

Chapter 3

THE GARO AND RABHA COMMUNITIES: ETHNIC IDENTITIES

Ethnic pluralism is one of the basic characteristics of Northeast India, where we can have a glimpse of ethnic varieties of life styles, cultures, religions, languages, beliefs and traditions. The present study focuses on two major tribes of Northeast India – the Garo and Rabha communities that are living together in the border areas of Assam and Meghalaya. Their social structures are being introduced here.

But, before going to discuss the social, cultural, economic and political aspects of the two communities, let us look into the legendary past of the ancient Assam.

LEGENDARY PAST

Miscellaneous arguments have been made about the origin of the term ‘Assam’ in the historical recordings of ancient Assam, based on gleanings from a few ancient epics, scriptures and inscriptions of the pre-historical period. ‘Assam’ is known as ‘Pragjyotisha’ in the epics- Ramayana and Mahabharata; ‘Kamrupa’ in the Allahabad Pillar inscription of Samudra Gupta and the early Puranas; ‘Asham’ in the Ain-i-Akbari; and ‘Asam’ in the Padshahnamah as well as in Francis Hamilton’s work Account of Assam. The word ‘Assam’ seems to be the English form of ‘Asam’ (Barpujari 1990:1). The derivation of the term from ‘Asam’ (or uneven) in the sense of ‘the land consisting of hills and plains’ in some other works of Assamese scholars, however, seems unlikely to have existed prior to the Ahom rule over the land (Assam) for more than 600 years. Therefore, the term seems to be derived from the present designation of the Ahom (Gait 1926:234).

The Kalika Puran, the Vishnu Puran and the Yogini Tantra (stories related to Mahabharata) give the boundary of Kamrupa in the ancient time. In the Yogini Tantra its boundary was the Bay of Bengal on the south, the sacred river the Karatoya in the west, the Dikhu in the east; the Kanjagiri mountain in the north and the Brahmaputra and Lakhya rivers in the south. The areas included within these boundaries are roughly the east of Mymensingh in Bangladesh and, possibly, the Garo Hills in Meghalaya of today. Further, the province was divided into four parts; namely, (i) Kampith from the Karatoya to the Sankosh, (ii) Ratnapith from the Sankosh to the Rupahi, (iii) Suvarnapith from the Rupahi to the Bharali, and (iv) Saumarpath from

the Bharali to the Dikrang. Then, Pragjyotisha included not only the whole of Assam and parts of North-East Bengal (presently Bangladesh) but also the hill tracts up to the border of China. The Kalika Puran mentioned about the Kamakhya temple (Guwahati) located in the centre of Kamrup, while the Bishnu Puran noted the country extended around the temple in all directions for about 450 miles. The earliest king of Kamrupa was Mahirang Danab succeeded consecutively by Hatak Asur, Sambar Asur and Ratna Asur. Subsequently, there emerged a powerful chief, Ghatak, who ruled over Kirats but was defeated by Narak Asur- the hero of various stories in the Purans and Tantras. Narak's son, Bhagadatta, frequently referred in Mahabharata as a powerful ruler in the east was killed by Arjuna in Kurukshetra. His descendants continued to rule for 19 generations. Of the last two kings of his line Subahu and Suparna, one went away as an ascetic in the Himalayas and the other was killed by his ministers (Gait 1926; Barpujari 1990). The Bhagavat narrated about a king, Bishmak, having ruled over Vidarbha around Sadiya and his capital at Kundina that still survives in the Kundil river at Sadiya. The Rukmini (Abduction) Story of Mahabharata translated into Assamese has mentioned about Bhishmak having five sons and a daughter, Rukmini, who was married to Krishna. The Bhagavat and the Vishnu Puran have narrated the legend of the popular king of Sonitpur- the city of blood (Tezpur in Assamese), Ban Raja- the contemporary of Narak, having many sons and a daughter, Usha, who was married to Aniruddha – Lord Krishna's grandson (Barpujari 1990).

The first authentic historical information about ancient Kamrupa provided by the Chinese pilgrim, Hiuen Tsian, who visited India and Kamrupa during 600-648 A.D.- the period of Bhaskar Varman, the king of Kamrupa, reveals spread of the kingdom of Kamrupa in an area of 1,700 miles bounded by the Karatoya river in the west and in the east by a line of hills adjacent to the tribes on the Chinese frontier. The inscriptions on the copper plates reveal that after the dynasty of Narak, there ruled Bhagadatta and Vajradatta for 3,000 years. Pushya Varman of the dynasty was succeeded consecutively by Samudra Varman, Bola Varman, Kalyana Varman, Ganapati Varman, Mahendra Varman, Narayan Varman, Mahabhuta Varman, Chandra Mukha, Sthita Varman and Susthita Varman. The last ruler had two sons- Supratishita Varman and Bhaskar Varman. After Bhaskar Varman, several Varman kings ruled in Kamrupa (Gait 1926; Barpujari 1990; Kumar 1995).

During the period from 13th to 16th centuries, the emergence and development of a large number of tribal political formations could be seen in North-East India. Those tribal groups were the Chutia, Tai-Ahom, the Koch, Dimasa, Tripuri, Meithei (Manipuri), the Khasi and the Pnar (Jaintia). Among these the most developed in the 15th century were the Chutiyas whose kingdom was annexed by the Ahom ruler in 1523 (Amalendu Guha 1983:04).

THE RABHA

Written documents on Rabha tribe are very rare. There is only one way to know about Rabha history and that is the systematic study of folk culture and other related traditional practices including oral tradition. Jiten Das in his article *Rabha Buranjir Abha* stated that the word 'Rabha' was noticed in Mirza Nathan's book *Baharistan-I Ghaibi* written during the period 1632-1641 of Shajahan's rule. The word appeared in the phases "700 Rabhas desert Nathan" (p.532). It is said that about 5000 years ago the Rabhas were living in Cyberia. Due to crisis of food, water and means of livelihood they migrated towards China (Das 2004). The term 'Rabha community' refers to one of the nine scheduled tribes that inhabit the plain districts of Assam. But they are not living in single geographical location. The Rabhas are scattered all over Assam yet they are mostly located in the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang. Besides Assam, the Rabhas are found in Bangladesh, North Bengal, Manipur, Arunachal, Bihar, Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal, and in some areas of Meghalaya (Bordoloi 1987: 128; Rabha 2006:49). The Rabha community is a group of Mongoloid racial stock and linguistically the community belongs to Sino-Tibetan group. Their physical structure is comprised of round face, flat nose, prominent cheekbones, small eyes, yellow complexion, coarse hair, scanty beard and well developed and strong lower extremity. About their ethnic origin, place of origin and relationship with other tribes, there are encountered various views. Of them having relevance for the study may be mentioned here: Major Playfair had tried to trace the origin of the Rabhas in the Tibetan region who migrated from that place to the Garo Hills in Meghalaya and then scattered over the plains of Assam (Bordoloi 1987).

Besides this source, much information on their migration has been preserved generation to generation through the oral history of the Rabha people. The oral story says that there was a great warrior, named Dadan during the reign of Ban dynasty in

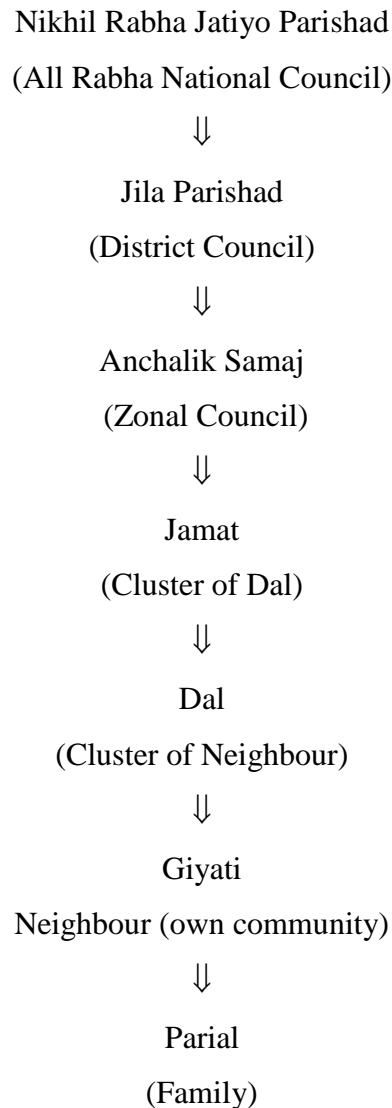
Sonitpur (some people call Dadan a King and some others call a captain). After the defeat of Ban-Raja by lord Krishna, Dadan moved to Bhutan for shelter but the king there turned down Dadan's request. Consequently, Dadan and his group proceeded to the southwest of the Brahmaputra valley. They reached north Kamrup via Duwangiri and took rest at the Bakbuwa hill of Barpeta. Thereafter, they founded Goalpara and settled near the Hasila Bil and then they moved to Lakhimpur via the bank of the Duldunga river and established their kingdom at Dubupahar area. Dadan built a fort at Tikirkilla. He trained his soldiers at Nakrong forest (Bodo 2012)

The word *Rabha* means to bring. There is a belief in the Rabha society that the Rabhas were brought to the earth by their *Risi* (supreme god) from *Rongkrang* (heaven), and hence they are called Rabhas. They also believe that Dadan their traditional hero, brought them apart from the others and they began to call themselves Rabhas. Many scholars have divided the Rabha people into sub-groups. Endle classified seven sub-groups; namely, Rangdaniya, Maitoriya, Pati, Koch, Bitliya, Dahuriya and Sangha. Like Endle, Friend Preira also classified the Rabhas into seven sub-groups. E.A Gait mentioned five sub-groups of the Rabha tribe; namely, Rangdani, Pati, Maitory, Dahuri and Kachari (Bordoloi, Thakur and Saikia 1987:129). Now, the Rabhas are divided into a number of sub-groups such as Pati, Rongdani, Maitory, Koccha, Tatla, Hana, Dahuri and Bitalia Rabha (Basumatary 2010). Some other scholars name two more sub-groups; namely, Tutla and Chunga Rabha. B.M. Das explained the role of *Barai* (*Gutra*) in the Rabha society. Mother's Barai or Gutras are acceptable in Rabha society. The Rabhas have 12 gutras: namely, Chung, Chilan, Nafa, Nongdo, Diya, Dogom, Fathu, Rangrong, Kasu, Daru, Nongbag and Dobathol (Barpujari 1990).

Social Structure

The Rabha social structure starts from *family*. Earlier *Giyati* was formed of two or three families but in contemporary times at least ten families are required to organize this. The third stratum is *Kamchena* which is an association of more than three *giyatis* belonging to at least two or more villages. The next is *Jamat*, formed of 8 to 25 villages. *Anchalik Samaj* is the most important and structural functionary in the Rabha society. About 5 to 12 *Jamats* constitute an *Anchalik Samaj* which performs all the important functions. Then comes the *Zila Parishad*, relatively less functioning

structure of the Rabha society. The most important function that it performs is to organize the Rabha people of the respective district. The top most organizational structure is known as *All Rabha National Council* (ARNC). No geographical or other boundary is maintained here and as such all Rabhas are included in it whether they live in a district, state, nation or abroad. The structure of the Rabha society is diagrammatically shown in the following chart:



This social structure is more or less common in the Goalpara and Kamrup districts of Assam and the East Garo Hills and West Garo Hills districts of Meghalaya. For instance, Mechpara Purbanchal Rabha Samaj of Goalpara district is formed of Family, Giyati, Dal, Jamat, Mechpara Purbanchal Rabha Samaj, Goalpara Zila Rabha Samaj and it joins the Nikhil Rabha Jatiyo Parishad. Of the seven structures mentioned above, the most functional is Anchalik Samaj. The Anchalik

Samajas of Goalpara district which include some areas of West, East and North Garo Hills districts in Meghalaya are six in number: (i) Dudhnoi Purbanchal Rabha Samaj, (ii) Dudhnoi Pachimanchal Rabha Sanmilon, (iii) Jinari Madhyanchal Rabha Samaj, (iv) Mechpara Madhyanchal Rabha Samaj, (v) MechPara Purbanchal Rabha Samaj and (vi) Goalpara Sahar Bashi Rabha Samaj. The Rabha people always prefer to live in their traditional societal patterns. To maintain/preserve Rabha identity, they obey some laws regarding food habits, dress pattern, behavioural patterns, worship and other social customs and traditions. Though Rabhas are scattered in different regions, they are seen to be trying their best to follow the dictums from the All Rabha National Council (Rabha 2012:94-95).

Political Life

To protect religion, language and socio-cultural elements, Gowardhan Sarkar and Darika Nath Rabha formed a national organization in 1926 named All Assam Rabha Association (*Sadou Asom Rabha Sangha*) and later it was renamed as All Rabha National Council (ARNC). Now, under this parent organization, many other organizations exist. These are as follows:

1. All Rabha Students Union (ARSU)
2. All Rabha Sahitya Sabha
3. All Rabha Kristi Sonmilon
4. All Rabha Yuba Chatra Sanmilon
5. All Rabha Women Council
6. Rabha Hasong Demand Committee
7. Rabha Hasong Security Council
8. Rabha Jatiyo Gana Sanmilon
9. Sixth Schedule Demand Committee

Through these organizations, Rabhas are engaged in political exercise, protecting their ethnic identity. But still they are politically far behind in comparison to the tribes like Bodo or Garo. Presently, ARSU, Sixth Schedule Demand Committee and All Rabha Women Council are unitedly continuing their movement against the state government to achieve sixth schedule status. Finally on 10th of March 1995 Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council was formed. But practically, the Rabhas could not get sixth schedule status whereas the Bodos have got it. To achieve this status, the

ARSU and other Rabha organizations often announce bandh calls in the Goalpara district of Assam. On the other side, All Rabha Sahitya Sabha is also gradually developing. Rabha language has been introduced as the medium of instruction in some schools. Besides, Rabha scholars are trying to publish/write books, journals, articles in Rabha language (Rabha 2010:47).

Language

Garo and Rabha languages belong to the Bodo language family. The generic term Bodo was first used by Hodgson to this group of languages. The Bodo group comprises the tribes like Kachari/Bodo, Lalungn (Tiwa), Dimasa, Garo, Rabha, Tripuri, Koch, Chutiya (Deuri) and Moran (Basumatary 2010:01). These groups belong to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. But within the Rabha community the language variation comprises Pati, Hana and Totla. The Rabhas have lost their mother tongue and instead they speak of Assamese language as their mother tongue as Ahoms, Chutiyas, and several other communities do. Now, the Rangdani, Maitory and Kocha, three Rabha groups, maintain their inherent language and culture. The Rangdani claims higher status among the Rabhas. In the present time the Rabha writers are trying to write in their own language but the rest of the Rabha groups, particularly the Pati, Totla and Hana Rabhas have lost their own language and they have adopted Assamese language as their *lingua franca* (Basumatary 2010:03).

Religion

The Rabha people are very conservative and therefore they always try to preserve their customary laws. In the pre-Independence and also post-Independence eras, several major religious groups/sects such as Choitanya Gouriyo sect, Sanatan sect, and Neo-Vaishnavite sect of Hinduism and, Baptist and Catholic sects of Christianity have entered into the Rabha society. Those Rabha who have been converted into Hinduism have adopted titles like Das, Rai, Saraniya (non-tribal Assamese) etc. (Moni Rabha 2006:42). But in the contemporary time, the Rabha religious beliefs and practices are mainly based on animism as well as Hinduism, particularly the Pati-Rabhas have been assimilated into Hindu culture. Adoption of Christianity by a section of the tribe is also noticed in Kamrup and Goalpara districts of Assam and in East Garo Hills district of Meghalaya (Bordoloi, Thakur and Saikia 1987:136-137).

Occupation and Economy

Traditionally, Rabhas were very close to nature and as such hunting, fishing, weaving and agriculture were the major sources of economy. Settled cultivation in the Rabha community comprises the Ahu and Sali varieties of rice crops. They also produce pulses, mustard seeds and jute. Shifting cultivation is still practiced in the bordering areas of the Meghalaya state. However, the expansion of education, improvement of communication and geographical mobility of the people have made an impact on traditional economic affairs and have increased their participation in diverse fields such as services, business, and others. Rabha youths are now found engaged in trade and commerce. In the sphere of agriculture, a small segment of the cultivators have used the modern technologies whereas a large number of cultivators are still using traditional modes of cultivation. Products from animal husbandry of pigs, cock, ducks etc. and the handicraft products made of bamboo such as Pasi, khorahi, chaloni, dola, kula, jakoi, cheap etc. supplement incomes in the Rabha society.

In their economic sphere women play an important role. They are traditionally specialized in spinning and weaving. Normally Rabha women make their dresses in homes. Some of the important traditional dresses made by Rabha women are Rifan, Kambung, and Khodabang for woman. The male dresses are Pajal, Khasne, Fali, Buksil, Passara, etc. These make a part of material culture of the Rabha society (Bordoloi, Sharma Thakur and Saikia 1987:131-151). Besides, they are often seen occupied as masons, salesmen in big shops and servants in hotels.

Marriage and Family:

The Rabha society is in practice of several types of marriages. The following marriages types are found sanctioned in the Rabha society:

- (i) Kambu marriage, in which the bride, with full honour, is taken to groom's house and there, the marriage customs are performed.
- (ii) Bhorì Singkai in which the parents of groom discuss the proposal with the bride's family and if the two families agree then the groom's parents take the bride, adorn in marriage costumes, to the groom's house and there they perform the marriage rituals.

- (iii) Nuk Dhangkai occurs when a girl likes or chooses a boy; the girl willingly goes to the boy's house (with due permission of the boy's parents) and their marriage is solemnized there.
- (iv) Bhoru Bikai is a marriage by force. This type of marriage takes place when a boy likes a girl but her parents do not allow the boy to marry their daughter. The boy then marries the girl by force.
- (v) Jang-oi Dhangkai or ghar juwai is a marriage in which the boy goes to bride's home to stay permanently.
- (vi) Krangci Bhoru is widow re-marriage. In Rabha society, the remarriage of widow is permissible.
- (vii) Sarkar Nuki Changkai is a marriage registered in a Temple or Court (Rabha Customary Laws 2007: 9-22).

The Rabha marriage system follows some customs. These are as follows (Bordoloi, Thakur and Saikia 1987:141-142):

- (i) In Rabha society, marriage cannot take place between the groom and bride of same 'Barai' or clan.
- (ii) The junior levirate and sororate marriages are permissible in Rabha society where a younger brother can marry the widow of his elder brother in the former case. Similarly, one can marry the younger sister of one's wife (levirate marriage) if contingency so requires but not the elder sister if unmarried still.
- (iii) The cross-cousin marriage is also permitted but it is limited to marrying the daughter of one's maternal uncle.
- (iv) The cousin marriage is not practiced but two brothers can marry from the same family provided the elder brother chooses to marry the elder sister.

Rabha marriage, particularly of the Pati Rabha, is solemnized in a very simple way as compared to the Rangdanie and Maitories. It passes through several stages before the actual marriage rites are performed. These stages are: pan tamul kota, Guta tamul khuoya, Pan-cheni or Joron. Besides the traditional marriage system, the

Rabhas also perform marriage following the Hindu customs. At the end of a marriage, it is customary to propitiate Risi-Sore- the deity looking after family's welfare- by scarifying a cock and a hen before the formal union of the groom and bride. The performance of this ritual marks the completion of all formalities pertaining to a marriage by negotiation. On the contrary, separation of married couple is secured by a divorce which is recognized in the Rabha society (Bordoloi, Thakur and Saikia 1987:142-145). In Rabha society divorce is known as *fati chekkai* and it is considered a disgraceful deed and therefore, both the parties are punished by the society. The customary punishment requires a payment of Rs. 200 to 1050 by the following parties:

- (i) Gyati or neighbours of the both parties
- (ii) Sakha or Jamadar society
- (iii) Anchalik Samaj (Rabha Customary Laws 2007:22-26).

Inheritance and Property rights

Manis Kumar Rabha (1989) in his book *Matriliny to Patriliney: A Study of Rabha Society* informs that the Rabha society has changed from matrilineal to patrilineal system like the Garo and the Khasis of Assam. Among Rabhas traditionally bride-groom has to go to the bride's house after marriage leaving his parents' house for ever. Rabhas, traditionally followed matrilineal family system, but with the passing of time and contact with the caste people mainly the Hindu castes, their family has undergone various changes. His study based on two districts of West Bengal i.e., Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar divide and all the Rabha villages into two types: Forest Rabhas and village Rabhas. The Rabhas in the forest located in the remote corner do not much contact with outsiders, and so they still follow their traditional matrilineal system. On the other hand, the village Rabhas being close to the outsiders, mainly the Hindus are changing from matriliney to patriliney. He also mentioned about Pati Rabhas of Assam who have adopted Hinduism.

Family property is mainly of two types: Movable and immovable. Generally, both the types of property rights are enjoyed by sons but if the family does not have a son then a daughter will get the property right. If someone does not have their own child, the property right will be enjoyed by the nearest kin. An adopted child gets the property rights only if he or she is able to get *Barai* and *Warish* status. A son normally

gets the property right, however, in case of mother's property, a daughter will inherit that property (Rabha Customary Law 2007: 34-35).

Festival

The Rabhas have traditionally practiced different festivals and worships like Baikho Utsav, Bishuwa Utsav, Langamara puja, Dadan and Risi Puja, Lakshmi Puja, etc. Baikho festival is celebrated in the month of May every year. The image of Baikho may be compared to the Hindu Goddess of power (shakti) called Durga. The Langamara worship is also practiced as their national festival in the same month. In February, the Rabhas celebrate Bir Dadan Divas and Risi Devata Puja, particularly in the Goalpara district of Assam. Another important festival, Lakshmi Puja or the Goddess of Wealth held before the harvest every year. This is also known as Hasong Puja. It is celebrated to welcome the Goddess Lakshmi. Besides, the Rabhas also celebrate Rongali Bihu, Kati Bihu and Magh Bihu. These are festivals of the Assamese community as a whole (Rabha Customary Law 2007: 48-49).

THE GARO

Khasi, Jaintia and Garo are the three major tribes in the state of Meghalaya. The Khasi and Jaintia who call themselves the *Hynniewtrep* believe that they belong to the Mon-Khmer Austro-Asian stock of races from the East Asia. The Garos, on the other hand, belong to the Tibeto-Burman stock. The Garo population in Meghalaya is about 30% of the total state's population (Sangma 2006: 11-19).

The Garo is one of the aboriginal ethnic groups in Northeast India. The historical writings on Garos are very rare. Since the year 1788 the studies on Garos have been done by the colonial scholars like John Eliot, Francis Hamilton, Thomas Sisson, David Scott, C.S. Reynolds, Moffat Mills, W.J. Williamson, E.T. Dalton, Alexander Mackenzie, John Avery, Austin Godwin, A. Playfair and B.C. Allen (Marak 2011: 518). However, their existence is ancient in the Vedic period they were, generally, referred as Kiratas and in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, as Mandeha and Gurudas respectively. The Garos are of Mongoloid origin, a section of Tibeto-Burman race which belongs to the greater Boro stock. Their physical features comprise short stature, long head, broad facial form and broad nose (Bordoloi 1991). The Garos once inhabited the northern region called Garuland in Tibet, bordering

China. Gradually they migrated from Tibet to the Northeastern part of India and finally settled in the Garo hills of Meghalaya. They are also scattered in different places like Rongpur and Mynmensingh districts of Bangladesh; Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam in particular. There, they were known as Garu Mandai, from which the term Garo was adopted. The Garos call themselves by the name Achik Mande, derived from the word ‘Achik’ meaning **hill dwellers** and ‘Mande’, meaning **man** (Sangma 2006:27). Marak (2011) mentions their itinerary:

...the ancestors of the Garos inhabited a province of Thibet (sic) named Torua, whence, without any apparent reason they started on a voyage of discovery under the leadership of two chiefs, Jappa-Jalinpa and Sukpa-Bongipa. The first place in the plains of Bengal of which they make mention, is “Rangamati near Rangpur”, possibly the place now known by that name in the Goalpara district, which once formed part of the Rangpur district. Thence, these people moved on to Dhubri, where resigned the King Dhobani. This king received them in a friendly manner, but being afraid of them, he would not allow them to settle there permanently, so they moved on up the right bank of the Brahmaputra until they reached its affluent (sic) the Manash river. Here the emigrants met with their first misfortunes. The chief of that part of the country was both powerful and cruel. He was attracted by the beauty of Juge-Silche, the daughter of one Kangre-Jingre, and endeavoured to carry her off by force. To defeat his end her fellow-countrymen hid her in a cave at a place called Jugi-Ghopa, and, a battle ensued in which the progenitors of the Garo race were defeated. For a few years they seem to have been under subjugation... The Garo were eating their mid-day meal when their enemies came upon them, but, though surprised, they fought with desperate courage and with such success, that they were allowed to proceed on their journey without further molestation. A place called Garo-mari...is said to be where they made their stand (Marak 2011:519).

The Garos, in antiquity, were fierce warriors engaged in constant war with others; head hunting or killing was regarded as a noble activity and it was a sign of maturity in man. A man was considered adult or matured only when he killed at least one man. Playfair broadly categorized the Garos into two, on the basis of geographical location: hills and plains. However, the Garos are further sub-divided on

the basis of location and dialect. First, they are divided into twelve different groups: Akawes, Chisaks, Duals, Matchis, Matabengs, Kochus, Atiagas, Abengs, Chiboks, Rugas, Ganchings or Garas, and Atongs which are endogamous. Second, all these 12 groups are divided into hill and plains people. The plain dwellers are Akawes, Chisaks and Kochus while the hill dwellers are Duals, Matchis, Matabengs, Atiagas, Abengs, Chiboks, Rugas, Ganchings or Garas, and Atongs (Marak 2011:518-19). Within these Garo groups, there are five major clans; viz., Sangma, Marak, Momin, Shira and Areng.

Society

The Garo community has a large number of cultural and dialect-based groups which are settled in the area called Garo Hills. They are given below (Bordoloi, 1991:5,9):

1. The A'Wes are scattered in the entire region of northern hills,
2. A'Kawes, the plain Garos are inhabiting Assam,
3. The Chisak sub-tribe occupies the northeastern hills,
4. The Duals occupy the areas near by the south of the Chisak,
5. The Matchis stays in the central valley of the Sinsang river.

The Khasis, Jaintias and the Garos are matrilineal tribes of Northeast India. Besides these, there are found several tribes in Northeast India like Rabha, Cachar Barman and Tiwa which possesses the matrilineal characteristic. Descent is counted only through female line and, therefore, the Garo society is based on the sub-clan which is called MA'CHONH or motherhood. Their descent comes from a common ancestress or mother and all the Garo people belong to the MA'CHONG. In a Garo family, the mother is the head of the family and inheritance passes through the mother to daughter and father is considered to be an outsider. According to their customs, the father is not required to play any important role in the Garo family. Like Khasi, women enjoy the property right which passes through mother to daughter. The youngest daughter of a family automatically becomes the owner of the mother's property. The privileged daughter is called NOKMA, meaning heiress. On the contrary male children cannot claim any property as per societal norm. The boy stays in the house of the parents of his wife after marriage. The Garo family is very systematic and it is pre-structured in the sense that the family consists of the husband,

wife and their children and the children have to leave the house to form their own family. Except the youngest daughter, the rest of the daughters establish separate households after their marriage (Bordoloi 1991:5,9).

Bachelor's dormitory in Garo society is known as NOKPANTE and according to their custom, each village should have a dormitory. It also depends upon the number of the families belonging to a clan and each clan has a dormitory. The dormitory works as informal educational institution for youths training in traditional arts, crafts, singing, dancing, playing of musical instruments, use of weapons, etc. in the Garo society. Only male youths are allowed to enter the dormitory whereas the females are not allowed to enter (Bordoloi 1991:16).

The system of community ownership of land still prevails in Garo society. In Garo society, the traditional village/ clan chief is called NOKMA and he is the custodian of all lands in the village. A man can choose any plot for jhum cultivation within the village. NOKMA cannot sell any land without permission of his wife's MACHONG or "motherhood". Therefore, land is administered by NOKMA and council of village elders in accordance with the customary laws. A man from outside village can also cultivate the village land by permission of NOKMA and if he does not belong to Garo community he has to pay land revenue to NOKMA. It is important that in the Garo society, male member (Nokma) plays an important role in village administration, celebration of festivals, religious rites, marriages, death ceremonies, cultivation etc (Bordoloi 1991:8-9).

Economy

Agriculture is the main source of economy in the Garo society. The Garos living in plain areas do sedentary agriculture whereas the Garos in the hilly areas practice only jhum cultivation. They were traditionally engaged in shifting cultivation, using the slash and burn method. They cultivate the same plot for two years. In the first year a variety of crops are grown, and in the second year only rice is cultivated. After cultivating for two years the land is allowed to lie fallow at least for seven years. The land belongs to the whole village. Every year, elder persons of the village allot land to each family, depending on the needs. Rice, maize and millets are mostly grown for consumption of a family. Ginger, turmeric and green chillies are grown to sell them in the market and to earn some money for household expenses. The soil's

quality is good in the West Garo Hills and therefore cotton has become a staple crop there (Deb Roy 2002:174). Besides shifting cultivation, Playfair mentioned that the Garos practiced hunting and fishing (Marak 2011:519-520). Besides paddy, they have expertise in horticulture, potato, pineapple, cabbage, cultivation etc. The rubber plantation is emerged one of the contemporary practices and it will become a major source of economy in future, particularly in the Garo Hills. They also rear cattle, pigs and poultry. Like other tribes of Northeast India, weaving has an important role in fulfilling their domestic requirement of cloths. A big section of Garo youths is engaged in service sector, especially in services like police and army (Bordoloi 1991:11-12).

A big portion of the Garo's traditional beliefs and practices are related to shifting cultivation. When jhum season comes, the chief of the village calls the villagers to select a site for the year's jhum cultivation. During the year of the cultivation, the Garos perform a series of rituals in the villages. The slash and burn process is started on a plot in the forest to make individual site for jhum cultivation and it is called *o.pata* or site making. After that, site burning ritual is performed, which is called *a.galmaka*. The ritual performed at the first weeding of the jhum is called *jakra gama*, at the second round it is called *bamil gama* and it goes on so goes on till the multiple crops are harvested. Finally, the biggest post-harvest festival is performed, which may go on for several days. It is called *wangala*, thanks giving for *Misisaljong*- the deity of agriculture (Sangma, 2006:34, 46).

The making of small hut or *bo.rang* on trees to keep watch on the jhum is still continuing. It is a temporary shelter for men to sleep and keep watch on their cultivation from animals and thieves. In the Garo society, jhum is customary and rather mandatory for every able-bodied man, woman and child, and they temporarily shift their residence to the jhum field if it is far away from village (Sangma 2006:35).

Marriage

Marriage system among the Garos is clan exogamous where the marriage is not practiced within the same clan or sect. As for example, a Sangma girl cannot marry a Sangma boy. Thus, husband and wife must belong to different clans or motherhoods. The significant feature of the Garo marriage is that after marriage the groom goes to stay in the bride's home, instead of the bride going to stay in groom's

home. Several forms of marriage are found in the Garo society. Some of the important marriage forms are: first, marriage of a girl by negotiation with father's sister's son but girl has to give consent; second form of marriage takes place in dormitory, if a girl offers food to a boy and he accepts the food, preferably he should be her mother's brother's son and in the third form of marriage the boy comes to live with the girl in her house at night. Besides these, some other forms of marriage are also practiced in Garo society, e.g., the marriage that takes place in the presence of priest (Khamal) in the bride's house. There may be marriage by capture, by trial or others. The cross-cousin marriage is the dominant marriage system among Garos (Marak 2011:520). It is a system in which a girl marries the mother's brother's son but there is taboo related to marriage of a girl with the son of father's sister.

The NOKROM and CHOWARY are two types of status for male members, which emerge out of marriage in the Garo society. After marriage the groom has to reside in the house of his mother-in law and the groom becomes a representative of his father's clan which is called Nokrom. If father-in law dies, the Nokrom becomes the owner of everything because he has to manage all the properties that the family possesses. On the other hand, Chowary signifies the marital status, where the son-in-law does not stay with mother-in law and he has to build his house in the village of his wife and manage his wife's property. If the father-in law of a Nokrom has been a headman or NOKMA, then Nokrom becomes Nokma after death of his father-in law. If someone marries the youngest daughter of a family then he becomes Nokrom (Bordoloi 1991; Marak 2011).

In the traditional Garo society, if father-in law dies then daughter's husband becomes the husband of both mother-in law and her daughter. Another interesting custom of Garo society is that if a boy is going to marry two sisters of the same family, he has to marry the elder sister first and seek consent of his wife for solemnizing another marriage. In such case, the first wife is called as JIK-MAMUNG and the second one is called JIK-GITES (Bordoloi 1991).

Language

The Garo language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. Scholars say that the Garo language belongs to the greater Boro linguistic group of the Tibeto-Burman Group. During the British rule the Garos developed their script. Initially, they

adopted Bengali script but later the Roman script was adopted. Thomas Jones a British Missionary introduced Roman script in 1842. The coarse and soft tunes of using the language indicate the dwelling place of the Garos. For instance, the Garos living in the plain areas of Assam speak in a soft tone whereas those living in the remote hilly areas speak in a coarse tone.

Religion

More than 70% of Garo people have adopted Christianity. But they still remember their traditional religious beliefs and practices. Before Christianity, animism was the dominant belief among the Garos. In local parlance, it is known as *Songsarek* or the spirit of worship. They have any idol and specific place for worship. *Tatara Rabuga* is the supreme god of the Garos. Besides the supreme god, they have some major and minor gods – some benevolent and some malevolent. *Nostu-Nopantu* and *Machi* created the earth; *Chorabudu* is the servant of supreme god and protector of crops; *Saljong* (Sun) is the god of fertility; *Goera* is the god of strength and cause thunder/lightning; *Kalkame* is responsible for lives of all humans; *Susime* (Moon) is the goddess of riches and *Nawang* is an evil spirit. Each of the gods has his/her own likes and dislikes. They believe that certain fiendish and malignant spirits incessantly try to create chaos in the world and these negative forces need to be properly propitiated, or in some cases to be exorcised out; where some benevolent deities will help mankind to achieve their dreams if properly pleased. If a calamity emerges in a village, or if someone suffers from sickness or an accident takes place in someone's life, they always attribute it to the wrath of some god. In that case, some elaborate rites and rituals called *Sima nia* are performed by the *Kamal Tuara* (Chief Priest) to determine the god who is responsible for the trouble and to determine the divinations, according to his (god's) personal preferences to be performed, which called *Kamal tata* or *amua*. They believe that generally the minor gods are satisfied with the offer of gourds of rice beer or *chu* and other agricultural products. But, some of the gods demand appeasement by blood sacrifice of their favourite animal or bird (Sangma 2006:28-29; Marak 2011:521).

As mentioned earlier, the major portion of Garo's customary laws or rituals are related to agricultural activities. *Songsarek* Garos have also the custom of making wooden memorial posts or *kima* in front of their house as tributes to the departed soul.

The number of posts signifies the number of persons that died in that particular household (Sangma 2006:36-37).

The Garos believe in re-birth. After death of an individual, his/her soul goes for a temporary stay at *Balpakram*, until re-born. *Balpakram* is a sacred place - the abode of spirits of the dead people. One strange belief among the Garos is that they believe in the existence of a relationship/affinity of humans with other beings with the tigers, leopards, pythons, mermaids or *sangkni* (mythical animals). The animals and birds are related with beliefs and practices in the Garo society, for which they forbid the unnecessary killing of birds and animals (Sangma 2006:36-37).

Christianization among the Garos began after the British entered the Garo hills in the middle of 18th century. The Britishers tried to convert them from the *Songsarek* to Christianity. David Scott took the initiative to convert them in 1822. In 1964, the American Baptist Missionaries were the first one to establish in the Garo hills. In 1864 only two Garos were converted, but in 1867 the number increased to 40 and a church was established at Goalpara. In 1991 census, of 668930 persons 407080 were Christian. The Garos are now divided into two religious groups: the *Songsarek* or traditional worshippers and the Christians. The Garo villages vary from small to large in size. A Garo village consists of several households and the houses are made in similar rectangular style with some accommodation plan. The houses are made on hillocks.

GARO AND RABHA COMMUNITIES: ETHNIC IDENTITIES

Major Playfair had found some similarities between the linguistic and cultural aspects of the Garo and Rabha communities. Edward Tuite Dalton also noticed that “the Rabhas and the Hajong of the Goalpara district are also branches of the Kachari groups and connected with the Garos (Basumatary 2010:02).

B.M Das had tried to establish the fact that the Rabhas were more closely related to the Garos, rather than any other tribe of the Bodo group. Sir Edward Gait (1892) also opined that the Garos and Rabhas were of the same ethnic branch (Bordoloi 1987:128, 129). Although these scholars have showed similarities of ethnic origin among the Garos and Rabhas, the contemporary scenario shows an unrest or tension among these two, otherwise analogous ethnic groups.

In the state of Meghalaya, when looked comparatively at the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia tribes, it is found that the Garos are different from the Khasi and Jaintia not only in their origin and stock but also in their traditional beliefs and practices. Only one common bond that exists between them is the matrilineal system of inheritance. From racial, linguistic and social points of view, the Garos share affinity with the plain tribes, specially, with the Rabhas and Boro (Sangma 2006:29). In this regard, Playfair has stated that the Garos lived closer to the plains. For instance, many stories of the Garos are associated with the places in the plain areas such as Rangamati, Dhubri, Jugi Ghopa and Garo-mari (Marak 2011:519). This view goes on the line of B.M. Das's view as cited above.

Linguistic similarities

Linguistically the Boro, Rabha and Garo tribes are so close and similar to each other that in the Boro Sahitya Sabha's meeting held at Dudhnoi in 1981 three girls from the three communities each symbolically stood in front of the entry gate welcoming the delegates each in three languages – *Khulombai* (Boro), *Enchi* (Rabha) and *Salam* (Garo), the meaning the same. There are found some words/sentences are similar in the Rabha and Garo communities as given below (Deben Kachari 2012):

Table 3.1

Linguistic Similarities between the Garo and Rabha Communities

English Word	Rabha Word	Garo Word
Bring	Rabba	Rabba
Drink	Roung	Roung
Take	Rung	Ra
Road	Rama	Rama
House	Nok	Nok
Rice	Mairong	Merong
Lion	Singa	Hinga
I shall go	Ang Rengu	Anga Rigen
Have a cup of tea	Nang sah Roung	Nanga cha Roub

Source: 'Borghuli-A Souvenir' (2012), Author- Deben Kachari

Status of Women

Men and women both play significant roles in developing a society and in the Indian social system women do not have equal status. But in the Garo and Rabha communities, the status of women is significantly high. Traditionally both the tribes have been matrilineal and therefore the status of women is higher than that of men. To preserve culture, women play a strong role. In the contemporary times also, both the communities have matrilineal characteristics. Looking to the cultural practices of the Garo and Rabha communities, the women play vital role in different festivals, domestic and social life. From the ancient times they have prepared their own traditional, beautiful cloths. Silk, 'ari', cloths are very prestigious and in earlier times they collected some particular types of seeds from different trees to make colorful cloths. *Bufan*, *Kambung* and *Khodabang* are Rabha women attires. The Rabha women also make *Gamucha* (towel for men) very beautifully. *Dakmanda* is a beautiful, women's wear in the Garo society. In agricultural activities, the Rabha and Garo women are equally engaged with men.

In marriage also, both the Rabha and Garo women play significant role. In the Rabha society, the system of widow re-marriage also exists. It is, perhaps, due to the existence of matrilineal system of society since the remote past that the status of women is higher in these societies compared to the rest of India. In the contemporary times also, the Rabhas, particularly Rondani Rabha are following mother's title (*gutra*) instead of fathers. Similarly, Garo women are also ascribed high status in marriage institution. Importantly, instance the Garo women get divorce easily. In the field of religious rituals related birth, death and *Namkaran*, the women of both the communities perform significant roles. In every ceremony, certain songs are sung by women (Phukan Patgiri 2012).

Although the Rabha and Garos have similarities in certain aspects like linguistic, racial and ways of property inheritance, yet there lie certain points of dissimilarity between them. In the Rabha society property inheritance is basically vested in females. But in the Rabha society, traces of matrilineal system could only be seen through the inheritance of mother's title. Regarding the family structure also, the Garos are completely matrilineal whereas the Rabhas follow a pattern of patriarchy due to their close proximity with the other patriarchal cultural groups. Regarding the

dress patterns also, the Garos are more inclined towards western outfits, due to the influence of Christianity. To the contrary, the Rabhas mostly use traditional dress. Although the Garos are influenced by western modernity, yet their social system is mainly governed by traditional systems. In the economic sphere, the Rabhas have expertise in settled cultivation whereas the Garos largely stick to jhum cultivation. Moreover, the Garos are still using their own traditional language while the Rabhas, especially the Pati Rabhas, have encountered extinction of their original language. They are now using Assamese language.

CONCLUSION

Thus, to conclude it may be said that although the Rabhas and the Garos belong to the same racial and linguistic family – Mongolian race - and Tibeto-Burman linguistic group respectively, yet there have emerged cultural differences between these two tribal communities. The Garos are mostly settled in the hills and the Rabhas are in the plains; the Garos are Christians, the Rabhas are mostly Hindus. Although to some extent a inter-community marriages have occurred, the Garos and the Rabhas are now two discrete tribal communities, having different cultural ethos.