Rabhas, which was articulated within the framework of the demand for autonomy. The nature and the various aspects of the political movement will be discussed in the subsequent Chapters.