

**A STUDY OF THE SONGS AND NARRATIVES  
OF THE TOTLA RABHAS IN BAKSA AND  
UDALGURI DISTRICT**

**A THESIS**

**SUBMITTED TO GAUHATI UNIVERSITY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE DEPARTMENT OF FOLKLORE  
RESEARCH UNDER FACULTY OF FINE ARTS**



**BHUPEN RABHA**

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**DEPARTMENT OF FOLKLORE RESEARCH**  
**GAUHATI UNIVERSITY**  
Gopinath Bardoloi Nagar  
Guwahati - 781014  
Phone. 0361-2570672

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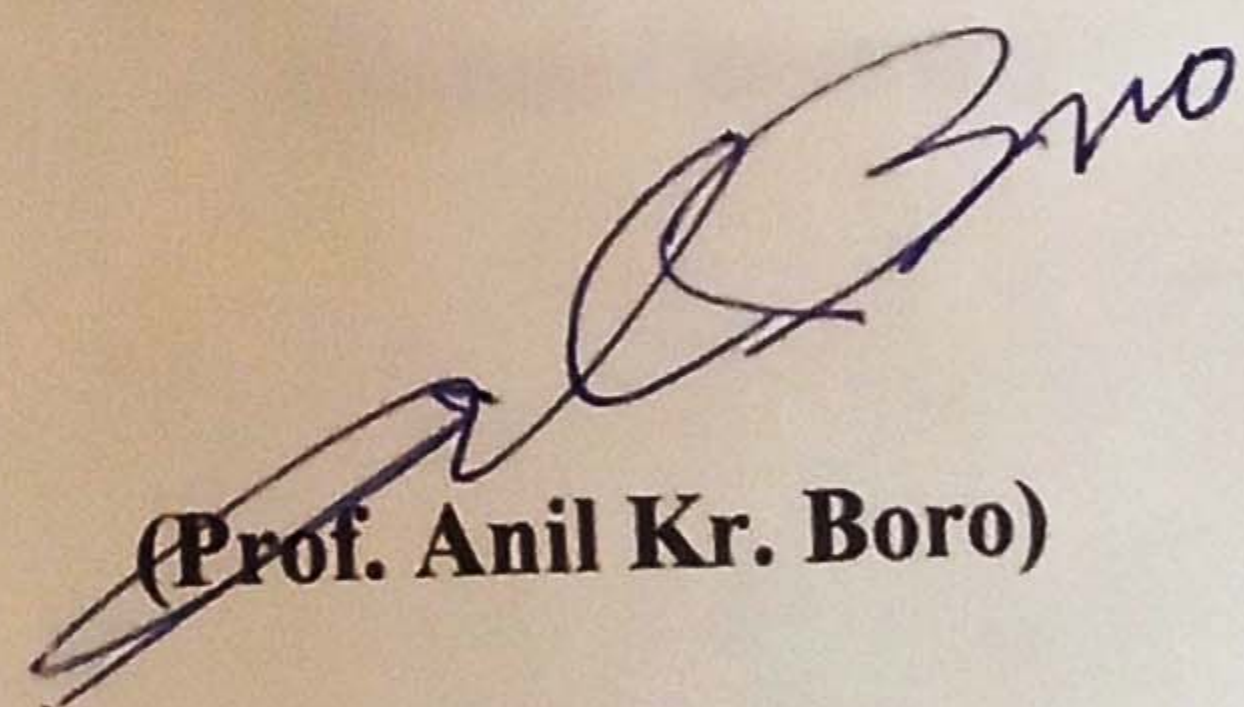
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### CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis “**A STUDY OF THE SONGS AND NARRATIVES OF THE TOTLA RABHAS IN BAKSA AND UDALGURI DISTRICT**” is an authentic record of research carried out by Bhupen Rabha for the award of Degree of Doctor of Philosophy under Gauhati University. This research work has been conducted under my supervision and guidance. This thesis has not been submitted to any other University/ Institution for the award of any Degree or Diploma.

The candidate has complied with all the requirements for submission of PhD Thesis as laid down in the regulation of Gauhati University.

Date: 26/10/2021

  
(Prof. Anil Kr. Boro)

Head & Supervisor  
Department of Folklore Research  
Guahati University  
Head  
Folklore Research Department  
Gauhati University



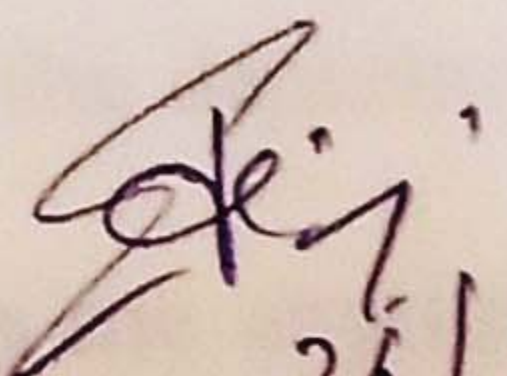
## Declaration

I, Bhupen Rabha, do hereby declare that the thesis entitled 'A Study of the Songs and Narratives of the Totla Rabhas in Baksa and Udalguri District' submitted to Gauhati University in partial fulfilment of PhD degree is a result of my own investigation and this content has not previously formed the basis for the award of any other Degree, Diploma, Associate ship, Fellowship or other title.

This thesis contains less than 90,000 (ninety thousand) words excluding bibliography and captions.

Date:

Place

  
26/10/21

(Bhupen Rabha)  
Research Scholar,

Department of Folklore Research  
Gauhati University



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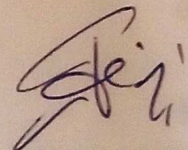
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**(Bhupen Rabha)**  
Research Scholar,  
Department of Folklore Research  
Gauhati University



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## A NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

India is a multilingual nation and the need for translation studies is all the more important in order to bring people belonging to different linguistic group closer. Translation is both a science and an art through which we can bridge the distances of culture and geography. In a country like India where countless dialects as vibrant as any of our developed languages exist, translation studies have a vast role as the web of knowledge and information existent among the oral communities would remain underground or turn extinct. Here, translation refers to the rendering of a literary work from one language into another, thus, matching phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic equivalents. However, the translation of oral literature, be it poetry or narratives would initially involve transcription in the source text (ST) and then translation into the target text (TT).

The present study is an analysis and assessment of the folksongs and narratives of the Totola Rabhas of Assam. It is sometimes argued that even if fiction or drama may be amendable to rendition in another language, any attempt to translate poetry will be an act of vandalism, an aesthetic impertinence (Varshney, 2008). It is a challenge to a translator of poetry and this gets reflected in the words of John Middleton Synge: “A Translation is not translation unless it will give you the music of poem along with the words.” American poet Robert Frost famously remarked, “Poetry is what is lost in translation”. This is so because form and content in poetry cannot be separated. Content is highly language-bound and this is what makes poetic translation of poetry more difficult than the other types of translations.

However, it is a humble attempt to translate and analyze the folk songs of the Totola Rabhas. Pragmatic translation problems arose as situations in ST and TT differ to a great extent. Cultural translation problem was confronted due to differences in ‘conventions (norms) and



habits' (Schjoldager, 2008: 175) between the ST culture and the TT culture. Linguistic translation problems and Text-Specific translation problems were also encountered. However, more of Oblique Translation methods using sense for sense procedure were used to get close to the ST.

Newmark (1988) believes "the translation of poetry is the field where most emphasis is normally put on the creation of a new independent poem, and where literal translation is usually condemned" (p.70).

The oral poetry of the Totola Rabhas are indeed unique in their own nature. They are a living tradition passed down from generations orally. Thus, it is of utmost importance that the language of this oral community gets connected to the languages of other oral communities through translation.

And to end the discussion, let us reflect the words of Ruth Finnegan (1977), "To ignore the existence of this huge wealth of oral poetry throughout the world in the present as well as the past, is to miss one of the great sources and products of man's imaginative and reflecting and dramatic faculties – of those things which mark him out as a human and a social animal."

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# Chapter I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

In this research, I have attempted to explore the roles and meanings of songs and oral narratives in relation to the lives of the Totola Rabha people. The Totola Rabhas are a branch of the Rabhas who belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group of people and form a part of the great Bodo family which includes besides the Rabhas, the Kacharis, the Garos, the Lalungs, the Dimasas, the Hill Tippera, the Hajongs, the Mech, and others.

Folk songs of a community are very much a part of Folklore and speak a lot about the cultural traits of that community. They are a form of communication in both day-to-day life and festive contexts, storing information, know-how, and values, and imbued with traditional wisdom and symbolic meaning, often used to express and interpret salient information, individual experiences and values.

This system of traditional forms of aesthetic expression, in ancient times, was firmly rooted in vernacular ways of speaking. They not only allowed the emotions of the folk to be expressed as per the situation, but also helped in motivating work time in the fields and home with their relaxing and pacing rhythms. Songs display an intensity of feeling like poetry but with tune and melody.

The lyrics of the songs are like windows to the past as words are all that we have that record the past in an oral society. It is through the songs that we can understand the life of persons of an earlier time and the poetic language reaches into the distant past as

it appears to be older than all the existing dialects and it truthfully delivers the experiences and conditions of that age.

Folksongs are an important source of sociological data. They may or sometimes may not deal with social themes directly; however, they are capable of hinting and suggesting. Sociologist Indra Deva (1989) highlights the sociological value of songs and asserts that scholars should not treat folksongs as simple documents, as they are not 'scientific monographs.' He further argues that folksongs are not a reliable account of actual happenings, but they reflect and represent people's perception about situations, incidents and relationships. It is seen that folksongs, being registers of collective experiences, do not record autobiographical details of individuals rather they represent the details of community whole.

Oral narratives, according to Bascomm (1955), "are an appropriate term for the widespread and important category of verbal art which includes myth, legend and folktales." They are traditional tales shaped and carried on by different groups of people from generation to generation. Oral narratives are not a mere vestige of the past; rather it has revealed the thought process, the hopes and fears, ideas and philosophical views of the people as well as the gradual changes that came in the wake of the changing condition of life. Oral Narratives or Folk narratives are "reflections of the societies and individuals which create and transmit them; consequently, they reflect a wide range of human ideas and emotions" (Oring, 1990. p. 133). They are "the productions of individuals, produced during social interactions, and informed by surrounding cultural traditions" (Ibid, 1990.p. 134). The 'comparative context' as mentioned by Oring in his 'Folk Groups and Folklore Genres' (1990, p. 140) refers to the "world of folk narrative



which extends beyond the immediate situation of performance, perhaps beyond the society and culture as well.”Three major oral narrative categories regularly distinguished by folklorists are myth, legend, and folktale.

The present study has been an endeavour to describe and analyse the folksongs and oral narratives making up the culture of the Totola Rabhas. It could be claimed that the Totola Rabhas have drawn a different colour in spite of a confluence of several other cultures. The process of cultural borrowing among the different communities of Assam particularly in the field of oral literature, material culture, popular religion, myths, beliefs and superstitions gives the society a significant character. Despite of differences, people have lived in peaceful co-existence. It is seen that the songs and narratives of the Totola Rabhas have evolved from its close assimilation with other communities. Therefore, they are found to be a lot more identical with the neighbouring communities. The cultural affinity of the Totola Rabhas with their neighbouring communities cannot be ignored.

## **1.2 Statement of the problem**

This research is a humble attempt on my part, through the songs and oral narratives, to prove the historically specific existence of the lesser-known tribe, the Totola Rabhas who have been ignored by most of the scholars, both past and contemporary. This is so because linguistically they have failed to keep a separate identity. They have been in close contact with the neighbouring Assamese speaking and Bodo speaking population from time immemorial and consequently, they have been highly influenced by these populations of the Brahmaputra valley. As a result of their exposure to the non-native environment, their social life and social customs have gained a different colour, which

has now become distinct and quite different from the remaining Rabha groups. At present, their common media of conversation is a variety of Assamese mixed with Rabha and Boro words and expressions. There has been an excellent cultural synthesis in the evolvement of the Totola Rabhas. Today, when the Totola Rabha society is trying to know and preserve its past, songs and oral narratives are reliable ways of understanding it.

The Totola Rabhas are the least represented among all the other groups of the Rabhas. In fact, in many of the classifications of the Rabhas, Totola Rabhas are not even mentioned. They are thought to have undergone not only a cultural change but they are also believed to have assimilated with their neighbouring communities. This is partly true as Totola Rabhas have undergone a change as regards their cultural identity but at the same time, they have acquired a unique identity, an identity very different from the Assamese as well as the Bodos. They have the characteristics of the Bodos regarding their food habits and way of life and at the same time they have adopted the language of the Assamese mixed with Bodo words and also words that have been independently developed.

It is through the songs and oral narratives that I would like to establish a separate identity of the Totola Rabhas. Folklore helps to establish the identity of a community. Today, many communities have lost their own identity due to various reasons. It is only through folklore that the lost identity of a particular community can be established. Folklorist Alan Dundes argues, 'folklore is an autobiographical ethnography—that is, it is a people's own description of themselves' (1969: 471). He also argues that through the study of folklore one can see and perceive another culture 'from the inside out',



instead of looking at it 'from the outside in' (Dundes 1966; 1969; 1997). Culture speaks of the ways of the people. It is never static but dynamic. It changes with time. It changes to a drastic level as a result of contact and assimilation with other cultures. As the pace of modernization gears up and due to the impact of other cultures, it is seen that there are bound to be changes and alterations in the traditions. The Totola Rabhas are a community that has never lived in isolation. They are touched on all sides by other communities and ethnic groups. Therefore, cultural assimilation in the case of the Totola Rabhas is not a new phenomenon. The culture of the Totola Rabhas which is a part of Indo Mongoloid culture has contributed a lot towards the greater Assamese culture. The evolvement of a new cultural identity in the real sense of the term, the Totola Rabhas, with the passage of time is a fact ignored by and unknown to the world. Therefore, it is of utmost necessity to study the folklore of the Totola Rabhas to understand the culture of a community not only least represented but also misunderstood. One of the instances of cultural assimilation is the village of 2 No. Kataligaon (Rabha Supa) situated 3 kms from Mushalpur town, the district headquarters of Baksa. With 80 families (450 persons in all), the villagers of 2 No. Kataligaon (Rabha Supa) is now a mixed population; as most of the villagers, i.e. the mothers and wives, are from different communities including Boros, Nepalis, Karbis, Assamese and Garos, of which the Boros are a majority. Inter caste marriage is a common sight that maybe due to lesser contact with people of their own kind. The village itself has diversity in language due to the fact that it is bounded by Bodo villages on one side and the Assamese on the other side. The ones nearer to the Bodo village speak fluent Bodo and the others speak the dialect spoken by the Assamese population living nearby. There's also a common language spoken but that too is a mixture of Assamese and

Bodo. With such diversity in the very population of a single village, the culture of that village is sure to take a different turn with the passage of time, thus giving rise to a new culture with traits of different communities.

This assimilation of the Totola Rabhas has enriched and added to the already existing folklore of the Totola Rabhas, thus “revealing the thought processes, the hopes and fears, ideas and primitive philosophies of our remote ancestors, as well as the sudden or gradual changes in all these things affected by the changing conditions of material life” (Hole, 1944-45).

The folk songs and the oral narratives of the Totola Rabhas are indeed unique in their own nature. The songs sung during various occasions are a living tradition of the Totola Rabhas. They are sung during marriages, during work, during worship, during festivals, etc. The Totola Rabhas believe in many Gods and Goddesses and they observe a variety of rituals. This instance lets us understand the need to do intensive research on the lost traditions as well as the surviving ones which might get deleted in the long run.

We need to conserve and preserve the songs and narratives of a particular community in today's fast-changing world. Globalization and socio-economic compulsion have eroded the memory culture of expressive verbal arts of many communities. This is because of their assimilation into the more dominant ways of life. The songs and narratives of a community perish along with the knowledgeable elders without disseminating it to the younger generation.

This study is a small initiative on the part of the researcher to document the folk songs and oral narratives of the Totola Rabhas. There are bound to be hurdles as the pace of modernisation has already eroded the undocumented knowledge present among the folk.



There are bound to be changes in the originality of the narratives and songs. It is better to be late than never do it. It is important to document the oral traditions so that at least in future generations, we know our contours through the documented perspectives.

### **1.3 Objectives of the study**

- a. To document, examine and explain the continuities and changes in the folksong traditions of the Totola Rabhas with an assimilation motif.
- b. To examine how folksongs as an epistemic resource capture the attitudes, concerns, contexts, aspirations and aesthetic sense of the Totola Rabhas.
- c. To explore the complexities of their worldview and their perspective about life and nature as highlighted in the oral narrative traditions of the Totola Rabhas.
- d. To study how the ethnic assimilation and amalgamation of the Totola Rabhas with their neighbouring communities contribute to the socio-cultural milieu in the Brahmaputra valley.

### **1.4 Significance of the study**

- a. There has always been a study of the Rabha tribe in general. But the fact that some of the clans of the Rabhas have in the long run developed their own distinct identity due to assimilation and contact with other communities is hardly given any importance. The folklore of the Rabhas, in general, has hardly any similarity with the folklore of the Totola Rabhas in particular as of now. Therefore, a study of the folk songs and narratives of the Totola Rabhas would give light to the ways of the Totola Rabha community, which would indeed contribute towards the conservation of the dying culture of the Totola Rabhas. It

is an attempt to preserve the already deteriorating intangible cultural heritage of the Totola Rabhas strongly, effectively and unambiguously in order to prevent cultural bankruptcy in the future.

- b. Whenever any study is done on the Rabhas, it is always the Rabhas living on the Southern bank of the Brahmaputra, especially in Goalpara district, that are studied. As a result, the Rabhas living on the Northern bank of the Brahmaputra rarely get any attention from scholars and academicians which in turn makes the Totola Rabhas feel left out. Thus, a study of the Totola Rabha community living on the Northern bank of the Brahmaputra would yield results never thought of.
- c. Totola Rabhas evolved as a result of their assimilation with other communities especially the Bodos and the Assamese. A unique culture developed as a result of cultural synthesis. This would indeed contribute to the already existing knowledge of the Rabhas.
- d. Originally the Totola Rabhas were speakers of a Tibeto-Burman variety but now they speak a variety belonging to the Indo-European language group. The variety of Assamese spoken by the Totola Rabhas does not match the Eastern, Central, Kamrupi and Goalpariya dialects of Assamese. The ethno-dialect spoken by the Totola Rabhas is an interesting fusion between two genetically non-related languages where features be it phonological, lexical and grammatical of both the source languages are clearly noticed. Therefore, the analysis of songs in Totola Rabha language ought to have an academic and socio-linguistic importance in the present multi-linguistic and socio-cultural situation in Assam.

## 1.5 Literature Review

Oral literature or verbal literature is one of the fields of folklore that includes all the spoken or orally transmitted forms of traditional utterances. It also includes oral narratives along with songs, proverbs, riddles, and charms.

Burne, 1996 says, “Song is so many-sided and so all-pervading a form of human expression that it is hard to say from what point of view it may best be approached. Perhaps its beginnings first arose out of the perception by early mankind of the power of the human voice over animals, and then extended to belief in its power over other beings or phenomena.”

Regarding the collection of folksongs among the fishing communities, Creighton (1899) says, “For the most part, you would have to leave the travelled highways and seek the byways that lead to secluded farms and fishing villages, where people in the old days had no outside entertainment and had to supply their own. You may find an old man beside a sheltered harbour singing to his family or closest friends or perhaps to other fishermen as they sit mending their nets together. If he takes you out in his boat he may sing while his line is out, increasing the volume as he pulls in a particularly fine catch, but never stopping to break the story. Or he may be shy before a stranger and try to pay you off by saying, “I couldn’t carry a tune in a suitcase,” or (another favourite)”, I lost my voice crying for bread and molasses.” If you notice the twinkle in his eye and have the knack to draw him out, however, he will sing if he can, and without coaxing. Fisherman, farmers, lumbermen and a “scattering few” women are our main sources, and they must be sought out diligently.” He also says, “A true folksong is not fixed but allows for great flexibility on the part of the performer.” (Creighton)



Oral narratives are traditional tales shaped and carried on by different groups of people from generation to generation. Oral narratives, according to Bascomm, “are an appropriate term for the widespread and important category of verbal art which includes myth, legend and folktales.” The German equivalent for the term is *Marchen*. Oral narratives are distinguished from proverbs, riddles, ballads, poems, tongue twisters on the basis of strictly formal characteristics. The former are narratives in prose, whereas the latter is not. Folklorists like Boggs, Davenport, and Berry used the term oral narrative to include myth, legend, and tale. Nowadays the term is most widely in use in folklore circles. The oral narratives are not a mere vestige of the past; rather it has revealed the thought process, the hopes and fears, ideas and philosophical views of the people as well as the gradual changes that came in the wake of the changing condition of life. Oral Narratives or Folk narratives are “reflections of the societies and individuals which create and transmit them; consequently, they reflect a wide range of human ideas and emotions” (Oring, 1990. p. 133). They are “the productions of individuals, produced during social interactions, and informed by surrounding cultural traditions” (Ibid, 1990.p. 134). The ‘comparative context’ as mentioned by Oring in his ‘Folk Groups and Folklore Genres’ (1990, p. 140) refers to the “world of folk narrative which extends beyond the immediate situation of performance, perhaps beyond the society and culture as well.” Three major oral narrative categories regularly distinguished by folklorists are myth, legend, and folktale.

“Myth is a term used for a narrative generally regarded by the community in which it is told as both sacred and true” (Oring, 1990. p.124). They can be defined as “traditional prose narratives which in the society in which they are told are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past.” (Brunvand, 1998. p. 170). They “deal

with the great issues of life, the creation of the world, the nature of good and evil, and the relationships between deities and mortals” (Ashliman, 2004. p.3.) Myths may be categorized into Etiological myth, Historical myth, Anthropological myth, Metaphysical myth, Cosmological myth, Sociological myth and Psychological myth. “The rich variety of myth is demonstrated by one of the most comprehensive general reference works in folklore studies, Stith Thompson’s Motif-Index of Folk Literature (1955-58). A motif, or ‘narrative element’, from these traditional texts is any striking or unusual unit recurring in them; it may be an object (such as a magic wand), a marvellous animal (such as a speaking horse), a concept (such as a taboo or forbidden act), an action (such as a test or a deception), a character (such as a giant, an ogre, or a fairy godmother), a character type (such as a fool or a prophet), or a structural quality (such as formulistic numbers or cumulative repetition). Although the Motif-Index is used primarily in studies of folktales, it is inclusive of world mythology and thus has important applications for analysing myth” (Brunvand, 1998. p.179). Myth is not simply a collection of stories permanently fixed to a particular time and place in history, but an ongoing social practice within every society.

Another category of oral narrative to which the folklorist frequently refers is the legend. “Legends are considered narratives which focus on a single episode, an episode which is presented as miraculous, uncanny, bizarre, or sometimes embarrassing. The narration of a legend is, in a sense, the negotiation of the truth of these episodes” (Oring, 1990. p.125). “Unlike myths, legends are generally secular and are set in the less remote past in a conventional earthly locale. Legends are sometimes referred to as folk history, although actual history is soon distorted by oral transmission. Legends are often told to validate superstitions or other traditional beliefs in modern folklore.” (Brunvand, 1998.

p. 196). “Legends are usually migratory- widely known in different places- but when texts become rooted and adapted to a particular place, they are said to be localized.” (Ibid, 1998.p.197).Legends may be classified into Religious Legends, Supernatural legends, Urban Legends, Personal legends and Local legends.

“A folktale is a narrative which is related and received as a fiction or fantasy. Such narratives, unlike myths, are not sacred, nor do they challenge the world views of the audience in the same manner as the legend. Folktales appear in a variety of forms. They are encountered only rarely in the oral traditions of our own society” (Oring, 1990.p.126). The “Type-Index is an essential tool for any collecting, archiving, or comparative analysis of Indo-European tales throughout their present world distribution” (Brunvand, 1998. p.231). Aarne-Thompson classifies folktales into Animal tales, Tales of Magic, Religious Tales, Novellas (romantic tales), Tales of stupid ogre, Jokes and Anecdotes, Formula Tales and Unclassified Tales. Tales “rely on their ability to satisfy for their survival” (Ashliman, 2004. p.2) as they are told first and foremost as entertainment.

The distinction between myth, legend and folktale is meant simply as a useful tool for grouping traditional stories. In many cultures, it is hard to draw a sharp line between myths, and legends. Some cultures divide their traditional stories into two categories, one that roughly corresponds to folktales, and one that combines myths and legends. Even myths and legends are not completely distinct. A story may be considered true (and therefore a myth) in one society, but considered fictional (and therefore a folktale) in another society. In fact, when a myth loses its status as a part of a religious system, it often takes on traits more typical of folktales, with its formerly divine characters reinterpreted as human heroes, giants or fairies.



Motif is a word used by folklorists who analyze, interpret, and describe the traditional elements found in the lore of particular folk groups and compare the folklore of various regions and cultures of the world based on these motif patterns. Folklorists identify motifs in folklore to interpret where, how, and why these motifs are used, so they can understand the values, customs and the ways of life unique to a culture. Stith Thompson says that motifs and tale types are interrelated.

The Totola Rabhas have a very rich tradition of folklore, which has not at all been explored. They are passed down from generation to generation through word of mouth and in the long run they have undergone a drastic change due to assimilation with people of other communities. This assimilation has enriched and added to the already existing folklore of the Totola Rabhas, thus “revealing the thought processes, the hopes and fears, ideas and primitive philosophies of our remote ancestors, as well as the sudden or gradual changes in all these things affected by the changing conditions of material life” (Hole, 1944-45).

Bordoloi (2004 reprint) dwells on the folklore of Assam as a whole. The folk religion, folk practices regarding rites de passage, marriages, folk games, folk speech, festivals, folk beliefs, folk songs, etc. gets highlighted in his book. There are similarities with the practices of the Totola Rabhas with slight modifications.

Bora (2013) says that the Rabhas maybe different from the Bodos but their ways and culture are almost the same. He further notes that the Rabhas maybe thought to have mingled with the Garos but the Rabhas have managed to preserve their own cultural identity. Bora also highlights the fact that the Rabhas, though an important community of Assam, have been deprived of social and political rights.

Rabha (2005) speaks of the history of the Rabhas, their religion, their acceptance of other cultural practices, their assimilation with the greater Assamese society. But he is confined to the Rabhas living on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra. He is confined to the Rabhas living in Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC). There are Rabhas living in Bodoland Autonomous Council (BTC) as well and this fact has been long ignored.

Hakasam (2011) writes about the various types and stages of marriage among the Rabhas. There are songs sung during marriages. He also narrates a *mantra* chanted during marriages. This in fact gets confined to the Rongdani and the Maitori Rabhas.

Therefore, from the above review about the Rabhas, it is seen that the Totola Rabhas are the least mentioned and hence the need to do a research on the folklore of the Totola Rabhas is urgently felt. Thus, the researcher has chosen to study the songs and narratives of the Totola Rabhas in order to fill the gap thus formed.

The researcher belongs to Totola Rabha community and it is a humble attempt on his part to preserve the already deteriorating intangible cultural heritage of the Totola Rabhas strongly, effectively and unambiguously in order to prevent cultural bankruptcy in the future.

## **1.6 Research Methodology**

### **a. TYPE OF STUDY**

The present study is an ethnographic research designed to collect songs and oral narratives of the Totola Rabhas living in the districts of Baksa and Udalguri. It is aimed at giving a light to the songs and oral narratives of the Totola Rabhas which are fading day by day due to lack of attention and also due to assimilation with other tribes and communities.

## **b. DATA COLLECTION: TYPES**

The study of the folksongs and narratives of the Totola Rabhas is based on both primary and secondary information and data.

- ❖ To collect primary data the Researcher used ethnographic research methods and visited the areas of study and recorded oral narratives and songs using recorders (audio or video) and field notes were prepared and later used for comparative study. (Qualitative)
- ❖ To collect secondary data the Researcher also accessed secondary sources including documented perspectives like books, newspaper archives, souvenirs and journals. A review of literature in the field had also been made in order to develop a theoretical background of the problem.

## **c. DATA COLLECTION: TOOLS AND PROCEDURES**

- ❖ Survey Method was used to identify the villages inhabited by Totola Rabhas the area of the study.
- ❖ Although there are several methods and techniques of data collection used by investigators in the field, two methods, mainly participant observation and interview method were used to collect narratives and songs from the village folk and record them using different types of field recording equipment (photos, sound recordings, video recordings). The researcher has gathered information for the dissertation through open-ended interviews and informal conversations.



- ❖ For analysis of the data collected, the researcher has also used an insider's perspective. The data collected were systematically organized for analysis and qualitative interpretation. Separate indexes were prepared for different types of field recordings (photos, sound recordings, video recordings). The recordings were later transcribed and used for comparative study.
- ❖ Field notes were prepared and later used for analysis, interpretation and comparative study (Qualitative).

**d. DATA ANALYSIS**

The following research methods were used for the study -

- ❖ Participant observation Method
- ❖ Interpretative Method
- ❖ Analytical Method
- ❖ Descriptive Method
- ❖ Comparative Method

**e. AREA OF THE STUDY**

The researcher has chosen Baksa and Udalguri district for the proposed study.

**Baksa**

Baksais a newly created district under the Bodoland Territorial Area District. This district was created when BTAD was formed on the 10<sup>th</sup> of February, 2003 under the 6th Schedule areas. The district was formed curving out some parts of Barpeta, Nalbari and Kamrup Districts. The area of the district is 2400 sq.km. The Headquarter of the

district is Mushalpur. The district is surrounded by Bhutan to the North, Udalguri district in the East, Chirang district in the West, Barpeta, Nalbari and Kamrup districts in the South. The district has three sub-divisions, i.e. Tamulpur, Mushalpur and Salbari and three Bidhan Sabha constituencies, i.e. Tamulpur, Barama and Chapaguri. Each sub-division has some Developmental Blocks and in total there are 8 developmental blocks according to the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India (MGNREGA). Accordingly, Tamulpur sub-division has three blocks, i.e. Tamulpur, Goreswer and Nagrijulee. Mushalpur sub-division has three Developmental Blocks, i.e. Barama, Baksa and Dhamdhama and Salbari sub-division has two developmental Blocks, i.e. Jalah and Gobardhana. The district also has 13 revenue circles, i.e. Baksa, Barama, Tamulpur, Goreswar, Baganpara, Ghograpar, Barnagar, Bajali, Jalah, Patharighat, Rangia, Sarupeta and Tihu.

According to the 2011 Census, the total population of Baksa district is 9, 53,773 and ranked at 458 in India (out of 640). The sex ratio of the District is 967 per 1000 male. The literacy rate of the district is 70.53% as per 2011 census out of which, male rate is 78.55%, female rate is 62.23% (Provisional Population Census, 2011). Baksa District is an abode to people of various language and culture. The major tribes residing in the district are Bodo, Rabha, Sorania Kachari and Madahi. Among these populations, the Bodos and Rabhas are the highest in concentration in the District.

**Table: 01 Brief profile of Baksa District**

| <b>Population in numbers (2011 Census)</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|--|--------------|
| Actual population                          | 953,773      |
| Male                                       | 484,825      |
| Female                                     | 468,948      |
| Sex ratio (per 1000 male)                  | 967          |
| Rural total                                | 941,600      |
| Male                                       | 478,577      |
| Female                                     | 463,023      |
| Urban total                                | 12,173       |
| Male                                       | 6248         |
| Female                                     | 5925         |
| Area sq. km                                | 2005.50      |
| Density per sq. km                         | 475          |
| Population growth rate                     | 11.17        |
| Proportion to Assam population             | 3.06%        |
| Literacy rate total                        | 70.53%       |
| Male                                       | 78.55%       |
| Female                                     | 62.23%       |

Source: Provisional Population Census, 2011. Statistical Handbook of BTC 2011

Mushalpur situated at a distance of 12 kms from NH 31 on the North is the district headquarter of Baksa which is bounded by Bhutan to the North, Udalguri district to the East, Barpeta, Nalbari and Kamrup districts to the South and Chirang district to the West. Mushalpur is located at 91° 21.57'E and 26° 39.39'N.

Baksa is a home to diverse population. It is a home to people belonging to different tribes. Some of the tribes and communities in Baksa are:

1. Bodos
2. Totola Rabhas
3. Assamese
4. Rajbongshis
5. Nepalis
6. Modahis

Baksa is not only a home to people of the mentioned tribes and communities but also to people who have migrated from Jharkhand during British regime like Oraons et al, now more popularly known as the Tea-tribes.

**Table 02: Number of S.T. Population in Baksa District, 2011 Census**

| District     | Scheduled Tribe (ST) |          |          | P.C. of ST Population to Total Population |
|--------------|----------------------|----------|----------|---|
|              | Person               | Male     | Female   |   |
| <b>Baksa</b> | 3,31,007             | 1,65,634 | 1,65,373 | 34.71                                     |

**Source: Census of India, 2011**

The table shows that the total population of scheduled tribes is 34.71% of the total population in the District.

Some of the Totola Rabha Villages along with the number of families and their population are as follows:



**Table 03: List of Totola Rabha villages in Tamulpur sub-division.**

| <b>Sl No</b> | <b>Name of the Village</b>         | <b>No. of families</b> | <b>Population</b> |
|--------------|------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| 1            | Geruapargaon                       | 35                     | 185               |
| 2            | Uparsariya                         | 101                    | 500               |
| 3            | Kasukata                           | 70                     | 400               |
| 4            | Barangabari                        | 61                     | 305               |
| 5            | NatunHowli                         | 228                    | 3000              |
| 6            | Kahibari                           | 15                     | 89                |
| 7            | Hahkata (Amayapur)                 | 80                     | 330               |
| 8            | Jhajikona                          | 38                     | 302               |
| 9            | Bherakhatgaon (Choudhurikhat Suba) | 66                     | 400               |
| 10           | Dolongpar                          | 120                    | 600               |
| 11           | Majdia                             | 80                     | 420               |
| 12           | Dongpar                            | 19                     | 98                |
| 13           | Sarangbari                         | 120                    | 500               |
| 14           | Potharpar                          | 82                     | 389               |
| 15           | Padmapar                           | 75                     | 430               |
| 16           | Sapatal                            | 22                     | 135               |
| 17           | Dhekipota                          | 63                     | 283               |
| 18           | Ghogmari                           | 46                     | 435               |
| 19           | Ulubari                            | 56                     | 326               |
| 20           | Baraliapar (Haldhibari)            |                        | 111               |
| 21           | Barbelbari                         | 39                     | 204               |
| 22           | Geruapar                           | 40                     | 200               |

|    |                           |    |     |
|----|---------------------------|----|-----|
| 23 | Kandulimara               | 27 | 121 |
| 24 | Pakribari                 | 21 | 102 |
| 25 | Kakribari                 | 35 | 220 |
| 26 | 1 No. Pub Howli           | 40 | 197 |
| 27 | Barkhopa                  | 63 | 281 |
| 28 | Betagaon                  | 56 | 278 |
| 29 | Dimlpar                   | 25 | 130 |
| 30 | Batiyamari                | 19 | 100 |
| 31 | 2 No. Dakshin Dongargaon  | 22 | 110 |
| 32 | Saran jhongol             | 10 | 45  |
| 33 | Banguri                   | 46 | 220 |
| 34 | Kosubari                  | 46 | 230 |
| 35 | 2 No. jamuguri (Batabari) | 96 | 468 |
| 36 | NijJhargaon               | 8  | 40  |
| 37 | Majgari                   | 73 | 361 |
| 38 | Maharipar                 | 14 | 63  |
| 39 | Bilpar                    | 34 | 153 |
| 40 | DahshinSuburi             | 33 | 215 |
| 41 | Senigaon                  | 40 | 200 |
| 42 | Gandhibari                | 10 | 56  |
| 43 | Borigaon                  | 76 | 389 |
| 44 | Nowakhat                  | 56 | 270 |
| 45 | Pub Naukata               | 5  | 17  |

There are several Totola Rabha villages in and around Mushalpur area. Some of the Totola Rabha villages in Mushalpur area are:

**Table 04: List of Totola Rabha villages near the district headquarter of Baksa.**

| <b>Sl No.</b> | <b>Names of Totola Rabha Villages</b> |
|---------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1             | 2 No. Kataligaon (Rabha Supa)         |
| 2             | Bunbari                               |
| 3             | Laphakuchi                            |
| 4             | Bamunpara                             |
| 5             | Totolapara (Thamna)                   |
| 6             | Manikpur (Thamna)                     |
| 7             | Sontapara (Thamna)                    |
| 8             | Chaulkara                             |
| 9             | Balabari (Doomni)                     |
| 10            | Ahopa                                 |
| 11            | Narayanpur                            |
| 12            | Bagribari (Subonkhata)                |
| 13            | Saranpara                             |
| 14            | Kaljar                                |
| 15            | Uttarkuchi                            |

### **Udalguri district**

Udalguri district is one of the twenty-seven districts of Assam with Udalguri town as the headquarters of the district. Prior to the formation of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) on the 10<sup>th</sup> of February, 2003 Udalguri was a sub-division under Darrang district.

Udalguri was formally inaugurated as one of the four districts of Bodoland Territorial District (BTAD) on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June, 2004. Udalguri is bounded by Sonitpur district in the East, Baksa district in the West, Bhutan and Arunachal in the North and Darrang district in the South. It lies between 26°46' and 26°77' North Latitude and 92°08' and 95°15' East Longitude at an altitude of about 345' above the mean sealevel (MSL).

Total geographical area of the district is about 1,985.68 sq. km (estimated based on GIS+Atlas) and the population of the district is roughly about 7,56,671 meaning that the population density is 381 persons per sq. km. Distance of the District Headquarters from the state capital of Guwahati is about 140 km.

Some of the revenue villages inhabited by Totola Rabhas in Udalguri district are as follows:

| <b>Sl no.</b> | <b>Names of Revenue villages inhabited by Totola Rabhas</b> |
|---------------|---|
| 1             | Darogaghat  |
| 2             | Dowamokha (Odlā)  |
| 3             | Jamuguri  |
| 4             | PuroniTongla (Kokalbhāngi)                                  |
| 5             | Habigaon  |
| 6             | NolKhamora  |
| 7             | Meskapukhuri  |
| 8             | Chamuapara  |
| 9             | Geruagaon   |
| 10            | Ghargaon  |
| 11            | Gobsachuba  |
| 12            | Buduragaon  |
| 13            | PuroniBhergaon  |



There were many more villages with Totola Rabha population on the way to Rowta from Udalguri. However, it's a sad fact that many have converted themselves into Christians and changed their surnames and adopted the surnames of the neighbouring Bodos. This is a fact which came to light during updating the list of names in NRC.

### **1.6 Limitations of the study**

The present study is not without limitations and some of them are listed below:

1. The Totola Rabhas are scattered in various parts of the state of Assam in small numbers and only two districts were selected to represent the whole population. This is because a majority of the population lived in these two districts. And this was considered to be resourceful in representing the whole.
2. In the wake of the *Vaishnavite* movement in Assam, many of the Totola Rabhas have converted themselves to a higher strata of society through a process where they took initiation or *sarana* under the Brahmin priest or Vaishnava Guru and came to be known as Sarania Kacharis, thus giving up their surnames for Das, Sarania, Deka, Medhi, Choudhury, Hazarika, etc. Many of the Totola Rabhas of Udalguri district have converted themselves into Christians and have adopted the surnames of their neighbouring Bodos. Thus, the population of the Totola Rabhas got reduced.
3. Most of the Totola Rabhas have been living in isolation from the members of their own type and in smaller numbers. Therefore, in most cases, the Totola Rabhas have embraced the way of life of the neighbouring communities and have forgotten their own. Some of the Totola Rabhas have also converted themselves into Bodos. This happened without any process of conversion but

due to their isolation from members of their own tribe. Therefore, the folklore material needed for the research could be found only among a few.

4. The Totola Rabhas are scattered in small numbers across the state and their neighbouring communities differ from place to place. Hence, the folksong of the Totola Rabhas living in a particular place might not be identical with those living in another place.
5. Using oral literature as epistemic resource for academic research has certain limitations as folksongs can index only certain meanings and perception of life and they cannot be mistaken for life itself. In addition, such indexing is not done within the conventions of the 'written world'. This adds to the difficulty to emplace and time the folksongs with precision.
6. Due to globalization and modernisation and exposure to media an impact is seen on tradition and local cultural identities. Folk culture is giving way to the more sophisticated way of life. The transmission of cultural knowledge is being hampered by the rapid process of modernisation and this has now left us with fragmented forms of cultural knowledge and dispersed indigenous communities. This has in fact had its toll on the culture of Totola Rabhas and this is the reason why it is quite difficult to find oral cultural productions among the tribe.

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## Chapter II

### AN ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTE ON THE RABHAS IN GENERAL AND THE TOTOLA RABHAS IN PARTICULAR

#### 2.1 The Rabhas and their Branches

The Rabhas belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group of people and form a part of the great Bodo family which includes besides the Rabhas, the Kacharis, the Garos, the Lalungs, the Dimasas, the Hill Tippera, the Hajongs, the Mech, and others. They are one of the nine Scheduled Tribes in the Plains districts of Assam. Linguistically, they fall under the Tibeto-Burman group of languages of the Sino-Tibetan family of language.

The ancient Indian literatures specially the Aryan Sanskrit literatures, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, Kalikapuran, Jugini tantra, etc. describe the Indo-Mongolian and the Sino-Tibetan people as 'Kiratas'. Even in the Yajur Veda (*Shukla* XXX.16; *Krishna* III.4,12,1) and the Atharva Veda (X.4,14), there is mention of the 'Kiratas'.

The records about the Rabha tribe are found as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century. There was a mention about the Rabha tribe in a Persian history, *Baharistan-I-Ghaibi*, written by Mirza Nathan in 1632 (*Borah M.I.: Baharistan-I-Ghaibi, English Translation published by D.H.A.D., 1931*). J.M. Cosh's monograph '*Topography of Assam*' (1837) and M. Martin's book, '*History, Antiquity, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India*' (1838) describe aspects of the Rabha Tribe.

E.A. Gait in his '*Reports of the Census of Assam for 1891*' (1892) summarises about the Rabha tribe, "There seems to be a good deal of uncertainty as to what these people 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 most 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 others have become Koches, it seems probable that the Rabhas are in reality a distinct tribe."

Some of the colonial perspectives as to who are Rabhas seem to create a kind of controversy. According to Lt. Col. Wadel (1901), the Rabhas were a branch of the Kacharis and had become almost Hinduised although the process of conversion (to Hinduism) was of lesser intensity than that of the Koches. B.C Allen (1905) says that the Rabhas are a section of the Bodo race and appear to be an offshoot of the Garos. Rev. S. Endle says that their origin is but imperfectly known, but they are said to be descended from a Hindu father who lost caste by marrying a Kachari woman. G.A. Grierson in his *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. III says that "Rabha appears to be a Hindu name for the tribe and many men so-called are Kacharis." According to Dr. Francis Buchanan- Hamilton, the aspects of socio-religious and material life of the Rabhas have similarities with those of the Pani-Koch. E. Dalton on the other hand, argues that the Rabhas and the Hajongs are the branches of Kachari race and connected with the Garo. According to B.H. Hodgson the Rabhas belong to the Great Bodo or Mech ft Pani-Koch and the Rabhas have the same lineage and the latter has their connection with the Garo.

Sidney Endle observes in his monograph, *The Kacharis* (p 83): “The name of this tribe (Rabhas) is of uncertain derivation and in this district (Darrang) the people themselves are sometimes called Totolas, which may perhaps be a nickname. Another term used in designating them is *Datiyal Kacharis*.”

### **Divisions**

Pereira in his *Census of India* (1911) points out seven different groups of the Rabhas which are: Rongdani, Pati, Maitori, Kocha, Dohari, Bitalia and Cunga.

Rabha (2002) points out that the Rabhas can be divided into eight groups. They are: Pati, Rongdani, Maitori, Kocha, Dohari, Bitalia, Totola and Hana.

However, it is seen that Pereira (1911) missed out Totola and Hana Rabhas and Rabha (2002) missed out Cunga Rabhas. Therefore, it can be summed up that the Rabha population consists of nine different branches and they are:

**Table 05: Branches of Rabhas**

| <b>Sl No</b> | <b>Rabha Group</b> |
|--------------|--------------------|
| 1            | Rangdani           |
| 2            | Maitori            |
| 3            | Dohari             |
| 4            | Pati               |
| 5            | Cunga              |
| 6            | Bitalia            |
| 7            | Totola             |
| 8            | Koches             |
| 9            | Hana               |

The Koches in Assam are also considered to be a branch of the Rabhas. However, in Meghalaya, they are recognized as a separate community. This is again thought to be a political aspect.

The Patis form a majority group of the Rabha population, but they have almost lost their own speech and they are now identified as speakers of a broken variety of Assamese which has similarities with the Goalpariya dialects of Assamese.

The sad part of this little known Rabha tribe is that they are scattered mostly in small groups among other tribes and communities and have lost most of their cultural identities including their own language, culture and traditional dress. Apart from Rongdani and Maitori Rabhas, the Pati and Totola Rabhas, have almost dissolved themselves amidst either the Assamese or the Bodos.

It's indeed a sad fact that some of the Rabhas in Udalguri and Baksa districts have completely given up Rabha culture and embraced Bodo culture. They have even changed their surnames into those of the Bodos.

Again, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of January, 2017, a number of persons in Ahopa of Baksa district, belonging to the Mohadi community have embraced Rabha surnames. This was done mainly for political gains as the Modahi community do not have a separate recognition under the Scheduled Tribes. Gaining a Scheduled Tribe status means a lot as far as jobs and other govt. opportunities are concerned.

## **2.2 Origin of the name 'Rabha'**

Friend Pereira in the Census Report of 1881 states, 'When Husheng was the chief of the powerful Atong clan, he brought the Rabha into Someswari valley to till the land,

because at that time the Garo, being nomads, were not acquainted with more settled methods of husbandry'. Based on this report Saha (2006: 46) is of the opinion that the Rabhas, earlier known as Koches, were driven out of Garo Hills but were later called back by the Garo King Husheng in order to teach the Garos the art of cultivation. The Garos lived mainly on hunting as they were not acquainted with the art of cultivation. The Rabha people then taught the Garos how to till the soil. Since the Rabhas were called back they came to be known as 'Raba'. The word 'Raba' in Garo language means "recalled" or "called back".

There are various opinions as to the origin of the name 'Rabha'. Dhananjay Rabha is of the opinion that the 'Rabhas' got their name from the word '*marab*' which means man in the dialect of Koch Rabha. This is derived from the words '*ma*' from '*mra*' which means 'man', and '*rab*' which means 'uneven' or 'rough' and '*ha*' which means 'land' or 'earth'. Thus '*marab*' is a condensed form of 'man of uneven place'. He is further of the opinion that a group of people called '*Kochhe*' migrated and first took refuge in a place called '*Rab-ha*' in Tibet and then entered into Assam and further to Garo Hills. They got their name from the place they had come from, ie. *Rab-ha*. There is still a place in Tibet called '*Raba*' in the Mongo valley (Rabha, 1998-25)

There are legends as to the origin of the tribe. According to a legend prevalent among the Rabhas, the tribe came all the way from a place somewhere in Tibetan region. In addition, there are other opinions regarding the origin of the tribe prevalent with minor variation in different localities of Goalpara district of Assam and Garo Hills districts of Meghalaya.

A legend says, *Risi-Bay* or Lord Rishi who dwells in *Rang-Karang* (heaven) is the creator of the world. In accordance with the order of *Risi-Bay*, *Takmmanbra* (creator) controls the *Prithimi* (Earth). *Rang-Karang* represents the Tibetan region, which resembles the roof of the world and this represents the heaven above. *Risi- Bay* created three brothers *Bingga*, *Ringga* and *Raba*. They were brought down to *Phithimi* along with their families. The name of the third brother, *Raba*, was extended to the whole group. In Rabha language, '*Raba*' means to bring. Thus, this group of people came to be known as Raba. Although the tribe is named as Rabha, the native articulation in earlier times was '*Raba*'.

The names of the different sub-groups of Rabha tribe, based on folk-etymology, comes from ritual practices as well as occupations.

The *Rongdani* sub-group is named after their way of worship of primitive deities. This group used to sit on a flat stone (*Rongka*) while worshipping the deities and since then this group came to be named after the term *Rongka-dam*, where the word '*rongka*' refers to 'stone' and '*dam*' refers to a 'low stool' in Rabha language.

The *Maitori* group migrated from place to place and finally finding a fertile land produced paddy on a large scale. '*Mai*' means 'paddy' and '*tari*' means 'land/ place' in Rabha language. Thus, the group came to be known as *Maitari/ Maitori*.

A legend says that a group of Rabha tribe worshipped a serpent to whom a man had to be sacrificed every year. Two brothers namely Randan and Chandan killed the serpent and saved the life of this group forever. The two brothers are honoured every year by the tribe. On the occasion of the two brother's death anniversary every, this group of



Rabha tribe erects two bamboo-poles bearing colours of serpents. This group is named after the bamboo-poles i.e. *Dahari/ dahori*.

Another group of Rabha called *Betolia* (*Betilla* means areca-nut) Rabha was named after their occupation of skilled areca-nut plantation.

A group of Rabha while worshipping deities offered the entrails of birds or animals. This group came to be known as *Totola/ Totola* (which means entrails in Rabha language).

A group of Rabha tribe during their offerings to the deities, instead of cutting the neck of birds or animals, pierced the animals. Therefore, they came to be known as *Hana* which means to ‘pierce.’

A large group of Rabha tribe, according to some native authors attempted to reform their traditional socio-religious practices under the influence of Hinduism. In the process, they separated themselves from their traditional society and were designated as *Pati Rabha* (*Pati* means separation from other groups).

### **Koches**

The Koches are also referred to as *Pani Koch* particularly in the Wet Garo Hills. This word has been derived from the word ‘*Panni Koch*’. ‘*Pan*’, in Rabha, means ‘tree’ and ‘*ni*’ is a suffix. Thus ‘*Panni Koch*’ means inhabitant of the forest.<sup>1</sup>According to Grierson, the Koches are of six divisions<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rabha, Dhananjay. Rabha Janajati Samu Itihas. P-34

<sup>2</sup> Grierson, G.A. Linguistic Survey of India. Vol-III. Part – II. P-95

**Table 006: Divisions of Koches**

| Sl No. | Divisions of Koches |
|--------|---------------------|
| 1      | Harigaya Koch       |
| 2      | Satpariya Koch      |
| 3      | Dasgaya Koch        |
| 4      | Chapra Koch         |
| 5      | Wanang Koch         |
| 6      | Tintekiya Koch      |

Gait has observed that Pani Koches are the only division of the tribe which speaks Koch language.

Rowney observed, 'The primitive or Pani Koches lived amid the woods.....'. He further observed, 'They claim to be the same race with the Garos and the language and customs of the two peoples certainly do agree to a great extent'.<sup>3</sup>

### **2.3 Migration and Settlement**

The original home of the different groups of people belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family was in Western China near the rivers, Yang-tse-Kiang and the Howangho from where hordes of them went down the courses of the Chindwin and the Irawadi and then the Brahmaputra and started settling down in the valleys of these rivers and also remote hills adjacent to the valleys.

They were first settled in the Brahmaputra valley in 2000 BC and gradually spread to other places. Now, they are scattered in Kamrup district, Goalpara district, Dhubri,

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<sup>3</sup> Rowney, Horatio Bickcrstaff. The Wild Tribes of India. P-146

Nalbari, Darrang and Kokrajhar in Assam, parts of West Bengal and Garo Hills in Meghalaya.

A. Playfair (1909) in his monograph, says that the migration and settlement of the Bodo group, especially the Kacharis, the Garo, the Rabha and the Koch took place from Tibetan region. According to him, the migrations took place from that region to the Brahmaputra valley and thence to the hills of Assam in the remote past.

The Rabhas, as stated by George Abraham Grierson, came to northeast India in 2000 BC or so. According to A Playfair, the Rabhas originally occupied the Garo Hills where from they came down to the plains. He proves this by the fact that certain section of the tribe which lives on the border of that district have no word for the North and South, but describe the former by the word *Bhota-hi-chu* or Bhutan hills and the later by Tura, the district headquarters of Garo Hills.

This belief is further supported by a legend which tells that there lived two sisters, Sae Bonge and Bonge kate, somewhere in the valley of the Someswari river. Sae Bonge married a Garo and their descendants are the modern Atong who live in the south-eastern corner of the district in the valley of Someswari. The other sister had some sexual relationship with her brother. As such the guilty couple was compelled to leave that locality. They moved northwards and in course of their movements they arrived on the northern slopes of the Garo Hills. The descendants of this couple are the present day Rangdani Rabhas.

Baines (1912) in his 'Ethnography', also mentioned about the Rabhas. He classified them under the Assam Hill Tribes and is also of the opinion that the Rabha originally

occupied the northern part of the Garo Hills wherefrom they came down in course of time. (Baines, A. 1912: *Ethnography*, Strassburg).

The settlement of the different Rabha groups are as follows:

| Sl No | Rabha Group | Settlement  |
|-------|-------------|---|
| 1     | Rangdani    | Hills, Eastern part of Lakhipur, Different parts of Goalpara District and in Western Meghalaya. Some of the areas in Goalpara district are: Nadiapara, Bardamal, Mechpara Lakhipur and Pancharatna areas. |
| 2     | Maitori     | Foot Hills of Garo ranges and Plains, South West of Lakhipur, Jairamkuchi, Chaibari areas of Goalpara District  |
| 3     | Dohari      | North Goalpara and some places of Bongaigaon District   |
| 4     | Pati        | South of Brahmaputra spreading from Guwahati to Dudhnoi and also Dhupdhara and Ranguli area.  |
| 5     | Cunga       | Hills   |
| 6     | Bitalia     | Goalpara district   |
| 7     | Totola      | Plains, Northern side of the river Brahmaputra, Darrang district (Mangaldai sub-division), Rowta, Udalguri , Tangla, North Kamrup and also Baksa district of Bodoland. (Rangia and Tamulpur)              |
| 8     | Koches      | Cherphanguri in Kokrajhar and Tura (West Garo Hills)  |
| 9     | Hana        | Boko circle area of Kamrup  |

Table 07: Settlement of different Rabha Groups

**Population:**

As per 2001 census, the total population of the Rabhas in Assam is 2,77,515 which comprises 8.4 % of the total ST population of the state. The total population of Rabhas

in comparison to the total state population of Assam was 0.63% and 10.31 to the total ST population of Assam according to 1971 census. According to 1991 census, the total population of the Rabhas is 2, 63, 873. The distribution of the population of the Rabhas is as follows: -

**Table 007: Population Distribution of the Rabhas, 1991 Census**

| Sl No. | State        | Persons    |
|--------|--------------|------------|
| 1      | Assam        | 2, 36, 932 |
| 2      | Meghalaya    | 20, 454    |
| 3      | West Bengal  | 6, 325     |
| 4      | Other states | 161        |

The distribution of the Rabhas in the various districts of Assam as per census report of 2001, is as given below:

| District   | Rabha  |        |        | % to the total Rabha Population |
|------------|--------|--------|--------|---------------------------------|
|            | Person | Male   | Female |                                 |
| Assam      | 277517 | 140614 | 136903 | 100%                            |
| Kokrajhar  | 13012  | 6530   | 6482   | 4.69                            |
| Dhubri     | 10133  | 5078   | 5055   | 3.65                            |
| Goalpara   | 93912  | 47217  | 46695  | 33.84                           |
| Bongaigaon | 6700   | 3333   | 3367   | 2.41                            |
| Barpeta    | 4144   | 2128   | 2016   | 1.49                            |
| Kamrup     | 88191  | 45177  | 43014  | 31.78                           |
| Nalbari    | 17563  | 8908   | 8655   | 6.33                            |

|            |       |       |       |            |
|------------|-------|-------|-------|------------|
| Darrang    | 32331 | 16358 | 15973 | 11.65      |
| Morigaon   | 66    | 28    | 38    | 0.02       |
| Nagaon     | 2363  | 1196  | 1167  | 0.85       |
| Sonitpur   | 4256  | 2130  | 2126  | 1.53       |
| Lakhimpur  | 175   | 89    | 86    | 0.06       |
| Dhemaji    | 1878  | 976   | 902   | 0.68       |
| Tinsukia   | 830   | 429   | 401   | 0.30       |
| Dibrugarh  | 371   | 202   | 169   | 0.13       |
| Sibsagar   | 108   | 58    | 50    | 0.04       |
| Jorhat     | 132   | 68    | 64    | 0.05       |
| Golaghat   | 1307  | 681   | 626   | 0.47       |
| Cachar     | 37    | 22    | 15    | 0.01       |
| Karimganj  | 1     | 1     | 0     | 0.000036 0 |
| Hailakandi | 7     | 5     | 2     | 0.0025     |

Table 09: Distribution of the Rabhas in the various districts of Assam as per census report of 2001

#### **2.4 Language and Linguistic Affinities**

The Rabha dialect, as stated by George Abraham Grierson, belongs to Bodo group of languages which again belongs of Assam-Burmese branch of Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. Linguistic scholars are of the opinion that the Rabha language is a Homogenous language of the Chinese language which has developed at the rising spot of the river Howang-ho and Yang-tse-kiang in China.



Though the Mongolian people, the Rabhas, came to northeast India in 2000 BC or so, they were not conscious of their language and literature for a long period of centuries. Their language was found to be in only a few books in the 19th century and early 20th century although the records about the Rabha tribe are found as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The earliest evidence of Rabha Language was found in a translation of the Bible in Rabha language called '*Markni Nima Saikai*' published by 'British Foreign Bible Society' in 1909 A.D. Political reports<sup>4</sup> of the Britishers also makes a mention about some aspects of Rabha language.

Endle (1911) opines about Rabha language, 'Their language, which would seem to be rapidly dying out, forms a very interesting link between Garo and Kachari (Bodo), having much in common with both, but some special features peculiar to itself. Like the tongue of the other branches of Boro race, the Rabha language, at one time undoubtedly agglutinative, seems to be in process of becoming inflexional, through contact and intercourse with the speakers of more or less broken-down Sanskritic languages, e.g. Bengali, Assamese, etc.'

The Rabha language is fast dying out and meagre data on their language seem to exist. The Pati and the Totola Rabhas have already abandoned their own dialect in favour of

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Footnote:

<sup>4</sup>(a) Statistical Accounts of the District of Jalpaiguri (1876, p.37). by W.W.Hunter.

(b) Notes on the locality and population of the tribes dwelling between the Brahmaputra and Ningthi rivers.

(J.R.A.I. Vol.XII, 1880,pp.223- 235). by G.H. Domant.

(c) Rabhas, Hajong, Mech in Census of India 1881 Report Assam.

(d) *History of the Relation of the Government with Hill Tribes of the North East Frontier of Bengal.*(1884,p.549).by A.Mackenzie.

(e) *The Prodigal Son* (1900, quoted in Linguistic Survey of India) by Rev. A.F. Stephen.

(f) *Linguistic Survey of India* (Vol. III, part.II,pp.102-105, 106-108)by G.A. Grierson.

Assamese, an Indo Aryan language spoken by around 20 million people which serves as the lingua franca in the region. The Rangdani and Maitori have also adopted Assamese language to some extent and most of them are bilingual speakers.

Rev. A. F. Stephen's specimen of Rabha language reveals that – 'Rabha is a tongue once agglutinative which has become inflexional under the influence of surrounding Aryan languages'.

A. Playfair also has pointed out some linguistic and cultural similarities between the Rabhas and the Garos. He also remarks that there exists a striking linguistic affinity between the A'Tong (Garo) language and the Rangdania (Rabha) dialects. This led him to think that, at some point of time they lived in contact with each other.

Rangdani dialect, besides showing similarities to the Atong dialect of the Garo, 'shows point of resemblance with the Garos of Cooch Bihar and Jalpaiguri and with Tintekiya Koch of Goalpara'. Domant 'considered the Maitori Rabha to be most probably the purest specimen of the race: they bear a close resemblance both to the Garo and Pani, both in their dialect and in their manners and customs.'

The Rabhas of West Bengal and Assam generally speak the local Bengali and Assamese dialects. The Rabhas who live in the forest villages have retained their original Rabha dialect to a great extent.

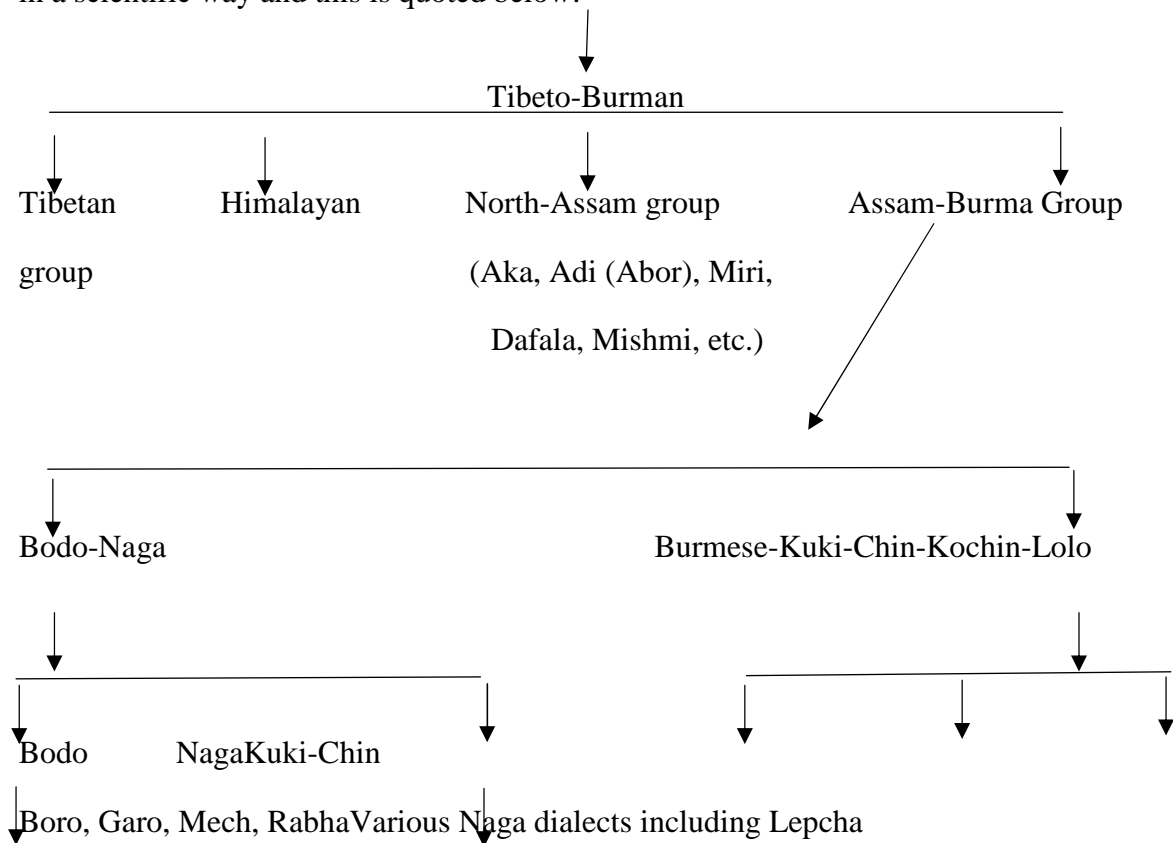
The Totola, Pati, Dohari Rabhas mostly attend Assamese medium schools where the medium of instruction is Assamese. So, they naturally embrace the Assamese language. There are also instances where the Rabhas go to Bodo medium schools. These days,

there is also an increase in number of students going to English medium schools. Rabha medium schools have also been set up in some areas of Goalpara District.

Linguistically the Rabhas are both Bilingual and Monolingual.

In the year 2017, diploma in Rabha language has been started in Gauhati University for the spread of the language.

Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay<sup>5</sup> proposed a classification of the Tibeto-Burman language in a scientific way and this is quoted below:



In the case of the Totola Rabhas of 2 No. Kataligaon, most of the villagers, i.e. the mothers and wives, are from different communities including Boros, Nepalis, Karbis, Assamese, Garos, of which the Boros are a majority. Inter caste marriage is a common sight maybe due to lesser contact with people of their own kind. The village itself has

<sup>5</sup> Chattopadhyay, S.K., *Kirata Janakriti*, 1950. p.25

diversity in language due to the fact that it is bounded by Bodo villages on two sides and the Assamese on the other two sides. The ones nearer to the Bodo village speak fluent Bodo and the others speak the dialect spoken by the Assamese population living nearby. There's a common language spoken but that too is a mixture of Assamese and Bodo. Steps had been taken to teach Rongdani Rabha to the villagers and coaching classes have been arranged in the past but to no effect. Teachers from as far as Goalpara have been brought in vain. Chilarai Rabha Krishti, a Rabha cultural troupe, was formed with the aid of dancers from Rabha communities of Rongjuli. The youngsters danced to the tune of Rongdani Rabha music and songs without even knowing the real meaning. It at least helped the unemployed youths to earn an honest amount. Though it lasted but only a few years, it had a drastic impact on the villagers. A few Rabha words were added to the dictionary of the village folk and they have learned to weave Rabha dresses. The use of Rabha dress at least within the village was a common sight but that too only for a short period. The villagers now prefer mekkelas, the dress of the Assamese and a few prefer dokhonas, the dress of the Bodos. This is due to the close cultural contact with the two communities.

According to the information published in the spreadsheet of UNESCO, the number of native speaker of Rabha is 1.5 lakhs as is evident in the 'Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger' (2011) published by UNESCO.

**Table 10: Endangered Languages of Assam as per Degrees of Endangeredness**

**(UNESCO, 2011)**

| Name of the Languages         | No. of Speakers | Degree of Endangerment |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| Bodo                          | 900000          | Vulnerable             |
| Mising                        | 550000          | Definitely endangered  |
| Karbi                         | 420000          | Vulnerable             |
| <b>Rabha</b>                  | <b>150000</b>   | <b>Vulnerable</b>      |
| Dimasa                        | 112000          | Vulnerable             |
| Bishnupuria Manipuri (creole) | 72899           | Vulnerable             |
| Kachari                       | 59000           | Definitely endangered  |
| Deori                         | 28000           | Definitely endangered  |
| Tiwa                          | 28000           | Definitely endangered  |
| Tai Khampti                   | 13000           | Vulnerable             |
| Bagani                        | 12000           | Critically endangered  |
| Singpho                       | 5000            | Definitely endangered  |
| Tai-Aiton                     | 2000            | Severely endangered    |
| Tai-Phake                     | 2000            | Severely endangered    |

## Script

The Rabhas do not have their own script and so they have adopted the Assamese script, an abugida system, from left to right, with a large number of typographic ligatures.

## 2.4 Physical features

According to J. E. Friend- Pereira as written in his *The Rabhas* (Census of India. Voll III. Part 1), “In general appearance the Rabhas show all the characters of the Mongolian stock, a round face, flat nose, prominent cheek bones, obliquely set eyes, sallow complexion, coarse hair, scanty beard and well-developed lower extremity.”

## 2.5 Religious background/ Folk Belief

According to Lt. Col. Wadel (1901), the Rabhas were a branch of the Kacharis and had become almost Hinduised although the process of conversion (to Hinduism) was of lesser intensity than that of the Koches.

Rabha people traditionally practice a few traditional rituals. However, today they more often follow a faith, which is a blend of some Hindu and a few traditional rituals. There are considerable differences in ritual practices among forest Rabhas who still live in the forest villages and the Rabhas that live in the villages as cultivators. The forest Rabhas follow traditional animistic practices tinged with some rituals of mainstream Hinduism. On the other hand, village Rabhas have merged with local Hindus as far as their religious practices are concerned. Thus, they worship different Gods and Goddesses in their unique and spiritual ways.

Rabha people's religious world is pervaded with various spirits and natural objects. They have their unique ways of performing various rituals for purifying their minds and worshiping different Gods and Goddesses, according to their belief and social custom.

The main deity of the Rabhas is called *Rishi*. *Rishi*, for the forest Rabhas as well as village Rabhas, is a male deity. He is also known as *Mahakal*. Forest Rabhas worship him in all important social and religious ceremonies according to their belief and social custom.

According to 2001 census, the different religions followed by the Rabhas are as follows:

**Table 11: Religions followed by the Rabhas**

| Sl No. | Religion     | Percentage |
|--------|--------------|------------|
| 1      | Hinduism     | 98.83 %    |
| 2      | Christianity | 0.62 %     |
| 3      | Others       | 0.56%      |

According to Endle, "The general types of the Rabha religion is distinctly animistic, but one or two of the Patis, are said to show a leaning towards Hinduism of the Shakta form".

### ***Khoksi or Baikho***

Amongst all the *pujas* of the Rabhas *Khoksi* is the dominating one. The Rabhas believe that *Khoksi* is the Goddess of agriculture and to show obeisance to Her the Rabhas have been performing the puja and sacrificing animals before Goddess *Khoksi*.

In course of performing this puja, the Rabhas sacrifice big and healthy pigs with a hope that it will fetch more and more paddy with further hope that they will get sufficient rain water and will be protected from any kind of illness. Goddess *Khoksi* is adored in four different forms, namely *Daduri*, *Susuri*, *Nakati* and *Tamai*. *Daduri* is adored to be Goddess of Fire, *Susuri* is considered to be the Goddess of ornaments, *Nakati* is considered to be the Goddess of *Chakrapura* (a wheel of a chariot) and Goddess *Tamai* is considered to be the sound of God. This puja is also known as Agni puja (worshipping of fire). As part of this puja, the Rabha people construct a rick of wood and set it on fire. Thereafter, they start dancing and singing round the burning rick, till the rick is reduced to burning coal on which they dance with bare foot till its extinction. The Rabhas believe that if there is any deviation in this puja, people will die while dancing on the fire.



Earlier this puja was performed continuously for seven days at a stretch, once in a year between the months of April-May or July- August, but now-a –days due to financial stringence this puja is being observed for three days.

### ***Kachakhaiti Puja***

This puja is offered usually in between the months of Baishakh and Jaistha. When the puja is performed in the name of *kachakhaiti*, it is performed in the river banks. This puja is offered for the protection of the villagers from various ailments. The altar of *Kachakhaiti* is called “*Dinga*”, which is made out of banana plantain due to which sometimes it is called *Dinga Puja*. The puja is mainly performed by the Pati Rabhas. The symbols of some other deities such as Biswakarma and Mahadeva also find a place in the *Dinga*. There is no sacrifice made in this puja. However, a duck or a goat is put inside the *Dinga* and is allowed to float as a symbol of sacrifice.

It is believed that the *Kachakhaiti* is the only deity which can control evil spirits and witches. So a drive to scare them away is organized. The youths of the village go on striking the wall of each and every household believing that evil forces could be driven out.

### ***Jarighora/ Hanaghora Puja***

This puja is performed mainly in the month of *Jaistha* for protection of the cultivation field and agricultural products from natural calamities as well as for the welfare of all other living beings. While performing this puja, *Jarighora/ hanaghora* is made out of natural resources as the altar of the puja. It is made in such a way that it can be worn by a man on his shoulder. After offering all the *Naivaidyas* and on completion of the puja,

the *Jarighora/ Hanaghora* is taken out by the young menfolk and they perform dances on their way by hanging the *Jarighora.Hanaghora* on the shoulder of a villager. Thereafter, this dance is also performed at the courtyard of the villagers praying for their welfare.

## **2.7 Dances:**

### ***Pharkanti* Dance**

*Pharkanti* dance has great significance and importance in Rabha society. In the ancient times the Rabha people had to fight with different communities for their self-defence and survival. In this process many people had to sacrifice their lives and it had been the tradition to bury the warriors together beneath a *Simalu* tree (Heptaphylum). In this regard the mythological belief of the Rabhas is that, after few days of burial of the warriors, when they go for collecting the last remains of the dead warriors, they find the *simalu* tree having no leaf in it and three birds sitting on three branches of the tree. The first bird *Manselengka*, tells that it knows about the parents of the deceased, the second bird *Tandalengka*, tells that it knows about the birth of the deceased and the third bird *Badikatika*, tells about the whereabouts of the departed soul of the warriors. The Rabhas believe that there has been some nexus between the spirit soul of the deceased and the three birds. With the passage of time, it became a practice in the Rabha society to gather at the burial place and prepare a *Manselengka Thoka* with natural resources, representing the *Simalu* tree and the three birds sitting on it. Gradually this became a tradition in their society to keep a *Manselelga Thoka* in the house of a deceased, till the last rites are over. After burial, the relatives of the deceased, along with the villagers, collect the last remains of the deceased and on their way home the villagers used to perform a kind of dance with traditional attires, shield (*Dhal*), Sword and *Manselengka*

*Thoka* so as to protect the last remains of the dead warriors from all evils. After arriving at the place of the last rites, the place of Shraddha, they use to continue to dance for seven days and nights continuously. This dance is known as *Pharkanti* dance. Gradually it became a traditional dance of the Rabhas, which nowadays is performed irrespective of death of any warrior.

While performing this dance in public, it is mandatory that the place where the dance is performed must contain a *Mangkhrum*, a memorial. In the recent times, it has become one of the most famous dances of the Rabhas in the North east region.

It is noticeable that since time immemorial, the Rabhas have been emphasizing on dignity of labour and are paying rich tributes to the departed soul of their warriors. This is reflected in the *Manselengka Thoka*, a symbolic creation of the bare looking *Simalu* tree with three birds sitting on it.

### ***Charitomokai Dance***

The Rabhas depend their livelihood mainly on Jhum Cultivation, on the sloppy hills. When they reap adequate quantity of Jhum produces, they are filled with great happiness which is expressed through a dance. This dance is known as *Charitomokai*. Sometimes this dance is also performed for the safety of the crops.

### ***Hamzar Dance***

This dance is also related to Jhum cultivation. In the ancient times, when the Rabha people went to jungles for finding and preparing lands for Jhum cultivation, they became very tired. After completion, they become joyous and to forget their tiredness, they indulged in a kind of dance, which gradually took the form of a traditional dance in their society. This is known as *Hamzar* dance. While performing this dance, besides

traditional attires and musical instruments, the boys carry ‘*dao*’ and ‘*axe*’ in their hands. The various steps in this dance expresses agricultural activities.

### ***Sathar* dance**

*Sathar* dance is performed by the Rabha boys and girls, at the time of *Baikho* puja as well as *Bohag Bihu*. The theme of the song and the moods of dance together are expression of their love to each other. Though, this dance is performed with traditional attires and musical instruments, unlike other dances, the participants of this dance do not tie a veil on their head. This dance has vast similarities with Bihu dance of the non-tribals.

## **2.8 The Totola Rabhas**

The Totola Rabhas are a branch of Rabhas whose social life and social customs have gained a different colour as a result of their exposure to non-native environment. Their culture, traditions and customs have become distinct and quite different from the remaining Rabha groups. Their socio-cultural ways are similar to their neighbouring communities in many ways. They have undergone a change as regards their cultural identity but at the same time they have acquired a unique identity, an identity very different from the members of their own tribe as well as their neighbouring communities. There has been an excellent cultural synthesis in the evolvment of the Totola Rabhas. According to Rabha (2010), apart from the many Hindu Gods and Goddesses they worship, they have their own traditional deities who are worshiped in their own way. They worship Goddess Lakshmi in an altar made by a lump of Earth on the North-East corner of their kitchen. They sing *ahu-hali* songs at the start of their cultivation. They perform *Moh Kheda geet* and *Bhaluk Nosowa Geet* in the month of

*Aaghon*. They also perform *Bambol pita* songs. They light oil lamps in the paddy field as well as at home during Kati Bihu and during uruka they traditionally encircle their house and yard with thread and they torch *bhela ghar* like the Assamese. They bid farewell to their cowherd during Magh Bihu. During Bohag Bihu they consume *hongkha*, a preparation of twelve types of leaves. They perform *lalilang* songs, *ahu-hali* songs, *Moh Kheda geet* and *Bhaluk Nosowa Geet*. They drink rice beer and consume pork unlike their neighbouring Assamese community.

### **Why are they called Totola?**

Sidney Endle observes in his monograph, *The Kacharis* (p 83): “The name of this tribe (Rabhas) is of uncertain derivation and in this district (Darrang) the people themselves are sometimes called Totolas, which may perhaps be a nickname.”

There are various opinions as to why they are named so. Rabha (2010) presents two opinions one of which is related to offerings and the other to the way they speak Assamese language. A group of Rabhas offered the neck part (known as Totola) of their sacrificial animal to the Gods. Therefore, they were named so. They could not pronounce Assamese language fluently rather they pronounced indistinctly. Therefore, they came to be known as Totola by their neighbouring Assamese community, where the word Totola is derived from ‘*Thatola*’ which means one who pronounces indistinctly. Even their surnames were Totola in earlier days. Later, they adopted the title ‘Rabha’ as the name ‘Totola’ was mostly used in a teasing sense to highlight their speaking style. There are also legends as to the naming of the group which are discussed in the subsequent chapters in details.

The Totola Rabhas remained isolated from the rest of their clans even after Indian Independence. It was only in the year 1952 at the initiative of Padmadhar Rabha, Paniram Rabha and Sombar Rabha that *Darang Zila Rabha Jatia Parishad* was established. Thus, they came in contact with the other Rabha clans. Their customs, practices and oral traditions show that they were once a member of Rangdani or Maitori Rabha.

### **Stories of their Origin:**

The different groups of Rabhas have been believed to have got their name from their responsibilities during their offerings to Baikho. However, here's another version of the origin of the Totola Rabhas. They are believed to have originated from 'Thotha *Roja*' or King Thotha. Thotha *Roja* was the commander-in-chief of 'Ban *Roja*', the king of Sonitpur. He had to face the wrath of Ban *Roja* due to his laziness and was ousted from Sonitpur. Thotha *Roja*, along with his family went to the foothills of Bhutan where he established himself as King. Since he brought along his family and relatives from Sonitpur and established his kingdom, they were known by his name as 'Thotha loi' meaning 'To Thotha'. This later got converted to 'Thothala' which later came to be known as 'Totola' or 'Totola.' The mention of 'Thotha *Roja*' can be found in the *Bambol Pita* songs prevalent among the Totola Rabhas of Tamulpur.

#### **(i) Livelihoods**

The Totola Rabhas are an agrarian community. The agrarian system is based on landowners, share croppers and agricultural labours. Agriculture has been practiced since time immemorial. They not only cultivate the summer and winter varieties but also seasonal vegetables. They also cultivate pulses, mustard, wheat, sugarcane, etc.

Apart from paddy the folk also plant areca nut, vegetables and bamboo. They sell their products in the local market. Some are also involved in the business of Pan shops, Tea stalls, selling of meats (chicken and pork) and fish, groceries, vegetable and fruits.

With the decline in agriculture sector and increase in economic hardship there is a tendency among the educated and landless people to leave the village and go out in search of jobs in the nearby towns and urban areas. There is seen a trend to change the occupation among the youths. Most of the youths also join the armed forces to eke out a living. Many serve as day labourers or do businesses. The increase in educated youths has led to many of them working in Govt. offices as well. Hence it is seen that the occupation of the Rabhas have changed with the passage of time.

Almost every family owns a fishing pond. However, they also go out fishing in the rivers and *beels* using traditional fishing implements like the other communities of Assam.

The Totola Rabhas domesticate goats, pigs, poultry, cows and buffaloes.

#### **(ii) Customs of division of labour and function of family**

The division of labour among the Totola Rabhas exists to some extent. This can be viewed in the perspective of agriculture as the Totola Rabhas are an agrarian society. Both men and women contribute to agricultural practice.

**Men:** The men do the heavier part of the work. They do works like ploughing the fields, sowing of seeds, weeding, harvesting, carrying the paddy home, husking and storing. They are helped by the other male members. The men do all the works related to construction of house. They thatch the roof, attach the poles and weave the bamboo

walls while the women cement the walls with mixture of mud and dung. Hard works, like cutting of big trees, digging of ponds, herding, fencing, etc. are done by the men.

**Women:**The women of the family assist the male members in doing light jobs relating to agriculture. They take food for the men in the fields, plant the paddy, help in weeding and assist men in husking and storing.They also do the pounding. Fetching water, collecting herbs, firewood and cooking are usually done by the women. They also collect seasonal varieties of vegetables, fruits, tubers, mushrooms, etc. The male members render help in collecting firewood.

Weaving is done exclusively by women. A girl of tender age is given basic training in weaving under the guidance of her mother or her elder sisters.

They also go out fishing in rivers and *beels*<sup>6</sup>. This gets reflected in the folksongs of the Totola Rabhas to be discussed in the subsequent chapters.

Again,it is the responsibility of the womenfolk to take care of children and perform domestic chores. The domestic responsibilities are entirely borne by the housewife. A family also earn by sale of domesticated animals. They domesticate cows for milk, poultry and goat for sale. The women assist in the milking of cows as well.

It is seen that the womenfolk play an important role in a family and they contribute in the farm and non-farm activities. They have in depth knowledge on edible leaves and insects.

However, with the exposure to modernity, the responsibilities of the men and womenfolk have changed a lot. Firewood has been replaced by cooking gas and the

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<sup>6</sup> A large water body, ie. a lake.



need to collect firewood has dwindled. Fruits and vegetables are readily available in the local markets and the need to go collecting herbs does not arise. Even clothes that were previously women are readily available in the markets. The children, both male and female, prefer to go to schools than to work in the fields and weave clothes. However, some of the practices cannot be done with and they still continue.

### **(iii) Language of the Totola Rabhas**

The Totola Rabhas speak an indistinct variety of Assamese language mixed with words from Rabha as well as the neighbouring Bodos. Just as the Pati Rabhas, they have adopted Assamese as their mother tongue. Perhaps, this arose because of their isolation from members of their own tribe and their assimilation with speakers of Assamese and Bodos. As is the tendency of all the other linguistically minor tribes to speak Assamese as these languages are mutually abstruse and Assamese language is generally used for public interaction, so also is the case with the Totola Rabhas. Originally, they were speakers of a Tibeto-Burman variety but now they speak a variety belonging to the Indo-European language group. The variety of Assamese spoken by the Totola Rabhas does not match the Eastern, Central, Kamrupi and Goalpariya dialects of Assamese. The ethno-dialect spoken by the Pati Rabhas has been called Rabhamese by Dr. Upen Rabha Hakasam (2005). He makes a note on the interesting fusion between two genetically non-related languages where features be it phonological, lexical and grammatical of both the source languages are clearly noticed. He does not, however, mention any name for the ethno-dialect spoken by the Totola Rabhas.

### **Cultural Background/ Synthesis**

The Rabha community have a rich, multi-faceted and distinct culture of their own. The religious practices, agricultural practices, food habit and belief systems of the Rabhas reflect a conglomeration of features from both the Aryan and Mongoloid culture. This is so because they have never lived in isolation.

#### (iv) **Religious Practices and Folk Belief**

The Totola Rabhas don't perform the Khoksi or the Baikho puja. However, attempt has been made in the district of Baksa at a place called Thamna (26.6407° N, 91.2867° E) to bring to life the tradition of Baikho puja since a few years now. But, it is more of a fair than a religious festival. The reverence for Goddess Khoksi does not seem to exist as people in this part do not know much about the Goddess or the relevance of the *puja*.

#### **Folk Belief and Rituals**

The Totola Rabhas have been Hinduised long ago and they mostly worship the Hindu Gods and Goddesses. They do not follow any particular Hindu method of worship nor do they use any Sanskrit mantras to appease the Gods and Goddesses. They perform sacrifices in front of the Gods and Goddesses. However, apart from the many Hindu Gods and Goddesses they believe in, they have their own traditional deities.

The basic elements of folk belief among the Totola Rabhas comprise ritual systems concerning deities of the Forest and also deities inherent in entities and substances like water. They perform *Bat puja*, *sur puja*, *puja to Bura Bun Gohai*, etc. Each Totola Rabha village worship their traditional Gods in their own way. Since the Totola Rabhas depend mainly on cultivation, most of their offerings are connected to their agricultural way of life. They worship Goddess Lakshmi with great reverence and devotion. They

perform religious rites right from the start of their cultivation to the harvesting and consumption of the first harvest. Some of the rituals among the Totola Rabhas are done individually in families and some are done as a community. Rituals related to initiation of ploughing, plantation of paddy and harvesting are usually done individually.

### **Initiation of Ploughing (*Hal Jatrawa*)**

The Totola Rabhas are an agrarian community and it gets reflected in their songs and chants. Their day to day life and festivities are centred round their agricultural way of life. They follow traditional practices during various processes of agricultural starting from ploughing and sowing of seeds to the harvesting of the products. At the start of their cultivation, they fix a favourable day (usually not Tuesdays and Saturdays) and give their offerings to the ancestors. The main member of the family go to his field, place an *agloti* (a part of a banana leaf from the tip) at a corner, offer black lentils and rice grains and light an earthen lamp and incense sticks. This is done before the start of ploughing the fields. The fields are then ploughed and the seeds sowed either on Monday or Thursday. On this day, a type of grass known as *kahi bun* is planted on the four corners of the field and the following verse is chanted:

*Jomor mohtu aani halkhon jurilo,*

*Bharmai dila bidhan,*

*Take pai monushyoi hoishyo khetro aarombhila*

*Jibo hoila taron.*

(I have brought in the bulls of *Jom*<sup>7</sup> and started to plough,

Brahma has given the grains

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<sup>7</sup> The God of Death

With this man has started cultivation

And so, the lives thrive.)

This is chanted in praise of *Jom* who has lent man his pair of bulls for ploughing and also Brahma who has given him the necessary grains for sowing. This proves that God is the giver and it is because of him that man thrives on earth.

It is seen that during the initiation of ploughing, the Totola Rabhas clean their houses and do not give alms on that day.

### **Planting the paddy:**

The day the Totola Rabhas first plant their paddy, offerings are made in the field. The main member of the family go to his field and plant paddy in the four corners. Then he places an *agloti* (a part of a banana leaf from the tip) at a corner, offer black lentils and rice grains and light an earthen lamp and incense sticks. He also plants a banana plant as a symbol of life. During the planting of paddy he is helped by his neighbours who come as *hauri* or accept daily wage as is seen at present. *Haurikhowa* is a traditional practice where neighbours come in to help in exchange for help in return when they need it. After completion of the work, they feast on food and wine.

### ***Hal uthowa puja:***

On the last day of plantation of paddy, the owner of the fields invites all the persons who have helped him during the process of ploughing and plantation and offers them food and drinks after which they all enjoy singing and dancing. It is a time for wine and merriment. One of the planters brings home a bunch of paddy along with earth in a bowl and plants it near the granary. Some of the planters carry home mud from the fields and smear the face and back of the family members in merriment.

### **Bringing tip of paddy home(Dhanor aag aana Protha)**

The Totola Rabhas bring home a few tips of paddy along with rice corn in a traditional way which is symbolic of bringing Goddess Lakshmi home. This is usually done with the paddy that ripens earlier. And this is done by the women in the house. She has to get purified using an egg before going through the process. The day before, a neighbour is called in to sacrifice a cock. The things that she has to take along with her for the offerings are:

1. A *khorahi* (implement made of bamboo and used for washing rice grains or vegetables)
2. An implement used in handloom (*Holabari*)
3. A duck's egg
4. Tulsi water
5. Tip of banana leaf (*Agloti*)
6. Earthen lamp, incense, etc.

She arranges the offerings in the *agloti* in the paddy field and prays saying-

*Heujiya lukhumi, potharor aai lukhumi,*

*Ghoroloi adori nibo ahiso.*

*Tumiu Padmini, moyu Padmini, duyu mili thakim lukhumi gharat.*

*Tetiyaha hanti hobo amar grihobahit.*

(Mother of the green fields

I have come to welcome you home.

You and I are *Padmini*<sup>8</sup>; we both will dwell in unison in the granary

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<sup>8</sup> Refers to Hindu Goddess Lakshmi (In Sanskrit- She who sits in Lotus)

Then peace will prevail in our dwelling home.)

The Totola Rabhas believe that granary is the place where Goddess Lakshmi dwell and she is therefore traditional brought home from the fields. A good harvest means blessings in abundance from the Goddess. The granary is usually built separately towards the East and it is kept clean. One removes shoes and slippers while going in just as one does in temples. So, when the rice paddy is brought from the fields, it is hung in the granary. The woman compares herself to Goddess Lakshmi and therefore she says that they would stay together in the granary. It is usual among the Totola Rabhas to say that the women in the house represent Goddess Lakshmi and that the success of the family depends on her. It is she who takes care of every household chore and is responsible for looking after the children. So, a family without a woman is like a family without Goddess Lakshmi.

***Nowan khowa (New rice feast):***

Also known as 'Na Khowa' among the Assamese, this traditional new rice feast has been practiced by the Totola Rabhas since time immemorial. This is celebrated in the month of *Aghon* after harvesting the maiden crops. The Totola Rabhas bring home the first bunch of rice, purify it with *tulsi* (basil) water and then place it in the granary after saying a prayer to the Goddess Lakshmi. Wine is served to the invitees.

Other than the rituals related to agriculture, the Totola Rabhas worship different traditional deities in their own way. One such example is the worship of *Bura Bun Gohai*, Old Forest Deity, in the village of 2 no. Kataligaon (26.6594° N, 91.3409° E) in the district of Baksa. She is believed to be the Goddess of all things and the prosperity of the village depends entirely on her. She is all powerful and there have been instances

where people have received boons from her. She is considered to be all merciful and kind at the same time. People believe that their wishes are fulfilled once they ask it from 'Mother *Bura Bun Gohai*'. Many childless couples have received the blessings of '*Bura Bun Gohai*' in the form of their sons and daughters. They are so grateful to her that they now take it as a duty to offer prayers and offerings to her every year. There are many families who conduct the puja at their home and the Gohai is brought to the very steps of their household accompanied by the beating of big drums and trumpets. It was during the worship of *Bura Bun Gohai* that a song was sung but at the moment the song is just played on a musical instrument known as *kahal*. I have tried to document the song and analyse it in my subsequent chapters.

The Totola Rabhas of Bogoribari, 18 kms from Mushalpur, the district headquarter of Baksa, worship their traditional deity *Rishi Jogot Gohai* in addition to other Hindu Gods and Goddesses just like the Totola Rabhas of Kataligaon. The deity, *Rishi Jogot* is considered to be the one to protect the village from any kind of evil. He is considered to have been saving the village from the evil spirits. They worship this deity on the 9<sup>th</sup> of *Aaghon* (a month in Assamese calendar falling between November and December) every year after the harvesting season. All the villagers come together and the village priest offers a red cock to the deity. This is done inside a house below the main post (*Mudha Khuta*) of the house and the blood from the wing is sprinkled on the post. They believe that the blood of the sacrificed animal is important to propitiate the deity. A feast is then arranged for the whole of the village. All this is done during daylight. Every family brings a pot of wine for the celebration. New rice is offered to the deity. It is only after this offering and feast that the other families in the village can give individual offerings to the deity and feast to the villagers in celebration and

thanksgiving for their new harvest. In addition to this offering to *Rishi Jogot*, they also worship Goddess Lakshmi by offering a black cock and they worship *Bikh Hari* by offering duck and pigeon. Unlike the other Hindus of India, the Totola Rabhas have their own way of praying to the Gods and Goddesses. “No worship is complete without wine”, says an interviewee Mr. Toren Rabha (68 years) of Bogoribari.

#### (v) **Rites de Passage**

Rites de passage such as child birth, weddings and funerals, unlike the mainstream Assamese population, are performed by the village priest appointed by the Village Management Committee. No mantras are chanted and no Sanskrit words are used. As far as the blessings are concerned, they could use their own words and the folk could do their own praying. The most important aspect during wedding ceremonies, is the blessings of the village priest and the elders. The priest has to fast but can drink wine that is usually being offered by the family. During marriages, a tantric is called in to give each member of the family a sacred thread to be tied around their wrist so that no harm can come to them during the occasion.

#### **Childbirth**

When there is childbirth in a family, it is an occasion to rejoice. This is a continuation of the family. It is usually considered a disgrace by the society if a woman is barren. Most of the times, a barren woman is subject to insults by the people of her own family or neighbourhood. Usually, a bride is expected to deliver a child within a year or two. If not, there will be hue and cry amongst the villagers. Steps are being taken by the mother of the family to ensure that the young mother bears a child. She might visit *ojas* and get a *talisman* for the mother so that no harm comes to the mother. The young mother might



also visit temples and observe the many rites and practices enjoined on her to bear a baby. It is usually common for the family to visit a temple or an *oja* rather than consult a doctor to get a child. In this respect, the family also asks for boon in exchange for an offering to the gods and goddesses in the village. Therefore, a childbirth in a family is an occasion to rejoice. A childbirth in a family also brings respect to the mother and the family. It is indeed the happiest moment as it means continuation of the family. The Totola Rabha families, influenced by the nearby Assamese communities, celebrate ceremonies connected with the child. Firstly, the purification of the family and secondly naming of the child in case of well-off families. It is during the naming of the child that relatives are invited for a feast. And every feast in a Rabha family is incomplete without wine and merriment. Though the occasion of naming of the child is a practice of the Assamese community, the Rabhas have adopted it but with a difference in practice. Like the Assamese, a Brahmin with knowledge in astrology is invited to calculate the stars and give the initials for the naming of the child. Unlike the Assamese, pork is being prepared and wine being served to the guests. On the occasion, the child will get gifts in the form of ornaments usually from the maternal uncle. The child also receives clothes, toys and money as gifts from the relatives and neighbours who have come to attend the celebration.

In case the families cannot afford to celebrate the occasion, the father goes to an astrologer to get details of the stars and the initials for naming the child. Relatives are not invited but there is a feast with a few neighbours and the village priest for purification. This is incomplete without wine and merriment.

## **Marriage**

Totola Rabhas are a patrilineal society where the bride, in most cases and with exception to ‘Gharjeya biya’, comes to the house of the groom. There are mainly 7 types of marriages in practice among the Totola Rabhas. They are as follows:

**Table 12: Types of marriage practices among Totola Rabhas**

| Sl no. | Types of Marriages               |
|--------|----------------------------------|
| 1      | <i>Topola Biya</i>               |
| 2      | <i>Tokon biya</i>                |
| 3      | <i>Dhoka biya</i>                |
| 4      | <i>Gharjeya biya</i>             |
| 5      | <i>Poka biya or Hamajik Biya</i> |
| 6      | <i>Log kheda biya</i>            |
| 7      | <i>Baillyo biya</i>              |

a) *Topola Biya*:

The word ‘*Topola*’ means a bundle of clothes. A boy and a girl might fall in love and this might not be acceptable to the parents of the two families. Even the boy might not be ready to marry the girl at that moment. At such cases, the girl prepares a bundle of all the necessary clothing and taking the bundle comes to the house of the boy. The parents of the boy are then compelled to accept the girl as their daughter-in-law. Since the girl comes on her own with a bundle of clothes, this type of marriage is called ‘*Topola Biya*’.

b) *Tokon Biya*

In some cases, the boy might like a girl but the girl or her family might not agree to the marriage. In such cases, the boy might go along with a group of his friends with batons and forcefully bring the girl and perform the marriage rituals. Such marriages are called 'Tokon Biya', where 'tokon' means a baton. Since 'tokon' is used, it is known as 'Tokon Biya'. This type of marriage is no longer seen these days.

c) *Dhoka Biya*

Widow Remarriage is acceptable among the Totola Rabhas and sometimes the marriage of a widow might be with a widower. So a marriage between a widower and a widow is known as 'Dhoka Biya'.

d) *Gharjeya Biya*

Marriages where the groom decides to stay at the house of his in-laws is known as 'Gharjeya Biya'. The word is a condensed form of 'Ghar Jowai' where 'Ghar' means house and 'jowai' means son-in-law. There are two types of 'gharjeya biya':

1. Ulowa gharjeya
2. Khunor gharjeya

*Ulowa Gharjewa:* In this type, the groom stays in the house of his in-laws and after some years returns to his parents' home along with his wife and children.

*Khunor gharjeya:* In this type, the groom stays in his in-laws house once for all and even gets a share of his in-laws' property.

e) *Poka Biya or Hamajik Biya*

If the parents of the bride and the groom give consent to a marriage and the marriage ceremony is performed socially observing all the rituals, such a marriage is called *Poka Biya* or *Hamajik biya*.

f) *Log kheda biya*

This type of marriage is neither found in any written form nor heard of. I came to know of it from elderly persons of 2 no. Kataligaon and there are siblings still alive as a living proof. In earlier days, female persons were less in number. A married woman goes out of home mostly to catch fish in the river near another village. The men working in the fields nearby might spot her and take her forcefully home along with her children. Since the children come along with their mother to their new father's home, this type of marriage is called *log khedabiya*. A wife may leave her husband and go with another man along with their children. Such types of marriages are also called *log kheda biya*. Mr. Loka Rabha (52), Mr. Joka Rabha (65) and Mr. Poka Rabha (68) are such siblings who were brought along with their mother from *Barimukh* to live with their new father in 2 no. Kataligaon.

g) *Baillyo biya*

This marriage refers to child marriage which was prevalent in earlier days but is no longer in practice. With the spread of education among the Totola Rabhas and the legal age for marriage being fixed by the government, this type of marriage is done with.

## **Divorce**

Sometimes, the wife and husband might not be happy with their marriage and might wish to separate. The Totola Rabhas have their own way of initiating divorce between wife and husband. This is done through a process called '*Paan Sira*' where '*paan*' means 'betel leaf' and '*sira*' means 'to tear'. The divorce is initiated in the presence of the village priest and the members of the village in the groom's house. They both give written statements about their willingness to separate. Then they hold a betel leaf, the priest sprinkles *tulsi* water and both repeat after the priest, "From this day, we no longer have the relationship of a wife and a husband. The relationship is over. The members of the society are a witness." They then tear the betel leaf that they had been holding. Since betel leaf is torn in the process, it is known as '*Paan Sira*'.

## **Funeral**

When a person in a family dies, the Hindu rites are being observed but without a Brahmin. Ceremonial uncleanness is observed for a certain period of days. The period ends on the day of Shradha, held according to the convenience of the family. This is done after ten days.

Rice is cooked in an earthen pot in the courtyard mostly by the eldest son. Branches of certain plants are used as stands to do the cooking. This is then offered to the deceased by placing it into the mouth. Water is also offered. In most cases, the favourite items of the deceased are cooked. This is done by many people. They also bow to the deceased. The body is carried to the funeral site. Prayers are offered before finally lighting the pyre. All the people who have come for the funeral rite have to perform a cleanliness act back home. Fire is lit at the gate of their home. They have to take bath, sprinkle

*tulsi*(basil) water, drink a bit of it, light the fire using straw in most cases, put a stone and some dry leaves of jute plant into the fire, and then strike the stone with a knife before finally entering into the house.

Back home, the family members of the deceased fast for three days and on the third day, after performing some cleanliness rites, and taking *jasa gura* (rice powder, milk, banana, gram and other fruits brought by the family of the maternal uncle) they start taking boiled food. This is done only in earthen pot and after dusk. It is only after *daha*, a ritual performed in ten days, that people can come to their home or they can go out. Before this, it is considered unclean to come to the family and anyone who comes should take bath. The *Shraddha* is performed in thirteen or fifteen days or according to the convenience of the family.

#### **(vi) House Construction**

The Rabhas living in the plains have a common layout of their houses, though it has changed in the recent times. Every family usually owns four huts surrounding four sides of a rectangular or square courtyard. In earlier times, huts were mostly thatched and the walls made of reeds or bamboo with mud and cow-dung plastering on both sides. These days, the houses are mostly of tin roof and the walls constructed with brick in case of richer families. However, majority of the Rabha people still live in old traditional houses made of bamboo and mud with only the roof being replaced by tin due to unavailability of thatch and the convenience of tin. To the East lies the granary; to the West, the kitchen; to the North, the main house where the head of the family lives and to the South, the cowshed. The whole compound is encircled by a bamboo fence and a

ditch. The compound of a Rabha house usually has a pond, betel trees and leaves, other trees both fruiting and non-fruiting.

In earlier days, villagers came in large numbers to help in the construction of the thatch roof of every family. As the roofs were way bit heavier to be lifted, people helped each other in turns. This is referred to as *houri khowa*. There would be lot of drinks at the end of the hard task.

### **(vii) Weaving and Clothing**

The Totola Rabhas weave their own clothes using traditional handloom. The Totola Rabha women are expert in the art of spinning and weaving and this is considered a necessity among the women. Just as a woman is expected to know how to cook, so also she is expected to know how to weave her own clothes and also clothes for the other members of the family. Normally, the women weave apparels for their own use but some do it for commercial purposes as well. The women's knowledge of the art also gets reflected in the folksongs and narratives prevalent among the tribe. With the advent of science and technology and the supply of clothes coming from elsewhere, the art of weaving is dwindling among the community women. However, some of them prefer to weave their own clothes rather than getting it from the market. Though hard toil is involved, the result is rewarding. Some clothes can never be woven by machines. For example, '*Ek Deng*'. This is a cloth that has to be woven in a single day and is used for rituals related to the birth of a child. The speciality of the cloth is that the length should be equal to the distance of a single footstep and no blades or knives can be used to cut it. However, one can use a sharp edged split bamboo or a broken glass to get the work done. Another cloth that cannot be woven in a machine is '*anakata*'. The speciality of

this cloth is that only a single piece of cloth has to be woven and no blades can be used to cut it. 'Anakata' is used by the bridegroom. Therefore, it is seen that the weaving is very much a part of one's culture. It is customary to present a *bihuwan* to the elders and relatives during Bihu. *Bihuwan* is woven at home by the women folk. The male members of the Totola Rabhas use traditional *gamochas* to wear and this is usually woven at home. The Rabha women also weave woollen shawls, *mekhelas*, *chadors*, traditional Rabha dresses, etc. for their use. Hence, the knowledge of spinning and weaving is considered an essential part of a girl's seduction.

The Rabha women weave clothes both in traditional and modern patterns. They weave colourful and attractive patterns with interesting colour for commercial purposes. They also dye yarn using indigenous processes. Thus, the Rabha women weave not only for their use but also for commercial purposes, thus serving as a secondary source of livelihood.

#### **(viii) Food Habits**

The staple food of the Rabhas is rice. The Rabhas also love pork, both dried and smoked, with rice powder, certain insects and a whole lot of rice beer locally known as *hari* which is prepared at home. Some people even sell it and this contributes a lot to the socio-economic growth of the people. Every festive occasion is incomplete without pork and rice beer. Even during religious offerings, they do have rice beer. However, they are gradually giving up their habit of drinking. Fermented fish, other than dry fish, is another delicacy for the Rabhas. Beef is prohibited among the Rabhas.

The Rabhas are fond of pork which is either smoked, dried or roasted. It might be boiled and left in the sun for several days together. It might also be left above the cooking



place to be smoked. Pork is also cooked with rice powder, leafy vegetables or dried leaves of jute. The traditional Rabha dishes are really savoury and relinquishing. Fermented fish, called *hindalis* another distinguishing tribal cuisine. Mixtures of grinded smoked fish, specific leafy vegetables and rice powder is left for days and months together in a sealed bamboo. It is also known as *Sunga Sundari*. It can be taken as a *Chutni* (paste formed by adding chilli, *Hindal* and other ingredients). The whole area gets to know is *hindal* is prepared due to the overwhelming smell.

### **Entomophagy among the Totola Rabhas**

The Rabhas, like the other tribes of Assam, also “have chosen to take entomophagy as a sustainable source of food as it has been using since ancient times, a knowledge which has been passed down from generation to generation through word of mouth. Some edible insects consumed by Rabha folk in lower Assam are cricket, grasshoppers, termites, red ants, beetle larvae, pupa of insects, water skater (Gerridaec), silkworm or mulberry silk moth, *Mou* (Honey bee), *Japripoka* (Water Giant Bug), *karaipoka* (water scavengers), *hamka* (snail) etc. All these insects have long been considered a food delicacy among the Rabha folk.”<sup>9</sup> (Rabha, 2016)

In general, consumption of edible insect is part of folk cultural heritage, and the tribal knowledge on how to find, gather, prepare and conserve insects is passed down from generation to generation through oral communication. Children learn from their parents how to find or collect insects through imitation or instruction.

#### **(ix) Traditional Beverage:**

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<sup>9</sup>Rabha, Bhupen. "Edible Insects as tribal food among the Rabhas of Assam." *IRA-International Journal of Management & Social Sciences (ISSN 2455-2267)* [Online], 3.2 (2016): n. pag. Web. 10 Jan. 2018

The consumption of alcohol is a fact of everyday life in societies across the world, both past and present: the motivation to alter one's state of consciousness through drinking has been pervasive throughout the centuries, whether or not this alteration is a source of enjoyment.

Alcohol is deeply embedded within many rituals among the Totola Rabhas, such as the greeting of an honoured guest, the demonstration of masculinity, or as part of religious ceremonies. Even the local Gods and spirits are being ritually fed with rice beer. It is also an activity primarily associated with leisure time, joyfulness, and celebration.

The Rabhas prepare beer and alcohol from rice in their own traditional way.

**(x) Administration**

Totola Rabhas never live in isolation. They always live together in a village administered by a village council headed by the President of the council. A person having good knowledge of social norms is usually selected as the president. There are other members elected to the council including the secretary, *halmaji*, etc. according to the need. There is no hard and fast rule as to the membership of the council. Most of the important decisions are taken during meetings headed by the council. Every villager is a member of the council. The council not only formulates rules and regulations for the villagers but also decides the dates on which particular village festivals are to be observed. The Totola Rabha people are simple minded people and there are provisions for changing the rules when the need arises. There is no written proceeding as such as those are carried forward by the word of mouth. At times, the council has to be strict in punishing culprits when the need arises. The culprits might have to pay fine to the council, or take a vow not to repeat the offence. A times, if the deviation from social

norms is too grave, the council might have to resort to excommunication. A saying goes, *Raije Roja*. It can be translated into 'people are the king.' So, it is common even for the council to do according to the opinion of the majority of the people, ie, the villagers. Hence it is observed that the Totola Rabha people do have not complexities regarding administering the village.

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## **Chapter III**

### **TOTOLA RABHAS AND THEIR INTER-CULTURAL RELATIONS WITH THE NEIGHBOURING COMMUNITIES**

#### **3.1 Totola Rabhas and their Assimilation**

The inter-mingling of the different ethnic and linguistic groups has led to changes in social life of Assam. From the point of ethnology, Assam is a land of remarkable variety with varied races and cultural pattern. There are the Assamese caste Hindus, Muslims and Bengali Hindus and Muslims who speak Indo- Aryan languages such as Assamese and Bengali. There are also people belonging to Mongoloid stock such as Bodo-Kacharis, Lalungs, Sonowals, Chutias, Mishings, Manipuris, Karbis, Dimasas, Ranglongs, etc.

Again, the tribes of Assam can be classified as the Hill tribes consisting of Karbis and Garos and the plain tribes consisting of Bodo-Kacharis, Mishings, Lalungs, Rabhas, Hajongs and Meches. Most of the communities live in close proximity with the others and therefore cultural assimilation is not an uncommon phenomenon. It is seen that many of the festivals are observed by communities irrespective of whatever caste or creed they belong to. It is also seen that cultures have undergone drastic changes as a result of acculturation.

#### **Assamese**

The Assamese society is a society, as the cultural historians perceive, formed by the synthesis of Aryan and tribal cultural elements. Baruah (1961) views Assamese culture as

the end product of racial and ethnic assimilation and amalgamation of different ethnic groups of North East India. However, there is an overcoat of Hinduism.

The main framework of Assamese culture was Aryan and this was further enriched by continuous addition of non-Aryan elements (Baruah, 1961). Here Aryan denotes North Indian Hindu Culture. Baruah holds out the assimilation of Aryan and tribal cultural traits as:

1. Firstly, the mother cult as a whole and the use of turmeric paste,vermilion, on foreheads are derived from Austriacs.
2. Secondly, Shiva cult represents the contribution of the Dravidians.
3. Thirdly, the Assamese culture is greatly enriched by the Tibeto-Burman Mongoloid group like Boro-Kacharis. Some of their contribution are:
  - a) extensive use of bamboo in house construction and in the manufacture of other items,
  - b) the craft of weaving,
  - c) relatively higher status of women,
  - d) the practice of oracle telling (*deodhani*) have all been derived from the Tibeto-Burman Mongoloid group like Boro-Kacharis.
  - e) the central role of the *namghar* is also a shadow of the bachelor's dormitories of the Tibeto-Burman people.

### **Assimilation of Aryan and Tribal Cultures**

Just as the Assamese culture has been enriched by tribal cultures so also the tribal cultures have been greatly influenced by the former, be it language, religion or other



social practices. Today, all the tribes inhabiting in Assam form an important part of the greater Assamese society.

The many tribal languages prevalent in Assam are limited within the tribe. These languages are mutually abstruse and Assamese language is generally used for public interaction.

### **The Case of the Totola Rabhas**

The Totola Rabhas have never lived in isolation. They have been in close contact with the neighbouring Assamese speaking and Bodo speaking population from times immemorial and consequently they have been highly influenced by these populations of the Brahmaputra valley. Thus, their social life and social customs have gained a different colour, which has now been distinct and quite different from the remaining Rabha groups. At present, their common media of conversation is a broken variety of Assamese mixed with Rabha and Boro words and expressions. There has been an excellent cultural synthesis in the evolution of the Totola Rabhas.

Language has a unique power to tie different section of people, irrespective of caste, creed, and religion to a common linguistic and cultural unit (Basid, 2016). Therefore, it is seen that the culture of Assamese speaking population has had a large effect on the Totola Rabhas. It gets reflected in the socio-cultural life of the tribe. The folksongs of the Totola Rabhas highlight their attitudes, concerns, aspirations and aesthetic sense but through a language that they have adopted and use in their day to day life. Thus, along with the language of the Assamese, their cultural traits also get a place.

Today, the Totola Rabhas are the least represented among all the other groups of the Rabhas. In fact, in many of the classifications of the Rabhas, Totola Rabhas are not even mentioned. They are thought to have undergone not only a cultural change but they are also believed to have assimilated with their neighbouring communities. This is partly true as Totola Rabhas have undergone a change as regards their cultural identity but at the same time they have acquired a unique identity, an identity very different from the Assamese as well as the Bodos. They have the characteristics of the Bodos regarding their food habits and way of life and at the same time they have adopted the language of the Assamese mixed with Bodo words and words that are independently developed. In fact, some of the Totola Rabhas in places like Rupohi of Baksa district have adopted Bodo language as their mother tongue. However, it is seen that the Rabhas are mostly bilingual. The impact of the other languages around has had a toll not only on the Rabha language but also on their identity. The social as well as cultural effect cannot be ignored.

### **3.2 Totola Rabhas and Saranias and Modahis**

A visit to Baramchari near Bwrimakha of Baksa District highlighted deep concern among the Totola Rabha population. Dipak Rabha, aged 64, a retired headmaster of an LP School, expressed concern about the assimilation with the communities nearby and the kind of impact on the Totola Rabhas. With only 13 households and a population of 57, their customs and ways seem to be giving way for others. “It’s high time we do something to preserve our culture or else we will be nowhere,” says Dipak Rabha. The village is surrounded by the Assamese, Bodos and Adivasis. They don’t even have a knowledge about the customs to be followed during rituals of rites de passage. And now

they have been asking help from the other Totola Rabhas to show them the traditional ways and customs.

The situation was different in Uttar Totolapara near Thamna. Gauri Shankar Das (65 years), a retired teacher from Uttar Ahopa LP School, Ahopa and now a teacher in a private school, Jyoti Prasad Academy, in Bhalukamuri, was once a Rabha. He, along with his family and fellow villagers got converted to the Vaishnavite faith.

In the wake of Vaishnavite movement in Assam, many people belonging to Tribal origins, got themselves converted through a process where they took initiation or *sarana* under the Brahmin priest or Vaishnava Guru. They, then came to be known as SaraniaKachari. They not only got converted but also changed their surnames for Das, Sarania, Deka, Medhi, Choudhury, Hazarika, etc. They became a part of the Hindu society and they considered themselves as belonging to higher strata of society.

Lieutenant C.G.M. Kennedy says regarding the process of conversion- The aboriginal tribes of this district who are now becoming Hinduised are the Lalungs and Kacharis. Some Mikirs are converted occasionally, but their number is very limited. The method by which they are converted is as follows: The *Gossein* or some of his subordinates usually select certain families of the aboriginal tribes, who reside in the vicinity of Hindu villages and at a distance from the main villages of the aboriginal tribes. These families are frequently lectured upon the purity of the Hindu religion and the easy ways in which they can get salvation, and how they can acquire a position in the Hindu society if they give up their habits of eating pork and other forbidden food, including liquor, and conform to the Hindu methods of eating, drinking and worship. As these people frequently feel the inconvenience of their isolated position they are easily tempted

to become Hindus, and thereby be enabled to associate and move with their Hindu neighbours by whom they are hated and looked down upon as a degraded class so long as they remain in an unconverted state. When these people after frequent lectures show some inclination towards giving up their religion and becoming Hindus, a certain propitious day is selected, and they are questioned as to whether they would like to give up their former habits and customs, and become perfect Hindus, or if they would simply take *Saran* (religious instructions) from the Hindu *Gosein*, and remain free as to their habits of eating and drinking. When they express a desire of entire conversion to the Hindu religion, they are made to fast for a day or two, and then to undergo *Prayachit* (atonement), for which they must spend 5 to 20 rupees according to their circumstances. They then receive their *Saran Bhajan* (religious instructions and mode of worship) from the *Gosein*, whom from that day they look upon as their spiritual guide. These people then change all former utensils of cooking and eating and also their dwelling house and become quite Hinduised.<sup>1</sup>

The Saranias mingled with the major stream of Hindu society as they considered themselves to be developed or developing groups of tribal people but in practice they are found to have remained far behind. They have found themselves between two boats as they are at the crossroads of two trends- Hinduism and Tribalism. So, they remained isolated from the two of them and they have preferred to retain a separate identity as Sarania Kacharis. The Sarania Kacharis now have been demanding ST status and are striving for a separate identity. In fact, the Saranias are originally tribal people akin to the Kacharis and as such, there were no accounts of their separate identity.

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<sup>1</sup>Kennedy, Lieutenant C. G. M. Officiating Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong, *Census of India, 1961*, Vol-iii, Assam, Part V-A Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes Reprints from Old Census Report and Special Tables.

In fact, though they got themselves converted to a higher stratum of society, many could not give up their tribal certificates, perhaps because of the various gains they received for being a tribal. They still write their original sub-groups in brackets, eg. those converted from Rabhas and Boros still write Rabha and Boro respectively within brackets.

Those persons who got themselves initiated into the Mahapurusiya sect of the Vaishnavite school are not supposed to indulge in pork and rice- beer or any form of intoxicating drinks, but this is not the case. Many, as informed by Gauri Shankar Das, still take pork and wine. Das stated that pork is taken in every family, but it is not served during occasions of marriage or any other celebrations. Some families also rear pigs at home for economic purposes.

Kameswar Rabha (80 years) of Kataligaon near Mushalpur stated that a Brahmin had come into their village to influence them to take initiation and change for a higher stratum of society. In that case, they would have to give up their surname and present gifts to a Brahmin in the form of clothes and a patch of land. Late Bhubaneswar Rabha almost got himself converted and changed his surname to Das, when other village youngsters got a hint of it and repelled. The villagers of Kataligaon took a firm decision that they would never give up their customs come what may. “We will never give up wine and pork,” declared many of the villagers. Late Bhubaneswar Rabha then turned back to his previous title. Kataligaon was thus saved from conversion due to the timely intervention of the villagers.

There are many such instances where the converted ones are turning back to their original groups. A slogan was raised by the Rabhas that Modahis are Rabhas. This was

an initiative to bring back the converted Modahis to their original group. This seems to be necessary now as in a democratic country, number counts. In places like Manikpur near Thamna, the children of the Saranias are now changing their surnames to their original ones. The daughter of Jyotish Das (45 years) bears the name Nikhita Rabha. This is a prove that some the converted tribals are now turning back to their origin.

### **3.3 Assimilation with the Bodos**

Racially the Boros and the Rabhas have long years of association. So, they have developed certain amount of cultural and linguistic similarities. In many cases the Rabhas are thought to be the Bodos because of their similarities in looks. They both belong to the mongoloid stock. Therefore, their physical affinities are closer.

Bora (2013) says that the Rabhas maybe different from the Bodos but their ways and culture are almost the same.

‘The Bodos are the earliest known settlers of Assam’ (Das and Doley, 1995. p.19). Grierson identifies the Bodos as a section of the Assam-Burma group of the Tibeto-Burman speakers belonging to the Sino-Tibetan speech family (Grierson, 1967). They are the largest ethnic group of Assam and are a majority among the other tribes along Indo-Bhutan Border. S.K Chatterjee regards the Bodos as the most important Indo Mongoloid people in Eastern India (KirataJanakriti, 1974, p.13).

Genetically the Boros and the Rabhas of Assam belong to the Tibeto-Burman sub-family within the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. It is seen that the twolinguistic communities, Bodo and Rabha, share common features at all levels of folk-culture and language system. As the Boros and the Rabhas have a common point of origin, therefore

linguistic and cultural correspondences occur to a great extent. Most of the scholars have some valuable opinion about the origin of the concerned linguistic communities. Rev. Sidney Endle remarked, "The origin of the Kachari race is still very largely a matter of conjecture and inference in the absence of anything entitled to be regarded as authentic history. As remarked above, in feature and general appearance, they approximate very closely to the Mongolian type and this would seem to point to Tibet and China as the original home of the race."<sup>2</sup>

Both the Rabhas and the Boros are believed to have originated from Tibet. Though there are diversified opinions about the origin of the Boros and Rabhas, ethnic affinities establish them to be members of the same stock. In course of time, they acquired an identical inheritance of language and culture of their own. They spread throughout the length and breadth of the Brahmaputra valley in Assam, besides Meghalaya, and North Bengal. It is seen that though the Rabhas are scattered in smaller numbers, they live in close proximity to the Boros. In most cases, a single hamlet consists of both Rabha and Boro families. In many places in Dhekiajuli, the Rabhas have given up their surname and language. They have now adopted Boro surnames and also their language. Rabha people living in Bathouपुरi of Baksa district also have adopted Bodo language as their mother tongue and have replaced their surnames for those of the Boros. The reason is quite unknown.

### **3.4 Context of Inter-marriage**

Inter caste marriage among the Totola Rabhas is a common sight maybe due to lesser contact with people of their own kind.

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<sup>2</sup>Endle, Rev. S. The Kacharis. P- 3

In most Totola Rabha villages, the mothers and wives, are from different communities including Saranias, Modahis, Boros, Nepalis, Karbis, Assamese, Garos, etc. of which the Boros are a majority. The presence of housewives from different communities among the Totola Rabhas has brought about a change in their ways and practices.

### **3.5 Participation in the same festival**

Religious festivals like celebration of *Bathou puja* among the Bodos is organised at community level. Bathou refers to the traditional religion of the Boros where 'Bathou' denotes the five principles of creation. The Bodos worship 'BwraiBathou', the supreme God. He is the creator of the five ingredients, ie. earth, water, air, fire and ether (*ha, dwi, bar, or, orkhrang*). Bathou religion is symbolized by *Sijouplant (Euphorbia spendens)*. They do not worship idol. *Sijouplant* is believed to represent the supreme soul. Today, the religion is practiced by offerings of flowers, fruits and *prasads* rather than sacrificing fowls and animals as was done in the past.

Also, the Bodos organize annual festivals and fares in many places where people come not only for entertainment but also to seek the blessings of BwraiBathou. The Totola Rabhas actively participate in organizing this kind of festival of the Bodos right from the start. They even send volunteers to help the committee to conduct the fare smoothly. Even the women take active participation in the fares. They bring offerings to BwraiBathou and also take back *Maina* home. The local priest throws rice grains among the devotees and the devotees try their best to get hold of the grains. This is then brought back home and placed in the granary. The Totola Rabhas, along with the Bodos, believe that this will lead to prosperity. Therefore, it is seen that the Totola Rabhas are influenced by the religion of the Bodos as well.



There are similarities between the Bodos and the Totola Rabhas in many other spheres of life as well. This is because they have been living side by side since ages and the context of inter-marriage is not an unknown practice. Therefore, there are cultural affinities among the two communities resulting from years of association.

### **Material culture**

Similarities are seen both in tangible and intangible heritages of the Totola Rabhas and the Bodos. There are a lot of similarities in material culture or the physical folklore as is known in folklore scholarship. Members of both the communities are mostly cultivators and the village economy largely depend on cultivation. They use different household and agricultural tools and implements in their day to day life which are almost similar. There are also affinities in settlement and housing, tools and implements, the art of weaving, food habits and making of bamboo products, etc.

### **Settlement**

It is seen that the Totola Rabhas and the Bodos lead an agricultural way of life. So, their mode of settlement and the pattern of housing are based on their needs. In earlier days, they lived near the forests, on lowlands or hillocks and sometimes near the river or other water bodies. But later, they inhabited the plain areas of the Brahmaputra valley. They preferred to live near cultivable land as they mainly survived on agriculture. They were also apt in fishing and hunting as is reflected in the folk songs which are discussed at length in the chapters to follow. However, hunting practices are nowhere to be seen now.

While selecting sites for their homestead, both the Totola Rabhas and the Bodos performed ritualistic tests. It was usually performed on Saturdays and Tuesdays among the Bodos. They arranged the site for test by cleaning it. They place a tip of banana-plantain leaf, place two leaves of basil and nine grains of rice. They then covered it with a basket made of bamboo. They then inspect it in the morning. If the things were found in order as they had left it, the site was selected for the homestead. If not, the site was considered to be unsuitable and harmful. They believe that if they build their home at the spot, the members of the family might be affected by the influence of ghosts, deities or malevolent spirits.

The Totola Rabhas also did the same but they placed rice grains in numbers of five, seven or nine, in all the four corners of the proposed site. If the grains are to be misplaced by ants or other animals, they believe that the members of the family would get separated in the same manner.

However, this kind of practices are now giving way to the modern ways. But they still consult astrologers or look for favourable and auspicious days in calendars as is done for every other occasion like marriage, etc.

### **Types of housing:**

In earlier days, the Totola Rabhas and the Bodos constructed thatched houses with walls of bamboo or straw covered with mud and dung. The Bodos call their main house as '*noma no*' and the Totola Rabhas call it '*barghar*'. They construct the kitchen near the main house but separately. They have a granary for storing rice grains and a storing place for agricultural and fishing implements. They also have separate sheds for poultry, cows, pigs, goats, etc. and also for firewood. They have a haystack near the cow shed.

It is seen that both the Totola Rabhas and the Bodos have similar ways of constructing their homes.

In addition, the Bodos have a place of worship known as '*Bathousali*' in their courtyard. The Bathou altar consists of a *sijou* (*euphorbia splendens*) plant surrounded by a fence of eighteen pairs of small bamboo posts folded with five fastenings of small bamboo strips.

### **Domestic utensils:**

The Totola Rabhas and the Bodos use similar type of utensils. In earlier days they used utensils made of brass, bamboo, wooden and earthen. But now the more traditional utensils are being replaced by modern ones. Apart from the utensils for cooking, both the communities have separate utensils for storing rice-beer. The Bodos call the pitcher for storing water as '*dwi*hu' and the pitcher for storing rice beer as '*zwudu*'. The Totola Rabhas use '*koloh*' for rice beer. These utensils are being replaced by metal ones because they are lighter and durable. However, the village folk prefer the earlier ones. They say that rice beer stored in an earthen pitcher is of better quality. They also use similar utensils for preparing rice spirit.

The use of bamboo implements for agricultural and household purposes is indispensable. Some of the implements can never be replaced by any other modern implement because they won't serve the purpose. They use different types of storing implements made of bamboo or wood for agricultural and household purposes. They store their paddy in bamboo containers of varying sizes known as '*duli*'. They use bamboo sieve, both big and small, for sifting purposes. The Bodos call it '*sandri*' and the Totola Rabhas call it '*sangli*'. It is therefore seen that the use of bamboo for

different implements is quite indispensable for both the communities. They have similar type of implements for agricultural and household purposes.

### **Food habits:**

The staple food of both the Totola Rabhas and the Bodos is rice. They eat a lot of green vegetables which they collect from forest lands and this gets reflected in their folksongs and narratives. They also practiced fishing and hunting animals mostly deer and wild pigs. This is no longer in practice these days. They have their own ways of catching fish which is prevalent even today. Community fishing is a common practice in both the communities. Both the Totola Rabhas and the Bodos consume dry fish and dry meat of pigs or chicken. They ferment fish in bamboo tubes which the Bodos and the Rabhas call '*napham*' and '*hindal*' respectively.

Both the Totola Rabhas and the Bodos prepare rice beer at home and use it in rituals as well. . Alcohol use reflects forms of community, identification, and their interrelated values. Drinking is related to the pleasant side of life and is unavoidable in certain situations like rituals and ceremonies, family gatherings and community feasts. It is an activity primarily associated with leisure time, joyfulness, and celebration.

There are some common items consumed both by the Totola Rabhas as well as the Bodos. Some of them are:

1. Rice powder known as *onlaby* the Bodos and *guraanjaby* the Totola Rabhas
2. They use plantain alkali traditionally known as *khar* and *kharwiby* the Totola Rabhas and the Bodos respectively, in most of the traditional curries.

3. They consume bamboo shoot, both fresh and fermented. The Totola Rabhas call it *bahorgaja* and the Bodos call it *ouwamewai*
4. They consume meat of animals like pig, deer, wild buffaloes, frog, rat, bat, tortoise, hare, jungle cat, small Indian civet, mongoose, porcupine, duck, monitor lizard, etc. Most of the animals mentioned are scarcely available these days.
5. They also consume edible aquatic insects such as Giant Water bug, Water beetle, water scavenger, larva of diving beetle, snails, prawns, crabs, etc.
6. They also consume other edible insects like silkworm, grasshopper, cricket, wasp, rhinoceros beetle, weaver ant, honeybee, termite, etc.
7. Leaves, flowers, roots and shoots of certain plants are used as delicacy among both the tribes. Some of them are - dried jute leaves, jasmine flower, arum flowers, long sucker roots of arum, shoot of arum, arum bulb, etc.

### **3.6 Impact of other cultures on the Totola Rabhas**

#### **Religion and Festival**

The impact of the Assamese speaking population on Totola Rabhas is evident in many walks of life. This is so because they have been living in close proximity with each other. Many a times, they are members of the same village. Half of the population got themselves converted to Saranias while the other half stuck to their past. In many cases, inter-marriage among the two is a common phenomenon. As a result, the customs and belief system got highly influenced by the Saranias. It is now seen that *naamis* performed in Totola Rabha villages in occasions like birth, cleansing, Shivratri, Laxmi puja, etc. But there is a difference in the habits of eating and drinking. It is seen that

even the ones who are performing offerings or *naam* indulge in drinking local wine, an act considered unholy by the Saranias or the Assamese. The Saranias while getting themselves converted have pledged to give up wine and pork. The Totola Rabhas for no reason will give up this habit of eating and drinking.

**Table 13: List of festivals throughout the year**

| <b>Assamese Month</b> | <b>Periods in English Calendar</b> | <b>Festivals observed by the Totola Rabhas</b>                          |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Bohag</i>          | April-May                          | <i>Rongali Bihu</i>   |
| <i>Jeth</i>           | May-June                           | <i>Ai-naam</i>  |
| <i>Ahar</i>           | June-July                          | <i>AmotiSuwa</i>  |
| <i>Saon</i>           | July-Aug                           | <i>Shiva Puja</i>   |
| <i>Bhado</i>          | Aug-Sept                           | <i>Janmastami</i>   |
| <i>Ahin</i>           | Sept-Oct                           | <i>Durga Puja</i><br><i>Lakshmi Puja</i>                                |
| <i>Kati</i>           | Oct-Nov                            | <i>Kati Bihu</i><br><i>Diwali</i><br><i>Kali Puja</i>                   |
| <i>Aghon</i>          | Nov-Dec                            | <i>Na-Khowa</i>   |
| <i>Puh</i>            | Dec-Jan                            | ---   |
| <i>Magh</i>           | Jan- Feb                           | <i>Magh Bihu</i><br><i>Ganesh Puja</i>                                  |
| <i>Phagun</i>         | Feb-Mar                            | <i>Holi</i><br><i>Deol</i><br><i>Saraswati Puja</i><br><i>Shivratri</i> |
| <i>Chat</i>           | Mar-Apr                            | ----  |

## **Seasonal Festivals**

### **Bihu**

According to Das(1966:13) ‘The Bihu, an Assamese national festival, is considered by some authority to be a contribution of the tribal folk, now the Assamese form of Bihu festival has become a common feature of many of the tribes, both in the hills and in the plains. One can hear the familiar Assamese songs of the plains echoed in the district

hill'. Just as the other communities of Assam, the Totola Rabhas also celebrate Bihu with great excitement but with a difference. No Bihu is complete among the Totola Rabhas without wine and merriment. The three festivals of Bihu, *Bohag Bihu*, *Kati Bihu* and *Magh Bihu* are celebrated at various stages of cultivation of paddy in different periods and cycles of the year. Rangali Bihu is the spring time festival and Bhogali Bihu is the harvesting festival.

### ***Bohag Bihu/ Rangali Bihu***

This Bihu commences on the eve of the Assamese new year which begins somewhere in the month of April. According to Birinchi Kumar Baruah (1961), Bohag Bihu is an 'agricultural festival celebrated at the commencement of the season of agriculture. It is a festival of the village farmers. It has got nothing to do with priests and religion: the Bohag Bihu extols only those things that are directly connected with agriculture. The chief instrument of agriculture is the cow'.

Therefore, the first day of the *Rongali Bihu* is dedicated to the cattle and is known as *Goru Bihu* where 'goru' means a 'cow'. The day before *goru Bihu*, the children collect sprigs of *dighlati* and *makhiyati* plants, bottle gourd, brinjal, turmeric, aubergine etc. early in the morning next day, the cows are taken to the nearby river to be cleaned. They are struck with *dighlati* and *makhiyati* plants and the vegetables collected the previous day are thrown at them while singing songs. The accompanying folk then exchange the garland of vegetables with their neighbours and bring them home. The cows are then left free for the day. The villagers then place the bunch of *dighlati* and *makhiyati* plants and the garland of vegetables tucked in their roofs and leave it for as long as it lasts. In the evening, when the cows are brought back home, they are given new tethers. It is

almost customary for the Totola Rabhas to take rice beer and pork. They take pork cooked with different kinds of herbs and leafy vegetables. Eating of edible fern plants is a must on this day.

The next day, the children bow to their elder ones seeking their blessings. In most cases gifts are exchanged. Everyone wears a new cloth. The female members offer *gamochas* or *pajar and phalli* to the young ones as well as to the elderly to show their respect, love and adoration.

Most of the Totola Rabhas offer prayers to their deities during this festival. They take their deities to every household being accompanied by the beating of drums and the sound of trumpets. They wish the family a better life throughout the year. The Rabhas also go dancing from house to house collecting rice grains in return. This is then used for a feast at the end of Bihu. Every household prepares rice beer and is offered to the relatives. Feasting and drinking are a common sight in every household during this Bihu.

### ***Kati Bihu***

*Kati* (Oct-Nov) is that period of the year when the cultivators eagerly wait for a good harvest. This is a period when the granary is yet to be filled by the harvest. Kati Bihu is celebrated on the first day of the Assamese month of *Kati* (Oct-Nov). This Bihu is also referred to as *Kongali Bihu*. The village folk light earthen lamps in the granary as well as in the paddy- field in the evening. They also use peels of elephant apple as lamps. Every family light a lamp the basilplants (Tulsi). They pray for happiness and prosperity. The Rabhas light a kind of lamp called '*katigosa*' which is placed on a



bamboo pole above the height of the paddy. Lamps are lighted in order to preserve the paddy from the predations of the locusts.

### ***Magh Bihu or Domahi***

*Magh Bihu* also referred to as *Bhogali Bihu* is a festival of feasting and is celebrated in the month of January. This winter festival is also called '*Domahi*' by the Totola Rabhas.

Rice beer is prepared almost in every household during this festival. They drink rice beer, sing and dance. Every family, whether rich or poor, has enough meat and fish during this festival. In the evening of *uruka*, they tie bamboo strips around all the fruit bearing trees like betelnut tree, coconut tree, mango tree, etc. in the yard. This way they believe the trees will bear more fruits. The women fasten a white cotton thread known as '*awahuta*' around their house. They believe that this will protect their household from evileye as well as natural calamities.

In the evening, they build '*meji*'<sup>3</sup>. The next morning, the '*mejis*' are burnt down traditionally. '*Ma karoi*'<sup>4</sup> is sprinkled on the '*mejis*'. The young ones then seek the blessings of their elders.

### **Na-khowa**

The Totola Rabhas perform a ceremony on the occasion of the feast of harvesting. This festival is called as *na-khowa* (new rice feast), which is observed in the Assamese month of *Aghon* (mid- November to mid-December) after the completion of harvesting.

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<sup>3</sup> A tall structure made of straw and bamboo poles

<sup>4</sup> Mixture of dry fried rice and black lentil and a bit of ginger and salt to taste.

## **Amati Chuwa**

*Amati* is considered to be the menstruation period of goddess Kamakhya and it is believed that the earth becomes impure during this time period. This ritual is performed in the month of *Ahar* (June-July) in the day of *Ambubashi* which falls on the fourth day of the month. The village folk abstain themselves from doing some of their usual activities like lighting a lamp in before the altars, plucking of fruits and leaves, digging of earth, etc. They observe the ritual for four days and on the fifth day, all the villagers wash clothes and clean their houses. They also take bath early in the morning and observe fasting. The *deuri* or the village priest offers rice, gram, sour fruits, betel nut, betel leaf, etc. to goddess Kamakhya. The village priest goes around the village sprinkling *tulsi* (basil leaf) water in every household. A feast is usually arranged for the whole village which involves drinking rice beer. Sometimes after the feast, the village folk play games. Usually a football match is arranged between the married and the unmarried folk. This is done for merriment.

Majority of the Totola Rabha population follow Hinduism though they have their own traditional Gods and deities. Some of the different Hindu Gods and Goddesses the Totola Rabhas worship are:

## **Religious Festivals**

### **Goddess Saraswati**

**Saraswati puja** is celebrated in honour of the Goddess of knowledge, language, music and arts. People celebrate it with great sincerity and fervour. This puja is mainly observed by youngsters at school. Usually a Brahmin priest initiates the worship to the goddess in traditional Hindu way by lighting ritual fire. The devotees throw handful of

flowers to the image of the deity while uttering spells in the guidance of the priest. This is known as *anjali orpushpanjali*. The devotees observe fasting until the completion of the offerings. The offerings to the Goodness consists of soaked gram, banana and other fruits, unboiled rice, coconut, sweets, unboiled milk, etc. The Hindus usually abstain from meat and drink during the occasion. But it's a different case among the Totola Rabhas. They perform the offerings on their own without inviting a Brahmin. It is seen that they perform the puja on one hand and on the other hand some are busy preparing meat and fish to be consumed after the prayers and offerings are over. In most cases, wine is also consumed after the offerings. They give an excuse saying that you can take wine or meat once the offering to the Goddess is over. With the Rabha population being influenced by the neighbouring Hindus, this practice is dwindling with the coming days.

### **Biswakarma Puja**

The Hindus consider Lord Biswakarma as the God of Artisans of both heaven and earth. Therefore, this festival is celebrated mainly by people who are in the occupation which requires use of machinery, like a motor mechanic, carpenter, driver, etc. Lord Biswakarma is worshipped for protection of life as well as for improvement of their skills. This festival is celebrated in the Assamese month of *Bhador* which falls somewhere between August and September. This festival is celebrated both at individual household as well as community level. It is seen that people wash their vehicles and decorate it with garlands and flowers. It is festive season for the whole of Assam as the schools and colleges remain closed on this day. The Totola Rabhas also observe this puja with great devotion and as is usual this celebration is incomplete without wine and merriment.

## **Lord Ganesh**

Lord Ganesha, the god of peace, harmony, power and wisdom is an elephant headed god and is worshipped before the start of any task. The Totola Rabhas living near the forest areas infested by elephants observe this celebration to protect themselves from all evils and also from wild attacks. The people celebrate this festival on the day of 'Maghipurnima'. The devotees offer sweets and fruits to the God and the sacrifice of animal is restricted.

## **Goddess Durga**

The festival of Goddess Durga is one of the oldest festivals to be observed in Assam. Dhankar (2014: 121) says this festival was introduced in Assam by the Ahom king PratapSingha. Goddess Durga manifests herself in different forms as Prithvi, Parvati, Sati, Uma, Chandika, and Maa Kali. She is a symbol of good over evil. She is worshipped in the month of September-October as denoted in the 'Panjika'. This festival goes on for nine days and on the last day the statue of Goddess Durga is immersed in water and this is referred to as 'bisarjan'. The Totola Rabhas take active part in the celebration of *Durga Puja*. It is festive season and fairs are organized at all places where stalls and *melas* are a common sight. Everyone wears new clothes and the children play with balloons and crackers.

## **Goddess Lakshmi**

Lakshmi is the Goddess of wealth and is worshiped in every Totola Rabha household. The Totola Rabhas use rice beer during offerings to their traditional deities but in this case rice beer and also the sacrifice of animals is prohibited. The worship of this deity is

performed in the full moon night of *Ahin* (September- October). The offerings are made in individual households as well as out in the paddy fields. The devotees offer soaked gram, banana and other fruits, coconut, unboiled milk, silikha (*Terminalia chebula*), unboiled winter variety of rice, etc. to the goddess. The ritual is done by the women in the house and no Brahmin is invited.

### ***RaasMahotsav***

The Rash Festival is celebrated in most parts of Assam starting from the full moon night of the month of *Aghon* (October-November). Lord Krishna is worshipped during this festival. The Totola Rabhas are not directly involved in celebrating this festival but they are very much a part of it. This festival is more of an exhibition where the different avatars of Lord Krishna are being displayed in the form of clay figures. Fairs are also organized in most places. It is indeed a festive season for the seven days or so for the people living in the vicinity of the area. People also come to participate in the festivals from far and wide. It is a festival to celebrate the victory of good over evil.

### **Malevolent Spirits among the Totola Rabhas**

The Totola Rabhas are simple minded folk and they believe in the existence of many malevolent spirits and that they are responsible for diseases caused in a family. The generic term to denote such spirits is *deo* and the folk also use the equivalent terms *bhut*, *pikhas*, *devota*, etc. The Totola Rabhas try to appease them through different rituals, usually done by the village priest or *ojas* and *tantrics*.

### ***Bira***

*Bira* is a male demon with terrible looks and is believed to live at thicket. It can change its size to that of an unthinkable height. It can even grow taller than the tallest bamboo.

Its appearance can make a person faint at one gaze. It is believed to stand as a hurdle and often stops a lone traveller at night. It bends down the bamboo tops to the ground and when the traveller tries to go over it, it goes up hurling the unsuspecting traveller to the air. A person is sometimes possessed by the spirit and he goes about shouting, dancing, singing and jumping abruptly while making fearful faces. In such cases, the *tantrics* or the *ojas* are the only ones to expel the *Bira* out of the possessed. It is also believed that some *ojas* tame *Biras*. They often force them to do works for them. Some evil minded *ojas* also take revenge on their enemies by bidding the *Birato* cause him sufferings and pain. This is again healed by other powerful *ojas*. This practice has also led many among the illiterate village folk to be killed illogically. Innocent men are sometimes made victims and are being accused of taming a *bira* and causing harm. This practice is now dwindling with the increase in educated people and awareness among the folk. I have discussed instances of *bira* attack in the subsequent chapters.

### ***Kuber***

*Kuber* refers to the aquatic spirits that live in ponds and other water bodies. A *kuber* is responsible for ailments like indigestion and stomach pain. An *oja* identifies the *kuber* according to the nature of the ailment. The spirit is appeased by sacrifices of he-goat or a fowl. The offerings to the spirit are made near a water body be it a pool or a pond, usually in the southern direction. The *oja* prepares a straw image of the spirit and a raft of plantain stem on which offerings consisting of parched rice (*karat*), bananas, betelnuts, betel leaves, eggs, etc. are placed. The liver of the sacrificed he-goat or fowl is then roasted and offered to the spirit. The rest of the meat is consumed by the folk other than the patient.

### ***Jauka Pal***

*Jauka Palas* believed by the village folk is a group of little spirits usually of seven in number. They appear and cry like kids and they follow you when you carry eatables usually of meat and fish at night. It is very common for the village folk to go to the market in the evening to get vegetables and other essential commodities. They usually have to cover long distances through villages and fields, as cycles and other vehicles were not so common. Many a times, it gets dark while on the way. In other cases, the village folk might return from their relatives' home or from fairs and *melason* foot. These little spirits won't leave you unless you give them something to eat. Such stories have been discussed in the subsequent chapters.

### ***Ukabhoot***

*UkaBhoot* is one such spirit. It appears at night in the form of light and it jumps around. Stories of attack by *ukabhootis* very common among the Totola Rabha folk and such stories have been portrayed in the subsequent chapters.

### ***Umuk***

When a person is asleep and he feels something pressing against his heart causing him to struggle to breathe, it is said that he is attacked by *umuk*. It is believed that such a person gets back to normal when someone gives him a shake.

The Totola Rabhas have adopted a good number of spirits both malevolent and benevolent from the Assamese Hindus due to their age-old contact. They try to appease the spirits and keep them away from attacking the members of their family or their village. They perform periodical propitiations and organize propitiations and offerings

to get favour from the benevolent spirits. They also make occasional sacrifices to satisfy malevolent spirits. In addition to the above-mentioned spirits, there are other deities that the Totola Rabhas believe in.

The Totola Rabhas use amulets (*tabiz*) given by *ojasto* protect themselves from evil spirits. They also believe in the effect of evil eyes. Therefore, they hang slippers and other objects on trees to protect those from evil eyes. Similarly, to protect the crops in the field or the kitchen garden from evil eyes, they put some grotesque figures. This may be analysed as scarecrow but there is this purpose of warding off the evil eye as well.

In earlier days, the village folk believed in superstition. According to them, there are people who indulge in witchcraft. Such a person is believed to possess supernatural powers. They call such a person *daini*(witch).They believe that a *daini* can transform herself into a fox or other animal.An *ojacan* cure a person suffering from an evil spell of a *daini*.



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## Chapter IV

# FOLKSONGS OF THE TOTOLA RABHAS

### 4.1 Folksongs

Folk songs or oral poetries are byproducts of the thought-process of past human rationality that is handed down from generation to generations through word of mouth. Unlike other literary creations and compositions, socio-historical value of folksongs is more than their literary value and they have intensely human attitude towards life (Gupta 1964; Joshi 1982).

Singing can be characterised with onomatopoeic expressions, synonyms for talking, expressions for emotional reactions, descriptions of composing a song, and with metaphors that depict singing and song in terms of diverse objects and activities (Lotte, 2013). According to Renwick (1997), the most striking feature of a lyric folksong is the quality of its appeal to affect it is more directly about the feelings it expresses- regret, longing, despair and ecstasy. The worldview, and most prominently of course, the feelings are all offered from the perspective of the speaker himself or herself.

Oral Poetry is a part of folklore that is composed and transmitted through the word of mouth without the aid of writing. It also includes any poetry that is performed live. In many cultures, oral poetry is identical with or overlaps with song. For instance, oral poetry, as interpreted by Ruth Finnegan is a broad subject which ranges from American folksongs, Eskimo lyrics, and modern popular songs to medieval oral literature, the heroic poems of Homer, and recent epic compositions in Asia and the Pacific. According to Ruth Finnegan (1977), there is much to learn from concentration on the

oral side of poetry. In particular, the element of performance, or oral presentation, is of obvious and leading significance in oral poetry.

#### **4.2 Folk songs of the Totola Rabhas**

The Totola Rabhas have a very rich tradition of unexplored folklore, passed down through generations orally and at present they seem to have undergone a drastic change due to assimilation with people of other communities. This assimilation has enriched and added to the already existing folklore of the Rabhas, thus “revealing the thought processes, the hopes and fears, ideas and primitive philosophies of our remote ancestors, as well as the sudden or gradual changes in all these things affected by the changing conditions of material life” (Hole, 1944-45). Folklore, today, is considered as a social process in which transmission, mobility, continuity, change, function and diffusion are common and natural things. Folklore then is a group centered social communicative process (Ben- Amos, 1982). Folksong is very much a part of folklore and there are bound to be changes and alterations with time.

From the cultural point of view, the Rabhas have a very rich and glorious heritage. They have their own songs, music, dance, musical instruments and performances for various occasions, such as, cultivation, fishing, hunting, marriage, etc. In most of the cases they have lived side by side members of other communities. Therefore, it is seen that they have acquired the characteristics of other communities, be it linguistically or culturally. However, they have managed to retain their folklore to a great extent. It is through the songs that their thought process and way of life gets reflected.

Today, when Rabha society is trying to know and preserve its past, songs are one of the reliable ways of understanding it. A song is framed by its poetic language and tune, and the rhythm aids memory as well.

The present study has been an endeavour to describe and analyse the materials making up the culture of the Totola Rabhas. The questions, which guided my engagements with the folksongs of the Totola Rabhas, can be listed as follows:

a) How folksongs reflect the worldview of the Totola Rabhas and their perspective about their life, nature, aspirations, aesthetic sense and also their sense of poetic expression through simile, metaphors, etc.

b) What are the attitudes, concerns, contexts and metaphors highlighted in folksongs traditions?

c) What is the importance of folk song in life? How does it help in living a life (like releasing tension, etc.)?

c) How do folksongs as an epistemic resource capture the complexities of gender?

d) How does one document, examine and explain the continuities and changes in the folksongs with assimilation motif?

However, according to the subject matter and nature of the folk songs current among the Totola Rabhas, some special characteristic is distinctly noticeable. They may be mentioned as listed below: -

1. Songs for religious occasions/ folk blessings
2. Folk songs influenced by the songs of the Pati Rabhas like Bahurangi.

3. Songs having common materials of Rabha way of life- marriage songs, love songs, Worksongs, Festive Songs
4. Songs fully shared by both the Totola Rabhas and the Assamese, like *Moh Kheda Geet*, *BhalukNosowageet*, etc.
5. Incantations special to the Rabhas mostly for purification and healing.

The folk songs of the Totola Rabhas as collected for this research can be categorised as follows:

1. Devotional Songs/ Folk Blessings
2. Songs of Love and Yearning
3. Marriage Songs
4. *BahurangiGeet*
5. Work Songs
6. Drinking Songs
7. Hunting Songs
8. Fishing Songs
9. Shepherd Songs
10. *Moh Kheda Geet/ BhalukNosowaGeet*
11. *BambolpitaGeet*
12. Lullabies/ Cradle Songs
13. Play songs
14. Incantations and Chants

Before continuing, I would draw the attention of the readers to the fact that my research should not be read as a treatise on monolithic/uniform reality of Totola Rabha society. It

is largely concerned with the folk songs I have come across, both documented and undocumented perspective. Totola Rabhas are scattered in small numbers across the state and their neighbouring communities differ from place to place. Hence, the folksong of the Totola Rabhas living in a place might not be identical with those living in another place.

#### **4.3 Devotional Songs/ Folk Blessings:**

“Song is used to communicate with other worlds-to address the Above-folk, as the Congo natives call the dwellers in the skies.” (Burne, 1996)

Folk religion is the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion (Yoder 1974: 14). James Cox says that “Religion refers to identifiable communities that base their beliefs and experiences of postulated non-falsifiable realities on a tradition that is transmitted authoritatively from generation to generation” (Cox 2007: 85). Folklorist Leonard Norman Primiano, who criticises the terms ‘folk/popular’ religion and prefers ‘vernacular’ religion instead, points out that, since vernacular religion is religion as it is lived, it is impossible for the religion of an individual not to be vernacular (Primiano 1995: 44). The term ‘vernacular’ is borrowed from linguistics and has meanings such as ‘indigenous’, ‘personal’, ‘private’, ‘native’, and ‘local’ attached to it (ibid.: 42–43). Whatever the term, let’s us consider the religious practices of the Totola Rabhas as is evident today and the songs associated with it.

The Totola Rabhas have a definite body of beliefs connected with distinct observances and ritual practices. They believe in a good number of benevolent and malevolent spirits

who they think reside in the hills and mountains, forests, ponds, rivers, trees, *gohaighar* (House of Gods, ie, temples) and in other places. It is still a practice among the Totola Rabhas to propitiate the spirits. Some of them are worshipped annually and collectively by the village folk for prosperity and happiness. There are also some deities who are worshipped in the individual household. They are the household deities. It is usually the village priest known as *deuri* who propitiate the deities.

The following songs are sung during various stages of the offering to a traditional deity '*Bura Bun Gohai*'. The offering is held during the time of *BohagBihu*, the festival celebrated to welcome the New Year in Assam. This starts sometime between 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> of April every year. The deity is taken around the village to every household accompanied by the beating of drums and the sound of trumpets and *taal*. The songs have been collected from Dhanburi Rabha (80 yrs) of 2 No. Kataligaon (Baksa) on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 2016.

*Honarhalakhati*

*Ruporpahikhati*

*Gohai jai alangotuthiye*

*O di khawarongmoni*

*O biyadibalagewe*

*Ruporpahikhati*

*Gohai jai alangotuthiye.*

(Ornaments of gold

Ornaments of silver

The deity goes on a palanquin

With heart of joy

She must be married off

Ornaments of gold

The deity goes on a palanquin.)

The song speaks of the marriage of the deity that is decorated with gold and silver ornaments. The deity is carried on a palanquin. Here the symbolic representation of the deity in the form of handkerchiefs decorated in a bamboo, is also decorated with gold and silver.

*Gohaiiahegothaighorote*

*Ulaibiyakhang*

*Ami nariabhagenihewakarijang.*

(The deity comes to the house,

Let's partake in the marriage feast.

We the women, let's bow to her.)

Here, the deity comes to the household and the womenfolk are ready to bow and be blessed. The deity is carried house to house in the village and the members of the family bow to her. This is done once in a year during the month of *Bohag* which falls in the second week of April.

*Gohaiiaherati*

*Gohaibandheati*

*Gohaikeborabajapiye*

*O son puinoborotiko*

*Huna lore sore.*

*Gohaiiaherati*



*Gohaibandheati*

*Gohaikeborabajapiye.*

(The deity comes at night  
The deity is prepared by tying  
Wear the sacred bindu  
Listen, it shakes  
The deity comes at night  
The deity is prepared by tying  
A hat to welcome the deity.)

The song will be understood only when one is aware of the religious practices prevalent among the Totola Rabhas. Here, a symbolic representation of the deity is prepared by tying hundreds of handkerchieves and *bihuwans* with threads known as *awa huta*.

*Dhan tikuwadewritopuwa*

*Ui ram poratkhangporatkhankorewe*

*Rohelogoribhagabaparanai*

*Ui ram duklaikhangduklaikhangkorewe*

(The priest, early in the morn,  
Says he will devour  
Wait a while friend, I am unable to distribute  
He tries to eat the whole.)

The above songs highlight the devotion of the village folk associated with their simple humorous life. The priest is also teased through the song. It highlights that the priest can't wait any longer to eat the offerings. The one who distributes the offerings including gram, banana, etc. is trying his best to give a share to everyone. But the priest can't wait any longer.

*Baudhankekuadeuritukhukuwa*

*Ui ram kolkhangkolkhangkorewe*

*Ro he logoribhagabaparanai*

*Ui ram baklaikhangbaklaikhangkorewe*

(The paddy is bent, the priest is a glutton

He wants to gobble a banana

Wait a while, I am still distributing

He wants to have even the peels.)

The priest is so gluttonous that he wants to consume even the banana peels. This song is sung to tease the priest. Totola Rabhas are fun loving people and they grab every opportunity to create a mess. They have fun even while offering prayers.

The following devotional lines have a sad context. It speaks of the sisters working together in the fields and now the time for separation has come as one of them is to be married. The deities are referred to here. It's a sad reference to the context as to who will accompany the one left behind in cultivation.

*Hokol Phule Phule*

*Aru phulenarirkopalotehenduror phot. (entry)*

*Phule phuleurilo jai*

*O bai he enuwakorarmoktenuwakoraremok.*

*Aa katikaturulunghali*

*Dui bhuilabhuilanari, narirkopalote*

*Hendurorrekhamusi di jabokone.*

*Jangikataturulungui, hiyakekatibo kune*

*O mahi olai aa olai aa aahwiyajahohoiyapetotasatoikokramokrahoiya*

*Gohaighororkathikathiindure tule mati*

*Gokhaniyebohiasebogularepakhi.*

*Aa aajang aa olai aa.*

(The flowering flowers everywhere  
And the *bindu* on the forehead  
It flies from flower to flower  
Hey sister, why do you do this to me?  
We have planted the *hali* paddy  
Two women, *bindu* on the forehead  
Who will wipe it off?  
We have planted the betel-nut plants in a line  
Who will cut it down?  
Come out aunt, you are lying there in pain  
The rats dig the verandah of the temple  
The deity sits there on white wings  
Come out let's leave.)

### **Context**

When the whole of Assam is busy in their preparations for the new year starting with Bohag Bihu, the only festival which is celebrated by every resident of Assam irrespective of their religion, caste and creed, during a time when most of the Indian states celebrate what they call *Baisakh*, the first month of the Indian calendar; the Totola Rabhas of 2 no. Kataligaon (Rabha Supa) in Mushalpur, the district headquarter of Baksa (Assam, India), gear up to pay their homage to *Bura Bun Gohai*, the Goddess of all things.

The one indigenous religious practice, the one Goddess, apart from the many Hindu Gods and Goddesses the Totola Rabhas of Mushalpur believe in, is '*Bura Bun Gohai*' that can be exactly translated into 'Old Forest Goddess'. She is worshipped only in this village, but she has many believers scattering from the Assamese to the Bodos far and wide. She is believed to be the god of all things and the prosperity of the village depends entirely on her. She is all powerful and there have been instances where people have received Boons from her. She is considered to be all merciful and kind at the same time. People believe that their wishes are fulfilled once they ask it from 'Mother *Bura Bun Gohai*'. Many childless couples have received the blessings of '*Bura Bun Gohai*' in the form of their sons and daughters. They are so grateful to her that they now take it as a duty to offer prayers and offerings to her every year. There are many families who conduct the puja at their home and the *Gohai* is brought to the very steps of their household accompanied by the beating of big drums and trumpets.

Here is a blessing muttered by a village elder known as *Letra Bangali*. His prayer goes-

*"He ai Bura Bun Gohai,  
Ami je einaungnaungsuliketakloi  
Ga dhui, gatjikakapur loi, eirodot  
Athukarinomoskarkorisu,  
Khaungte, loungte, ghurongte, phurongte,  
Kibabhul hobo pare.  
Najat jaungnakhatkhaung.  
EiBrahmarhalakhorjenekoiijulias  
tenekesirojibonsirokaljatejulithake.  
Joi ai Bura Bun GohaikSinti,*

*Hori bol, horibol, horibol.*”

And the air rings with the sound of everyone young and old present, ‘*Hori bol, horibol,horibol.*’

The translated version of LetraBangali’s blessings would be-

“O Mother Old Forest Goddess,

We, along these small small kids

Bathing, taking wet cloth on our body, in this hot sun

Bow to you kneeling.

While eating, while moving around

We might have committed mistakes.

We go where we are not supposed to, eat what we are not supposed to.

Just as the Brahma’s wick

Is burning;

In the same way,

Let our life shine forever and ever.

Let’s say, praise be *Bura Bun Gohai*, praise him, praise him, praise him.”

The above prayer is not in the form of *mantras*; it’s rather just a prayer in simple colloquial words seeking the deity’s blessings.

The Totola Rabhas also sing religious songs influenced by the Assamese *naam* and use the same songs as their neighbour.

#### **4.4 Songs of Love and Yearning**

Lovesongs are sung among the Totola Rabhas. The following song presents the theme of love and longing. Love poetry or song has been present since ages in all

communities. One can fathom and understand love, longing and loss through the love songs. Though the folk are illiterate they have their own way of expressing love and this has been handed down from generation to generation through word of mouth. The Totola Rabhas too are not behind in romance. They are indeed natural poets in the real sense of the term.

It's almost common in Totola Rabha folk songs or poetry to use repetitive words. This helps in retaining the song to memory.

The following love song is sung in praise of a girl from *Majikusi*. In the song which I have attempted to translate, one can see all the nuances of these songs and this particular genre. *Majikusi* is a village in the district of Darrang in Assam. The narrator has fallen in love with the beautiful girl but the girl is lured away by someone and that too with his melodious note of flute. His life, thoughts and feelings are clearly defined. The speaker uses simple repetitive words and imagery to intensify his feelings of pangs as a result of his unrequited love. He uses nature as a background to convey his emotional states. The poem is full of archaic words in a dialect form of Assamese, developed as a result of intercultural communication. The Totola Rabhas have developed their own way of expressing emotions. There is a simple and straightforward representation of rural life which also highlights the simplicity in the life of the Totola Rabha folk. The oral poetry has been collected from an informant, Mr. Ajay Rabha of Baksa District of Assam. An attempt has been made to translate the source text (ST) into a Target Text (TT), in this case, English, not with an aim to create a new poetry but to express the meaning underlying it.

*O Majikusirghisiri, tore nam je komoli*

*Hayohaihitoyiya mor, posonda jai.*

*Komoliyenomoli, dehanohoitayahorjali*

*Hayohaihitoyiya mor, posondo jai.*

(O beauty of *Majikusi*; Softy is thy name.

Hai o hai, that daughter, is the one I choose

The soft one, the lovable one, your body, unlike the cucumber's thorned surface

Hai o hai, that daughter, is the one I choose.)

In the above translation, some words have been condensed to bring out the effect of love. The words 'hai o hai' have been retained to give the original feel. Through the lines, the beauty of the girl from *Majikusi* gets highlighted. Her body seems to be the opposite of a cucumber's thorned surface. So, he names her 'Softy'. The universal concept of love is touched upon. The lines 1, 2, 5 and 6 in the ST follow the same rhyming scheme and the lines 3 and 4 are repeated in the lines 7 and 8. The use of alliteration is also seen in the words '*Hai o Hai Hito*'.

*O hate jolemuthikharu, kanejolemunikeru*

*Hayohaihitoyiya, mor posondo jai*

(O the bangled hand, o the ringed ear

Hai o hai, that daughter, is the one I choose.)

The lines praise the beauty of the girl. The speaker praises her ringed ear and bangled hand. The speaker has repeated the lines '*hai o haihitoyiya, Morposondo jai*' to point out the girl whom he loves. The first two lines follow the same rhyming scheme in ST.

*Tulilitibahito, konebojala*

*Anba lagajiyato, konebhulala*

(Who has played the melodious flute?

With that, who has lured, the daughter I was supposed to marry.)

A melancholic note is seen in the above lines that questions as to who has lured the girl he was supposed to marry and that too with the melodious note of a flute. Here, opaque translation method is used to clarify the meaning. Here, lines 1 and 3, 2 and 4 are in the same rhyming schemes in ST. The use of assonance is also seen in the line '*Anba LagaJiyato*' where the vowel sound of 'a' is dominant.

*Kaur kandekelengkeseng, gasoruporot*

*Halorgorubisidilong, monordhikarot*

(The crow crows on treetops

The buffaloes, I sold in mental woe.)

The sad condition of the singer is highlighted through the 'unceremonious' visit of the crows atop a tree and this gives a hint of the superstitious belief among the rural folk. It is a folk belief that a crow crows when some misfortune has taken place or is about to take place. Alliteration is used in the line '*Kaur kandekelengkeleng*' to bring an effect of bad omen. Onomatopoeia is also used in '*kelengkeleng*' to denote the crowing of crows. The buffaloes are the most prized possession of a villager and the height of sadness is expressed in the selling of these very buffaloes due to utter sadness caused by the elopement of his love. Lines 2 and 4 are in the same rhyming scheme.

*Khorikatongurongedoronge, jhirangegasortolot*

*Gasoretolotesiumorigathilong, dibanapalongghisirigolot.*

(Here, there, I cut the logs; below the trees, I rest

The garland I made below the trees; I failed to present her.)

The melancholic lover expresses his perils of love by engaging in hard work and toil. He was so infatuated in love that he started making garlands for her much before he could actually express his feelings. His disappointment is one of despair as his love is



gone forever. Imagery is used here to present the helpless condition of the speaker. His choice of nature as a background is a major feature. Here, the translator has made use of substitution to create the same effect as the ST.

*Aatijahalalong, safatibirilong, kodulapelalonglai*  
*Lairemajotilafahakgujila, singotajerandhutanai.*

(I have fenced my plot, and planted lettuce  
But there is none, to pluck and to cook.)

The lover now feels the absence of the girl when his plot is filled with vegetables as there is none to pluck and cook. This itself is a traditional way of expressing love among the cultivators. Rural setting is seen to be used as a background to intensify the pangs of love. The second and fourth lines in the ST follow the same rhyming scheme.

*Upai gel upore, mone gel bhitore*  
*Mone gel oiranormaje*  
*Oiranormajote, ghuripakiahongte*  
*Teunakhaibonoriyabaghe.*

(Hopes have died,  
Mind has gone aloft  
I wander among the woods,  
Even tigers seem to overlook.)

The poet is so forsaken that even the tigers seem to ignore him in the forest. Here, displacement is used by the translator for the sake of beauty. Here all the lines follow the same rhyming scheme. The speaker plunges into the woods out of grief to get consolation and later realize the presence of tigers who seem to ignore him just as the saying goes, 'Tigers don't feast on wounded preys.' So also, the heartbroken lover is wounded deep within and is left alone even in the woods.

*Borjharortiyasorai,  
Akakhdhakiuri jai  
Sai mane nedekha hoi  
Sokupanimatit pore  
Aagorkothamonot pore  
Monotporileupaboloinai.*

. (The parrot of the woods  
Fly away into the sky  
Disappears as one surveys  
Tears fall to the ground  
The past I recollect  
She's nowhere to be found.)

The grief-stricken poet now watches the parrot fly into the sky and beyond. Tears seem to fall to the ground as the past keeps coming back but in vain.

*Nodi nodiuti jai, haporapohuto  
Boituthijhokoraikan  
Ki kopal, hadhilon  
Ghisirirnapalong mon.*

(The deer drifts in the river  
Shakes its ears in the bank  
What fate do I hold?  
Failed even to win her heart.)

Here, the poet compares his life to that of a drifting deer who manages to get to the shore. But moans at his inability to win the heart of his love. Unrequited love seems to be the theme of the lines.

*Hori oi hori!gamsa gel siri  
Kon dina pam moi, tor nisinatiri.*

(Lord O Lord!gamosa has been worn to shreds  
When shall I find, a mate like you?)

He then calls out to God saying there is none to provide him with a loin cloth, *gamosa*. It is traditional for a wife to weave *gamosas* for the husband. But here, there is none. So, the speaker wonders as to when he shall get a mate like the girl of *Majikusi*. Here, the trust on God and the belief that God will provide with a wife gets highlighted. The speaker calls out to God for help as he needs a spouse.

The above song translated from Totola Rabha is a lyrical song dwelling on the pangs of unrequited love on the part of a peasant boy. He falls in love with a girl from *Majikusi* whom he describes to be one so slender and soft. He uses metaphorical comparison but with an opposite effect when he refers to the body of the girl to be unlike the rough surface of the cucumber. His love story seems to be one of sadness when the girl of his dreams is lured by the romantic tune of flute. The words used by the speaker of course creates a hilarious situation amid sadness for he says-

*'Anba lagajiyato<sup>1</sup>, kune bhulala'*

The lines express a feeling of despair. The speaker says, 'Who has lured the girl I was supposed to marry?' And that too with just the notes of a flute.

Nature seems to realize his sadness when he describes a crow spreading his melancholic message. He, instead of doing anything daring to bring back the girl, inflicts himself with agony when he sells his buffaloes out of bitterness. He has prepared a garland of flowers but to no use as the girl of his dreams is has flown away. His utter helpless condition gets highlighted when he says,

*'Oiranormajote, ghuripakiahongte  
Teunakhaibonoriyabaghe'*.

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<sup>1</sup>Daughter

The speaker wanders among the woods in utter sadness, but even the tigers seem to overlook. Such was the condition of the speaker. He again compares his condition to be worse than that of a drifting deer who has every hope of swimming to the shore. But for him, there is no hope left as his dreams have been shattered.

The oral poetry that have been analyzed manages to touch the bitterness of unrequited love using poetic techniques such as alliteration, onomatopoeia, metaphor, couplet, rhyming schemes, etc. Thus, we see that oral Poetry of Totola Rabhas are rich in form and content.

The source and target texts were analyzed at extra linguistic level. Regarding extra linguistic level, the two texts were examined in terms of coherence and implicature under the headings of grammar and poetics. The translator had to use opaque translation due to the pragmatic, linguistic and cultural translation problem. In many cases, he has shifted at different levels which are led to the change of effect in the TT. The poet has keenly used alliterations, onomatopoeia and metaphors intending to show his pitiable condition, and interestingly, the translator, following the speaker, have successfully conveyed them to the TT. To sum up, a translator's success arises from his literary expertise, background knowledge, and cultural knowledge which are dominant features in the extra textual analysis of oral poetry.

Here's another love song sung by the damsels.

***More naam kumoli more naam numoli***

*Aasilongaaibaparluru*

*Randhibaknajanongbaribaknajanong*

*Horutebiyadilausorgatnuthilagoru.*

(Softy is my name

I was apple of my parents' eyes  
I know not how to cook or serve.  
I got married off early and none presented a cow.)

Through the above lines, we get a view into the life of a young girl who was the apple of her parents' eyes and grew in love and care. She is pushed to her limits when she is married off at an early age. It is expected of every bride to know how to cook and serve food, but she knows none. She does not know what fate awaits her at her in-laws. It was customary to present cows to the bride, but she didn't receive it maybe because her parents could not afford it.

*Kosuhaktulilong, khorahibhoralung*

*Jhohaimanenodhoresoru*

*Randhongte gala gali, Barongte gala gali*

*Pithit pore haluwaloru.*

(I plucked leaves of arum plant, filled the basket,  
But they are too much to fit the pan.  
I get rebuked while cooking, while serving.  
I get whipped on the back with a goad meant for the bulls.)

The young girl got married off at an early age only to be abused and harassed by the in-laws. She does her best to collect leaves of arum plant and cook for the family. But since she is unexperienced in cooking, she does not know the quantity to be put in the pan. Therefore, she gets whipped on the back with a goad meant for the animals. She is not spared even while serving food. Here, the pitiable plight of the young bride is portrayed. This throws a light into the harassment meted out to the young unexperienced brides among the Totola Rabhas. The parents of the bride marry her off without knowing much about the family of their son-in-law. They are concerned only about marrying their daughter off and not her happiness. This is a lesson to all the

parents of possible brides. They should rather marry her off only when she comes of age and gets experience about the ways of life. She needs to know many things in life. That is why, the girls are expected to learn how to cook or weave cloths before their marriage. They should learn those in their mothers' home. This will later lead to a peaceful life with their in-laws.

*Borhanjakaahila, sirikesarake*

*Jhiki jai sotalorkhori*

*Borhanjhekakesakhori, bhatrandhongkenekori*

*Likrakanderoyajhoyakori.*

(The rain drops fallsirikesarake,  
Drenches the firewood in the courtyard.  
The firewood gets damp, how do I cook  
And there my child cries.)

The plight of the bride gets worsened when the rain drenches the firewood that's layed out to dry in the sun. She now has no firewood to cook food and she is at a fix. She knows that she will be whipped if she doesn't cook food.

*Botahjakaahilalaheriloheri*

*Horigelgasore pat*

*Nonglarmukhotetelaskaporlogalong*

*Kayo dengtanai mat.*

(The wind blows gently  
The leaves fall  
As I spread out the yarn for weaving  
There's no one to speak to me.)

Here, the bride speaks of her loneliness as she spreads out the yarn for weaving. There is no one that she can talk to in her solitude. Some of the duties of a wife as portrayed in the song can be said to be collecting leaves for cooking, cooking and serving food,

weaving and looking after the children. One is expected to be acquainted with all these responsibilities. If not, she is whipped thoroughly.

*Bor nodi dhongalimongali*

*Pare parekekurikahi.*

*Khangbulinokola, nengbuliunokola*

*Kata tamol, hoi gel bahi.*

(A large river flows,

Thickets of grasses grow by the sides.

You never expressed you'll dine, or you'll take away

The cut betel nut is now a waste.)

The husband has not expressed his desire to dine maybe because he is dissatisfied with the kind of food his wife has cooked. As it is customary to chew betel nut after food, she keeps it ready for her husband, but he does not take it and it's a waste.

In the above song, we are given a view into the life of an unhappy married couple. This is because the girl was married off at an early age. She was young and inexperienced and didn't know the complications of a married life. This led her to be whipped time and again. It is seen that the life of many young brides is pushed to a waste because of wrong decisions taken by the parents. Even the groom and the in-laws are not considerate enough to have patience with the young bride. Their expectations are much higher. This leads to domestic violence and even death at times.

In fact, the above song has a lesson. It has got a message to spread.

Here's another song sung by the damsels:

*Ghamrung deka oi, kamrung deka*

*Eri najabimok*

*Dehi kata huta, joraijorai*

*Gamsapindhamtok.*

This an appeal not to leave her behind as she wants to go with the handsome young man. She tries to influence him to take her along saying that she will weave *gamsa*<sup>2</sup> for him.

*Aabunakhailaphu*

*Moinorandhong kino hak*

*Barit aasetutoyaraag*

*Gasotthakaguito*

*Matit hat bhagkorithak.*

*Aaliaalinajabi, aalibhangibo*

*Pororjhiyanojhokabi, dailagibo.*

*Selengsatiyabotiya mara,*

*Panitolot jota mara.*

*Kathiyenaikothayenai,*

*Gharat goledhukunarbera.*

(Grandmother has no taste for mushroom

What edible leaves do I prepare?

There are edible plants in the yard

The *guion* treetops

Divide it into seven shares.

Don't tread on the pathways, they might give way.

Don't tease others' daughters for you will then be guilty.

You are so egoistic and proud that

You wear shoes even underwater

Your house doesn't even have a verandah

And has walls made of betel tree leaves.)

(Rabha, 2010: 193)

Through the song, one is advised not to tease other's daughters or else he might be considered guilty and punished. The pride of a person is highlighted through the lines. He is so proud that he wears shoes even in knee deep water. He does this to hide his

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<sup>2</sup> A loin cloth



poverty back home. The song is one of humour where the pride goes before a fall. The person who is showing off does not even have a proper house for the walls are made of betel tree leaves rather than bamboo.

The boys now sing to attract the damsels:

*Botahoraagote, molemolgondhala*

*Karno barite aam?*

*Aamorejabori, datotlage Jodi*

*Lagoke*

*Teublikorsaikham.*

(The wind carries fragrance of flowers  
Whose yards are those that has mangoes.  
What if, the mango fibres get stuck between teeth?  
Let it be-  
We will still devour it with joy.)

The lines portray seasons of fruit. The fragrance of mango flowers is quite inviting. It is common for the village folk to share the fruits and vegetables that grow in their yard.

This portrays the simplicity and sharing attitude of the folk.

*Hap lejiyasuli*

*Oi khoromphuliyabhor*

*Heijhiyaknalagemok*

*Gharhotsiri.*

(The snake long hair  
And the long slender legs  
I don't need such a bride  
That might break a family.)

The preference of the groom regarding a bride is portrayed through the lines. The girl might have long hair, long slender legs but she might not be preferred. One's character

is what counts more than one's external beauty. The peace within a family might be destroyed if the bride does not have the qualities that are expected of a wife.

*Porboteporbote, riuriuwaporbot*

*Nami aahekholongiyabhot*

*Eikhongaonrjhiyagilar*

*Koliyaparor thot.*

(The high standing hills  
Comes down kissing the plains  
The damsels of this village  
Have lips that of a pigeon.)

The above lines are sung in a teasing mood. The lips of the damsels are compared to the beaks of pigeons. This is so because of the bright lipstick that the girls apply to beautify themselves. The lines are a satire on the effort of the girls to look beautiful even if they are not.

*Hairekolir din, oi hairekolir din*

*Kolirdinorjhiyaklage, khopat mara pin.*

(The days of *kalyug*, and the nights of *kalyug*  
The daughters in the days of *kalyug*, ask for hairpins.)

Here, the bad days of a person are highlighted. The days are compared to *kalyug*. One does not have enough to feed one's family and here the daughters ask for hairpins to make themselves look beautiful.

*Silang sipang, randhoni*

*Silang sipangbaroni*

*Silang sipangrandhonirpala*

*Dehahekoliyadhun mare dhuniya*

*Aanjarandhepaniyapaniya.*

*(Silang sipangcook*  
It's her turn to distribute the food.  
And to cook the food.  
She might be a lady with beauty,  
But she cooks curry that's watery.)

The above lines are sung to tease a person who spends most of her time to beautify herself rather than learning the art of cooking which is a necessity. It's a fact that one's beauty won't satiate one's hunger. She should know the household chores.

(Satish Rabha)

#### **4.5. Marriage Songs**

Sociologists and Folklorists have identified folksongs as reservoirs of woman's said and unsaid expressions (see Narayan 1986, 1993; Raheja and Gold 1996; Gold2003). Here's a song that portrays the sadness of three sisters at the thought of departing. They have grown together under one roof and now they have to part. They prefer to die rather than to get separated.

*Kothiya tolitepaninasolasol*  
*Hahinipari gel phol.*  
*Haterekotatamol*  
*Hatotehukai gel*  
*Dibarenapalong sol.*  
*Berarebaro kami*  
*Aamihoisotiniboini*  
*Nomorithakilungkiya.*  
*Ei bole nengneng*  
*Hiu bole nengneng*  
*Selengkapurlogailulungkiya*

(The water beneath the paddy is calm  
The duck has layed eggs.  
The nut that I cut  
Got withered in hand  
Yet, I couldn't give a thing.  
Twelve split bamboos hold the wall  
And here we are three (sisters)  
Why weren't we dead?  
He says he wants to marry me,  
And the other says he too wants to marry me,  
Why should we get our *seleng* ready?)

The very first line of the song brings to light the sadness caused at the thought of departure. Even the otherwise moving waters in the fields remain still. One of the sister has cut nuts for the other but they too get withered now. The wall in the house is held together by twelve split bamboos and here their family is held together by these three sisters who are now about to part. This is symbolic in that the three sisters are the backbone of the family. They prefer to die rather than to be separated. A confusion is created as their suitors are many. They regret that they have got their *seleng* ready for the groom. *Seleng* is a shawl used by the groom to wrap round his body on the day of marriage.

In earlier times in case of *HamajikBiyaie.*, Social Marriage, it was a compulsion to felicitate the Mother and the maternal uncle of the Bride. The mothers were usually presented with Mekhela and the uncles were presented with a pair of duck or the thighs of the pig. Therefore, the songs sung during marriages is known as *PheraBharigeet* or Thigh song (referring to the thighs of the pig). This dance is actually very rare and was performed by the Totola Rabhas in ancient times. Here '*Bhari*' refers to the essential

things, like betel-nut and pig thigh being carried on the shoulder of the groom's party-men. It's a proud moment to be the carrier of a pig-thigh. The following song is sung as a plea to be made a thigh carrier.

*Nislamasorbasatinidaldari*

*Mokokurlokbasafferabhari*

*Hori o hori, Ram o Ram*

*Mokokurlokbasapherabhari.*

(The prawns have three beards  
Make me, o son, a thigh carrier.  
O Lord O Ram  
Make me, o son, a thigh carrier.)

### **Marriage song**

*Udongbarirtupokilewa*

*Pitrimatri Korong hewa*

*Laikhelaikhesalam Korong.*

*Biyakhabaprojahokol,*

*Beyapaleuupainai*

*Tondoresoronotdhorong.*

(The creepers of the open grove  
I bow to mother and father  
I pay my deepest respects.  
The people gathered here for the marriage  
It's ok even if you feel bad,  
I touch your feet.)

The song starts off paying deepest respects to the father and the mother and the people gathered for the marriage ceremony. It is customary to touch the feet of the elderly seeking blessings. A guest is considered to represent the 'Goddess Lakshmi' herself. It is always considered a blessing if more guests come in to attend a ceremony, be it a

marriage ceremony or any other ceremonies. Even uninvited guests are welcome in such occasions.

*Aagolibahorekatilungdhenu*  
*Pod marongrenurenu,*  
*Huni thakibibotahordalot.*  
*Khoparangighisiri*  
*Balubotholnohoba*  
*Enehengabhorukalot.*  
*Tamolkatilungaangiliaangili*  
*Panko katilungjor.*  
*Jhalukbarirgobhora*  
*Biyakhabaahili*  
*Baohatimeghelatdhor.*

(I make a bow out of a bamboo tip  
The one with the red pun  
Don't be a mess  
At such a young age.  
I cut the betelnut,  
I cut the betel leaf.  
You have come from Jalukbari  
To attend the marriage ceremony  
Take hold of your *mekhela* by your left.)

The above lines reflect the social norms to be followed while in public. Here, a young girl with a red pun is advised to behave properly and to take hold of her *mekhela* that's dragging.

*Ki bhelengi ki jotuwa*  
*Gol melimelisai.*  
*Mod dhalbapaninai*  
*AanonggeiGhoramarar pai.*  
*Ghoramarpaninai*

*Sulikosabarhi jai*

*Bandhiborupainai.*

(What bushes, what the obstacles,  
They watch with raised necks.  
There's no water for the wine  
Let me bring the water from Ghoramara  
There's no water in Ghoramara  
The long growth of hair-  
There's no way to tie it to a knot.)

Here, lines from a hunting song are brought in. There's no water for the wine and the deers have come overcoming all obstacles for water.

*Borgharharilung, soragharharilung*

*Urahotpelalungjeng.*

*Misikmarisowali, nasibanajana;*

*Matitesosoretheng.*

(I cleaned the main house, swept the rest house  
Threw away the twigs.  
Smiling girl, you don't know how to dance  
For you drag your feet.)

Morning chores are a must for a girl. She has to clean all the rooms early in the morning. And here, a girl is addressed to as not being able to dance. She rather drags her feet.

*Borghar hokum kum*

*Soraghar hokum kum*

*Hari harinaherorkhuta.*

*Gheterathebela*

*Jhokaihenoloba,*

*Aageaagebisorasuta.*

(The main house is large  
The rest house the same

Wooden poles all along  
Huge and large  
Do not tease  
For you look for excuses.)

It's not an easy task to clean all the rooms in the house. The main house is large and has wooden poles all along. Therefore, it is not an easy task. One should not look for excuses rather one should do ones work with responsibility.

*Aahongbulinahili*  
*Jang bulinigili*  
*Dukhiyabulidekhillimok.*

(You promised  
But never came  
You promised but never went  
You judged me to be poor.)

Here, the pangs of love and poverty are being spoken of. A promise is being broken and it really hurts.

*Kothiya tolitepaninasolasol*  
*Hahiniparigelphol*  
*Hatorekotatamol*  
*Hatotehukai gel*  
*Dibarenapalung sol.*

(The water beneath the paddy is calm  
The duck has layed eggs.  
The nut that I cut  
Got withered in hand  
Yet, I couldn't give a thing.)

The duck has layed eggs in the calm waters. The betel nut has withered in the hands and yet the loved one has not arrived.



*Berarebaro kami*  
*Aamihoisutiniboini*  
*Nomorithakilungkiya*  
*Eu bole nengneng*  
*Hiu bole nengneng*  
*Selengkapurlugailulungkiya.*

(Twelve split bamboos hold the wall  
And here we are three (sisters)  
Why weren't we dead?  
He says he wants to marry me,  
And the other says he too wants to marry me,  
Why should we get our *seleng* ready?)

Here, there are three sisters and yet none is married off as yet. The ones who come to see the girls have fallen for the same girl and now she is at a fix. She laments as to why she should get her *seleng* ready. When a person gets the *seleng* ready, it symbolizes that they are ready for marriage. When potential grooms know that there are girls of marriageable age in a family and that they are getting ready for marriage, they come in to see the girls. And now, the problem is that all the grooms have fallen for the same girl.

### ***Marriage song***

*Aaguwaibandhilung gain a damuri, pasuwaibandhilunghati*  
*Batitnakhangpani, kahitnakhangbhat*  
*Kar logotkhowanaiguwa, Guwahatirguwa pan.*  
*Takkorengkhangkhang*  
*Maas besa bojaror sun.*  
*Sun saikhabittoi, gao hot rakhibo tan.*

(I tether the cows and calves in the front, and the elephant at the back.  
I won't drink water in a bowl, I won't eat rice in a plate  
With whom have I not shared betel nut and leaf of Guwahati?)

We so love to taste  
Lime from the fish market  
Be careful with the lime you take; keep yourself healthy.)

It is seen that most of the lines in a song are used due to their musical effect and might not match in meaning. However, the rhyming effect gives the song its beauty. Here, the custom of offering betel nut to the guests is being referred to and that one should take care of his own health.

*Mas mara masuwoi, jal mara jaluwoi*  
*Keita puthi mas pali? Dabudangrisuwali*  
*Aamakebasili, keitasikunmunipali?*

(The fisherman catches fish, he throws the net  
How many fishes have you caught? You, the punned girl  
You have rejected us; how many handsome men have you found?)

Through the above lines a girl is compared to a fisherman. Just as a fisherman throws his net to catch fish, the girl tries to entrap men with her beauty. In the process, she has rejected many men. The pride of the beautiful girl with a pun is being projected.

*Holmaskutilung, dokhoradokhuri*  
*Kofulkutilungthuki,*  
*Khormarangisuwali, munihokepowanai*  
*Sai mora dokhomorputhi.*

(I cut the snakehead fish, into uneven pieces.  
I chopped banana flowers.  
The punned girl, hasn't yet found a man.  
You check the texts of class X)

Here, the girl is still in search of a man and hasn't yet found one.

*Notunkhalkhundilung, magur mas jiyalung*  
*Silingotsalongot kore;*

*Misikmarirhatote, pilingotpalangot kore.*

(I dug a new pond, and reared catfish

It swims *silingotsolongot*.

In the hands of Misikmari; it wriggles and struggles.)

A new pond if dug for rearing of fish. The fishes in the pond swim happily and they wriggle and struggle in pain when taken out of water.

*Oi gosjhupura, magur mas tupura*

*Bonakebonakeuri jai tiya;*

*Aana ji anibi, bhalsaianibi*

Nanibigoru sara jiya.

(The plants are thick, the catfish is round

The parrots fly in flocks;

Fetch as you wish, fetch but a good wife,

Not the daughter who tends the cows.)

Through the above lines, the addressee is given his independence to marry a girl of his choice, but he is advised not to marry the one who tends the cows.

(Rabha, 2010: 199)

### **Fetching water song (*PanitolaGeet*)**

The Totola Rabhas, like the neighbouring Assamese, perform the same rituals during a marriage. The women go to the nearby river in a procession while they sing and dance carrying pitcher on their heads or hips. It is a time of merriment as all the women and girls in a village take part in this ritual. The water is then used to bathe the bride back home. A song prevalent among the Totola Rabhas during such a ritual is as follows: -

*Ulaidiyatamorkoloh e, bhangafuta sang*

*O jaure, bibahorpani, tulibakejang.*

*Dhoinyodhoinyonolrojaebalibhatkhai*

*O Jamboyoti name koina, batotulaisai.*

(Bring out the copperpot, and the shattered bed

Let's go; fetch water for the marriage

The bride by the name of Jamboyoti

Peeks from the streets.)

(Pona Rabha)

The women are ready to go on a procession to the river to fetch water for the marriage of a bride by the name of Jamboyoti. They ask the members of the household to bring out the pitcher made of copper. While they go to fetch water, the bride comes out to the streets to check if they have returned.

#### **4.6 BahurangiGeet**

*Bahurangi* is a dance form very popular among the Pati Rabhas but now due to inter-marriage between Pati and the Totola Rabhas, they are also prevalent among the Totola Rabhas. *Bahurangi* is a mirthful dance and the whole surrounding is set to laughter and enjoyment and the whole crowd present is tempted to take part. They highlight the life of village folk. The agricultural life is also given a light as the main occupation of the people is cultivation. This dance form was actually performed by the aged women folk but now, the younger folk are a part of the entertaining dance form. *Bahurangi*, also referred to as '*Jorageet*' or '*khisageet*'. Their significance and appeal is in the expressive nature of the songs. The songs are joined together in couplets representing different thoughts and therefore they are called '*jorageet*' where '*jora*' means 'to join'. They are known as '*Bahurangi*' because it is composed of lines and stanzas of various contexts. A particular *Bahurangi* song might not highlight the same thought or the same context. It does not express a story or an event, but it is a mixture of whatever thought

one my get. It can go on and on. The aesthetics of the *Bahurangi* songs is the ability of the composers to put different contexts in the same song. It features good humoured comments of lampoons at the follies and foibles of the two sexes.

These songs were also prevalent among the elderly men and women, mostly when they marry off their daughters. The parents then go to their daughter's home and drink wine along with her in-laws. They have new relations called '*biyoi- biyoni*' with her in-laws. They then dance together singing mirthful songs. These songs did not speak of love but of other things in life. They usually start off when one gets drunk. It highlights the simple life of the village folk.

The musical instruments used during the performance are a long drum, flute and *tal*, a musical instrument made of metal plates to be smashed against each other. Split bamboo is also used just as the Bodos. During the process of the dance, materials that may be found lying nearby are used to create whatever sound possible. This is usually done when performed among their own folk but is avoided during performances in public places.

The following *Bahurangisong* is performed by the women folk who come together to a common ground, surround pots of wine and dance around it while someone from among the group goes around distributing wine to the already intoxicated dancers. As a result, they dance with more vigour and playfulness. Different formations are made from time to time as the song progresses. The movements are smooth and not complicated as the performers are usually aged women folk. They move in circles, straight lines, and also sit and stand from time to time. There are times when non-alcoholic dancers have to act as if being intoxicated by local wine. Equipment to extract local rice wine such as wine

pots, etc. are used during the dance. Time and again, the person at the middle falls off due to the actual effect of the wine. This gives more life to the whole performance as artificiality is nullified. A whole lot of traditional practices get portrayed in the song. The Totola Rabhas eat snails and this gets a light in the song. In fact, snails are a delicacy among the tribe. They use traditional fishing implements made of bamboo and this gets highlighted in the following lines.

*O boiniasilibakot, oboininasilibakot*

*Dui buini mas marong, mukalpatharot*

*Mukalorepatharot, hamukjeojeo*

*Saba naipokanai, kai pujibo deo*

*Manselengkatiutiu, hindulgasordalot*

*Take dekhi mas marong, mukalpatharot.*

(O sister, where have you been; sister! where have you not been,

Both sisters go fishing, in the open field.

Full of snails, in the open fields.

The kingfisher cries, and watches from branches

Seeing so, we go fishing, in the open fields.)

The song is sung between sisters where they sing about their fishing in the open field. They also sing in praise of the snail-filled field. As per their performance, they use fish trap called *jakhai* and an equipment to store fish, *kholai*. The rhyming scheme does not follow a pattern. Repetitive words are used to create a musical effect, ie. *Asilibakot*, *nasilibakot*; *jeojeo*; *tiutiu*, etc. Onomatopoeia is used as in *Manselengkatiutiu*. The language is a variant of Assamese language with archaic words. Many a times, there are no equivalent words to be found in English language and therefore, the actual meaning gets altered. The aesthetic aspects are to be felt only in the actual song with their

original pronunciations. The words used actually have no written form as they are a separate variant with own style of tone and way of pronunciation.

*Nadikotikasiluksiluk, hindulgasordalot*  
*Dui buini mas marong, lam patharot.*  
*Jakhamarongsubuksabak, uthildangorhol*  
*Mas marongteulaiporil, koyanakorphul.*  
*Jakharohilbimanot, kholekokalot*  
*Dui boinitamol Khang, jonmonohowahilot.*

(The water flows, below a tree  
Two sisters, go fishing, in the open fields  
With equipments, we fish  
Caught a large *hol*  
While fishing, I lost my nose-ring.  
The *jakhaigets* stuck, and the *khaloistill* in the hip.  
Us sisters, we chew betel nut, on the unborn stone.)

It's a humorous song indeed sung in a playful mood. They not only sing about fishing but chewing betel nut as well sitting on an unborn stone. It's while fishing that their nose ring falls off.

*Duror por dekhapalong, bogatingorghar*  
*Nasibakemon jai, borlokorghar.*  
*Hai haiborlokorghar.*

(I behold from afar, a tin-roofed house  
We can't help but dance, in the house of the rich  
In the house of the rich)

They then see a house with tin roof belonging to a rich man. They wish to go and perform *Bahurangibut* asks the owner not to scold them as they are not expert in

dancing. Onomatopoeia is used to represent the sound of the drum as in  
*DhimTaktaktakili*.

*Bohurangikhoparangik, naparibigali*  
*Nasibakenajanong, torengpagili*  
*Hai haitorengpagili*.

(Colourful dancer with red pun, don't ever rebuke  
For I know not how to dance; a fool I am  
A fool I am.)

They then request the rich man not to rebuke them as they were not experts in dancing.

*Dhimtaktaktakili, bajangdigholpeti*  
*Borlokorgharate, nasongbahurangi*  
*Hai hainasongbohurangi*.

(*Dhimtak* goes the drum, I sound the trumpet  
In the house of the rich, I perform the colourful dance  
I perform the colourful dance.)

The onomatopoeic sound of the beating of drum is presented through the words 'Dhimtaktaktakili'. Traditional drums are integral part of *Bahurangi* performance and the Rabha have got their own sequence of rhythm and beat. The performers sing that they now have entered the household of a rich man to perform *Bahurangi*.

*Borlokorbitita, sikuntamili*  
*Kanthonadolengdoleng, khopadangiri*  
*Hai haikhopadangiri*.

(The daughter of the rich, is a tender beauty  
With dangling earrings, she wears a huge pun  
Wears a huge pun.)



They praise the beauty of the daughter of the rich who wear dangling earrings and a big decorated pun.

*Borlokorbetata, mukhsotura*

*Bhikhadibonukhuje, imansipira*

*Hai haiimansipira.*

(The son of the rich, is clever mouthed  
He never gives alms; such a miser he is,  
And a miser he is.)

They then sing about the owner's son who is notorious and stingy. But at the same time, they ask for pardon for saying whatever comes to their mind.

*Kibakoisongnokoisong, beyanapabi*

*Bhul hoya thakile, dainodhoribi.*

*Hai haidainodhoribi.*

(I might have spoken something or the other, don't have grudges against me  
If I commit blunders, don't rebuke me  
*Hai hai*, don't rebuke me.)

The humbleness of the performers is portrayed through the above lines. They make it a point to ask for pardon if they might have uttered anything to hurt the household members.

*Hiltekongtekong re, hiltekongtekong*

*Duwarkhanihekong, modorjongadekhong.*

*Sot kxanimodta, khamkhanikhani*

*Take hunimahajon koi, naikaakharpani.*

(I strike the sone, I strike the stone  
I peep through the door, and get the glimpse of a wine pitcher  
The strong wine, will I consume  
The rich owner then says-There's no hope.)

Here, miserliness of the rich owner is portrayed. The performers peek through the door and get the glimpse of a pitcher full of rice beer but the owner says there's no hope for them. Perhaps, the owner does not want to offer wine to the performers.

*Hokolopokhi mas khai, manselekarnam*

*Hokolojati mod khai, Rabha jatirnam.*

(Many a bird feeds on fish; however, the blame goes to the kingfisher.

Every community consumes wine; and the blame goes to the Rabhas.)

The most interesting aspect gets highlighted in the above lines that says, every bird feeds on, but the blame goes to the kingfisher. Likewise, every community consumes wine, but the blame goes to the Rabhas.

The men folk are not dormant either. They swing to action saying-

*O kaka dangor bhai, tokeasongsai*

*Mokoekta ani dibi, taplidangorsai*

(O my elder brother, I take refuge in you

Bring me a bride, with huge buttocks)

The elder brother is addressed through the lines and he is requested to get me a bride with big buttocks and long hair.

*Jhulijhuliberalungmoi, jhulidighili*

*Moi dekhaapita, sulidighili.*

(I have wandered to and fro, through far ways

The bride I have seen, wears but long hair.)

The singer here has roamed places and set his eyes upon a potential bride with long hair.

*Salbariberalungmoi, log palungbagh*

*Moi monkhawaapita, mostodhapanak*

(I have wandered through forests, and came across a tiger  
I bride I have chosen, has a big flat nose.)

He now sings about the hurdles that he had to cross in search of a bride. He has wandered through forests and encountered dangerous animals like the tiger. However, he is undaunted in his spirit to find a bride. He finds someone at last and that too, a bride with a flat nose. An air of irony can be seen through the lines. He faces hardships only to be faced with despair.

*O singiribakhansukuri, ki hoke sai*  
*Biyakhanikoralungtok, ekelairandhikhai.*

(O the young tender bride, by what quality of yours  
Have I married you? Now that you cook and eat alone.)

He gets a bride, a partner so that he can share every joy and sorrow and live together happily ever after. However, this is far from reality. The bride cooks for herself and eats alone.

*Jake jakeuri jai, kankuralisaruk*  
*Asolotebandithoisung, monbhulanidaruk.*  
*Aaliaalineberabi, aalibhangibo*  
*Mahajonedekhapale, Jangoirakhibo.*

(They fly in flocks  
I have, in fact, tied, the mind enticer  
Don't move through the pathways; they will give way  
When the landlord beholds; he will make you son-in-law.)

It's now warning time as the landlord won't let anyone who trespasses into his field go scot free as he would hold him in his house as his son-in-law.

*Dhutilelem, sola lemlem*  
*Kunbadekhor hakim*

*Aamarphalenahibi, sokutipairakhim.*

(You wear aslarge dhoti and a dangling shirt  
A lawyer: which country have you come from?  
Don't come to this side, we will wink at you.)

A warning by the womenfolk as well. They warn the visitor not to come to their side or else they would wink at him.

*Lai pat dhapadhapa, mithanalage*

*Tor henoapitamokonalage.*

(Lettuce leaves are flat; they're not sweet  
And I don't need your daughter as well.)

The singer here says that he does not need the daughter

*Bohurangikhoparangi, ekghatare*

*Duwarjhapai mod khai, mokedorote.*

(BahurangiandKhoparangi, under one roof.  
Drink wine behind closed doors, in fear of me.)

The womenfolk take wine within closed doors fearing the wrath of the men and this aspect gets portrayed through the lines above.

*Kala kukurpanikhai, litungdangidangi*

*Khoparangipalai gel, dandilikabhangi.*

(The black dogs drink water, with lifted tails.  
Khoparangi has eloped, breaking all barriers.)

*Khoparangi* has now eloped with her beloved breaking all norms and barriers of the society. There is a marriage prevalent among the Rabhas known as *Topola biya*. The word '*Topola*' means a bundle of clothes. A boy and a girl might fall in love and this might not be acceptable to the parents of the two families. At such cases, the girl

prepares a bundle of all the necessary clothing and taking the bundle comes to the house of the boy. The parents of the boy are then compelled to accept the girl as their daughter-in-law. Since the girl comes on her own with a bundle of clothes, this type of marriage is called 'Topola Biya'. *Khoparangihere* elopes on her own accord breaking all barriers of the society.

The song also speaks of the character of the girls. They say that the one who moves around house to house is not to be trusted. This highlights the kind of social norms for girls.

*Igoapiboyahol, ghoreghorephure*

*Bura goruhekenghekeng, poriasebherot*

*Dine ratihopundekhe, baliramorjowak.*

(This pampered damsel, moves around from one household to another

The aged buffaloes, lie in the marshland.

The son-in-law of Baliram, dreams day and night.)

*Koliyapetuwabotuwa, jote tote jhokai*

*Aaroibosoriyajobeya, bohibajabokabai*

*Bura bulinojhokabiaai mor, raijeboyapabo*

*Hara murarohile, tore bhagotrobo.*

(Dark skinned and fat bellied, you tease everywhere you meet.

The foolish boy of two and half, who will marry you?

Don't tease me to be an old man; you will be rebuked.

If I turn to skin and bone, it will be your share.)

Through the above lines, one is asked not to tease others.

(Rabha, 1999)

Whatever the meaning of the song, the performance is a must watch affair as one is filled with joy at the sheer mirthful intoxicating movements of the performers. They say

it is not possible to perform this dance without actually drinking. This may be just an excuse so that they get actual wine.

### **Bahurangi Song**

The Totola Rabhas are mainly agrarian people. So, most of their songs highlight their agrarian way of life. Their day to day life is one related to agriculture. This gets highlighted even in the songs. Activities like ploughing, drying of rice grains and belief systems as seen in the ‘croaking of frogs’ and ‘unceremonious visit of the crow’ get highlighted through the song that follows.

*Eighargirikohai gel, soraihal bai*

*Eisoraihal bai*

*Bhikhadiba pam buli, berabhelongaisai*

*Eiberabhelongaisai, here ret here ret*

(Where have the members of this family gone? The flock has ploughed  
The flock has ploughed.  
Fearing of giving alms, they peep through the wall holes  
They peep through the wall holes, *here ret here ret.*)

The above lines are typical of a village life. The miserliness of the family is touched upon through the fact that the family members hide themselves and peep through the holes in the wall to check if the visitor is a beggar. This is done in fear of giving alms. The second sentence ‘*Sorai hall bai*’ brings to light the whole story. When translated directly, it goes ‘the flocks plough’ meaning the flock has created a havoc. It is usual for a family to put the rice grains out in the sun to dry and to sit somewhere in the vicinity keeping out the hen and birds. Drying grains in the sun itself proves that the house is not empty. Someone or the other is sure to be there keeping a watch. So, when the visitor comes to the family as sung in the above lines, he is concerned about the havoc being

created by the flock. So, he compares the flock creating havoc to the ploughing of rice grains as they litter the grains with their feet.

*Toro barit ada o*

*O moro barit ada*

*Tor putereadakhaikhai*

*Moko bole dada*

*Eimoko bole dada.*

(Ginger in your yard  
Ginger in my yard  
Consuming ginger, your son  
Calls me brother  
Calls me brother.)

Through the above lines, the visitor now compares that they both have ginger in their yard. The lines are sung in a playful mood. The stanza seems to be more effective due to the use of the words ‘*ada*’ and ‘*dada*’. They are in a way rhyming with each other, meaning ‘ginger’ and ‘brother’. The real beauty in the lines can be felt only in the original text rather than in the translated text.

*Bhekolakandetorottorot, sapramatirtolot*

*Notunkoinarsawakande, kanisirartolot.*

(The frog croaks *torottorot*, below mud rock  
The baby of the new bride cries, beneath torn cloth.)

Onomatopoeic words ‘*torottorot*’ are used to denote the croaking of frogs hidden beneath mud rock. The words ‘*kanisirartolot*’ denotes the poverty of the new bride who does not even have proper clothing as her clothes are torn.

*Kaur kandekelengkeseng, bahoruparat*

*Mali hutakate, bhangajotorot*

*Eibhangajotorot.*

(The crow cries *kelengkeseng*, atop bamboo grove  
Mali spins the yarn, in a broken wheel  
In a broken wheel.)

The sad condition of the singer is highlighted through the ‘unceremonious’ visit of the crows atop bamboo trees and this gives a hint of the superstitious belief among the rural folk. It is a folk belief that a crow crows when some misfortune has taken place or is about to take place. Alliteration is used in the line ‘*Kaur kandekelengkeseng*’ to bring an effect of bad omen. Onomatopoeia is also used in ‘*kelengkeseng*’ to denote the crowing of crows. Even Mali spins the yarn in a broken wheel. This also gives a light to the poverty of the family.

### **Wine and merriment in the life of a Totola Rabha**

The consumption of wine is a fact of everyday life in societies across the world, both past and present. Indigenous communities in Assam have been using alcohol, mostly in the form of rice beer since time immemorial. In Rabha community, wine is deeply embedded within many rituals, such as the greeting of an honoured guest or as part of religious ceremonies. Even the local Gods and spirits are being ritually fed with rice beer. It is also an activity primarily associated with leisure time, joyfulness, and celebration.

The use of alcohol among the Totola Rabhas get reflected in many of the *Bahurangi* songs and the following song is not an exception.

*Aayiulokhailogoriya, mod khabajang*  
*Nasi bagiurairati, bahurangigeetoke gang*  
*Bahurangikhoporangi, eke gharate*  
*Duwarjhapai mod khai, mor dorote.*



*Najang kaka bohari, gharjayaaani di.*

(Come hey friends, let's go, drink wine

Dance; make merry all night through.

Let's sing *Bahurangi songs*.

*Bahurangi* and *Khoporangi*, in the same house

Drink behind closed doors, in fear of me.

Brother, am not going a daughter-in-law; instead, bring home a son-in-law.)

Here, the life of merriment and joy is being highlighted along with the not so open nature of the girls. The girls drink wine but behind closed doors in fear of the brother. They plead their brother not to send them away to their in-laws but rather to bring home a son-in-law. There's a type of marriage prevalent among the Totola Rabhas known as '*GharjeyaBiya*' where the groom accepts and decides to stay at the house of his in-laws. The word is a condensed form of '*GharJowai*' where '*Ghar*' means house and '*jowai*' means son-in-law.

The simple village girls in the song prefer this type of marriage as they do not wish to leave their father's home. Through the songs, a marriage system prevalent among the Totola Rabhas is highlighted.

Here's another song that highlights the use of wine when relatives pay a visit to their near and dear ones.

*Nainokitobiyani*<sup>3</sup>, *goramodoke*

*Nohoinokitobiyani, goramodoke*

*Ekjongagorahol, arojongakhuje.*

(There's nothing to offer, *biyani*, but rice beer.

It's nothing, *biyani*, but rice beer.

One pitcherful of wine, and begging for more.)

---

<sup>3</sup> Form of address between the parents of married couple

*Biyani* refers to the form of address between the parents of the married couple. This is addressed to the female members by the father and mother of the bride or groom. The male is addressed as *biyai*. It is customary to offer rice beer to the *biyai-biyani* when they come to visit their daughter. Here, the *biyani* has already finished with one pitcherful of rice beer and is begging for more.

*Tater khutaputong re, tater khutaputong*  
*Aamarbiyanimasok jai, gharbandhi thong.*  
*Nohoinokitobiyani, porermukherkatha,*  
*Sal jangdhotura barit, phulebhoramatha.*

(I install a post, I install a post  
Our *biyani* goes fishing, let me build a house.  
It's nothing *biyani*, but someone else's words.  
Let's go to *dhatu* grove, filled with flowers.)

Here, the activities of the *biyai-biyani* are portrayed. The *biyani* goes for fishing as the *biyai* is busy installing posts and building his house. Later, they decide to go for a walk in the *dhatu* grove. The close relation that has been built between the *biyanis* or the *biyais* is portrayed.

*Ekporiyabahore, pakangsalangi,*  
*Ajikaliraapikeita, bhatar phalange.*

(With a single bamboo, I weave a sieve.  
The lasses of today, switch husbands.)

The above lines are sung in a teasing mood. This highlights the characters of today's lasses who are not serious in their relationship even after marriage. The women switch husbands, and this was not the case in earlier times. There is no concern about morality today and this has been the effect of so-called modernity or the modern lifestyle. The

earlier line has nothing to do with the marriage of the girls but is used for its poetic effect. However, it speaks of a practice of weaving sieves from a single bamboo. Sieves are an important part in a Totola Rabhas life. They are not only used to separate the rice grains from the husk or unbeaten rice but are also used in many rituals to place or carry offerings.

Today, *Bahurangisongs* are sung with varied themes and purposes. Most of them are sung in a playful mood. However, there are songs that are sung with a definite purpose. Here's a song sung to bless a newly wedded couple.

*Sati gosatelhindur, lowahatotkori*

*Borkoinakaahibau, kiu kora deri.*

*Natunkoinanatunbor, tomakdilobor*

*Sauwahotedhondhan, gharbhoripor.*

(Lamp, oil and vermilion; place those in your hand.

It's time for the bride and the groom; Why do you delay?

New bride and new groom, I bless you-

Along with children, may wealth fill your home.)

The members of the family are ready to welcome the bride and the groom. They are in a hurry and get ready with lamp, oil and vermilion. The bride and the groom receive blessings so that they beget children and their home be filled with wealth. This is what every newly married couple wish for.

The following song is sung in a playful mood without any ill feelings.

*Sira kutung tung tung, tetelire pat*

*Kino sabanatunkoina, kodalhana dat.*

*Bengkandetororot, sapramatitolot*

*Natunkoinarsabakande, kethakaportolot.*

*Kukurkandekengkeng, sabakandehengheng*

*Jiu eta sabahoise, datjengjeng.*

(I grind flattened rice, and leaves of tamarind  
What's the use of searching for a bride, with teeth like spade  
The frogs croak *tororot*, beneath mud rock  
The child of the new bride cries, beneath ragged blanket  
The dogs bark *kengkeng*, the child cries *hengheng*  
The child that is born, has protrudinguneven teeth.)

Here, the guy is tired of searching for a bride. The teeth of the bride are compared to that of the blades of the spade. This is done in a teasing air. Sometimes, the uneven teeth of a girl are also compared to that of the teeth of a coconut grinder that's really sharp and protruding. The beauty of the lines lie in the onomatopoeic effect of the words '*tung tung*, '*kengkeng*', '*hengheng*' and '*tororot*' that represents the sound of a grinder, a barking dog, a crying child and a croaking frog respectively. Fun is made even of the child who is said have protruding uneven teeth just like his mother.

As a researcher, I had gone to Thamna to speak to Hitesh Rabha (50 yrs) and talk to him about Totola Rabhas and their narratives and songs. It was noon and he wasn't in the mood as he was busy with preparations for *Honi Puja* starting the next day. However, he was kind enough to spare a few moments for me. It takes a while for a person to get into the singing mood without any drinks. The situation has to be created. He had a few collections of Totola Rabha songs but at home, a few kms away. He gave a glimpse into one of his collections by singing a few lines for us and asking us to meet at a later date when he would be free.

## **Bahurangi Song from Bunbari, Baksa**

Wine and merriment form a part of a Totola Rabha and this gets highlighted in the following song where the singer offers wine that is not yet ready. The song had been collected from Kukholota Rabha, 56 and Molota Rabha, 50 of Bunbari, Baksa. They were quite playful in their mood while they demonstrated the song for me.

*Saraswati Mohini, geetorsahini*

*Kaibabojai dhak dhul*

*Kaibabojabahi*

*Hai haikaibabojabahi.*

*Hai haikaibabojabahi.*

(DivineSaraswati, Goddess of melody

Someone plays the drum

Someone plays the flute

*Hai haisomeone plays the flute*

*Hai hai someone plays the flute.)*

The performers seek blessings from the Divine Saraswati before their performance so that they are blessed by the goddess of melody. The Totola Rabhas have become Hinduised and therefore in addition to their traditional deities, they also worship Hindu Gods and Goddesses. This is evident in the very start of the song.

*Hatolologomena, khupatlulungphul*

*Nasgaanbeya hole nodhoribabhul.*

*Hai hainodhoribabhul*

*Hai hainodhoribabhul.*

*O bai Rabhani Rabha patani*

*Kan sonadolengdolenghopadangeri*

*Hai haikhopadangeri.*

(*Gogona*<sup>4</sup> in hand, Flower in the bun  
When song or dance goes wrong, find not a flaw  
*Hai hai* find not a flaw  
*Hai hai* find not a flaw.  
O sister *Rabhani*, *Rabha patani*  
With dangling earring and a huge bun  
*Hai hai*, a huge pun.)

The dancers get ready with *gogonain* hand, flowers tucked in their huge bun and dangling earrings. They also beg the audience not to find flaw in their performance.

*Khadebiyanigoramodoke*  
*Tin diniyagora mod nisanalage*  
*Hai hainisanalage.*  
*Ranga toktokpokajalukjalanalage*  
*Hai haijalanalage.*

(Take the wine *biyoni*<sup>5</sup>  
It's only three days old, won't get high  
*Hai hai*, won't get high.  
The red chillies are not hot  
*Hai hai*, they're not hot.)

The *biyoni* is offered rice beer that is three days old. It is very common among the Totola Rabhas to offer rice beer when they have relatives or visitors in their home. And when it comes to the in-laws of their son or daughter, they are offered the best they have got.

*Seng mase puthi mase, kholatdilenase*  
*Hai haikholatdilenase.*  
*Aamakdekhiaapagilakhonemisikmasakhahe*  
*Hai haimisikmasakhahe.*

---

<sup>4</sup>traditional harp-like instrument made of bamboo

<sup>5</sup>relation between two in-laws

*Hokolowemilijulinaso*

*Aahaboininasoamibohurongiya.*

*Hai haibohurongiya.*

(The fishes dance when roasted in leaves

*Hai hai*, dance when roasted in leaves

The boys smile when they see us,

They smile when they see us.

Let's together dance.

Come sister, let's dance the colourful dance

The colourful dance.)

The context that is presented subsequently is not linear as the words are mainly used for their rhyming sounds. However, their custom or practice gets highlighted through the lines. Here, a delicacy prepared by roasting fish in leaves is portrayed. On the other hand, there are boys who smile at their sight to attract them.

*Haun mahorbanpani, okholmakhol kore.*

*Bohagbihuaahi pale*

*Senaikmonot pore.*

*Hai haisenaikmonot pore.*

(The floods of *haun*, creates havoc

When *bohagbihu* returns

I remember my love

I remember my love.)

A mention is made to the Bohag Bihu, a festival of Assam that is celebrated to welcome the Assamese new year in the month of *Bohag*, irrespective of caste or creed. At the onset of *Bohag Bihu*, one remembers their loved ones. So also, our performer here remembers the person she loves. The floods have caused havoc and destruction to life and property leaving one devastated, but the memory of the loved ones bring a new ray of hope.

*Kaur kandekalalagosor uproot*

*Phullaga mekhela pindhepororuporoot*

*Hai haiporor uproot.*

(The crow crows *kalalaon* treetops  
She adorns a flowery *mekhela*<sup>6</sup>, for free  
Hai hai, for free.)

The onomatopoeic effect of a crow crowing on treetops is depicted through the words ‘*kalala*’. The traditional dress of the Rabhas is being replaced by the Assamese *Mekhela* among most of the Rabhas and this is highlighted in the lines. A performer who is wearing a flowery *mekhela* is being teased. She seems to be wearing a beautiful dress that she received for free.

*Duror poradekhapalo, ekbari era.*

*Hai hai ekbari era*

*Jio eta motapalosoku eta kera.*

*Hai haisoku eta kera.*

(A huge cultivation of *era* I behold  
*Hai hai* huge cultivation of *era*  
The only husband that I got  
Has winked eyes.  
Has winked eyes.)

Now, it’s the turn to tease the husbands. They say that the only husband they got married to has winked eyes. It is not common for other communities to make fun of husbands who are portrayed as being very stern. However, among the fun loving Totola Rabhas it’s not uncommon.

*Dhoti lemlem sola lemlem*

---

<sup>6</sup> Assamese traditional dress



*Kundekhor hakim.*  
*Aamarfalenasabi, sokutipairakhim.*  
*Hai haisokutipairakhim.*

(Large dhoti and large shirt  
From which country, a lawyer are you?  
Don't stare at us, we will wink at you  
We will wink at you.)

The dancers now eye at a lawyer who had come to pay a visit wearing a large dhoti. They warn him not to stare at them or else they would wink at him instead. The Totola Rabha girls are of open-minded nature and they don't hesitate to tease the boys either.

*Aa do do aa do do*  
*Tapilatelathiyaipalo*  
*Beyaipabi hobo*  
*Hai haibeyapabi hobo.*

(Aa do do aa do do  
Kicked your buttocks by mistake  
You might have been hurt  
You might have been hurt.)

As they sing and dance merrily, they kicked the buttocks of their partners by mistake and now they feel sorry. The playful nature of the Totola Rabha girls is being portrayed. They do many funny things knowingly but act as if they had done that unknowingly.

*Kibakolongnokolongbeyanapabi*  
*Hai haibeyanapabi*  
*Bhuldokh hole amakhemakoridibi.*  
*Hai haikhemakoridibi.*

(We might have uttered something wrong, don't get offended  
Hai hai, don't get offended  
If I have blundered, do pardon us  
Hai hai, do pardon us)

Towards the end, they ask for pardon if they might have unknowingly uttered something wrong or hurtful. This is done so that there are no ill feelings after they have left.

(Collected from Kukholota Rabha, 56 and Molota Rabha, 48, Bunbari)

#### **4.6 Work Songs/ Agriculture Song**

The Totola Rabhas are an agrarian community. Agriculture has been practiced since time immemorial. They not only cultivate the summer and winter varieties but also seasonal vegetables. They also cultivate pulses, mustard, wheat, sugarcane, etc. The knowledge of the folk regarding cultivating their land has been passed down from generation to generation. They know when to till their land. They hear sounds of the roaring clouds and gear up for working in the fields. The process of cultivation involves a whole lot of rituals and traditional practices which gets reflected in their agriculture songs that follow.

In the following work song, a vivid picture of doing labour in the agricultural field and ploughing the paddy land is reflected.

*Gur gur gar gar kore*  
*Siriksarakborkhunaathe*  
*O bhai oata*  
*Aroahebata*  
*Hal baba homoi hoi*  
*Bhuirubohomoi hoi*  
*Hal lo jungal lo-*  
*Sobaimiliek ho.*

(The cloud says *gurgur gar gar*  
The rain drips *siriksarak*

Hey brother, hey grandfather  
It's time we plough  
It's time we plant paddy  
Take your plough  
Take your spade  
Let's all get united.)

The Rabha cultivators look at the sky for any signs of rainfall. They don't have the modern machinery to water their fields and they have to entirely depend on nature for water. Much before the rain comes, they get ready with their plough and spade to till their land. They know that they cannot miss out the opportunity. They have to plough and till their paddy land after the rains come down. The Rabhas do their work in the fields with the help of their neighbours and this is called '*hauri*' among the Totola Rabhas. This also gets reflected in the above song when the farmer calls out to the others to get united in their work.

Another song portrays the inheritance of the occupation from forefathers.

*Haularsabaaami*  
*Pothrote jai din*  
*Pothrote pang aami*  
*Honarupakhini*  
*Ekelogehal bang*  
*Ah pothartelang.*

(We are sons of peasants  
We spend our days in the fields  
We get our earnings in the fields  
We get gold and silver  
Let's plough together  
Let's go to the fields.)

The farmer here says that they are sons of peasants and they spend their days in the fields. The folk know about the importance of their lands. It is from the land that they get a living. The products of the fields are like gold and silver for them. They again speak of working unitedly in the fields.

### **Initiation of Ploughing (*Hal Jatrawa*)**

The Totola Rabhas are an agrarian community and it gets reflected in their songs and chants. Their day to day life and festivities are centred round their agricultural way of life. They follow traditional practices during various processes of agricultural starting from ploughing and sowing of seeds to the harvesting of the products. At the start of their cultivation, they fix a favourable day (usually not Tuesdays and Saturdays) and give their offerings to the ancestors. The main member of the family go to his field, place an *agloti* (a part of a banana leaf from the tip) at a corner, offer black lentils and rice grains and light an earthen lamp and incense sticks. This is done before the start of ploughing the fields. The fields are then ploughed and the seeds sowed either on Monday or Thursday. On this day, a type of grass known as *kahi bun* is planted on the four corners of the field and the following verse is chanted:

*Jomormohtuaanikhonjurilo,  
Bharmaidilabidhan,  
Take pai monushyoihoishyokhetroatrombhila  
Jibohoilataron.*

(I have brought in the bull of *Jom*<sup>7</sup> and started to plough,  
Brahma has given the grains  
With this, man has initiated cultivation  
And so, the lives thrive.)

---

<sup>7</sup> The God of Death

This is chanted in praise of *Jom* who has lent man his pair of bulls for ploughing and Brahma who has given him the necessary grains for sowing. This proves that God is the giver and it is because of him that man thrives on earth.

**Bringing paddy corn home**(*Dhanoraagaanaprotha*)

The Totola Rabhas bring home a few tips of paddy along with rice corn in a traditional way which is symbolic of bringing Goddess Lakshmi home. This is usually done with the paddy that ripens earlier. And this is done by the women in the house. She has to get purified using an egg before going through the process. The day before, a neighbour is called in to sacrifice a cock. The things that she must take along with her for the offerings are:

1. A *khorahi*(implement made of bamboo and used for washing rice grains or vegetables)
2. An implement used in handloom (*Holabari*)
3. A duck's egg
4. Tulsi water
5. Tip of banana leaf (*Agloti*)
6. Earthen lamp, incense, etc.

She arranges the offerings in the *agloti* in the paddy field and prays saying-

*Heujiyalukhumi, potharoraailukhumi,*

*Ghoroloiadoriniboahiso.*

*Tumiu Padmini, moyu Padmini, duyumilithakimlukhumigharat.*

*Tetiyahanti hobo amargrihobahit.*

(Mother of the green fields

I have come to welcome you home.

You and I are *Padmini*<sup>8</sup>; we both will dwell in unison in the granary  
Then will peace prevail in our dwelling home.)

The Totola Rabhas believe that granary is the place where Goddess Lakshmi dwell and she is therefore traditional brought home from the fields. A good harvest means blessings in abundance from the Goddess. The granary is usually built separately towards the East and it is kept clean. One removes shoes and slippers while going in just as one does in temples. So, when the rice paddy is brought from the fields, it is hung in the granary. The woman compares herself to Goddess Lakshmi and therefore she says that they would stay together in the granary. It is usual among the Totola Rabhas to say that the women in the house represent Goddess Lakshmi and that the success of the family depends on her. It is she who takes care of every household chore and is responsible for looking after the children. So, a family without a woman is like a family without Goddess Lakshmi.

### ***Haurikhowa***

It's a practice among the village folk to help each other in works that cannot be done single handed. For example, lifting the roof, ploughing a field, sowing the seeds or planting paddy cannot be done alone. So, villagers come in to help in exchange for help in return when they need it. After completion of the work, they feast on food and wine. This is called *haurikhowa*. Thus, they help each other in their works. Everyone is to benefit by this. And this gets reflected in the following lines:

*'Hauritbyayek gun,  
Hauritlabhtinigun'*

---

<sup>8</sup> Refers to Hindu Goddess Lakshmi (In Sanskrit- She who sits in Lotus)

(In *hauri*, you lose one-fold  
In *hauri*, you earn threefold)

Another saying goes-

*Hauribhaurit jai ji*

*Hatighoratuthe hi.*

(One who goes to *hauri*,  
Rides an elephant or a horse)

This is symbolic in that a person is greatly benefitted if one goes to help others.

#### **4.8 Drinking songs**

After work, the Totola Rabhas usually take rice beer as a means to relax. It is customary for every household to prepare rice beer during times of cultivation. The men and women work tirelessly in the fields and once they return home, they are served with rice beer to relax. During modern times, rice spirit has replaced rice beer. Rice spirit is readily available in most of the places, and it is more intoxicating. Therefore, many prefer to drink this stronger drink.

The following song is about drinking and enjoyment.

*Haritoubasadangora, modkhinibasaolopa*

*E he sikiliubasa, tororot kore,*

*Hero basa, mor dehahai.*

(The pitcher is huge, but the beer is less

I pour the wine.

Hey son, my body shivers, in ecstasy.)

The above lines are sung in a playful mood. Though the pitcher offered is large in size, it seems to contain less wine. However, the one who drinks the wine shivers in ecstasy.

*Mod sikilungbasa, lelailelai*

*Modorbatibasalulungfelai*

*E he modorbatitbasa, porilsai,*

*Moyohulungbasa, geetorghai.*

(I pour the wine, drowsily into the bowl

I spill the wine.

Ho there, in the bowl, ash has fallen.

And me, son, I have songs fullin stock.)

Now that he pours the wine drowsily into the bowl, he spills it. Though something falls into the bowl of wine, he does not care. When one is drunk, he usually starts to sing.

And here, a song follows another. He has but lot of songs in stock.

*E he nakipagolibasa*

*Ukhonabarir, geetorghaihona*

*Kub khai*

*E he tin tingibasa*

*Tingorghar*

*Harbaasebasabaihaghar*

*E he anba asebas*

*Dingranodirpani hero basa*

*Mor head jai.*

*E he dingranodirbasapanidhar*

*AahipalibasaJamadar.*

(Is he the one?

The one with stock full of songs,

Thrashed

The tin roofed house

The rooms yet to be cleaned

And yet to fetch waters

From river Dingra.

Ho there, the waters are really strong

Here you have reached Jamadar.)



When one gets drunk, he forgets his chores. Here, the rooms are yet to be cleaned and waters still to be fetched. It shows that while getting drunk a person forgets his own duty and lives in his own world of hallucination.

*E he dhara ding basapira ding*

*Kore hero basa, morodehahai.*

*E he dharateobasanobohong*

*Pirate basanobohong*

*E he matiteubasalutiyaibohong*

*Hero basa, morodehahai.*

*Hubrut kore koli gai*

*Meraibonbhasulinai*

*Ehemeraliubasa*

*Tinimer jai*

*Hero basa mor dehahai.*

(Offer the mat, offer the stool for the son

Where do you come from son?

I won't sit on the mat

I won't sit on the stool.

Let me sit on the floor

Ho there son!

There's no hair for the curls.

But for

Only three curls.

Ho there son!)

Here, a guest comes in and he is offered mat, stool and what not. A family may be poor but they are not less in offering hospitality. For the Totolas, a guest is considered to represent Goddess Lakshmi herself. Therefore, they do their bit to offer the best comfort they can inspite of their poverty.

*Ehenarikolorbasa, dabuwatdhor*

*Kandedekaibasa, hunna sari*

*Ehe aji dekabasa, rakhongkenekori*

*Basa morodehahai.*

(Ho there son, getting hold of the coconut,

He thus cries.

How do I?Control the youth.)

Here, the problem faced by the parents in controlling their children is being highlighted.

*EheUlubarirbasa, dhepadhol*

*Geetgalibasa, najaigol.*

*Bas morodehahai.*

*Katoligaonrbasaparausa, parongnorongbasajuri sang;*

*Ehelagba nori bhuthrijabi, basa mor dehahai.*

(The untuned drums of Ulubari

When played with songs, don't sound in harmony.

The songs of Kataligaon, let's give a try.

Ho there! You must but accept defeat.)

The melodious songs of Kataligaon are now compared to those of Ulubari in a playful tune. The songs of Ulubari are made fun of. They don't seem to be in harmony with the tune of drums and therefore it would be better if they accept defeat.

*Bengkandetorottarat, dulisaparartolot*

*Maikegisibhuiruba, sulikandebasagharat.*

(The frog croaks, beneath the granary.

The mother has gone to the fields; back home, the children cry.)

Here, the mother leaves behind her children back home and go to work in the fields.

(Pona Rabha, p 200)

Here's another drinking song:

*Modo khalungbasalelailai, modorbatiubasalulungpelai*

*Hero hona hero basa, moromlaga hat.*

(Had a drowsy drink, had spilt the wine bowl  
Listen my golden lads; lovely ones.)

Through the above lines, we can notice that the person has drunk too much as a result of which he has spilt his bowl of rice beer. Though completely drunk, he still has words for his lads whom he calls 'moromloga' meaning lovely ones. The first two lines are in a rhyming scheme.

*Ahu dhanorkherpuji, naspanajnadorakuji*

*Sotal khan hudunguri, nasi dikhamtinipakghuri.*

(Haystack of *Ahu* (a variety of rice), you don't know how to dance.  
The courtyard is not even, will show the dance turning thrice.)

Through the above lines, the playful mood of the father is highlighted when he challenges his own sons to dance. He says that though the yard is not even, he will still dance turning three times. There's a saying among the Rabhas that one blames the uneven ground if he can't dance.

*'Naspanajnasotalbeka'*

But in the song, the father is confident that even if the ground is not even, he will dance. One can do anything if one gets drunk, leave aside lifting hills.

#### **4.9 Hunting song**

At one time Rabhas were skilled in the art of searching and killing of wild animals using different techniques and tools. The fact that the Rabhas were a hunting tribe is

clear from their folksongs. Hunting does not all the time refer to the killing of animals for consumption but also for safety of their population from predators. This is also one of the oldest forms of food acquisition. It is assumed that humans have learnt the art of hunting long before they learnt to domesticate animals and plants and build homes (Marak and Kalita, 2013). Wildlife is an important resource for those communities that live in and around forests and is exploited for various reasons, including food, additional income, cultural practices and as a sport (Aiyadurai, 2011).

The Rabhas lived on food acquired from the forests. They were a hunting tribe in the past though hunting of wild animals is no more prevalent. The hunting songs prevalent among the Rabhas say it all. These days, the Totola Rabhas no longer go for hunting in the forests as this is either illegal or there are no forest areas nearby. Hunting was of two types- community hunting and individual hunting. These are no longer in practice. However, there are practices wherein young boys go out for ‘rat hunt’, ‘frog hunt’ or ‘crab hunt’ in the fields. This is done as a past time and the catch is taken with wine. However, with the young boys going to school and also for work, this is seldom practiced now.

The following hunting song is about deer hunt which reflects community hunting that was prevalent among the Totola Rabhas.

*Aa hoho aa bhai, horinkhidbajangjo*

*Ki bheloni ki jatora, golmelimelisai*

*Ah hoho aah bhai, horinkhidbajang jo*

(Come hoho come brother; let’s go chase the deer!

What bushes, what the obstacles; they watch with Raised necks.

Come hoho come brother; let’s go chase the deer.)

This is a call to the others for joining in the deer hunt. Hunting is an activity done in groups and in unison. The speaker here encourages the others saying they will cross every hurdle be it thick bushes or any other obstacles. The deer watches for any unseen danger with raised necks. This highlights that they have to be extra careful while approaching the deer through thick grasses. The village folk are skilled in the art of hunting and this gets reflected through the deer hunting song.

Another song that follows present the skills of a hunter.

*Aaghon jai puh jai, MaghiPurniAahi pai*

*Horinkhedibarhomoi hoi.*

*Aah o aah bhai, horinkhediba jai.*

(*Aaghon* has passed, *Puh* has passed;

With the arrival of *Magh*'s full moon night,

It's time we go chasing the deer.

Come ho come brother; let's go chase the deer.)

The stanza speaks of the right time to go on a hunt for deer. He says that it's full moon night in the month of 'Magh' and this is the right moment after *Aaghon* and *Puh*. Here the traditional knowledge of the Rabha folk is being highlighted.

*Jal lo jathi lo, horinkhediba jai*

*Ki bhelengi ki jotuwa, golmelimelisai*

*Aah o aah bhai, horinkhediba jai.*

(Take hold of a net, and a spear; let's go chase the deer.

What bushes, what the obstacles; they watch with raised necks.

Come ho! come brother; let's go chase the deer.)

The folk hunters are now getting ready to catch hold of the deer. The implements used are net and spear. No obstacles can stop them now. The deer is a very sensitive and fast animal and it's very difficult to hunt it down. But the folk are bent on killing it.

*Pesanapusanagolmelimelisai.*

*Jal lo jathi lo, horinkhediba jai.*

*Ki bhelengi ki jotuwa, golmelimelisai.*

(The young ones peep with raised necks

Take hold of a net, and a spear; let's go chase the deer.

What bushes, what the obstacles, they watch with raised necks.)

The folk now see that the deer has young ones as well. But still they are bent on hunting down the deer.

*Porbotlagisaihol, habipurimukalhol*

*Sokolagusiaathuhol, horinaahikhaborhol.*

*Horinkhedibarhomoihol,*

*Aah o aah bhai, pesanapusanagolmelimelisai.*

*Aah o aah bhai, horinkhediba jai.*

Hills have been burned to dust; the forests have been cleared.

Knees have been wounded, it's time for the deer to come.

It's time to chase the deer.

Come ho come brother, the young ones peep with raised necks.

Come ho come brother, let's go chase the deer.)

The hills have been cleared and the grasses burnt down. One can now see through the forests. There are tender grasses growing and so it's time for the deer to come and also for the hunters to get ready for the chase.

*Eisongothornai, Eisongotbhelenginai*

*Horbhelengipolai jai, Nijorare par pai*

*Hing jokaripanikhai, Horinkhedibarhomoihol*

*Aah o aah bhai, Horinkhediba jai*

*Ki bhelengi ki jotuwa, Gol melimelisai.*

(There's no turning in this, there's no hurdle in this.

It escapes obstacles, and reaches the banks.

Drinks water shaking horns, it's time we chase the deer.

What the bushes, what the obstacles, watches with raised necks.)

The deer, shaking his horns, now comes to the banks for drinking water but is vigilant at the same time. It watches with raised necks for any possible attack.

*Aaghuraaghur song aaghur, lal pat jathi pat*

*Horbhelengijalotporil, dhordhor mar mar*

*Horbhelengijalerebandho, horbhelengikbharbandho*

*Bharbandho oi bharbandho, horbhelengikbharbandho.*

(Make a circle, come around, throw the net, throw the spear

The deer, now in the net; Get hold, kill it!

Tie it with the net, tie it into a *bhar*<sup>9</sup>, tie it into a *bhar*)

The hunters have now surrounded the deer from all sides. The net is spread, and the spear thrown. The deer, now entrapped, is finally down. The legs are then tied, and the deer carried on shoulders using bamboo sticks.

It is seen that the song is actually about hunting of a deer right from the summoning of friends to the final carrying of the animal back home on shoulders. This shows that the Rabhas were used to hunting. They knew the techniques involved in it. They were also expert about where and when to find a deer. The time when the deer comes to the banks for water is known to the hunters. The full moon night in the month of *Maghis* the best time to hunt down deer. These practices are no longer prevalent among the Rabhas, but the songs remain.

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<sup>9</sup> To carry something on shoulders using a bamboo.

#### 4.10 Fishing Song

Fishing is an activity very common among the Totola Rabhas. This gets reflected even in the Bahurangi song that says-

*Dui Boini mas marong, mukulpatharot*

(Two sisters go fishing in the open fields.)

Totola Rabhas are fun loving people and it's seen that they go for community fishing in rivers and fields. Their motive is not to sell their catch but to have it with traditional dishes. The excess catch is often dried or smoked or even preserved in bamboos.

Another song goes -

*Motonganoditaahilabana, aamitanonghonakakrasana*

*Paldipotharotbanpaniuthise, roiboraliaahise.*

*Aah heralogorimas maribajang, aah heralogori mas maribajang.*

*Jakhainaikhalainai, kihokloijang.*

(Flood has come to the river Motonga, little crabs we fish.

Flood has overflowed Paldi field, rou and borali has come.

Come o friend, let's go fishing, come o friend, let's go fishing.

We have no *jakhai*<sup>10</sup> nor any *kholai*.<sup>11</sup> So, what do we take?)

During the monsoon heavy and incessant rainfall cause devastating flood damaging crops, lives and properties. Most of the tributaries or the mighty river Brahmaputra are overflowed creating havoc and destruction on its way. Here, the Paldi field has been flooded with the waters of the Motonga river in Tamulpur. However, for the village folk it's a blessing in another sense. The fields are now full of fish carried by the flooding

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<sup>10</sup> A traditional fishing equipment

<sup>11</sup> A traditional equipment to keep the fish catch



waters. Therefore, the song is a beacon to the others to go out for fishing. The Totola Rabhas are not fishermen profession but they are apt in the skill. They have their own traditional fishing equipments which are made by themselves using bamboo mostly from their own yard. The song presents not only the spirit of the folk but also their traditional skills in the art of bamboo craft and fishing. It is seen that the song consists of only a few lines arranged in couplets. The rhyming scheme is aa bb cc de. Crabs are a delicacy among the Rabhas and gets reflected in the song. It is either taken as *curry* with *mestatenga* (sour leaves) or roasted and taken in the form of paste with ginger and chilli. The legs of crabs are roasted and taken raw mostly with traditional drinks. It is traditional to take drinks in the afternoon before lunch. As lunch is being prepared by the women the men are busy drinking. It is during ploughing the fields that crabs are being caught.

#### **4.11 Shepherd Songs**

The children of poor families of the Totola Rabhas worked as servants tending the goats, cows and buffaloes. This gets reflected in the *lalilang* songs or ‘shepherd’ songs prevalent among the Totola Rabhas. Shepherds or cowherds go out to the fields and remain almost for the whole day. They have a lot of leisurely time as their cows and buffaloes or sheep lazily graze in the fields. They mostly shout to each other in questions and answers usually teasing one another that might sometimes turn vulgar. This is usually done for fun. Shepherd songs are known as *Lakhorgeet* among the Pati and Dahori Rabhas. This is so because during the singing of this song they use a flute known as *lakhorbahi*. The characteristic of this flute is that it is 2 ft in length with a

notch at one end and two holes in total. These songs are also known as '*banggeet*' among the Pati Rabhas.

Here's a song sung by cowherds in turns.

**1<sup>st</sup> Cowherd:**

*Lalilangloutuli, lalilangkoukhuli*

*Lalilangnagaokio?*

*Lalilangnajana, lalilangnubuja*

*Thiyoithiyoinomorakio?*

(Let's express *lalilang*

Why don't you sing *lalilang*?

You don't know or understand *lalilang*.

Why don't you perish upright?)

Shepherd songs are very common among the cowherds. Their joys and sorrows are expressed through the songs. Their life is not of an easy-going nature as they have to suffer the pangs of being away from family and home for a long time. They are away from the cares of their parents. But they have their own way of bringing joy and merriment in their life. Many a times their fellow cowherds are the only friends they have, and they tease each other to pass the time. Here, a cowherd suggests his friend that they sing shepherd songs. Through the lines one of the cowherds makes fun of the other saying that if he doesn't know or understand the shepherd song then he ought to perish.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Cowherd:**

*Noinoiutiaahe, haporapohuto*

*Boritutihokarekan;*

*Tohongtegorokhiyai, lakhorgeetnajana*

*Aamakedibahimaan.*

(The deer comes floating through the stream  
Jumps to the bank and shakes its ears.  
You the cowherds, don't know shepherd songs  
You should appreciate us.)

The above lines are used for their rhyming effect, but they still have something to portray. The deer comes floating through the stream and jumps to the bank shaking its ears to dry itself. And the cowherd tells the others that they should at least appreciate him for unlike them he knows how to sing *lalilang* songs.

**1<sup>st</sup> Cowherd:**

*Tek tektekeli, paniaanatekeli*  
*Dol singiporilakhalot;*  
*Tohongtegorokhiyaiamarlogotlagisa*  
*Logaithomsitkaphanot.*

(The kettle that holds water  
The handle falls off to the pond.  
You the cowherds, argue with us  
Will entrap you in a trap.)

Now the cowherd threatens to entrap the others in a trap. A trap is usually used for the animals like rats, mongoose and rabbits. A cowherd is expert in various hunting techniques and entrapping animals using a trap is one.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Cowherd:**

*Soitotsokori, bohagotbogori*  
*Jethotmolongadhan;*  
*Tohongtegorokhiya, amakaarimarisa*  
*Loruresingimekan.*

(Butterfly in *Soit*, gooseberry in *bohag*  
Rice Paddy in *Jeth*  
You the cowherds have messed with us,  
Will tear off your ears with a goad.)

The above lines are a warning to the first cowherd who has dared to mess with the second cowherd. He says that he will tear off his ears with a goad. This is done to tease or infuriate the other cowherds. In this way they pass their time in the fields.

**1<sup>st</sup> Cowherd:**

*Molongadhanbati, sitra phan patilo,*  
*Lagilaariyakakra;*  
*Torenobayerar, kopilaapato*  
*Pithitelobahiboka.*

(The bowl of rice, I have placed the trap  
There a crab entrapped  
The son of your sister,  
Carry her on your back.)

Now, it is the turn of the other cowherd to tease the first. He says that he (second cowherd) will have to carry his nephew on his back.

Here is a song prevalent among the Pati and the Dahori Rabhas but it was also prevalent among the Totola Rabhas.

*Dangor nodi ukulthukul, bhahijai loru.*  
*Tor baberdutatiri, eketasaraigoru.*

(The raging waters of the mighty river, awipes away the goad.  
Your father has two wives; one tends the cows.)

Here, the mighty raging river has nothing to do with the father of the other guy having two wives, but the lines are used to create a poetic effect. The rhyming scheme in the lines follow the sequence ‘abcb’. One of the cowherds teases the other saying his father has two wives and one of them one tends the cows. This is jokingly sung to tease the other who might be at the other end tending the cows. Here, an atmosphere of serenity can be sensed. The cows are peacefully grazing without the fear of an attack. And the cowherds are sitting at the backs of buffaloes, playing the flute and singing in joy.

*Hal gasornangoljungol, gamirigaserepira*

*Kon salai bang dise, bormanirkira<sup>12</sup>.*

(The yoke and plough, made of *sal* tree, and the *pira*<sup>13</sup>, of *gamiri*.

Who has deceived so? Swear by the household God.)

The above lines follow the same rhyming scheme as the previous. The shepherd now sings about someone who had deceived them. Someone has made a yoke and a plough using wood of *saltree*, which is usually not done. This is so because, the wood needed for a plough is of other trees with bends which is not usually found in *Sal*. And the *pirais* usually not made of *gamiri*. So, the carpenter might have deceived.

Another song goes:

*Saul sukongnusukong, bowalimasorfisa.*

*Kon salai bang dise, hokolkiraimisa.*

(To grind rice or not to, the fins of *bowali* fish.

Who has deceived so, all swears are fake.)

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<sup>12</sup> swear

<sup>13</sup> rectangular piece of wood with two legs usually of three to four inches height and used for sitting.

The above lines follow the rhyming scheme 'abcb' and they too speak about being deceived by someone. It is usual for the Rabhas to take '*kira*' only when he is speaking the truth. If not, the Rabhas believe that one will be punished someday or the other. So, one cannot take '*kira*' or swear unless and until he is sure of it. But here it is seen that the deceiver has sworn in without any fear. His swears are fake. In the first line, the speaker says about grinding. He speaks of separating the rice grain from the husks by using a *dheki*<sup>14</sup> or a traditional grinder.

The shepherd songs are not only sung in joy but also to express sadness. Clothes and food are two of the essential commodities in life, but the shepherd never have had the privilege to have those. They work as servants in the house of the rich to earn a living. They have their own hardships, and this is reflected in the following song:

*Pani pore sipursapar, mohedahekhai*

*Bhat kaporordukhote, jangoijabasai.* (Sarkar, 2008)

(The raindrops fall *sipursapar*, mosquitoes and bugs bite,

And sad at the deprivation of food and clothes, he wants to go as a son-in-law.)

Through the above lines, the shepherd expresses his utter sadness and helpless condition at the deprivation of food and clothes. He spends sleepless nights as he is bitten by mosquitoes and bugs. The beauty of the first line lies in the onomatopoeic effect of the words '*sipursapar*' which represents the sound of rain. This symbolises that raindrops fall through the roof adding to the displeasure created by mosquitoes and bugs. The pitiable plight of the shepherd is not known by his parents. Poverty has led him to work as a servant and he must live a dejected life. Therefore, the only way to escape from this

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<sup>14</sup>kind of traditional grinder made of tree trunk, suspended by posts and balanced to the ground a little near one end used for stamping with the leg while the other end grinds simultaneously

pitiabile condition is to go as a son-in-law and live with his wife in her father's home. This is a condition faced by many poor people. They must find a family where they can marry a daughter and live there. At least they get a house to live in.

Another short *Lakhorgeet* used in a teasing sense is as follows:

*Khed guru, khed guru, khedkhed*

*Khed oi, khed oi, khedkhed*

*Guru Jodi nikhida,*

*Dangordangor pet.*

(Chase the cow, chase  
Ho there! Chase it,  
If you don't chase it  
You will have a bigger tummy.)

The above lines are sung in a playful mood to tease the other cowherd. He might be sitting lazily gazing at the straying cows. He devises his own way of getting his work done. So, he calls out to the other cowherd who might be on the other side saying is he doesn't chase the cows, his tummy will grow bigger in size.

#### **4.12 Mohkhedageet (Chasing buffaloes)/ BhalukNosowaGeet**

In earlier days, the Totola Rabhas lived in forests and hills. They cleared the forests and cultivated the land. When the rain came, they cultivated paddy and during the month of *Aaghon*, it's time for harvesting the paddy. It is during this time that the animals from the forests devour the paddy. The wild buffaloes love to feast on crops. They come in large numbers and destroy the ready to harvest crops. So, the Totola Rabhas came out in groups with *lathis* and chased away the wild buffaloes. This gradually became a part of the culture of the Totolas. The ritual of chasing buffaloes known as *Moh Kheda* became

an annual celebration where the folk go from house to house performing the dances and collecting rice grains, money or anything the family offers. Later, the folk feast on the collection.

There's mention about the dance of the bear in *Moh Kheda* song. Bear is one amongst the animals that destroy the crops. It also devours lentils, mustard flowers and other cultivations. In earlier days, the Totola Rabhas captured the bear with the use of a mantra, brought it home and used it for doing household activities. Later, they offered food and sent it back to the forests. They also made it dance and used it to chase wild buffaloes and other wild animals. The captured bear performed his assigned duties with utter obedience. Therefore, the mention of bear can be found in *Mohkhedasongs*.

Kameswar Rabha of Kataligaon says, "It is quite interesting to watch a bear being enticed with a *mantra*. He carries all the firewood from the forest and does other works aswell. He is then well fed and left in the forest to go back. The one who entraps a bear with his *mantra* makes it a point not to hurt the bear in any way. He treats him well and once the work is done; he sends him back to the forest."

The songs are performed men and only at night. They perform the songs during the month of *Aaghon* in a full moon night. The Totola Rabha folk go from house to house performing the songs and dances and collecting rice grains, money or anything the family has to offer. They then bless the family wishing them a prosperous life throughout the year. They use split bamboo to create sound. They also use whatever materials they can set their hands upon, thus creating the same atmosphere as chasing wild buffaloes from their fields in real life. One of the performer wears leaves of trees to imitate a bear and jump to and fro during the performance to the utter joy and merriment



of the onlookers, especially the kids. He even wears a hat made of grasses. The other members of the group sing *Mohkheda* songs.

The group of youth pretend to be ready to chase the animals from the farms. They are equipped in full gear carrying batons and torches. The aim is not to hunt the animals down but to send them back to the forest without hurting them. This is highlighted in the kind of articles they carry along with them. Almost all the articles they carry are aimed at creating loud noise to frighten the animals so that they leave for the forests from where they came from, thus preventing the crops from being destroyed. The perfect time for the buffaloes to come to the fields is the full moon night of *Aaghon*, the time when the crops are ready for harvest. This also highlights the indigenous knowledge of the village folk. This gets highlighted in the following lines of the *Moh Kheda* song.

*Hari hourethuprehou, kana kujaealhou.*

*Houremohhou*

*Aaghonmahapurnihol, mohkhedba hokum hol.*

*Sunga tukanhatotolou, mohkhedbajangjou.*

*Kana kujadhanakowa, jhengmatlungbiretpuwa.*

(Get in line, come in groups; the lame and blind, to the one side.

There's a buffalo there.

It's full moon night of *Aaghon*, it's time to chase the buffaloes.

Get hold of sticks and batons, let's go chase the buffaloes.

Ho the lame and the blind, we're facing adversity early at dawn.)

The village folk recreate the atmosphere of urgency in chasing the wild buffaloes from their fields or else their crops would be destroyed. They call out to their friends to eat whatever they get even if it is tasteless and come in haste. This is felt in the following lines:

*Lora lorijangbol, tekorgurakhaibol.*

*Tekorguratnohol nun,*

(Let's go in haste, let's eat *tekpodwer* and leave  
The salt's a bit less.)

The following lines reflect the hardships the brother's son had to undertake while cultivating the fields. All his efforts are turned to dust as the wild buffaloes ravage through the fields. They have already destroyed the crops. The reference to '*honornagnal*' and '*rupor phal*' signify their richness. This may not remain the same if the buffaloes destroy all the crops. So, it is an urgent calling to all the farmers, whether rich or poor, to come out of their houses and chase the ravaging animals.

*Honornangolrupor phal, bharjiya beta bai hal.*

*Hal bai herali, moidilapati.*

(The golden plough, the silver yoke, the brother's son ploughs.  
You have ploughed but lost, everything to the buffaloes.)

The chasing folk run hastily through their yards. They pass through the yard of castor plants and they have no time to take care as not to trample over the plants. *Eri* plant is a useful plant as they are used to rear silk works and the folk utmost care to grow them. But here, they have no time to think of it as they must hurry to chase the animals.

*Barireerapat, mohkhedongjhotjhot*

(The castor leaf in the yard, we chase the buffaloes)

However, the simple-minded folk have a sense of understanding about the helplessness of the animals. They ask themselves what the animals will feast on if they can find nothing in the forests. Paddy grown by man is the only option left for them. Here, a sense of guilt can be felt. It is because of the clearing of the forests for cultivation by man that they have lost their food source. The forest areas are dwindling as a result of

the insensible activities of men to meet their own needs. Thus, the folk also feel a sense of guilt and therefore they take care not to harm the animals but to send them back to the forests by creating loud noise using *lathis* and other sound creating materials rather than weapons. Their sense of understanding gets reflected in the following lines.

*Dhan nakhaikhabo ki,*

*Habirmajotpabo ki.*

(What will they consume if not the paddy?

What will they find in the forest?)

The farmers cultivated ‘*bonni*’ variety of paddy which is very expensive but even this is destroyed.

In the following lines, the folk capture a bear that had come to the fields and use it for their merriment and also for chasing the buffaloes. The bear dances to the sound of the batons and other objects and runs fast after the animals. The Totolas then feed it and send it off to the forest from where it had come.

*Aaubhalukaau re, khonek nasi jaure*

(Come bear come here, dance a while and depart.)

The buffaloes now have left for the forests and for the performers of *Mohkhedageet*, its time to leave the household. They have been moving from house to house performing and collecting whatever the families had to offer. But there are some people who pretend to fall asleep and hesitate to speak or talk them. This represents the miserliness in the members. They don’t want to offer anything to the buffalo chasers and therefore they don’t come out of their houses but remain indoors quiet and silent. At this, the performers don’t take it as an offence but move away sad.

*Girasghararghumoti, deng ki nedong mat.*

(The household falls asleep; they hesitate to speak out.)

However, the performers plead out to the pretending household members saying that they are relatives.

*Sotal major tulohi, aamiholongaalohi.*

(The basil plant in the courtyard, we are kinfolks.)

Whether they get a contribution or not, the fun-loving folks bless the household wishing prosperity for the family. They bless the family saying-

*Kukholhoukmongolhouk, gohalitgoruhouk*

*Bhoralotdhanhouk.*

(Let the family prosper, let the cows in the shed multiply.

Let the granary be full.)

It is seen that an activity in real life now has become a festive occasion for the Totola Rabhas. It has become part of their culture. Many of the lines sung have nothing to do anything with their activity of chasing the wild buffaloes but they are used to give a poetic effect. The rhyming scheme in couplets add to the beauty of the songs as well as assist in memorizing it.

Here is another version of *BhalukNosowaGeet* which has the same context.

***Hari hourethuprihou***

*Hari hourethuprehou, kana kujaefalhou.*

*Houremohhou*

*Aaghonmahapurnihol, mohkhedba hokum hol.*

*Sunga tukanhatotolou, mohkhedbajangjou.*

*Kana kujadhanakowa, Jhengmatlungbiretpuwa.*

*Ojamatihulunglaj, sari bamune jure kaj.*  
*Bamune kore lora lori, hadtabetak kore babi.*  
*Lora lorijangbol, tekorgurakhaibol.*  
*Tekorguratnohol nun, sari kuleekedon.*  
*Honornangolrupor phal, bharjiya beta bai hal.*  
*Hal bai herali, moidilapati.*  
*Mohorhing eka beka, tate pore maslengka.*  
*Maslengkalikhuthu, murottiuliulaiighiu.*  
*Botorsaikhelongaami, ghararekar kami*  
*Galiparbanoratumi. kathikonarkumti.*  
*Henduliya sati, mohkhedongrati.*  
*Barireerapat, mohkhedongjhotjhat,*  
*Hendulgasorpoita, mohmarongsoyta.*  
*Rajai dilamatir tap, mohe bole oi bap.*  
*Moh gel mohmohai, hendulgasot ga ghohai*  
*Aathiyakolornuneujhaluk, jhap di aaheburabhaluk.*  
*Hunonahunoni, dhankhaibonni.*  
*Dhan nakhaikhabo ki, habirmajotpabo ki.*  
*Aaubhalukiaau re, khoneknasi jaure.*  
*Naserenasere.*  
*Ui nakhaikhabo ki, habirmajotpabo ki.*  
*Naseirenaseire, amarbhaluknaseire.*  
*Aamarbhaluksukuri, Naseghurighuri.*  
*Aaghonmahapurnihol,*  
*Baroruwatero kami*  
*Kathi konarkoyabon, deng ki nedong kore mon.*  
*Girajghararghumoti.*  
*Barireerapat, deng ki nedong kore mat.*  
*Raja ghororosiradhuwa, soli kandetohatoha.*  
*Sotal major tulohi, aamiholongaalohi.*  
*Dan dandan, kukholhoukmongolhouk.*  
*Gohalitgoruhouk, bhoralotdhanhouk.*

(Get in line, come in groups

The lame and blind, to the one side.

There's a buffalo there  
It's full moon night of *Aaghon*  
It's time to chase the buffaloes.  
*Get hold of sticks and batons*  
Let's go chase the buffaloes  
The lame and the blind  
It's early morn.  
We call in *Ojas*  
Four Brahmins start the work  
The Brahmins are in a hurry  
Seven sons are called in.  
Let's go in a hurry  
Have the pounded rice  
Though it's not salted,  
Devour what you get.  
The golden plough, the silver yoke  
The son ploughs  
Ploughed; yet lost  
Got the yoke ready.  
The curved buffalo horns  
There, the kingfisher rests.  
The kingfishers are small and tiny  
Mucus oozes when hard pressed by the head.  
We play by the weather  
The bamboo walls  
You can't rebuke.  
The verandah crickets  
The oiled lamp  
We chase buffaloes at night.  
The castor leaves in the yard  
We chase the buffaloes.  
The flowers of *hendul*  
We kill six buffaloes.  
The king presents land

The buffalo cries, "Oi father!"  
The buffalo leaves crying  
Rubbing himself against *hendul* tree  
Banana, salt and chilli  
The buffalo comes hopping.  
Listen listen  
It devours sticky rice grain  
What will they consume if not the paddy?  
What will they find in the forest?  
Come bear  
Dance a while before leaving  
What else shall they consume?  
What else is there in the jungle.  
They dance and dance.  
Our bear dances  
Our bear is plump  
Dances round and round.  
It's full moon night of *Aaghon*  
Twelve bamboo posts and thirteen split bamboo  
The grasses by the cornerside of verandah  
They hesitate to give a mind.  
The household falls asleep  
The castor leaves in the yard  
They hesitate to speak.  
The washerwoman of the King's palace  
Her children cry 'towatowa.'  
The basil plant in the courtyard.  
We are kinfolks.  
Let the family prosper  
Let the cows in the shed multiply  
Let the granary be full.)

Every *Bhaluknosowageet* ends in a blessing. The dancing folks bless the household wishing prosperity for the family. They bless the family wishing them a wealthier life. They shower blessings in their own traditional way saying. “Let the cows in the shed multiply. Let the granary be full.” In earlier days, a family’s wealth and prosperity was measured in terms of the number of cows and buffaloes they had. A household with a granary that remains full throughout the year was considered to be very rich. If a family had rice grains of previous years in stock, they are considered to be the wealthiest. Such was the simplicity of the village folk.

Here's another version of *BhalukNosowaGeet* prevalent among the Totola Rabhas.

#### **4.13 *Bambol pita* song**

‘*Bambol Pita*’ or ‘*Hepor Pita*’ is a festival celebrated among the Totola Rabhas. This is celebrated in the month of ‘*Bhado*’ of the Assamese calendar that falls between August and September during full moon night. The young and old take batons and go from house to house singing and dancing and collecting rice grains and money which are later used for feasting. A song sung during *Bambol Pita* is as follows:

*ThupriHorethupriho, kana kuja log ho*

*Kana kujadhanantori, ujanaikaasungbohi.*

(All you blind and bent, come together, get into a circle.

All you blind and bent, there’s no priest, yet together we sit.)

The lines reflect the unity among the young and the old. Even the blind and the lame are not left out. They all celebrate the festival in unison. The presence of a priest is not considered mandatory and any occasion can be started off without the blessings of a priest.



*Ki aihatei, Ki baihatei*  
*Bulu, bambolpitiwajang*  
*Herou, bambolpitiwajang.*  
*O hore o hore.*

(Hey you mothers, hey you sisters!  
Let's go, perform *Bambolpita*  
Praise the Lord!)

The performers now greet their mothers and sisters and sing praises to the almighty saying, “*Hari hari*”.

*Moniyabeharortelhorihori, moniyabeharortel*  
*Ki o bhangiunopore, ki o singiunopore*  
*EnehenMushalpuriyamel.*

(Oil from the mustard plants, oil from the mustard plants  
They don't break off; they don't fall off  
Such is the gossip of the ones from Mushalpur.)

*Bambolpita* song is fun filled. The lyrics might be anything to bring laughter among the listeners. Totoloa Rabhas are fun loving people and they tease anyone they come across. Here, they might be having an encounter with someone from Mushalpur, a region in Baksa. Therefore, they mention the name of Mushalpur.

*Moinagiridhanorelaruhorihori, Moinagiridhanorelaru*  
*Aahehitulaarunakhabi, nodirhiparebalar sore sore*  
*Pori asil dura, oheitolarunakhabi*  
*Hahuwerebulowadaru.*

(*Laddus* from rice grains of Moinaguri, *laddus* from Moinaguri  
Come, don't gobble that *laddu*; Beyond the river, beside the sandy bank  
Lay the pestle. Yeh, do not consume that *laddu*  
The rice beer made by your mother-in-law.)

Through the above lines, one is advised not to take the *laddus* from Moinaguri.

*Silkinimasore kata horihori*

*Silkinimasore kata*

*Oheighararaapi keta*

*Puja sabaulasi*

*Aainatsaimarsiphota.*

(The thorns of the tiny fish, O God!

The thorns of the tiny fish

The damsels of this family,

Are getting ready for the festival

And decorating their forehead with a *bindu*.)

Now, the damsels in the family are getting ready for a festival. They are decorating their foreheads with *bindu*. It is customary for every girl to wear a *bindu* on one's forehead.

*Ekso takarhalodhigura, duiotakar tel.*

*Tinsotakarghoratu, lahamsingi gel.*

*Khidinilungkhidinilung, banfornaithol;*

*Huhurburaidikhaidila, kotobahortol.*

(Turmeric powder for one hundred rupees, oil for two hundred.

The horse for three hundred rupees, has broken loose

I chased it away, the owner knows nothing.

Father-in-law has showed the way, to the bamboo grove.)

The damsels are wearing expensive decorative items. On the other hand, the owner of the house knows nothing of where the horses have gone.

*Bura asilkathitbohi, buri asilbhatrandhi*

*Tate moijatpaniphelailola.*

*Buri uthiaahongte, hiritkorikumraporadila.*

*O kokai, hiritkorikumraporadila*

(Grandpa was seated on the porch, Grandma was busy cooking

She spilt water there.

While walking, she slipped to the ground and tumbled like a white gourd.

O brother! There, she slipped and tumbled like a white gourd.)

While grandpa was seated on the porch, grandma was busy cooking. In the process, she spilt water and later slipped and fell tumbling to the ground, thus creating sound like that of a white gourd. This shows that one has to be careful while doing the household chores.

*Ifalehifalesai, buri poradekha pai*

*Gautuhepiyaihepiyaisala.*

*Hifalepatotdiya, masoreluratu*

*Bonda mekrigujrigujrikhala.*

*O kokaibondamekrigujrigujrikhala.*

(This way and that, he glanced and spotted grandma who was down on the floor

He drew his hands across to check grandma.

There, on the other hand, the fish that she roasted in leaf.

The cat gobbled them all.

Hey brother! The cat gobbled them all.)

Hearing the ‘thud’ sound, grandpa looked to and fro and spotting grandma down on the floor, drew his hands across to check grandma. On the other hand, the cat ate the roasted fish.

*Duraklagi phan patongte, bojilho hurbura.*

*O kokaibojilho hurbura.*

*Phandotbajihohurburai, paridilagali,*

*Kunbetaiphandpatsi, hiumekhlabhari.*

*O kokaihiumekhlabhari.*

(The trap was set for the cat; but grandpa got entrapped.

He got stuck in the trap.

Trapped Grandpa then rebuked,

And cursed- he that set the trap,

Will get a wife to reckon with.)

A trap was set for the cat, but it was grandpa who got caught in the trap. Grandpa, on the other hand, enraged, cursed the one who set the trap saying that the one who set the trap will get a wife to reckon with. If a person gets such a wife, his whole life will be turned to hell as he will have to face the wrath of his wife every single day. Though grandpa cursed with utter disgust and seriousness, there is a sense of playfulness.

*Aandinadura bajli, kore dhorfor.*

*Aajidekhoburabajsi, mukhedi boke bhorbhor.*

*O kokaimukhodi boke bhorbhor.*

(When the cat gets entrapped, it struggles to get free.

And here the trapped grandpa, verbalizes but endlessly.

Yes brother, he verbalizes endlessly.)

It is usual for an entrapped cat to struggle to get free and here it is seen that grandpa, who got stuck in the trap, endlessly rebukes the one who set the trap. It might be funny for the onlookers but it is really painful for grandpa.

*Aajidekhoburabajsi, dikhaldighalsuli*

*Manuhpolaidurorpere, burabhalukbuli.*

*O kokaiburabhalukbuli.*

(Today, grandpa is trapped; he has but long hair.

People run from afar, mistaking him to be an old bear.

Yes brother, an old bear.)

Grandpa, who is trapped has long hair. People who come in to help run away from afar mistaking him to be an old bear. Grandpa must undergo intense pain, as he must lay there for a longer period. He can't even shout for help as people are afraid to come close.

*Kakara Makara, khaikakarahorhor kore*

*O kokai- khaikakrahorhor kore.*

*Uparkatitol much, kakaraghukabordukh.*

*Ghukekakarajolomnipthare*

*O kokaijolomnipthare.*

(He eats the crab, and cries like one.

Yes brother, he cries like one.

Open at one end, it's a painful task to hunt.

You must endure the pain.

Yes brother, you must endure the pain.)

Grandpa is compared to a crab. He eats crab and now cries like one.

*Enthor buri aanjarandsi, khare sup sup kore.*

*O kokaikhare sup sup kore.*

*Enthor buri anjarandli, soruinapaitel*

*Heiaanjahabadorli, bhatgilaaapnaapni gel*

*O kokaibhatgilaaapnaapni gel.*

(Their grandma cooks curry, alkaline is brought to a boil.

Yes brother, alkaline is brought to a boil.

When their grandma cooks curry, the pan never gets oil.

When one consumes that curry, rice slips down the throat.

Yes brother, the food slips down on its own.)

Through the above lines, the miserliness of grandma is being spoken of. Grandma uses alkaline instead of oil to cook. Even when she cooks curry, one can never get the smell of oil. Therefore, when one consumes food prepared by grandma, he need not chew as it goes down the throat to the stomach on its own.

*Enthor buri aanjarandli, aanjatnede nun;*

*Burarpoisarkhoroskomai, burirkeman gun.*

*O kokaiburirkeman gun.*

(When their grandma cooks food, she seldom uses salt.

Reducing grandpa's expense, she thus has great virtue.

Yes brother, she has great virtue.)

Another characteristic of grandma's cooking is that she seldom uses salt to taste. This, she does to save grandpa's money. And for this, she is said to possess great virtue. She is not a spendthrift and she helps her husband in reducing expenses.

*Ki masomarilongaaberijaberi, ki masomarilungtora.*

*Moharajarputekeborgharbandsi, Seutinakhalajora.*

(What a useless fish have I caught! What fish have I caught, my love?)

The son of the king has built a large house, where the beam's not joined.)

*Puotikuptiharuwakupti, rajatherbaudhankhai*

*Rajareputekehaunorpotharot, kuptinolaba jai.*

*Kuptiyekolagasotnolabibaha, dimajorbhangijabo*

*Sanaklaginokoribiakha.*

(Bird in the early morn, devours the rice cultivated by the king.

The son of the king goes to the field; hey bird, do not stray there.

Do not build a nest atop the black tree, the eggs will break.

Do not expect young ones.)

Here, the cultivation of the king are destroyed by the birds and the son of the king goes to the fields to chase the birds. There's an advice for the birds not to build nest atop the black tree or else their eggs will break. When their eggs are destroyed, they cannot expect young ones.

*Seserikharorephotahorihori, seserigasorephota*

*Madhav mandirorpandaikoisi, deolotmaribiphota.*

*Aagfalebandhlong gai damuri, pasfalebandhlonghati,*

*Ito kothanohoi Jodi, kankatabaruarnati.*

*Aathiyakoloredonahorihori, aathiyakoloredona*

*Pukharpudhemenai sol solkoriloi gel, kanotenidilahona.*

(The *bindus* are made of *seseri* tree.

The *Pandas* of Madhav temple said, "Use a *bindu* during *deol*".

I tie the cows and calves at the front, and the elephant at the back.

If this is not the truth, it's the granddaughter of Baruah whose ear is cut.

Plates of the plantain, plates of plaintain

*Pukharpudhemena* took me away, no one presented me earrings.)

Here, a reference is made to the plates prepared from banana plantain that is used to serve food during occasions. This highlights a traditional practice that is actually helpful in curbing pollution. Banana plantain plates are biodegradable. These days, it is seen that non-degradable plates are used on all occasions. This creates pollution.

*Dhanmuthibandhilongsaulmuthikarilong, aaitherghorokjangbuli*

*Aaitherghorokejabakenidla, hahuremurakhambuli.*

(I bunch out the paddy and beat the rice, I get ready to go my mom's.

They won't allow me, for they think I will speak ill of my in-laws.)

A daughter-in-law speaks of her pitiable condition wherein she cannot even go to her mom's house. Her in-laws won't allow her fearing that she will speak ill of them. She does all the chores including beating the rice in advance so that she can be away from home for some days but in vain.

*Pubeposchimeuttaredokhine, koinaphurilungsai*

*Jiba eta koinapalong, boihobarkotinai.*

(East West North South, I search for a bride

The one bride I picked, has no buttocks to sit.)

Here, the beauty of a bride is spoken of. The singer here says that he looked for a bride on all directions and yet he found a bride who has no buttocks to sit. The beauty of a girl is usually found in her slender shape but here the case is just the opposite.

*Eklagharareklatiri, bonornapaiaali*

*Maj moiathagithoisi, kodolephelalungtuli.*

(The lone household and the lone wife; she's never free from work.

She's done the shit in the courtyard, I cleaned it with a spade.)

Even a hard-working wife finds it difficult to manage the household chores all alone. She's never free from work. Here, she is so engulfed in her daily chores that she does not even find the time to go for her needs. She passes her shit in the courtyard and it is the turn of the husband to clean it up.

*Bhotragasornangaljungal, era gasor dal*

*Enetiribiyakoratkoi, ghurifuraibhal.*

(A plough made of useless tree, branches of a castor plant  
It's better to be a vagabond, than marry such a wife.)

Through the above lines, it is highlighted that it is better to be a vagabond than marrying a useless wife.

*Puboraapibiyankorang, khatakhatasuli*

*Poschimoraapibiyankorang, telbesilagebuli.*

(I will never marry a girl from the East, for they always wear short hair.  
I won't marry from the West either, for they use excess oil.)

The characteristics of a bride from the East and the West is spoken of. A bride from the East is said to wear short hair and a bride from the West is said to use excess oil. Such brides are not considered to be good for a family. It is believed that a girl who wears short hair does not have the qualities of a good wife. She is considered to be modern and spendthrift. Therefore, she is not an option for a family.

*Uttarapibiyankorang, bandhbanajnekhopa;*

*Dokhinoraapibiyankorang, muthenamarephota.*

*O kokaimuthenamarephota.*

*E aihat o buli, Bambolbambolpitiba jai*

*Heroubambolpitiba jai.*

*O hure o hure.*

(I won't marry a girl from the North, she doesn't know to tie a pun



I won't marry a girl from the South, she doesn't wear a *bindu*  
She never uses a *bindu*; yes brother, she never uses *bindu*.  
Ho there! Let's go sing *Bambolpita*.)

In the previous lines, the singer rejected brides from the East and West due to their nature and he won't marry a bride from the North as she doesn't even know how to tie a pun. He won't marry a bride from the South as she never uses *bindu*, the characteristic mark of a wife. Such is the condition of the one who rejected many brides to find the right one. And now, he has to settle with the one is not happy with. He then, calls out to the others to come along and sing *Bambolpita* to forget his woes.

(Rabha, 2010 p 183)

*Moniyabeharortelhorihori, Moniyabeharortel,*  
*Uho, bhangiuropore, uho, singiuropore*  
*Enehen Tamulpuramel*  
*Ki aai hat ou, bolo bai hat oi*  
*Bambol bambolpitiwajau.*

(Oil from the mustard plants, oil from the mustard plants  
They don't break off, they don't fall off  
Such is the gossip of the ones from Tamulpur.  
Hey you mothers, hey you the sisters  
Let's go sing *Bambolpita*.)

Here's another *Bambol pita* song that mentions king 'Thotha' who is believed to be the ancestor of the Totola Rabhas.

*Kino mase marilongtora Hori Hori, kino mase marilongtora.*  
*O he Thotha Rojar puteke, borgharbandhise*  
*Seutinakhalajora.*  
*Ki ai hat o, ki bai hat o*

*Bambolbambolpitibajang....*

(What fish have we caught?What fish have we caught?  
Ho, the son of King Thotha, is building the main house,  
But the beams have not been joined.  
The mothers there, the sisters there,  
Let's go perform *Bambol Pita*.....)

Here a reference is made to 'King Thotha'. The Totola Rabhas are believed to have originated from 'ThothaRoja' or King Thotha. ThothaRojawas the commander-in-chief of 'Ban Roja', the king of Sonitpur. He had to face the wrath of Ban Roja due to his laziness and was ousted from Sonitpur. ThothaRoja, along with his family went to the foothills of Bhutan where he established himself as King. Since he brought along his family and relatives from Sonitpur and established his kingdom, they were known by his name as 'Thothaloi' meaning 'To Thotha'. This later got converted to 'Thothala' which later came to be known as 'Totola' or 'Totola.' The mention of 'ThothaRoja' can be found in the *Bambol Pita* songs prevalent among the Totola Rabhas of Tamulpur.

#### **4.14 Lullabies/ Cradle Songs**

The Rabhas are very rich in lullabies. Lullabies are songs sung specially to lull a child to sleep or to pacify a crying baby. Some of the songs are sung to entertain the weeping baby. It can also be referred to as cradle song. These are songs sung by the mother, grand parents or sometimes by the maid servants to lull the babies. A lullaby has no specific duration or time. A mother sings to her baby while rocking the child on her lap or in its bed or carrier until the baby falls asleep. The singing voice then trails off to a whisper. The text maybe or varying length. As for the Rabhas, 'a rich harvest awaits the

collector who turns his attention to them.’<sup>15</sup>In lullabies, there are references to birds, animals, other creatures or natural phenomena like stars, moon, cloud, wind, etc. Insects like firefly often find a place in lullabies.

### **Context:**

When there is childbirth in a family, it is an occasion to rejoice. This is a continuation of the family. It is usually considered a disgrace by the society if a woman is barren. Most of the times, a barren woman is subject to insults by the people of her own family or neighbourhood. Usually, a bride is expected to deliver a child within a year or two. If not, there will be hue and cry amongst the villagers. Steps are being taken by the mother of the family to ensure that the young mother bears a child. She might visit *ojas* and get a *talisman* for the mother so that no harm comes to the mother. The young mother might also visit temples and observe the many rites and practices enjoined on her to bear a baby. It is usually common for the family to visit a temple or an *oja* rather than consult a doctor to get a child. In this respect, the family also asks for boon in exchange for an offering to the gods and goddesses in the village. Therefore, childbirth in a family is an occasion to rejoice. Childbirth in a family also brings respect to the mother and the family. It is indeed the happiest moment as it means continuation of the family. The Totola Rabha families, influenced by the nearby Assamese communities, celebrate ceremonies connected with the child. Firstly, the purification of the family and secondly naming of the child in case of well off families. It is during the naming of the child that relatives are invited for a feast. And every feast in a Rabha family is incomplete without wine and merriment. Though the occasion of naming of the child is a practice of the

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<sup>15</sup>Burne, Charlotte Sophia. *The Handbook of Folklore*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd. 1996Pg. 279

Assamese community, the Rabhas have adopted it but with a difference in practice. Like the Assamese, a Brahmin with knowledge in astrology is invited to calculate the stars and give the initials for the naming of the child. Unlike the Assamese, pork is being prepared and wine being served to the guests. On the occasion, the child will get gifts in the form of ornaments usually from the maternal uncle. The child also receives clothes, toys and money as gifts from the relatives and neighbours who have come to attend the celebration.

In case the families cannot afford to celebrate the occasion, the father goes to an astrologer to get details of the stars and the initials for naming the child. Relatives are not invited but there is a feast with a few neighbours and the village priest for purification. This is incomplete without wine and merriment.

**A lullaby (cradle song):**

*E tupousokeyatupou*

*Dhan nakhabisaulnakhabi*

*Dhan pokilesira dim*

*Dalotbohikhabi*

*Dal dulbhanigya*

*Rojargharatjabi*

*Rani dibotelgamsa*

*Rajai dibophul*

*Rajarbitibiya hobo*

*Kai bajabodhul?*

(Little bird little bird

Eat not the corn, eat not the rice

When the corn is ripe, flattened rice will be provided

Eat, Sitting on a branch

Break the branch and go to the king's house,

The Queen will provide oil and napkin  
The King will provide flowers  
The King's daughter will get married to the one who  
Plays the drum.)

Here, the pastoral setting can be witnessed. The innocence of the little bird is epitomized through the lines. One is indeed carried away into a world of harmony where the gentlest bird and the most powerful persons in the kingdom, the King and Queen are brought together. It's a world of fantasy where the King and Queen are ready to serve the little bird instead of the bird serving the duo. Here, the simple mindset of the Rabha folk gets highlighted. The lines may be childish but underneath the lines lie symbolic meaning. It is an attempt to create a world where all creatures are equal and peace and harmony dwells.

Most of the lullabies are centered around the moon. Rabha lullabies are not an exception. The moon is usually referred to as '*Jon Mama*' which can be translated into 'Moon Uncle'. In the following song, the moon is addressed to as '*Mahi*' or 'Aunty'. Moon is here anthropomorphized. Food and accommodation are being offered to attract the moon. This is done to satisfy the child because a child is known to cry for the moon.

*Jona mahi jona mahi*

*Aah aah*

*Hak dim bhat dim*

*Sanga tolotebaha dim*

*Aah aah*

(Aunt Moon! Aunt Moon!

Come down to us.

We will provide rice and herbs,

We will provide accommodation beneath the bed,

Come down to us.)

Here, assonance is used in the words *hak* and *bhat; sangaandbaha*. It is seen that the lullaby not only promises the moon to the child, but also portrays childlike simplicity. The mother tries to lull the child to sleep saying that the moon will come down to them and sleep beneath the bed. The child might have questions as to what the moon will eat when it comes down to them. At this, the mother promises to provide rice and edible leaves to the moon. The child then goes to sleep peacefully. One must imagine himself/herself to be a little child in order to sing lullabies. They are usually lyrical poems with unique and simple themes. It's an exploration of an aspect of human nature that speaks of purity and innocence, gentleness and mildness that the folk possess.

Below is a simple cradle song with just three lines:

*Tim Sokoritim*

*Eta dimapari dim*

*Mathajori dim.*

#### **4.15 Play songs**

Folk games of each region and community are shaped not only by local environment but also culture. It depends a lot on physical space, materials available and the seasons. This may determine when and where they are played and the props that are used. Folk games often incorporate cultural knowledge, values and skills that have emerged over time from the reciprocity between a particular society and its given environment. Folk games are present in almost all communities irrespective of which part of the world they live in. They are rich repositories of values and skills, inherited over time through experience and passed down from generation to generation. Today, due to globalization and modernisation and exposure to media a negative impact is seen on

tradition and local cultural identities. Folk culture is giving way to the more sophisticated way of life. The transmission of cultural knowledge is being hampered by the rapid process of modernisation and this has now left us with fragmented forms of cultural knowledge and dispersed indigenous communities. This has in fact had its toll on the culture of Totola Rabhas and this is the reason why it is quite difficult to find folk games and songs related to the games among the tribe. The competitive education and other recreational alternatives like Television and other media entertainments including e-gaming, etc. have led to reduced opportunities and interest for traditional game playing.

Folk game is also losing out in the face of commercially produced games and toys, increased focus and time dedicated to formal education and schooling, reduced independence and mobility of children and not to mention space restrictions, etc.

Folk games can be of various types according to the availability of space and props. The special quality of folk games is that they can be played anywhere, for these games do not require a special space, a large dedicated playground or specialized equipment. Thus, folk games bring out the innovative mind in children. Children might be playing on the fields, empty plots, streets and even indoors. In earlier times, streets were not so busy as of today and metalled roads were nowhere to be seen in a village. Such were the times when children used the streets to play their games till late afternoon only to be chased by their parents, either to take bath or to take food. Children out of school had nothing to do other than playing games or going fishing, rat hunting, mongoose hunting or hunting for eggs of ants, etc. Those were the days of freedom.

Play songs are not very common among the Totola Rabhas these days. However, I have managed to collect some. They are usually very short in length. There are songs sung to start a game. For example, the game of chasing each other needs a start and this is done by singing a song usually accusing someone, maybe of farting or pissing in bed, etc. This is a kind of technique to offend a person and he will start chasing the others in turn. Here is a song or oral poetry quite common among the village folk, especially the school going boys. It is a kind of technique to find the person who farted. It so happens that whenever someone farts without any sound, it gets difficult to find the culprit. Everyone in the group nods his or her head indicating he/ she is not the one. Thus, it's all of a sudden that someone starts the following lines pointing to each person in a line as the words follow. The person who is pointed with the last word is the culprit and a loud cheer rings the air while the so-called culprit goes around chasing the others for making fun of him, because he is not the actual culprit. This then turns into a game on its own, a game much enjoyed. Sometimes it ends in crying on the part of the accused as he/ she is not able to catch or punish anyone for accusing him.

*Pokapaan, kasapaan*

*Jai Padsī, hiyemuselman*

(Ripe betel leaf, raw betel leaf

The one who farted, is a Muslim.)

The above rhyme does not have a contextual meaning as such. It is just a mixture of words but with a rhyming scheme. The context of the betel leaves has nothing to do with farting and the concept of the one who has farted is a Muslim, has nothing to do with farting. However, it has a definite rhyming scheme. 'Paan' and 'Muselman' end in the same sounding rhyming scheme. Though this is done in a playful mood, it helps in memorizing. Again, the use of the word 'Muselman' has another significant context.



Anyone who doesn't take bath and remains dirty is being referred to as a '*Musalman*' in a playful context among the kids. So, a person who has farted is being referred to as a '*musalman*' through the game. This itself infuriates the one who is blamed for the farting though everyone knows that he/she is not the actual culprit. So, he/she goes around chasing the others. Here, the word '*Musalman*' has nothing to do with the persons following Muslim religion. Similarly, there are other words that have no actual meaning of its own but they refer to a context. For example: During the lighting of *Meji* on *Urukaday*, the boys playfully sing:

*Hopohopohoya*

*Gongarorkutiboya*

(Hopohopo hoyo

The buttocks of Bhutias are awful)

The words in the first line do not have a meaning as such but are used to create an effect of alliteration. The above lines are referring to the buttocks of Bhutanese people as bad and dirty. The context behind this is not done to insult anyone but a concept prevails among the village folk that the people of Bhutan do not wash themselves after going for nature's call. They just rub their buttocks using leaves, stone or mud and mostly they are believed to drag their buttock against the ground. The folk also believe that they seldom take bath or clean their clothes. Therefore, they are considered to be dirty. This is so because the Bhutanese people have been coming to villages since ages to trade their goods like red chillies, oranges, etc. in exchange for rice grain or rice cakes. They come walking across the hills for days together and by the time they reach the villages on the Indian side, they and their dress stink. The weather on the Bhutan side is much cooler than the Indian side and in addition there is scarcity of water. Therefore, the

Bhutanese people have a different way of living their life. In addition, they carry lot of raw meat and other eatables in their pocket which is actually a part of their dress. And therefore, they start to stink.

Other play songs finding persons who might have farted are as follows:

*Ada pada labonjada*

*Jai padehiye haram jada*

The words '*Ada pada labonjada*' are used due to their rhyming scheme. '*Ada*', '*pada*', '*jada*(in hindi)' mean 'ginger', 'fart' and 'more' respectively. They have not connections as far as context is concerned but they have been used due to their rhyming scheme. But the second line '*Jai padeheye haram jada*' is indeed insulting. It means that the one who has farted is a stupid. This is sufficient to infuriate the person who is accused of farting and he goes about chasing the others.

It is seen that the songs are short in length and simple in diction.

### **Touch and kill game**

Games are played in various ways among the village folk. They might be played either in water or on land. They might be played while seated or while standing. They might also play football using a fruit big in size instead of a real football. There are many games that needs no props or equipment of any kind. The creativity of the village folk come in handy many a times. When they play games where one might have to run after another just to make a touch, they are at a fix as to who would start the chase. They have their own ways of starting a game and mostly with songs or phrases. The following are phrases in the form of question and answer where the final phrase is one

of insult to the one questioning repeatedly. And then the game of chase, touch and kill starts. The Lines goes:

*Eta Kotha*

*ki kotha?*

*Bengormatha.*

*Ki beng?*

*Pat beng.*

*Ki pat?*

*Nil pat.*

*Ki nil?*

*Gu gil.*

(One word

What word?

Frog's head.

What frog?

Leafy frog.

What leaf?

Blue leaf.

What blue?

Swallow shit.)

The above lines reflect the fun side of the folk. It is indeed a tough time translating the phrase into the Target Text (TT) as the Source Text (ST) is mainly composed with a certain rhyming scheme. The real beauty of the ST lies in the repetition scheme.

There are other variations of the same phrase prevalent among the Rabha folk in other places. Some of them are as follows:

*Eta kotha*

*Ki kotha?*

*Bengkotha*

*Ki beng?*

*Horubeng*

*Ki horu?*

*Kath horu*

*Ki kath?*

*Halkath.*

*Ki hal?*

*Goruhah*

*Ki goru?*

*Toi goru.*

(One word

What word?

Frog word.

What frog?

Small frog.

What small?

Log small.

What log?

Sal log.

What sal?

Pair of cows.

What cow?

You are a cow.)

The above Lines are in the form of questions and answers in repetitive words. The beauty of the lines are in the cross- questions asked for each answer. The words used don't have a meaning in sequence but are simultaneous answers. The essence of the lines are a rendering between two participants. The last sentence brings an offence to the second participant who goes putting unending questions. His questions are brought to an abrupt end with the final sentence where he is called a 'cow'. In most cases, the one who is called a cow goes around chasing the other participant.

Another variation of the question-answer game is as follows:

*Eta kotha*

*Ki kotha?*

*Bengormatha*

*Kibeng?*

*Pat beng.*

*Ki pat?*

*Neem pat.*

*Ki neem?*

*Ghora neem.*

*Ki ghora?*

*Hali ghora*

*Ki hali?*

*Mur gukhali.*

(One word

What word?

Frog's head

What frog?

Leaf frog.

What leaf?

Neem leaf.

What neem?

Horse neem.

What horse?

*Hali* horse

*What* hali?

You've taken my shit.)

In the final sentence, the questioner is teased to have taken the shit of the other and this brings an end to the unending questions.

**Play Song:**

*BandorBandor*

*ki pholkhai*

*Aam pholkhai*

*Mok eta di*

*Toi ki dibi?*

*Tok binji dim*

*Eibinjita ki koribo?*

*Mona silabo.*

*Eimonatu ki koribo?*

*Taka bhorabo.*

*Eitakata ki koribo?*

*Dao kinibo.*

*Eidaota ki koribo?*

*Tok katibo (Kate)*

*Peselele (Mori jai).*

(Monkey monkey!

What do you eat?

I eat mango.

Give me one.

What will you give in return?

A needle.

What will you do with the needle?

Will stitch a bag.

What will you do with the bag?

Will put money.

What will you do with the money?

Will buy a knife.

What will you do with a knife?

Will cut you (He cuts)

*Peselele (He dies)}*

The above lines are a conversation between two persons where one pretends to be a monkey who is fond of mangoes. When asked for a mango, he asks what he will give in return. This goes on when at the end the monkey asks what he would do with the knife only to be answered that he will kill him (the monkey). And then he cuts and the monkey dies saying ‘*Peselele*’ and showing out the tongue which is evident from the utterance of the very word ‘*Peselele*’.

#### **4.16 Incantations (*Montro*)**

It is very common among the village folk to believe in *Ojas*(tantrics) or medicine man. Whenever a person suffers from any kind of illness, it is a practice to visit the *ojas*. This is decreasing with the increase in accessibility to doctors. However, the mantras that the *ojas* use are interesting oral phrases passed down through word of mouth. Here is one such mantra being used in Tamulpur area to heal the attack of cold and fever.

*He amokaamoki*(Names of Gods), *kherorsalorghar*

*Saloruporoteuthiase, panilogajor.*

*Paniloluekghoti, panidiluhani*

*Horporboti hat dibo, amokaamoki* (names of the sick person) *jabobasi*

*Hidhogururpabo, rokhyia kora kamakhyajau...* (Blow three times)

(O so and so (Names of Gods); The thatched house

There atop the roof lies, cold and fever

I take a *ghoti* filled with water, I sprinkle the water

The hilly one will give a touch, (names of the sick) will be saved

Will get food from the *guru*; Protect, let me go to Kamakhya) (blows three times)

Here, the gods are invoked, and the diseases are considered to be spirits who dwell on the rooftops of thatched houses. Holy water consisting of tulsi, rice grains and a type of

grass (*duburi*) immersed in water usually in a *ghoti*, a traditional utensil made of bell metal and used for drinking water.

### **Purification chant**

The process of purification among the Totola Rabhas is done when there is illicit physical relationship between relatives (maybe brothers and sisters), if anyone of the village girls is married off to a Muslim, if anyone has physical relation before marriage or if any girl is pregnant before marriage, etc. The society takes strict action if any such incidents occur in the village. The family of the defaulter has to undergo purification. In some cases, the whole village has to be cleansed and the priest goes house to house sprinkling holy water (*Tulsi*, rice grain and a type of grass (*dobori*) immersed in water). The priest also sprinkles water brought from holes of crabs and kept in a hollow bamboo. He chants the following mantra:

*Pub Paschim Uttar Dakshin koriluPronam*  
*Iyatepalo hat patalorjolorhondhan.*  
*Aaibhagawatibura dharma koribodiya*  
*Chandra hurjyobayuvaruntomalokeu kora doya*  
*Manushyajatiekuweinajanedoya kora ibar.*  
*Ei hat patalorjolere pappi hokolhoukuddhar.*

(East, West, North, South I bow  
Here I have found the waters from the seven hells  
Mother Bhagawati, let us pray.  
Moon, sun, wind, rain- have mercy on us  
The human race knows not a thing, have mercy for once  
Let the waters from the seven hells save the sinners)

The above chant is more of a prayer invoking nature including sun, moon, wind and rain. The priest asks for mercy in quite a humble tone saying, ‘the human race knows



not a thing'. The waters brought from the crab holes symbolises water from hell and are used to be sprinkled on the sinners. Mother goddess Bhagawati is also prayed to for mercy. The Totola Rabhas don't usually have a strict punishment for the defaulters. They believe that it is not up to them to punish the sinners and that God is all merciful. This is highlighted through the words of the priest.

The priest then asks the defaulters to bow and repeats:

*Devor dev Mahadev*

*Halabontijolaiapunakhewajonaise*

*Dokhoporadhnokoralokprithivitnai.*

*Ibapaporprayochittokoripappihokolokuddhar kora*

*Hari bolharibolhari e.*

(The God of gods, Mahadev

They have bowed to you lighting wicks and lamps

There's none who does not commit sins and mistakes

Forgive the sinners for once and save them

Praise the Lord! Praise the lord!)

Here, Lord Mahadev is addressed as the God of gods. The priest, acting as the mediator, asks God to forgive the sinners for once and save them. He also says that everyone is a sinner. This highlights the simplicity of the village folk. They do not have any harsh form of punishment for the defaulters but seek refuge in god and leaves the matter upto Him begging Him to forgive.

Then the priest sprinkles holy water and the defaulter offers the priest a token mainly of banyan, a pair of betel nuts and leaves and a money in odds, eg, Rs. 11/-, Rs. 21/- and so on.

Here's a chant used during *jal puja* which is performed to when a person suffering from fever, ache, hypogonadism and other unknown diseases for prolonged period of time in spite of medication, does not get any better. This is done to propitiate the deity of the waters through an *oja*. The place for offering this puja is the bank of any stream or river or any water body. The ingredients and articles required for this puja are as follows:

1. Prasad of black lentils
2. Cooked rice
3. Flowers
4. Tulsi
5. Betel and nut
6. Earthen lamp
7. Incense
8. Rice beer
9. Egg
10. Frog
11. Fern plant
12. Yam plant
13. *Bhang*
14. Prototypes of man in two boats of banana plantain (big and small)
15. Oar
16. A pair *tal*(metal plates)
17. Sword and shield
18. Chick and duckling
19. Goat

The *oja* cleanses the ground with dung water in the courtyard of the sick. He decorates the boats with white flowers and places the ingredients in it. He then chants the mantras, places the boats on his head and goes to the banks. Again, he arranges the offerings and starts his prayers. He places the chick and the duckling in the bigger boat. He then sacrifices the goat and pours some blood in the boat, places the head and lets the boat into the water. The ones who go along with the *oja* to the banks, bathe in the river, come back home and feast on the sacrificed goat. It is to be noted that female or a child are not allowed to go anywhere near the banks. Here's a chant that's being used during the offerings.

*E hem,  
Aadi purbadebota,  
Bhollabhollijolkhetrojolkhetri  
Brahma BishnuMaheswar  
Eknirakar Niranjan  
TeulokePrithibihorojongte  
Aakash patalsoidhodebogondainijokhini,  
Labalobini, khowakhowini,  
Bhollabhollijolkhetrojolkhetri  
Ha hahuwejonmojoyodisil  
Aarutatetinihoityokarhi  
Hoityohoityobaikyokorisil.  
Ekonadirbani  
Hoityobaikyobhongokoribonapai  
Aaji kola kauri bogahowanai  
Boga kauri kola howanai.  
Hil hoi panituponganai.  
Kota posolajenekoithio hoi thake  
Hoittyodebotahoityobaikyomanibolage.  
Salorgudaberormatidaru hobo lage.  
Eikothabhongo kora jewe,*

*Tewe Mahadev parbotirmatha kha  
Aadi onadiShivorbani  
Ekotekadi Niranjan Brahma BishnuMaheswar  
Dut dui purukhnari  
Brahmaikorilashristi  
Tinittinibaikyohoityohoityohoityo  
Mahadevorkira.  
Sariuharihariuthorhari.  
Dev Devadiasesai.  
Pas pashotha hath kori,  
Rog byadhidibo age pas.  
Soyot soy rog byadhi kora khyoy  
Hatot hat pat tulosir pat  
Meruthattaliporbot  
Hothapotha kora hat.  
Athotathsolliskhonhotrodevaloy  
Noutnokhduwar.  
NirakarBrahmaiPrithibihorojongtehorojisil  
Dohot ji dokha- dondokhyomakoribolage  
He poromisswarPorbhu.(Rabha, 2012)*

*(He hem*

Deities of our forefathers,

O God almighty!

The deity of the waters

Brahma BishnuMaheswar

Formless and supreme

When they created the Earth,

Hell and Heaven, fourteen deities, even the demolisher,

The one who devours

The deity of the waters,

Performed the ritual of creation.

There, they seized the three truths

And uttered the sentences of ultimate truth.

The voice says

True sentences should not be broken.  
The black crow has never turned fair,  
The fair crow has never turned black.  
Stones have never floated.  
We must follow the sentences of truth.  
Let the roof and earth from the wall be turned to wine,  
The one who breaks these words  
Let him consume the heads of Mahadev and Parvati)

### **Chants for Warding off spirits**

Folk belief is a broad genre of folklore that includes expressions and behaviours variously called superstition, popular belief, magic, the supernatural, old wives' tales, folk medicine, folk religion, weather signs, planting signs, conjuration, hoodoo, root work, portents, omens, charms, and taboos.(Green, 1997 ed.)' Supernatural powers that cannot be explained by the laws of science and that seem to involve gods or magic do exist in our very own world. The belief system among the Totola give a light into their mind set which is mainly guided by occurrences of incidents within their tribe such as soul possession, attack by evil spirits. Attacks by spirits is not uncommon among the Totola Rabhas. They have been living near rivers and forests and the absence of spirits cannot be ignored. They often need to tread along paths that might be places of the spirits. When a person is attacked by these spirits, he might get high fever and vomiting. Many a times, he behaves strange. At such cases it is only the *oja* who can ward off the spirits and heal the persons. Soul possession in most of the times appear to be horrifying with the possessed acting just like an evil spirit with grinning teeth, untied hair (in case of possessed females), tremendous strength to push away a group of strong men and the tendency to run to the forest or dark areas avoiding daylight.

Totola Rabhas regard human death in accidents, just like suicide, murder, or any similar death before one's time as unclean. In most cases, this can be said especially about accidents, in which young unmarried people have died not in a natural way. The folk believe that the souls of the people who have died before their actual time don't rest in peace rather, they stay on earth, usually in the place of accident, and may harm the living. The village folk believe that the unclean soul of the untimely dead female wanders in search of a partner. The spirit usually after unmarried men, appears as a girl of beauty that can be seen only by the targeted men and not by others. This is usually healed by wearing a *tabij*<sup>16</sup> given by an *oja* or *bej*<sup>17</sup>.

Here's a chant to ward off evil spirits prevalent among the Totola Rabhas.

*He Hem*

*He ParamIswar Prabhu*

*Aadi kalorDevota*

*Shiv Mahadev*

*MonePranehewakoriso*

*He Mahadev Prabhu*

*Ekekokonadi devote Shiv Mahadev*

*Doutduitprithimishristikorila*

*Nij hate jot jiv*

*Tinittini ji baikyokorila*

*Heibaiyolorsorhowanai*

*Ete kauri bogahowanai*

*Hilpanituponganai*

*Sari saritbhagebhagepujisoharitari*

*Monushyoi ji khai take disoporbhhu*

*Mokorailetapani*

*Bojekhowatamol*

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<sup>16</sup> talisman

<sup>17</sup> Tantric or medicine man

*Bhomoraisuhaphul  
Gandhiyekhowasaul  
Jiborholonijivdiso prabhu  
Etehontustohollagi prabhu  
Pasot pas hothamotha hat  
He param Iswar prabhu  
Dainijokhinik ji baikyodisila  
Heipurbobaikyomanibolage.  
Soy soyotaapod bipod rog byadhi kora khyoy  
Salorgudaberormatidaru hobo lage.  
Hat hatotaponar hate hat  
Jot debotagon  
He param IswarParbhu  
Aponartinisayatini maya  
Jot devotagon.  
Aathathotphul-tulosieba aul paantamolere  
Korisohewahotkar.  
No nout prabhudebotainokhondumarotasaroibhalmundosai.  
Do dohot ji dokha- dondohoise kora khyoy  
Ahongtejaongtesowapanipelongte  
Jot dokhadondohoisenijhatenijmukhekorkhyoy  
He dev devidevagon  
Bhut pretdainijokhini  
Mahadevorkiba  
Jodi longhon kora  
Ma kamakhyamatha kha.*

*(O Hem*

*O Almighty God*

*The ancestral God*

*Shiv Mahadev*

*We pray whole heartedly*

*O Lord Mahadev,*

*You are the one, all powerful Mahadev*

*Second, you created the earth.*

With your own hands, given life.  
 Third, the words you uttered,  
 Have never failed.  
 The crows have never turned white.  
 The stones never floated.  
 Fourth, we all pray in turn  
 We offer whatever we have.  
 The water touched by the spiders  
 The betel nut chewed by *Bej*  
 The flowers sucked by *bhomora*  
 The rice consumed by Gandhi  
 We offer life for life, *Prabhu!*  
 Be appeased with these offerings, *Prabhu!*  
 Fifth, the rough tough hands  
 O Almighty God!  
 Whatever word you had given to the devil,  
 Let him do his part as earlier.  
 Sixth, the dangers that bring us misfortune,  
 The patch of thatched roof, the earth from the walls should be turned to wine.  
 Seventh, your hand  
 There, your power rests.  
 O Almighty Lord!  
 Your three shades, you threefold forms  
 There, your power rests.)

The *bej* invokes the ancestral God, *Shiv Mahadev* and offers prayers wholeheartedly saying that He is the creator of the Earth and the giver of life. His words have never failed. He created the crow that is black in colour and till date, the crows have remained black in colour and never turned white. The stones always sink to the waterbed due to their weight and it is seen that this has never been altered. He then offers whatever he can to appease the Gods. He offers water, betelnut, flowers, rice and a life for life. He



then asks God to let the devil do his part rather than bringing misfortunes into the family. He also prays saying that it his power that will prevail in this Earth. Thus, it is seen that the chant to ward off evil spirits prevalent among the Totola Rabhas contains simple and direct words to Lord Shiva.

**Here's a chant to protect oneself from illness:**

*Thu thuthu! Jar bemar tar thaitja*  
*Morthaitnahibi, thuthuthu.*

(Spit spitspit! Go to the place where you belong;  
Do not come to my place, spit spit spit.)

The above *mantra* is a direct communication with the evil spirit wherein the spirit is asked to go to the place where it belongs.

**Here's a chant to ward off *Bira*.**

*Bira* is believed to live up in the bamboo groves and treetops. There are occasions when a *birais* captured and made to perform tasks that might be evil. It is used to scare people and bring misfortune to a family. A *birahas* to be fed by its master. Here is a chant to ward off *bira*.

*Ui dalorebira, napatorebira?*  
*Aakakhorebiranapatalorebira?*  
*Ha bira, ha bira, ha*  
*Ui biramonsaite, kaiyunabarhe*  
*Ha bira, ha bira, ha*  
*Seuragasor pate, jonompaiya*  
*Seuragasor pate, korompaiya*  
*Biranihabma, u birani hamba,*  
*Birani hamba, u birani hamba.*

(*Bira* of the branch or the leaf,

*Bira* of the skies or the underworld,  
*Ha bira, ha bira, ha*  
Hey*bira*, no one grows, on its own  
*Ha bira, ha bira, ha*  
The leaf of *seuraplant*, when born  
The leaf of *seuraplant*, when it began to function  
The *bira* mows, hey *bira* mows  
The *bira* mows, hey *bira* mows.)

(Rajen Rabha p 213)

Here, the nature of the *birais* not known and therefore, he is addressed to as the *bira* of the branch or the leaf, the skies or the underworld.

Folklore is more than just collection of stories and songs. We can know about the people from their beliefs and practices, their attitude towards life and towards the world in general. There are some practices among the Totola Rabhas like other communities that cannot be explained scientifically but the folk have been doing since ages. The Totola Rabhas consider it inauspicious to do some works on Tuesdays and Saturdays like cutting of trees, earth filling, making of cakes. This gets reflected in the following song:

*Honibare, Mongolbare; Nabhajibi Kare.*

*Ghardevotapolaijabo; Kathiraareaare.*

(On Saturdays and Tuesdays; Do not dry fry rice grains.

The house deity will leave, by the verandah.)

The Totola Rabhas consider that even the house deity will be displeased if one works on Tuesdays and Saturdays.

There are other such practices which the Rabhas consider inauspicious. In addition, there are some practices among the Rabhas which do not have any scientific

explanation. This highlights the simple mindedness of the Rabhas. For example: when a Totola Rabha sits down to his meals, he offers the first morsel to Mother Earth by placing a few particles of rice on the ground by his plate. At the end of his meal, he will leave a morsel of food on his plate. When asked, he will say that this is for Lakshmi. It may not have any relevance about Goddess Lakshmi being offered food in plate but this morsel will surely feed the dogs or other smaller animals who stray around in search of food.

When a person takes wine, it is customary for him/ her to sprinkle a bit on the floor. This is one so that the wine does not take him in control.

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## Chapter V

### ORAL NARRATIVES OF THE TOTOLA RABHAS

#### 5.1 Myths

Myths reflect, express and explore people's self-image. In them we can find the key to people's world view, their answers and opinions about the basic issues of human life, such as the source of life, birth, death, divinity and existence. In Oban's words, myths can be said to be made up stories that try to explain how our world works. The stories are usually set in times long ago, before history as we know it was written. The word 'Myth' comes from the Greek word 'mythos' which meant 'word of mouth', 'speech', or 'discourse'. It can be defined as a traditional story of unknown origin and ostensibly historical events basically religious or supernatural in nature that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, institution or natural phenomenon usually in boldly imaginative term. It contains deeper truths and seeks to explain or rationalize one or more aspects of the world or a society. It serves to explain why the world is as it is, things happen as they do, and it helps to provide a rationale for social customs and observances and to establish sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. Two of the chief characteristics of myth which it also shares with other traditional narrative forms like legends, folktales, anecdotes, fables, etc. are its orality and anonymity.

Both myths and science offer explanations of the cosmos. A key difference is that information about the universe presented in myths is not testable, whereas science is designed to be tested repeatedly. Science also depends on cumulative, frequently updated knowledge, whereas myth is based on passed down stories and beliefs. Myths

may change over time, particularly after contact with other cultures, but they do not change and adapt to new periods and technological developments in the same way science does. Myths may be enacted through rituals and believed in absolutely, but they usually do not have physical effects in the real world, as in leading to new technology for building cars or providing medical treatment. People may believe they are cured through faith, and they may find important value-laden sentiments in myths, but these "real world results" are neither empirical nor usually repeatable (two standard criteria for science). Although science differs from myth in offering actual, testable control over the environment and producing real, repeatable results in the world, science is not completely divorced from myth. Many scientific theories are presented or understood in narrative form, which often end up sounding remarkably mythic.

The life of a tribal is associated with myths and traditions and without knowing them, we can never think of understanding their cultures and religions. Malinowsky clearly stated that "Myth may be mythical in our perspective but to the native it is a living reality." He emphasized on the fact that myths are sacred and that they serve society as a charter for action. Not all myths had the sacred element. They were not necessarily connected to religious beliefs but were often secular stories. It would help to throw significant light on many aspects of their life. British classicist Geoffrey S.Kirk in his *Myth: its Meaning and Function in Ancient and Other Cultures* says that 'myths denote stories with an underlying purpose beyond that of a simple story telling.....'

The oral tradition, the oral culture, oral narratives, the oral networking that has interlaced them, manifests itself in the continued existence of a way of life. Folk literature in its oral form has always represented a complex of information and

sensibility that resists erasure. A culture can be understood from the existing kernel of orality.

Folk literature is a multi-layered source of knowledge and information and it touches an important nerve in the particular society and trains it to look beyond the specificities of the tale.

American Folklorist Stith Thompson conceives of myth as a type of folktale which deals with sacred events that happened 'in the beginning'. It will highlight not only their old and sacred values but also their folk beliefs, folk practices and folk customs.

### **Myth about creation of the Earth**

In the beginning, there was only water and water everywhere. There was no existence of Earth or other planets. There were eighteen deities, '*Risi*' being the supreme God. The eldest among the deities was '*Krimisung*' and the youngest was '*Nomal*' or '*Numil*'. With due permission of all the deities a meeting was called one day to find out proper means of creating the Earth. '*Numil*', the youngest deity was nominated by the other deities for successful completion of this great task. At first, '*Numil*' created a crab and directed it to go underwater and bring many things so that he could create a mass of soil. The crab replied, "Oh Lord! The water is very deep down there and there are many things by which the *pinda* (mass of soil) is to be created. I have only four legs, I therefore request you to give me more legs." The deity agreed to the request and gave him six more legs making it to a total of ten. The crab then went underwater and brought various kinds of materials and finally helped in the creation of earth within the water. The deity then created earthworm and directed it to hard form the earth. He also created the hills and mountains, lakes, rivers and ponds, ants, insects, other animals and



creatures. He then created a giant tortoise and placed the Earth on the back of the tortoise. It is believed by the Rabha folk that the earth becomes unsteady if the tortoise begins to walk. This is believed to be the reason behind earthquake.

According to another creation myth prevalent among the Rabhas, the chief deity '*Risi*' and his wife "*Saripok*" are creators of this universe. These two deities dwelt in heaven and created the universe at first. Another deity '*Tokbora*', directed and advised by '*Risi*' created men and animals, trees and creepers, jungles, ants and insects, etc.<sup>1</sup>

The above myth recounts the story of creation of the earth. Mythical animals and creatures like crabs and earthworms have a major role in the creation of the Earth.

### **Myth about the Origin of the Rabhas**

There are myths as to the origin of the tribe. According to a myth prevalent among the Rabhas, the tribe came all the way from a place somewhere in Tibetan region. In addition, there are other opinions regarding the origin of the tribe prevalent with minor variation in different localities of Goalpara district of Assam and Garo Hills districts of Meghalaya.

A myth says, Risi-Bay or Lord Rishi who dwells in *Rang-Karang* (heaven) is the creator of the world. In accordance with the order of Risi-Bay, *Takmmanbra* (creator) controls the Prithimi (Earth). *Rang-Karang* represents the Tibetan region, which resembles the roof of the world and this represents the heaven above. *Risi-Bay* created three brothers *Bingga*, *Ringga* and *Raba*. They were brought down to *Phithimi* along with their families. The name of the third brother, *Raba*, was extended to the whole

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<sup>1</sup>Rabha, Rajendra Nath: Rabhar xadhu kotha, pp-127-128

group. In Rabha language, '*Raba*' means to bring. Thus, this group of people came to be known as Raba. Although the tribe is named as Rabha, the native articulation in earlier times was '*Raba*'.

The names of the different sub-groups of Rabha tribe, based on folk-etymology, comes from ritual practices as well as occupations.

The Rongdani sub-group is named after their way of worship of primitive deities. This group used to sit on a flat stone (*Rongka*) while worshipping the deities and since then this group came to be named after the term *Rongka-dam*, where the word '*rongka*' refers to 'stone' and '*dam*' refers to a 'low stool' in Rabha language.

The Maitori group migrated from place to place and finally finding a fertile land produced paddy on a large scale. '*Mai*' means '*paddy*' and '*tari*' means 'land/ place' in Rabha language. Thus, the group came to be known as Maitari/ Maitori.

A legend says that a group of Rabha tribe worshipped a serpent to whom a man had to be sacrificed every year. Two brothers namely Randan and Chandan killed the serpent and saved the life of this group forever. The two brothers are honoured every year by the tribe. On the occasion of the two brother's death anniversary every year, this group of Rabha tribe erects two bamboo-poles bearing colours of serpents. This group is named after the bamboo-poles i.e. Dahari/ dahori.

Another group of Rabha called Betolia (Betilla means areca-nut) Rabha was named after their occupation of skilled areca-nut plantation.

A group of Rabha while worshipping deities offered the entrails of birds or animals. This group came to be known as Totola/ Totola (which means entrails in Rabha language).

A group of Rabha tribe during their offerings to the deities, instead of cutting the neck of birds or animals, pierced the animals. Therefore, they came to be known as Hana which means to 'pierce.'

A large group of Rabha tribe, according to some native authors attempted to reform their traditional socio-religious practices under the influence of Hinduism. In the process, they separated themselves from their traditional society and were designated as Pati Rabha (Pati means separation from other groups).

Rajen Rabha, a noted litterateur, points out a myth that the different Rabha groups got their names from their responsibilities performed during their offerings to the supreme Goddess, Baikho. The offerings to Baikho started in a place in Goalpara named Athiabari. In order to conduct the *puja* smoothly, the different responsibilities associated with the puja were divided among themselves. The Rabhas meted out their duties and responsibilities so well that they came to be named after that. This was also done in order to remember each one's tasks. These names later represented the different branches of the Rabhas.

The Rongdani Rabhas were given the responsibility of placing the altar and also of carrying the stones for the people present to sit. In Rabha language, 'Rong' means 'stone' and 'dan' means to 'carry' or 'to collect'. This group carried stones all the way from the hills and later came to be known as 'Rongdani' Rabhas.

Another important branch of the Rabhas are the Maitori Rabhas. In Rabha language, 'mai' refers to 'rice' and 'toriya' means 'to serve'. This group was given the responsibility of serving food to the devotees including rice, meat, fish and wine. Later, this group came to be known as 'Maitori' Rabhas.

The Dahori Rabhas were given the responsibility to watch out for birds, dogs and cats that might cause a nuisance during the feast. They kept a watch on these animals using long bamboo poles known as 'dahari'. So, this group is named after the bamboo-poles i.e. Dahari/ dahori.

The Cunga Rabhas were given the task of helping with cutting and preparing of bamboo tubes for drinking wine or water. The word 'cunga' refers to a bamboo tube and this group of Rabhas were named after their duty.

The Bitalia Rabhas were responsible for creating humour among the devotees with their jokes and hilarious talks in order to make the ceremony lively. In Rabha language, 'bitalia' means 'one who delights'.

A group of Rabha tribe was responsible for arranging pork for the devotees. They pierced the pigs to death during the process. Therefore, they came to be known as *Hana* which means to 'pierce.'

The Pati Rabhas were named so from their responsibility of collecting banana leaves for distribution of rice, *prasad* and for cooking purposes. The term 'Pati' is derived from the word *Patratangi*, i.e. leaf cutters.

It is believed that the Totola Rabhas got their names not from their contribution to the *Baikho puja* but from their ancestral king, 'Thotha Roja.'

They are believed to have originated from 'ThothaRojā' or King Thotha. ThothaRojā was the commander-in-chief of 'Ban Roja', the king of Sonitpur. He had to face the wrath of Ban Roja due to his laziness and was ousted from Sonitpur. ThothaRojā, along with his family went to the foothills of Bhutan where he established himself as King. Since he brought along his family and relatives from Sonitpur and established his kingdom, they were known by his name as 'Thothaloi' meaning 'To Thotha'. This later got converted to 'Thothala' which later came to be known as 'Totola' or 'Totola.' The mention of 'ThothaRojā' can be found in the *Bambol Pita* songs prevalent among the Totola Rabhas of Tamulpur. Here's a *Bambol Pita* song that mentions about 'ThothaRojā.'

*Kino mase marilongtora Hori Hori*

*Kino mase marilongtora*

*O he ThothaRojarputeke*

*Borgharbandhise*

*Seutinakhalajora*

*Ki ai hat o*

*Ki bai hat o*

*Bambolbambolpitibajang....*

(What fish have we caught? *Hori hori*)

What fish have we caught?

Ho, the son of King Thotha

Is building the main house,

But the beams have not been joined

The mothers there,

The sisters there,

Let's go perform *Bambol Pita*.....)

### **Myth about the settlement of the Rangdani Rabhas**

The Rabhas, as stated by George Abraham Grierson, came to northeast India in 2000 BC or so. According to A Playfair, the Rabhas originally occupied the Garo Hills where from they came down to the plains. He proves this by the fact that certain section of the tribe which lives on the border of that district have no word for the North and South, but describe the former by the word *Bhota-hi-chu* or Bhutan and the latter by Tura, the district headquarters of Garo Hills.

This belief is further supported by a legend which tells that there lived two sisters, Sae Bonge and Bongekate, somewhere in the valley of the Someswari river. Sae Bonge married a Garo and their descendants are the modern Atong who live in the south-eastern corner of the district in the valley of Someswari. The other sister had some sexual relationship with her brother. As such the guilty couple was compelled to leave that locality. They moved northwards and in course of their movements they arrived on the northern slopes of the Garo Hills. The descendants of this couple are the present day Rangdani Rabhas.

### **Myth about *Bahurangi***

*Bahurangi* is a dance form very popular among the Pati Rabhas but now due to inter-marriage between Pati and the Totola Rabhas, they are also prevalent among the

Totola Rabhas. *Bahurangi* is a mirthful dance and the whole surrounding is set to laughter and enjoyment and the whole crowd present is tempted to take part. They highlight the life of village folk. The agricultural life is also given a light as the main occupation of the people is cultivation. This dance form was actually performed by the aged women folk but now, the younger folk are a part of the entertaining dance form. *Bahurangi*, also referred to as '*Jorageet*' or '*khisageet*'. Their significance and appeal is in the expressive nature of the songs. The songs are joined together in couplets representing different thoughts and therefore they are called '*jorageet*' where '*jora*' means 'to join'. They are known as '*bahurangi*' because it is composed of lines and stanzas of various contexts. *Bahurangi* means colourful. A particular *Bahurangi* song might not highlight the same thought or the same context. It does not express a story or an event, but it is a mixture of whatever thought one may get. It can go on and on. The aesthetics of the *Bahurangi* songs is the ability of the composers to put different contexts in the same song.

Here is a myth about the origin of *Bahurangi* song that is prevalent among the Totola Rabhas. *Bahurangi* and *Khoporangi* are named after two sisters by the same names. Long ago, Lord Indra wished to share the art of dance with the inhabitants of the Earth. With this intention in mind, he sent two angels *Bhaurangi* and *Khoporangi* who were sisters, to the Earth but he warned them not to be enticed and lost to the pleasures of the Earth but remain focussed in their assignment. The two sisters then set off to Earth and set to do the task they were assigned to. Once they were singing songs by the side of a stream beside the hill when the king who had come to the hillside for hunting spotted them. He was mesmerised by the beauty of the two sisters and he at once brought them to his palace. He called his ministers and subjects and immediately arranged for the wedding

of the two sisters with two princes. The elder sister was too talkative in nature; therefore, she was called *Bahurangi* and the younger sister was called *Khoporangi* as she was shy in nature. They both, along with their Prince husbands, began to spread the art of song and dance among the earthlings. Gradually, they were enticed by the pleasures of the Earth and they were therefore summoned by Lord Indra back to heaven. However, the art of song and dance taught by the two sisters remained and they came to be known as *Bahurangi* and *Khoporangi*.

## **5.2 Legends:**

Legends are true accounts and not fictional. Unlike myths, they are not sacred. They tell of period far less remote than myths. The distinction here between truth and fiction is not connected to any historical or scientific facts, only to the beliefs of those who tell and those who hear.

Here is a legend presented by Saha (2006:46) based on the census report of 1881 by Friend Pereira.

Friend Pereira in the Census Report of 1881 states, 'When Husheng was the chief of the powerful Atong clan, he brought the Rabha into Someswari valley to till the land, because at that time the Garo, being nomads, were not acquainted with more settled methods of husbandry'. Based on this report Saha (2006: 46) is of the opinion that the Rabhas, earlier known as Koches, were driven out of Garo Hills but were later called back by the Garo King Husheng in order to teach the Garos the art of cultivation. The Garos lived mainly on hunting as they were not acquainted with the art of cultivation. The Rabha people then taught the Garos how to till the soil. Since the



Rabhas were called back they came to be known as 'Raba'. The word 'Raba' in Garo language means "recalled" or "called back".

There are various legends as to the origin of the name 'Rabha'. Dhananjay Rabha is of the opinion that the 'Rabhas' got their name from the word '*marab*' which means man in the dialect of Koch Rabha. This is derived from the words '*ma*' from '*mra*' which means 'man', and '*rab*' which means 'uneven' or 'rough' and '*ha*' which means 'land' or 'earth'. Thus '*marab*' is a condensed form of 'man of uneven place'. He is further of the opinion that a group of people called 'Kochhe' migrated and first took refuge in a place called 'Rab-ha' in Tibet and then entered into Assam and further to Garo Hills. They got their name from the place they had come from, ie. Rab-ha. There is still a place in Tibet called 'Raba' in the Mongo valley (Rabha, 1998-25)

### **Place Legends (Origin of the Names of villages):**

#### **How *Kosukata* village got its name:**

There is a Totola Rabha village named *Kasukata* near TamulpurMahkuma. There are around 70 families at present with a population of around 400. According to Mr. Jatindra Rabha, the name of the village has its origin during British times. A legend about the naming of the village is still prevalent among the village folk. Long ago, a daughter was married off from this village to another. The groom had come for the first time after marriage to his in-laws. The family was very happy, and they received their son-in-law with great joy and hospitality. They offered good food during the day and the father-in-law requested the groom to spend the night in their house as he wanted to offer better food at night-time. Duck's meat, to this day, is a favourite dish in every Totola Rabha family and the father-in-law had a desire to offer this to the groom. The

groom agreed. In the evening, the groom went out for a walk but failed to return even when darkness began to set in. the situation was one of hum-drum in the family for the surroundings of the village was not safe as it was filled with dense forest with wild animals. The village folk gathered and searched for the groom but in vain. They then decided to move into the yam fields which was a few distance away. They began clearing the yam plants from one side and finally found the son-in-law hiding in the fields. They discovered that the son-in-law had night blindness. He wandered too far from home and finding no way of returning home, he took shelter beneath the dense yam fields. From then on, the village came to be known as *Kosukata*. The other part of the fields that remained uncleared came to be known as *Kosubari*. To this day the story behind the naming of the village is prevalent among the village folk.

### **The myth behind Geruwapargaon**

This village is situated 6 kms from Tamulpur. To the west of the village lies a stream named *Geruwa Dong*. The forefathers of the villagers of Geruwapargaon dwelled near the stream. Thus, the name of the village is derived from the name of the stream. The clothes washed in this stream get brownish in colour due to the colour of the water flowing. This stream flows till date and is also referred to as *lal dong*.

### **How *Pukhuripargot* its name:**

There is a myth about the name *Pukhuripar*. Long ago, there was a king who often travelled to Bhutan. The King dug a *pukhuri*(pond)of five to six acre and built a hut near this pond for rest. The King took rest for two to three days before proceeding to Bhutan. There were around five to six Totola Rabha families near this pond. Since the families

lived near the pond, the name of the village came to be known as *Pukhuripar*(The bank of the pond).

**(Legends related to the origin of shrine)**

In addition to myths and legends prevalent among the Totola Rabhas, there are other belief narratives that speak a lot about their culture.

Here are some of the belief narratives prevalent among the Totola Rabhas. One such belief narrative is stated by Balendra Rabha of *Uparsoriya* near Tamulpur. This village that was established some 300 years before the Independence of India, is situated at the banks of the river Pagladia. It was a common practice for the Bhutanes people known as Bhutias by the local folk to come to their village and trade chillies, oranges and *jabrang*(a kind of spice) with the villagers. Barter system was in practice those days. In one such visit to the village of *Uparsoriya*, the Bhutias halted to spend the night at the house of a villager before finally proceeding back to their country. The next day, after having breakfast, the Bhutias went into the village for trading their items. It was noon and they were tired. They halted to take rest below a tree near a small temple of *Durga Devi*. As they were taking rest, their eyes caught sight of the shining statue of *Durga Devi*, that was made of metal unknown to anyone. Till date none knows whether the statue was made of gold, iron, bronze or bell metal. The folk believed the goddess to be the destroyer of everything that's evil. The Bhutias all of a sudden thought of an evil plan. They planned to steal the statue and sell it for a high price elsewhere. They did as they planned. One of the Bhutias wrapped the statue in a cloth and when they were sure that no one watching them, they ran through the fields. On the way, a horse fell dead and two of the Bhutias suddenly suffered from stomach pain and dysentery and began to

vomit profusely. They somehow reached home. The next day, the whole of the village began to suffer from an unknown disease. They prayed to their Gods and Goddesses for help but in vain. The next night, *Durga Devi* appeared to them in their dreams and said, “The disease is a result of your deed. Inform the villagers and return back the statue to its original place. Then will all the villagers get cured.”

The next morning, all the thieves came together and revealed their dreams. All of them saw the same dream. They decided to go back to *Uparsoriya*, confess their misdeeds and return the statue. It was almost dark when they reached the Totola Rabha village. They spent the night in Late Gumalu Rabha’s house. They informed the villagers the next day when they all gathered before the temple. The villagers offered their prayers and placed the statue in its original place. The Bhutias cleaned themselves and bowed low before the goddess asking for forgiveness for their evil deed. Thus, the Bhutias got back to their normal health and were saved never to steal again. This story is still prevalent among the villagers of *Uparsoriya* and the villagers both young and old know it.

Once *BheltaTotola*’s wife was returning home from the fields in the afternoon by the *Durga Devi*’s shrine. People say that *Devi Durga*’s bad eye fell upon her as she immediately fell ill when she got home. *BheltaTotola* consulted the *Bejwho* who revealed that it was the deed of *Devi Durga*. In a few days, the wife got severely ill and died. *Mr. Totola* got quite mad at *Devi Durga* for killing his wife. He took an axe, got to the shrine and began hitting the statue of the *Devi*. He then dug a hole beneath a tree, buried the statue and began cursing *Devi Durga*. Hearing the humdrum caused late *Haharam Rabha* and late *Bhobka Rabha* who were working in the fields nearby came to the spot and saw that *BheltaTotola* had been rolling on the ground while cursing the *Devi*. They

saw that the statue was missing from its spot. They suspected Bhelta of hiding the statue and so they called in the other villagers who charged Bhelta about stealing the statue. They kept searching for the statue but in vain. So, when repeatedly asked, BheltaTotola showed them the spot but the statue was not to be found. He then showed another spot but in vain. The villagers knew that Bhelta was being possessed by the Devi. So they took him home while the others kept searching for the statue. They then found the statue buried under a tree. They cleaned it and placed it ceremonially in its original place. The story does not end here. From that day, the villagers have been hearing strange sounds after 12 o'clock at night. They have been hearing the sound of a horse walking. The folk say that it's the Devi on a horse's back. Many have heard the sound, but none has seen either Devi or the horse. Sometimes, knockings were heard at the door calling the house owner in the voice of one of his friends. The owner opens the door only to hear the sound of hoofs dwindling away. BheltaTotola suffered from an attack of an unknown illness and died in a few days. The village folk then performed ceremonies at the temple of Devi Durga and freed a cow in the Devi's name. The village elders to this day remember the story of Devi Durga and BheltaTotola. At present, people from far and wide still bring offerings to the Devi. There have been instances of blessings from the Devi. People still believe that they are well protected by the Devi.

### **Bura Bun Gohain (Old Forest Deity)**

Apart from the many Hindu Gods and Deities the Totola Rabhas of 2 no. Kataligaon believe in, is '*Bura BunGohai*' that can be exactly translated into 'Old Forest Deity'. She is worshipped only in this village, but she has many believers

scattering from the Assamese to the Bodos far and wide. She is believed to have many sisters of which one is in Laphakuchi; a Totola Rabha village situated 7 km away from Kataligaon. She is believed to be the god of all things and the prosperity of the village depends entirely on her. She is all powerful and there have been instances where people have received Boons from her. She is considered to be all merciful and kind at the same time. People believe that their wishes are fulfilled once they ask it from 'Mother *Bura BunGohai*'. Many childless couples have received the blessings of '*Bura BunGohai*' in the form of their sons and daughters. They are so grateful to her that they now take it as a duty to offer prayers and offerings to her every year. There are many families who conduct the *puja* at their home and the *Gohai* is brought to the very steps of their household accompanied by the beating of big drums and trumpets.

'The origin of the offerings to the *Gohai* in the village began long ago', says Kameswar Rabha aged 80. He says that the then village priest saw the deity in a dream and the deity expressed her wish to be brought to the village from the forest as she wanted to stay there. When the priest shared his dream with the villagers, the village folk agreed to the decision to bring the deity to the village and to build a place for it to stay. All the villagers then ceremoniously brought the deity to the village in the form of a lump of mud from the forest from a certain place and placed it below a tree in the village. Here, they began offering prayers. The village folk then built a shrine. Till date the shrine has been shifted three times before it's placed in the current location. There are many stories regarding the boons of the deity in the form of children or cure from an illness. There are also incidents where the deity has punished the wrong doers.

### **5.3 Folktales:**

Generally, tales are prose narratives which are regarded as fiction. Most of the tales of the Totola Rabhas are simple and entertaining. They have or have not a moral teaching in the context of the folk-society. Unlike myths and legends, tales are regarded timeless and placeless and may be shaped in any time and at any place. Tales are fictions which are orally improvised through words of the mouth. The tales prevalent among the Totola Rabhas are wonderous tales, jokes or humourous tales, animal tales, cumulative tales, trickster tales, etc. Most of the tales among the Totola Rabhas are entertaining and humourous. Thompson states that animal plays a role in all popular tales. They appear in myths especially those of primitive peoples where the culture hero often has animal form, though he may be conceived of as acting and thinking like a man or even, on occasion, of having human shape. Animal tales are non-mythical tales where human qualities are ascribed to animals. They speak, think more and trick other animals by their cleverness just like human characters. Such a type of animal tale prevalent among the Totola Rabhas is as follows:

**(i) The Frog King**

There was an old man and a woman who had no children. The old man always trapped the fishing traps in his cultivated land. He got a good catch but for a few days he was unable to trap a single fish. One day, a frog was caught in the trap. The old man got enraged and asked his wife to fry it. When the old woman tried to kill it, the frog spoke out. It addressed her as grandmother and promised to do all the household chores. The old woman then spared the life of the frog and when the old man came to know of it, he got very angry.

The frog then began to cultivate the land of the old man. There came a great flood and the crops were submerged in the water. A king came sailing along with his soldiers in the water over the crops. This made the frog very angry and he began to rebuke the king and his men.

This infuriated the king and he ordered his men to take the frog and the bullocks to the palace. However, to the surprise of all, the frog flew away from the place.

The frog then went to the old man and woman and narrated the whole story. He then asked the grandmother to dry fry rice grain and mix with sesame. With this, he moved to the king's palace and on the way he was accompanied by the bees and the snakes.

On reaching the palace, he asked the king to return his bullocks. When the king refused to comply to his request, he ordered the bees and the snakes to attack the king and the others present. This frightened the king and he promised to return the bullocks. He also declared to give his daughter's hand in marriage to the frog and accordingly performed the marriage ceremony. The king's daughter and the others in the palace were very upset. That very night, the frog turned into a handsome man. This surprised everyone. He then narrated how he turned into a frog. The king, later, vested the entire responsibility of the kingdom to the young man and they lived happily ever after. This is the story of the Frog King.<sup>2</sup>

## **(ii) A tale of the creation of spiders**

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<sup>2</sup>Rabha, Rajendra Nath: Rabhar xadhukotha, pp-28-36



Long ago, there lived a poor family in a village. They had no means of earning rather than to beg. They had two extremely beautiful grown up daughters. Their beauty was even believed to have fascinated the gods.

The village headman was moved by their pathetic condition and he took the younger daughter home to work as a maid. The members of the headman's family were so impressed at her work that she was married to their middle son. Two years have passed but she couldn't bear a child. She was not good in weaving as well. She soon landed in trouble as her in-laws turned hostile towards her. Though they hated her, they couldn't utter a word as she was married to their son on their accord. The mother-in-law tried to manipulate her son to abandon her and he was confused for he loved his wife dearly. He finally decided to kill himself but couldn't do so. He had to obey his mother.

One fine day, the son took his wife to a distant hill. He said that they would fetch some wild-banana leaves. He then her to sit on a rock by the stream and near a thick forest as he fetched the leaves. He quietly left for home leaving her in the forest. The sun was fast setting and she kept waiting but in vain. Her husband was nowhere to be seen. She then took shelter in a nearby cave covered by thick creepers. The place was infested with wild beasts all around.

She began to cry and her sadness hurt even the insects, plants and creepers in the forest but no one could help her.

After some time, she heard a voice but she could not see anyone. The voice called out, "Don't cry my dear! They will never ever come again to take you from here. You must live here for whole your life". She looked around but couldn't see anyone. She started

crying again. She had to go without food and water for days. She later became a wild spider.

Same was the condition of the elder sister. She too was unskilled in weaving and was later abandoned by her husband. She started picking threads at a corner and was later turned to a spider just like her sister. The sisters, till date, prepare the web for weaving as spiders.

The Rabhas still believe that spiders, both domestic and wild, are none but the two sisters once abandoned by their dear ones.

The children still sing in unison whenever they see spiders-

“We are two sisters

With love we live

We make a home

Where we keep on

Pulling threads all day.

Sing singsing

Who sits to weave?”

### **(iii) A Crow brings light from the East**

Here is a story collected from Jugal Rabha aged 72 in Lokpara, Baksa about how a crow brings daylight from the East.

A long time ago when the world was first created, there was no light. The simple folk thought it was dark all over the world. One day, an old crow revealed to the others how he had seen broad daylight on one of his long journeys to the East. People gathered around the crow and listened to his stories in awe. They now began to long for daylight. They imagined how life would be in light. They could see the wild animals before they could come near the village to attack. The village folk begged the crow to fetch them daylight. The crow was too old to do so and was reluctant to go because it was just too far away. Finally, he had to yield to their request.

The crow flapped his wings and began to fly high up in the sky towards the East. He flew and flew for days together until he was about to give up. "I am exhausted and I can go no further," he said to himself. As he was about to turn back, he saw a silver lining. It was nothing but the dim glow of daylight. He was filled with great joy as he would not have to turn back empty handed.

The crow flew further East and could see the dim light become brighter. It was really cold. He sighted a river and decided to rest on the tree tops nearby. He saw a figure coming towards the river. A girl had come to the river to fetch water. The crow hid himself and followed the girl back to her home. She was the headman's daughter. She went inside and the crow hid himself nearby. At the slightest chance, he went inside and hid under the bed. He saw a child playing with a cat. The crow pecked the cat and the cat ran away. The child began to cry. The crow appeared and whispered to the boy to ask for a ball of daylight from his father. The child began to cry more loudly and as the father approached, he asked for the ball. The headman wanted his only son to be happy and so asked his daughter to fetch a ball of daylight from the box in the attic. She left

and returned after a while with a ball wrapped in strings and gave it to the boy. The boy then began to play with it as the crow watched for his chance to snatch the ball. As soon as the headman and the daughter went from the room where the child was playing, he grasped the ball of daylight and flew out and launched himself into the sky flying towards the West. Though exhausted, he flew and flew and flew. He didn't look back for a moment.

Finally, he reached his village and took the ball covered in strings to the open ground. The people, hearing the commotion, came out. They were sad to see just a ball in the jaws of the crow. They expected daylight and the crow returned with just a ball. The crow told them to watch as he let go off the string. The ball dropped and was shattered to hundreds of pieces as light went into every home. It was light everywhere and people could see for miles. They could see the forest nearby and the hills beyond. They could now work for longer period. they gathered to hold a feast to thank the crow and to celebrate their new life out of darkness. Thus, the crow managed to bring daylight into the village from the East.

#### **(iv) An old woman helps a bear**

Here is a story collected from Hilang Rabha (75 yrs). The story was told to him by his father.

Once upon a time there lived an old woman in a village at the foothills of the Himalayas. She lived with her only son who was just three years old. She carried her son wherever she went and never left him alone. She was very poor and she earned her living by working in the fields of others for a potful of rice. She somehow managed to feed herself and her son. She often goes into the forest to fetch firewood for cooking.

One fine day, as she was collecting firewood, she heard a faint noise and took a few steps towards the sound. She suddenly heard a big roar and began to tremble in fear. She looked at a distance and saw a bear roaring. She saw that the bear was crying out as if for help. When she looked closer, she could see a bear cub trapped in a trap and the mother bear calling out for help. Though frightened, she moved closer and reached out to the cub to help. She freed the bear cub from the trap and moved back. The mother bear began to lick the wounded cub and looked at the old woman as if to thank her for her help. The bear and the cub, then, moved back into the thickets of the forest. The old woman came back to her village and life went on as usual.

The old woman went into the forest every few days to fetch firewood. One day, she noticed bundles of firewood ready to be carried home and was surprised. She knew that it was only she who collected firewood from the area. Confused, she carried the bundle back home. She was unable to digest what she had seen and she returned the next day early at dawn and hid herself in the forest. Suddenly, she saw two figures approaching. When the figures came closer, she saw that it was the mother bear and her cub. The mother bear carried bundles of firewood as the cub followed behind. “Was this a way to thank her for her kindness?” she thought to herself and smiled.

The old woman now came every day into the forest to carry the bundle home. After a few days, she was filled with much more surprise when she saw a huge pile of firewood piled at her courtyard. Now, she couldn't believe her eyes. But that was the truth. She doesn't need so much firewood and therefore, she sold it in the market nearby. She got a good sum in return. This happened regularly. In return, she left food for the bear and the cub outside. Gradually, she got enough money to buy food and clothes for herself and

her son. She repaired her home and sent her son to school nearby. The son grew up to be an educated man and soon got a job. The hard days were over for the poor family. It was a little deed of kindness that changed their lives.

#### **5.4 Other Belief Narratives**

##### **Soul possession**

Folk belief is a broad genre of folklore that includes expressions and behaviours variously called superstition, popular belief, magic, the supernatural, old wives' tales, folk medicine, folk religion, weather signs, planting signs, conjuration, hoodoo, root work, portents, omens, charms, and taboos.(Green, 1997 ed.)' Supernatural powers that cannot be explained by the laws of science and that seem to involve gods or magic do exist in our very own world. The belief system among the Totola give a light into their mind set which is mainly guided by occurrences of incidents within their tribe. The following stories explore the traditional belief system as prevalent among the Totola Rabhas with regards to soul possession by the restless dead. Soul possession in most of the times appear to be horrifying with the possessed acting just like an evil spirit with grinning teeth, untied hair (in case of possessed females), tremendous strength to push away a group of strong men and the tendency to run to the forest or dark areas avoiding daylight.

Khagen Rabha (now aged 60 years) of 2 no Kataligaon, 2 kms from Mushalpurwas on his way home from the weekly market in Mushalpur through Balapara and Nwlwbari when he felt an urge to pee. He sat at a place to pee and then he returned home. When he got home, he began to act quite differently. His wife Lakheswari Rabha (now aged 55 years) spoke to him but he spoke back in a different manner. Khagen Rabha seemed

to bend down like an old man and asked for tobacco, a thing that he never tasted till then. He also behaved strangely and even asked for *bidis*. His wife and the other family members were confused as they couldn't make out what was wrong with Mr. Khagen Rabha. The person they knew in and out seemed to behave in a strange manner. Lt. Rahi Boro of PuranHowli, an *oja* or *bej* was called in to take stock of the situation. He drew a circle around Khagen Rabha who was seated confused and after sprinkling *tulsi* water and chanting some mantras, he began questioning Mr. Rabha. When asked from where he was, he answered that he was a man from Nwllwbari who had died long ago. He also said that he was taking rest when Khagen Rabha passed urine over him. That is the reason he had entered Khagen's body. The oja chanted more mantras and tried to expel the spirit from Khagen's body but in vain. The spirit won't leave.

Lt. Nur Mohammad Miah (FakirOja) from Bheraldi, Barpeta was living in the very village for a while. He was known to control any kind of spirit whether good or bad. It was Fakir Oja who expelled the spirit from Mr. Khagen Rabha who is quite hale and hearty till date. When asked, KhagenRabhatells the story in a light note. He says that he knew nothing after he was possessed by the spirit. But his wife Mrs. Lakheswari Rabha (56 years) remembers everything afresh.

### **Supernatural experience and the restless dead**

Here's a living legend about soul possession collected from Mrs. Amala Rabha (52 years) about her own sister.

However, the present article is just the opposite. It speaks of a soul of a gentleman who comes back to his neglected family not to cause any harm but to help them start a new living.

**Background:**

Life had been very harsh as Lalitha had to workday in and day out in the flattened rice factory in Nalbari (a district headquarter in Assam) to keep the kitchen fire burning. She had no house of her own as her husband divorced and abandoned due to the influence of a widower who already had a son. Her sons, finding themselves fatherless, had to work as servants ploughing the fields every cultivating season and as labourers in tractors and trucks the rest of the year. Lalitha, determined to start a new living bought a piece of land in one of the hillocks of Gauhati, Bwikuntha Nagar. She knew that it is her bounded duty to provide a home for her sons before they could settle down with wives and children. She engaged herself in another trade, that of making and selling rice spirit. She supplied to someone who then sold those in retail. The profit was good but how long could she continue with this job where she had to sit beside the fire day in and day out making rice spirit? Gradually her sons got married and had children. They worked in factories and did other petty jobs but often came back to their mother for money. Long back they had gone to their father asking for help but in vain. They somehow got the news of their father's death and knew that they might be the beneficiaries but the stern standing of their mother not to accept any form of cash from the side of their father stopped them from getting anything. Papre, the elder son had once gone to their father's village to get an idea of the possibilities of any kind of pension money. Life had been too harsh now and he somehow knew that his mom would get the pension because his stepmother had died much before the death of his father. There, unknown to anyone, a plan had been hatched by his stepbrother to murder him but something unnatural happened and the one entrusted to do the dirty job began scolding the stepbrother for his greed. He instead began explaining that he had all the while received all the benefits and



attention from his stepfather while they (Lalitha and sons) had been deprived of everything including the love of the father, the one thing every child long for. The would-have-been murderer began telling things and describing incidents which only Lalitha's husband knew. Till date none, except Lalitha's family, knows about the sudden change in the murderer. Nonetheless, that saved a precious life and also transformed the hatred filled stepbrother. All this happened behind the back of Papre without him getting even a hint.

#### **The incident (2006):**

It had been an annual custom now for the family of Lalitha to perform MahaShivratri Puja at their home in Bwikuntha Nagar in Guwahati. It was during this time in the year 2006 that Lalitha had gone to her paternal home. She received an unexpected call one fine afternoon from her younger son, KholaBasumatary (35). "Mother, our father has come back, and he wants to talk to you", he said. At this, the lady was taken aback for she never believed that she would ever talk to her husband again for she had stopped talking to him long back, much before his death. On her son's earnest request, she agreed to talk to him, but the voice seems to be faint and cracked. She later discovered that whenever she tried to talk to him on phone it simply won't work out as technology did not accept the voice of the dead. The very next day she went to meet her returned dead husband and to her surprise, he was there not in person, but his soul had entered the body of her younger daughter-in-law who had never been seen by her husband when alive. It was simply astonishing to see her daughter narrate their whole story about love,

marriage and separation, that too in the voice of her husband. She (he) even asked for tobacco as it was his favourite during his lifetime. Whenever the soul entered the body of the daughter-in-law, a sudden change would come both in her body and her voice. She would bend low and act and walk like an old man and her voice would be slow, heavy and shivering like that of late Bisti. She would narrate incidents which only late Bisti knew even though she never saw or met him in person. She would talk to Lalitha of incidents which was a secret only between them. There were some in the neighbourhood who never believed in spirit possession, but they listened with wide gapped mouth when the possessed spoke. Every little bit of information was correct. Every action of the daughter-in-law matched to that of the deceased. However, there were some disadvantages. The daughter-in-law, a mother of two suddenly turned old and she would not allow her child to drink milk from her breast as the possessed felt it awkward. The deceased was a man and that explains it all. Nevertheless, the possessed would say, "I am going or else my grandsons would go hungry without milk. I will be here in the *sijou* plant and whenever you want to talk to me just give a call." He would then leave with a sudden jerk in the body of the daughter-in-law who in turn suddenly grew weak and thirsty. She could now feel the effect of the tobacco that the possessed had taken. She had been bending low for a while now and she would suddenly feel pain in her lower back. She would of course get well in a while.

It had been fun for the children as they all gathered round the possessed to listen to stories as the deceased knew many stories. They would all come and call out to their grandfather who would then come and possess the human body. They were not at all afraid as they were often made to laugh. Even Lalitha laughed many of the times when the possessed would spin jokes.

The possessed shared real-life stories which none had known till then. He told about himself and about the world. He had been wondering from place to place in search of his lost family after his death. His soul had not been appeased as his sons did not perform his last rite. Often, he came across his wife in Nalbari but could not interact as he was just a soul and he did not have enough power to do so. He even had to give up following her when she got into a vehicle as it was not possible for the spirits to touch metallic objects. This gives an insight into the belief of the simple folk. They say that the spirits and the devils cannot touch metallic objects specially an iron. This is the reason a village folk keeps a metallic object when he or she ventures into the night for some work. They have a habit of fishing at night or laying fish traps (which they check from time to time even at night) in the paddy fields aimed at trapping small fish. They would never go to the fields without carrying a metallic object. He had followed his son Papre when he had gone to his village in Dhamdhama. When he found out about the plan being hatched by his stepson to kill his son, he forced himself into the body of the would-be-murderer and saved his son. At that time, he had not received the blessings of lord Shiva to enter a human body, but a miracle had occurred. Even he seemed to be astonished at this. Everyone who listened to this was set aghast including Papre himself. He could do nothing then to thank his deceased father.

### **How he got the power to enter a human body:**

The restless soul of Late Bisti had been sitting on a rock in a nearby hill when Lord Shiva who was passing by, addressing him as *Boddeka* (elder brother) asked what was worrying him so much. He narrated his plight and Lord Shiva asked him not to worry. The Lord asked him if he would accompany him to *Shivratri puja* nearby to take

*Prasad*(offering). *MahaShivratri*, a Hindu festival celebrated every year in reverence of Lord Shiva, the night of which occurs on the 14th night of the new moon during the dark half of the month of *Phaguna* (February/ March) when the Hindus offer special prayers to the lord of destruction, was on. He accompanied Him but stopped a little distance from the house where the puja was performed as he was now impure (*suwa*). This highlights the folk belief that impure souls, devils and demons cannot come anywhere near sacred places where offerings are made. Lord Shiva had gone in, taken the *prasad* and had come back only to find Bisti crying. When asked he told that the ones performing the puja were his family whom he had been searching for so long. He even asked for a blessing so that he could somehow help his struggling family to get back to normal and thus help him complete his unfulfilled duty as a father. Lord Shiva was kind enough to give him the power to enter the body of a human and do his unfulfilled duties. This is how he got the power to enter the body of his own daughter-in-law.

#### **Daughter-in-Law as the Horse:**

The possessed later said that a spirit can't enter anyone's body. It can only be done in case of certain persons. He described his daughter-in-law as a horse who was being used not only by him but also by other Goddesses. He even showed the action of riding a horse which made the others laugh. Everyone was listening to him in rapt attention for he seems to be providing answers to their unanswered questions for they had already seen the daughter-in-law being possessed by the Goddess in a nearby temple, Gita Mandir. She would just stand outside the offering area and guide the pujaris as to the placing of the lamps. She would do the same thing without even entering the mandir

during her periods when she would not be allowed to enter inside. She had said that even Goddess Kamakhya has come to Gita Mandiras MaKamakhya temple had been rendered unholy due to illegal practices of the priests some of whom belonged to other religious groups. There used to be a bird in Gita Mandir that danced to the ringing of the temple bells. This, she described as Goddess Kamakhya. When possessed by the soul of the Goddess, the devotees would also ask queries relating to their life to which she would provide answers.

### **Late Bisti and Lalitha**

The possessed guided Lalitha as to what to do in order to get the pension benefits. Many a times he would beg for her pardon for neglecting them during their lifetime and both would cry together. He even promised to wait for her in her next birth. He would share as to how he was bewitched by his second wife to dump them. He even said that God always sets things right and this is how God did not let him die until his second wife died though he was ailing since long. He said that deep inside he was very ill and his organs were failing him. He even asked her to check the *sijou* plant from inside after he would depart from them. She would see that the plant has turned hollow and rotten from inside just as was his case when alive and this was found to be true. He said that God had kept him alive more than his second wife so that she (Lalitha) could get the benefits of his pension. He guided her, accordingly, told her of the people who owed him money and this is how she managed to get the pension and is still enjoying it.

### **Funeral Again:**

As all good things come to an end, it's now time for the soul to depart once again. His unfinished work now done; he has to take his leave. Before doing so, he instructed his

family to uproot the *sijou* plant, perform the dead rites according to Bodo social custom, cremate it and perform the purification ceremonies just as is done when an actual person dies. He asked them to light a lamp every evening before the photo of Lord Shiva that is placed in an altar at the foot of the *sijou* plant. He promised that he would be there behind the photo, but he would never be able to contact them again as his power was to be only until his cremation day. He blessed everyone, bid farewell to everyone and then took his leave from the body of his daughter-in-law. Tears could be seen rolling down everyone's cheeks as the soul departed from them. The family then uprooted the *sijou* plant and as per the instructions left by the father checked to see if the plant turned hollow and rotten from inside, and loo, it was there for everyone to see. They then performed the last rites and carried it to the cremation ground. A feast was held according to the Bodo Social Custom and thus ended the story of a family that lost a father thrice, once when he actually left the family to settle with another, once when he died unknown to the family and now when he actually took his leave after completing his unfinished task.

**Life at present:**

Lalitha now lives in a Barimukh and her elder son, PapreBasumatary, lives in the house with his wife and sons adjacent to hers. He most often goes to Guwahati to work as before. The younger son, Khola, died in the year 2013 and his wife and children live in Guwahati in their earlier home. Papre is still unemployed as he was not fortunate enough to get education. However, he often turns to his mom when in need. Lalitha on the other hand has taken a few acres of land which is cultivated by her brother's son. She gets half the share of the product every year. She at least doesn't need to toil as a

labourer or as a rice spirit supplier. She has taken a cycle and often goes around visiting her brothers, sisters and her son's family. She thus has a happy go lucky life now but often her son causes problem demanding for more money.

### **Soul Possession**

Totola Rabhas regard human death in accidents, just like suicide, murder, or any similar death before one's time as unclean. In most cases, this can be said especially about accidents, in which young unmarried people have died not in a natural way. The folk believe that the souls of the people who have died before their actual time don't rest in peace rather, they stay on earth, usually in the place of accident, and may harm the living. Here's a narrative of a personal experience about encounter with such a restless spirit. When enquired, the village folk shared a belief that the unclean soul of the untimely dead female wanders in search of a partner. The spirit usually after unmarried men, appears as a girl of beauty that can be seen only by the targeted men and not by others. This is usually healed by wearing a *tabij* given by an *oja* or *bej*.

### **Joge Rabha**

Mr. Joge Rabha (34 years) has had an encounter with one such wandering soul. Around 10 years back, he was always accompanied by a girl, a spirit that others don't see. Whenever he went to the fields to tether the cows, a beautiful girl did it for him only to learn later that his cows were never tethered. The beautiful girl sat beside him in the fields sharing stories of love and longing. She even accompanied him to his bed. He sat down to take food in her company. They both had food from the same plate, and he kept asking for more to the surprise of the others. In fact, the plate was never emptied. His behaviour seemed to be different and this came to be noticed by the other family

members. When he went to the market, he was accompanied halfway by the girl of beauty. This reminds us of the merciless lady in 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'. The family members grew anxious as Joge's health seemed to deteriorate. They called in a *bej* who gave Joge a *tabij* so that the spirit can in no way come near him. He also used his *mantras* to call in the spirit and lure her to another place a kilometre away. In this way Joge was saved from the spirit. Mr. Joge now quite hale and hearty and a father of two smiles when asked about the spirit. He still wears a *tabij* to ward off evil spirits.

### **Bijoy Rabha's servant losses life at the hands of the spirits**

Lt. Phanthao, a servant in the house of Mr. Bijoy Rabha, also came across the spirit but he was not lucky enough. He too was accompanied by the girl of beauty in his daily works. She was always there by his side even when at home. She ate with him and even lulled him to sleep. She told him stories of love and expressed her wish to make him her partner for ever. Phanthao did not reveal everything to the family. Though the family noticed differences in Phanthao's behaviour they couldn't take steps at the right moment. One fine morning, Phanthao was found to be sitting in the backyard of Mr. Nakul Rabha below a tree as if he were sitting with someone. There was a *gamcha* around his neck wrapped loosely. He seemed to be dead. The previous night he had gone to a family nearby to watch TV. TVs were rare during those days and there was no electricity. Saying he'll be back soon he left the others never to return.

The collective experience as collected from the other village folk refer to the places where the souls are believed to be present. There are many incidents that stand a witness to this belief. The body of a man from the nearby village was found after three days in the same vicinity. He had disappeared in the night and the whole village went out in



search of him but in vain. In the year, 2019, another man named Hareswar Rabha (52 years) was found to have killed himself in the same area.

### ***Jauka Pal***

*Jauka Palas* believed by the village folk is a group of little spirits usually of seven in number. They appear and cry like kids and they follow you when you carry eatables usually of meat and fish at night. It is very common for the village folk to go to the market in the evening to get vegetables and other essential commodities. They usually have to cover long distances through villages and fields, as cycles and other vehicles were not so common. Many a times, it gets dark while on the way. In other cases, the village folk might return from their relative's home or from fairs and *melason* foot. There are certain places where these *Jauka pal* or other spirits dwell. Late Bhadreswar Rabha says, "When you carry items such as meat and fish at dark fall, you will be followed by *Jauka Pal*." It is however believed that the spirits can't come after the food if you carry garlic or chilli along with you. Therefore, when a person brings eatables or curry from another home, even during the days these days, raw chilli or garlic is put along with it. At night, when people travel to other places, they usually carry metallic objects with them.

Bhadreswar continues, "When I was returning from Mushalpur market on foot one day, I came across *Jauka Pal*. I was carrying half a kilo of pork. It was already dark and the road seemed empty. When I reached the empty fields near Nwlbhari and was about to cross the then bamboo bridge, I heard cries of children from behind. I turned back and saw a group of naked kids following me. They tried to come nearer. I stopped, threw some pieces of meat on the ground at a distance, sat down to pee and sprinkled some

pee on myself. If you sprinkle pee, these spirits can nowhere come near you. I then lighted a *bidi*, and continued walking. Thus, I got rid of *Jauka Pal*".

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of January, 2019, in the evening, preparations were going on for my marriage reception. Three pigs were killed and were being cleaned and cut to pieces in the fields at the backyard. The place is usually deserted and believed to be dwelling places of spirits since long. Some village folk heard sounds of children crying and they knew it was *Jauka Pal* coming for the meat. Some began to laugh but some said that it is better to leave some meat for them. Mr. Manik Rabha took some meat near the bamboo grove 100 mts away from the spot they were cutting meat and left for the *pal*. The cries began to fade. After some time, Mr. Buddha Rabha (38 years) had gone a bit far into the dark for nature's call. He returned after some time only to murmur unintelligible words. None took notice of him speaking jumbled up words. He then left for home all alone and began acting in a different way. He searched his whole house and kept asking for meat. His brother, Mr. Jirad Rabha (40 years) noticed his strange behaviour and called the other village folk. The nearby village folk, Kanak Rabha (38 years), Joka Rabha (56 years) and Ajay Rabha (39 years) came running to check what had gone wrong. Buddha then ran out of home all of a sudden towards the backyard into the dark when he stumbled upon a bamboo lying on the floor and fell to the ground. All the ones present caught hold of him as he struggled to free himself. "He was so strong and we could somehow pin him to the ground," said Ajay Rabha. Buddha was then brought indoors and Joka Rabha sprinkled *tulsi* water and some mustard seeds on him as he began to come back to normalcy. Kanak Rabha kept watch on Buddha Rabha the whole night lest he should run into the dark. The next morning a tantric from Rampur, 6 kms away was brought in. He chanted some mantras and gave Buddha

Rabha a tabij which he wears till date. “He was possessed by one of the spirits from *Jauka Pal*,” said the tantric. Buddha Rabha, when interviewed said that he remembers nothing of what had happened the previous night. “I remember going a few metres from the dining hall of the marriage reception for my needs and nothing else,” says Buddha.

### **Late Babul Rabha’s encounter with a spirit**

Late Babul Rabha of Laphakuchi was on his way home from Thamna. He had actually come from Hajo a far way off and when he reached Thamna, it was already dark. Since there was none to pick him, he decided to walk the 4 km stretch home. He had a bag of eatables with him. As he walked past a bridge, he noticed an old woman sitting at the other end. ‘What are you doing here grandma,’ he asked but there was no reply. A shiver ran through his nerves but he stood his ground and continued his walk through the dark night. He could somehow sense something following him. He literally began to run. By the time he reached home mom and brother had fallen asleep as it was already late night. He washed his feet and hands and straight away went to bed without having supper. He felt sleepy but couldn’t fall asleep. He could suddenly sense something at the corner of his room. The figure slowly came nearer and kept begging for something. It was a girl child. She kept asking for the eatables he had brought along with him. Late Rabha knew that it was a spirit following him all the way from the bridge where he had seen an old woman sitting at the end of the bridge wrapped in a shawl. Rabha went into the kitchen, took a bread and threw into the courtyard. The little girl then disappeared. His mother heard the commotion and sensing something wrong came into the room. She saw that his son was shivering with fever. When asked, he couldn’t say a word. She knew something had gone wrong. She then sprinkled tulsi water and slept along with

her son. The next morning, they informed an *oja* in the adjacent village who then sent *panijara* (water blessed by chanting mantras) to be taken by Babul Rabha. He also sent a *jap* (a thread blessed by chanting mantras) to be tied round the wrist. Thus Babul Rabha was cured. He later died due to excessive drinking.

It is seen that the Totola Rabhas believe in the existence of spirits that might be of different forms and characteristics. They have names for these spirits. *UkaBhoot* is one such spirit. It appears at night in the form of light and it jumps around. Scientific explanation says that gases might evaporate from the ground at night, thus giving rise to something that appears to be a light. Mr. Jayanta Rabha (41 years) says, "I was asleep when I suddenly woke up and sensed something in the room. I then saw a light coming towards me. I kept watching through my half open eyes. When the light came nearer towards my feet, I gave a forceful kick and the light flew towards the corner and then disappeared. I was 16 years old then." This was an encounter with *ukabhoot* according to the folk belief. Most of the times, the encounter with the supernatural leave behind a sense of fear and the one who has encountered the spirits suffer from severe fever in the aftermath. There are stories of such encounters all around. However, the folk have *ojas* to cure such fevers. They usually give *panijara* and a *jap*. The folk believe that the spirits can't harm you if you carry a metallic object with you. Therefore, it is a practice to carry a knife when a person travels at night. Persons visiting their relatives and coming back home at nightfall usually carried garlic or chilli or mustard seeds as these are believed to ward off evil spirits. However, these practices are seen only in a few places now. The folk still practice carrying these items when they travel carrying eatables at night.

Subodh Rabha (54 years) is a farmer and it is a practice for him to get up at dawn before sunrise. He comes to work in the fields very early and he has had encounters with spirits many a times. He has learnt some interesting techniques from his grandfather to ward off evil spirits. He always carries his goad under his arm. He says, “The spirits get fooled if you carry a goad under your arm. They think that you have pierced the goad through your body. They are confused as they wonder about the kind of power you might be having. So they usually don’t attack you.” It’s not sure how effective his belief is but he still practices it. He also says that one should carry a match box and a bidi when one travels at night. Smoking bidi keeps evil spirits away. The folk belief that evil spirits are all around and they still practice various methods to keep these spirits away. It is very common for the folk to wear a *tabij* given by a tantric. They wear it round their neck, arms or hips. They also have to follow certain ways so that the *tabij* keeps working. In case the *tabij* is given by a *Muslimoja*, one need not maintain any rules. Or else, they can’t wear it when attending a funeral or a birth rite. When a female gets her menstruation, she has to remove the *tabij*. When any of these is violated, the *tabij* is purified by dipping it in water containing tulsi, rice grain and a variety of grass (*duburi*).

It is seen that the Totola Rabhas are simple-minded folks. They believe in spirits and spirit possessions. This might be because they do not have any scientific explanations to some of the events they come across. This has great significance in social and cultural context. Lives of the folk, in earlier days came to a halt when darkness set in as they didn’t dare to venture outside. The fear of the unknown always remained.

### **Unexplained beliefs and practices among Totola Rabhas**

Folklore is more than just collection of stories and songs. We can know about the people from their beliefs and practices, their attitude towards life and towards the world

in general. There are some practices among the Totola Rabhas like other communities that cannot be explained scientifically but the folk have been doing since ages. Here are a few examples.

- a) When a Totola Rabha sits down to his meals, he offers the first morsel to Mother Earth by placing a few particles of rice on the ground by his plate. At the end of his meal, he will leave a morsel of food on his plate. When asked, he will say that this is for Lakshmi. It may not have any relevance about Goddess Lakshmi being offered food in plate but this morsel will surely feed the dogs or other smaller animals who stray around in search of food.
- b) When a person takes wine, it is customary for him/ her to sprinkle a bit on the floor. This is done so that the wine does not take him in control.
- c) It is believed that a broom should not be placed upside down after use and two brooms should not be kept touching each other. If this is done, there might be a quarrel at home.
- d) When two hens or cocks fight each other, it is believed that there will be guests at home.
- e) A *pira*(wooden stool) should not be placed upside down or else there might be a quarrel.
- f) One should not eat mangoes below a mango tree, or else the mangoes in the tree will get insects.
- g) When we clean the house after dark, we should not throw the dust or rubbish outside. This practice might actually help us from losing something valuable.
- h) One should not use a needle after dark. This is done to avoid being pierced due to low light in earlier days.

- i) One should not call out someone by name at night. It is believed that the spirits might use the name to call you at night. One should not venture out of home alone at night when someone calls you. It might be a spirit.
- j) When one carries eatables at night (maybe curry from another home) one should bring garlic or chilli along. This is done so that spirits don't follow you for the eatable.

It is seen that the Totola Rabhas have a rich tradition of oral narratives. Their belief system suggests that there are occasions of superstitious practices still prevalent among them. This is mainly due to illiteracy and ignorance. However, with the spread of education and exposure to the outside world, the belief system of the Totola Rabhas have changed.

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## Chapter VI

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The rich tradition of folklore of the Totola Rabhas is inherent in the life of the folk. The Rabhas have been living in close contact with other communities having different linguistic structure and way of life and have been highly influenced by their neighbouring communities. Their social life and customs have gained a mixed colour due to the non-native environment they have been exposed to. The analysis of the various songs and narratives prevalent among the Totola Rabhas are a living proof to their assimilation and innate identity though linguistically they have failed to keep a separate identity. This gives light to an excellent cultural synthesis prevalent among the Totola Rabhas. The Totola Rabhas have adapted to the environment and this has given rise to a unique identity quite distinct and different from the other Rabha groups. The cultural borrowing from the different neighbouring communities of Assam particularly in the field of oral literature, material culture, popular religion, myths, beliefs and superstitions gives the society a significant character.

It has also been observed that the growing impact of globalization and modernization on day to day life has come in the way of maintaining the authenticity of majority of the folklore forms and items. This impact is reflected in the folksongs and narratives as well. However, preservation of folklore items with maintenance of their originality is of utmost importance now. Therefore, the research undertaken had been a humble attempt to document, examine and explain the continuities and changes in the folksong and oral narrative traditions of the Totola Rabhas with an assimilation motif. The task is just a

minimal collection and analysis compared to the vast expanse of knowledge present mostly in unwritten form. There had been hurdles as the pace of modernisation has already eroded the undocumented knowledge present among the folk. Changes were seen in the originality of the narratives and songs. However, it is better to be late than never do it. It is of utmost importance to document the oral traditions so that at least in future generations, we know our contours through the documented perspectives.

In the preceding chapters, the researcher has tried to shed light on the different aspects of Totola Rabhas through their songs and narratives. It has been an endeavour to describe and analyse the materials making up the culture of the Totola Rabhas. The cultural affinity of the Totola Rabhas with their neighbouring communities cannot be ignored. It could be claimed that the Totola Rabhas have drawn a different colour despite a confluence of several other cultures and that the songs and narratives of the Totola Rabhas have evolved from its close assimilation with other communities. Therefore, they are found to be a lot more identical with the neighbouring communities.

The researcher started off with the following objectives in mind: -

- a. To document, examine and explain the continuities and changes in the folksong traditions of the Totola Rabhas with an assimilation motif.
- b. To examine how folksong as an epistemic resource capture the attitudes, concerns, contexts, aspirations and aesthetic sense of the Totola Rabhas.
- c. To explore the complexities of their worldview and their perspective about life and nature as highlighted in the oral narrative traditions of the Totola Rabhas.

- d. To study how the ethnic assimilation and amalgamation of the Totola Rabhas with their neighbouring communities contribute to the socio-cultural milieu in the Brahmaputra valley.

The researcher designed the present study to collect songs and oral narratives of the Totola Rabhas living in the districts of Baksa and Udalguri. The researcher used both primary and secondary data for the study. Survey method was used to identify villages inhabited with Totola Rabhas and ethnographic research methods were used to collect the data from the field and these were later used for qualitative interpretation and comparative study. Many a times, the researcher has analysed the collected folksongs from the standpoint of a cultural insider. Thus, the researcher has drawn material sustenance essentially not from enquiry rather from outside the field of enquiry.

According to the subject matter and nature of the folk songs current among the Totola Rabhas, some special characteristics were distinctly noticeable. They may be mentioned as listed below: -

1. Songs for religious occasions/ folk blessings
2. Folk songs influenced by the songs of the Pati Rabhas like Bahurangi.
3. Songs having common materials of Rabha way of life- marriage songs, love songs, Worksongs, Festive Songs, etc.
4. Songs fully shared by both the Rabhas and the Assamese, like *Moh Kheda Geet*, *BhalukNosowageet*, etc.
5. Incantations special to the Rabhas mostly for purification and healing.

There are festivals celebrated in common by almost all communities of Assam like Bihu, Mohoho, etc. Hence, there are common features in the songs and narratives. The

people have been living together sharing the same space and breathing the same air. Hence, commonalities in cultures is not a new phenomenon.

The first chapter is an introduction to the attempt of the researcher to explore the roles and meanings of songs in relation to the lives of the Totola Rabha people and to the cultural tradition and practice of which they are an integral part of. There has been an excellent cultural synthesis in the evolvement of the Totola Rabhas. As a result of their exposure to non-native environment, their social life and social customs have gained a different colour, which has now become distinct and quite different from the remaining Rabha groups. They have given up their language and at present and their common media of conversation is a variety of Assamese mixed with Rabha and Boro words and expressions. The culture of the Totola Rabhas which is a part of Indo Mongoloid culture, has contributed a lot towards the greater Assamese culture. The significance of the study emphasizes on the unique culture developed as a result of cultural synthesis and assimilation with the neighbouring communities. Literature review of folklore, folksongs and oral narratives has been presented in the chapter. The existing literature on the Rabhas in general is also being presented. The researcher has also added the limitations to the study.

In the second chapter, the researcher presents an ethnographic note on the Rabhas in General and the Totola Rabhas in particular. The Rabhas belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group of people and form a part of the great Bodo family which includes besides the Rabhas, the Kacharis, the Garos, the Lalungs, the Dimasas, the Hill Tippera, the Hajongs, the Mech, and others. Linguistically, they fall under the Tibeto-Burman group of languages of the Sino-Tibetan family of language. The Rabhas have been

Hinduised through the process of conversion. They are divided into nine groups of which the Patis form a majority. Apart from Rongdani and Maitori Rabhas, the Pati and Totola Rabhas, have almost dissolved themselves amidst either the Assamese or the Bodos.

There are legends about the origin of the word 'Rabha' and this is presented at length. The researcher presents about the migration and settlement of the Rabhas. The original home of the different groups of people belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family was in Western China near the rivers, Yang-tse-Kiang and Howangho from where hordes of them went down the courses of the Chindwin and the Irawadi and then the Brahmaputra and started settling down in the valleys of these rivers and also remote hills adjacent to the valleys. The researcher also presents an overview of settlement of the tribe in various parts of Assam. The livelihood pattern of the Totola Rabhas is also presented. Their construction of houses, weaving and clothing, food habits, rites de passage, administration, religious practices and dances are given an overview.

In the third chapter, Totola Rabhas and their Inter-Cultural relations with the neighbouring communities are presented. The Totola Rabhas have never lived in isolation. They have been in close contact with the neighbouring Assamese speaking and Bodo speaking population from time immemorial and consequently they have been highly influenced by these populations of the Brahmaputra valley. Racially the Boros and the Rabhas have long years of association. So, they have developed certain amount of cultural and linguistic similarities. In many cases the Rabhas are thought to be the Bodos because of their similarities in looks. They both belong to the mongoloid stock. Therefore, their physical affinities are closer.

Bora (2013) says that the Rabhas maybe different from the Bodos but their ways and culture are almost the same. Inter caste marriage among the Totola Rabhas is a common sight maybe due to lesser contact with people of their own kind. In most Totola Rabha villages, the mothers and wives, are from different communities including Boros, Nepalis, Karbis, Assamese, Garos, of which the Boros are a majority.

In the wake of Vaishnavite movement in Assam, many people belonging to Tribal origins, got themselves converted through a process where they took initiation or *sarana* under the Brahmin priest or Vaishnava Guru. They, then came to be known as SaraniaKachari. They not only got converted but also changed their surnames for Das, Sarania, Deka, Medhi, Choudhury, Hazarika, etc. They became a part of the Hindu society and they considered themselves as belonging to higher strata of society. The impact of the Saranias on Totola Rabhas is evident in many walks of life. This is so because they have been living in close proximity with each other. For example, it is now seen that *naam* is performed in Totola Rabha villages in occasions like birth, cleansing, Shivratri, Laxmi puja, etc. But there is a difference in the habits of eating and drinking. It is seen that even the ones who are performing offerings or *naam* indulge in drinking local wine, an act considered unholy by the Saranias or the Assamese. The Saranias while getting themselves converted have pledged to give up wine and pork. The Totola Rabhas for no reason will give up this habit of eating and drinking. It is seen that there has been an influence of other communities not only on the religious practices but other walks of life as well, eg., dressing pattern, language, food habits, songs, etc.

In the fourth chapter, the songs of the Totola Rabhas are presented. Folk songs of a community are very much a part of Folklore and speak a lot about the cultural traits of

that community. They are a form of communication in both day-to-day life and festive contexts, storing information, know-how, and values, and imbued with traditional wisdom and symbolic meaning, often used to express and interpret salient information, individual experiences and values.

The following categories of folk songs were found among the Totola Rabhas:

1. Devotional Songs/ Folk Blessings.
2. Songs of Love and Yearning
3. Marriage Songs
4. *BahurangiGeet*
5. Work Songs
6. Drinking Songs
7. Hunting Songs
8. Fishing Songs
9. Shepherd Songs
10. *Moh Kheda Geet/ BhalukNosowaGeet*
11. *BambolpitaGeet*
12. Lullabies/ Cradle Songs
13. Play songs
14. Incantations and Chants

The Totola Rabha, in addition to the Hindu Gods and Goddesses they believe in, still have their own deities and the ways to propitiate them. Through the religious songs, the simple life of the folk is highlighted. They don't have any complexities of using Sanskrit in their prayers to the deities as is seen in Hindu religion. They use simple

words and they talk to the deities in their normal language. This is highlighted in the folk prayers the priest uses while seeking the blessings of the deities.

*Bahurangi* is a dance form very popular among the Pati Rabhas but now due to inter-marriage between Pati and the Totola Rabhas, they are also prevalent among the Totola Rabhas as well. Their significance and appeal are in the expressive nature of the songs which are joined together in couplets representing different thoughts and therefore they are called '*jorageet*' where '*jora*' means 'to join'. The aesthetics of the *Bahurangi* songs is the ability of the composers to put different contexts in the same song. These songs were usually prevalent among the elderly men and women, mostly when they marry off their daughters. These songs did not speak of love but of other things in life. They usually started off when one gets drunk. It highlights the simple life of the village folk.

Love poetry or song has been present since ages in all communities. One can fathom and understand love, longing and loss through the love songs. Though the folk are illiterate they have their own way of expressing love and this has been handed down from generation to generation through word of mouth. The Totola Rabhas too are not behind in romance. They are indeed natural poets in the real sense of the term.

The Totola Rabhas are an agrarian community and it gets reflected in their songs and chants. Their day to day life and festivities are centred round their agricultural way of life. They follow traditional practices during various processes of agricultural starting from ploughing and sowing of seeds to the harvesting of the products.

The fact that the Rabhas were a hunting tribe is clear from their folksongs. Hunting does not all the time refer to the killing of animals for consumption but also for safety of their



population from predators. This is also one of the oldest forms of food acquisition. The Rabhas lived on food acquired from the forests. They were a hunting tribe in the past though hunting of wild animals is no more prevalent. The hunting songs prevalent among the Rabhas say it all.

Shepherds go out to the fields and remain almost for the whole day. They have a lot of leisurely time as their cows and buffaloes or sheep lazily graze in the fields. They mostly shout to each other in questions and answers usually teasing one another that might sometimes turn vulgar. This is usually done for fun. Shepherd song among the Pati and the Dahori Rabhas is known as *LakhorGeet*.

The Rabhas are very rich in lullabies. Lullabies are songs sung specially to lull a child to sleep or to pacify a crying baby. It can also be referred to as cradle song. These are songs sung only by women to lull their babies.

Folk games of each region and community are shaped not only by local environment but also culture. It depends a lot on physical space, materials available and also the seasons. This may determine when and where they are played and the props that are used. Folk games often incorporate cultural knowledge, values and skills that have emerged over time from the reciprocity between a particular society and its given environment. Folk games are present in almost all communities irrespective of which part of the world they live in. They are rich repositories of values and skills, inherited over time through experience and passed down from generation to generation.

In the fifth chapter, the researcher has documented oral narratives prevalent among the Totola Rabhas. The life of a tribal is associated with myths and traditions and without knowing them, we can never think of understanding their cultures and religions.

Malinowsky clearly stated that “Myth may be mythical in our perspective but to the native it is a living reality.” Myths are sacred and that they serve society as a charter for action. Myths were not necessarily connected to religious beliefs but were often secular stories. It would help to throw significant light on many aspects of their life. British classicist Geoffrey S.Kirk says that ‘myths denote stories with an underlying purpose beyond that of a simple story telling.....’ (Kirk, 1970).

Folk literature is a multi-layered source of knowledge and information and it touches an important nerve in the particular society and trains it to look beyond the specificities of the tale.

A popular myth about the creation of the universe says that in the beginning, there was only water and water everywhere. The Rabhas believe that the supreme deity *Risi* and his wife *Saripokare* are the creators of this universe.

There are also myths about the origin of the Rabhas. The names of the different sub-groups of Rabha tribe, based on folk-etymology, comes from ritual practices as well as occupations. Rajen Rabha, a noted litterateur, points out a myth that the different Rabha groups got their names from their responsibilities performed during their offerings to the supreme Goddess, Baikho.

*Bahurangi* is a most popular dance form among the Pati Rabhas but now due to inter-marriage between Pati and the Totola Rabhas, they are also prevalent among the Totola Rabhas. There is a myth that says the *Bahurangi* originated from Lord Indra herself.

The researcher has also managed to collect place legends and temple legends and other belief narratives and folktales prevalent among the Totola Rabhas.

The narratives suggest how simple the Totola Rabhas are. It reflects their worldview and their perspective about life and nature. The effect of modernization and assimilation among different communities has brought about a change in the ways of life and lore of the Rabhas. The present study emphasises how folksongs and oral narratives reflect the Totola Rabha's worldview and their perspective about their life, nature, aspirations, aesthetic sense and also their sense of poetic expression through the folksongs.

It has been found that most of the categories of the songs are no longer in use and it has been quite a task in documenting those. The songs were collected from aged men and women and there is always a fear that these traditions will soon die out. They were also collected from documented perspectives like books, magazines, journals, etc. there were changes and alterations in the songs due to the assimilation and modernization.

The religious songs are no longer sung as the women have aged and the present youth do not have an interest to learn those. Songs, borrowed from the neighbouring Assamese community, eg. *Naam*, are now prevalent in most of the villages.

Songs of love and yearning are no longer in use. Sociologist Indra Deva (1989) says that folksongs reflect and represent people's perception about situations, incidents and relationships. The situations, today, are no longer the same and the cultural traditions have given way to the modern way of life. People's perceptions have changed as a result of the impact of globalization and modernization. So, there are bound to be changes and alterations. Therefore, it is seen that the folksongs, be it songs of love, work songs, hunting songs, etc. are no longer the same and most of them remain merely as documented perspectives.

The marriage songs like *pani tola geet* sung while fetching water from the nearby river to bathe the bride or the groom, borrowed from the neighbouring Assamese, are still in practice.

The *Bahurangi* songs are now sung and the dances are performed during festive occasions and meetings. Meetings and functions, be it political or academic, organized by various organizations, today, seek to highlight the diversity of culture and they pay for performances. Cultural troupes are being brought in from various parts of the state on payment of a minimal amount. However, as *Bahurangi* dances are performed mostly by older women, they can neither leave home for long nor travel long distances. Therefore, they perform only in nearby places. Lines of the song are usually sung by the folk in a playful mood usually to tease someone or when they are drunk.

In the present context it is seen that *Bahurangi* songs are receiving acceptance by a wider audience because of the modern compositions. Songs such as *Dhuti Lem Lem*, *Sola Lem Lem* sung by the Assamese singer Zubeen Garg are widely accepted.

The hunting songs are also no longer sung as hunting is no longer in practice. However, the documentation highlights the tradition that was prevalent once upon a time. Same is the case with shepherd songs and fishing songs.

*Moh Kheda Geet* or *Bhaluk Nosowa Geet* are still in practice not in its actual form but as a celebration during the Assamese month of *Aaghon*. Young boys, dressed in leaves and with batons, go from house to house, singing and dancing. They collect rice grains and whatever the household has to offer and later enjoy a party with their collections. The courtyard is left with marks of batons all around. The families turn off all lamps when the performers come in.

*BambolpitaGeetis* still in practice in Tamulpur area. This is celebrated in the month of 'Bhado' of the Assamese calendar that falls between August and September during full moon night. The young and old take batons and go from house to house singing and dancing and collecting rice grains, money, etc. which are later used for feasting.

Lullabies or cradle songs are still in use. Play songs are still in practice among village boys and girls. However, the effect of media has had its toll on the traditional practices. The competitive education today and other recreational alternatives like smart phone, television and other media entertainments including e-gaming, social media, etc. have led to reduced opportunities and interest in traditional practices. Today, the increased focus and time dedicated to formal schooling and education, reduced independence and mobility of children and not to mention space restrictions, etc., these practices have given way to the more sophisticated and modern way of life. A question arises, "What if the traditional practices were to remain only as documented perspectives and our children never get a chance to feel its essence?"

Incantations and chants prevalent among the Totola Rabhas highlight their social context. The Totola Rabhas living in far flung areas still believe in *ojas* and *mantra* to cure themselves of illness. This is mainly due to illiteracy and superstitious beliefs prevalent among the folk. However, there are organizations actively trying to eradicate such practices and this has yielded results.

It is seen that the ethnic assimilation and amalgamation of the Totola Rabhas with their neighbouring communities contribute to the socio-cultural milieu in the Brahmaputra valley. Assamese culture is the end product of racial and ethnic assimilation and amalgamation of different ethnic groups of North East India (Baruah, 1911). The

Assamese society is a society, as the cultural historians perceive, formed by the synthesis of Aryan and tribal cultural elements. The main framework of Assamese culture was Aryan and this was further enriched by continuous addition of non-Aryan elements (ibid).

The continuities and changes in the folksong traditions of the Totola Rabhas has indeed played a role in assimilation with their neighbouring communities. Therefore, it is seen that despite differences, people have lived in peaceful co-existence.

### **Scope for further research**

As the pace of modernization gears up, it is seen that there are bound to be changes and alterations in the traditions. So, it is our ardent duty to do our part in conserving our folksongs and narratives. The present study is a small beginning in trying to help document and conserve the folksongs and oral narratives of the Totola Rabhas. There is a vast source of knowledge yet to be explored. And it must be done before they actually die out.

The songs can be further recorded and preserved in archives. This will aid in preserving and promoting the already eroding folksong traditions. It will also unravel the precious values and practices embedded in the songs of the Totola Rabhas. This has to be done quickly as the knowledgeable elders are perishing along with the knowledge they have and that too without disseminating it to the younger generations.

Digital community archives should be established and fellowships should be instituted for further research into the traditions of the minimal group which is often viewed from

a distance. This can prove to be a major step towards preserving their cultural expressions.

Festivals should be organized to address the well-identified and urgent need for generating awareness of the diversity of tribal culture and traditions. This could be a step towards establishing a self-identity and presence of the lesser known tribe, the Totola Rabhas.

It is seen that the developmental schemes in Rabha Hasong Council does not cover the Totola Rabhas as they are not the inhabitants in the region. Even the BTR government does not have any specific scheme for the development and upliftment of the Totola Rabhas who are marginalised. And as a result, the economic and social condition of the Totola Rabhas have remained the same. Therefore, initiatives should be taken by the govt. to uplift the Totola Rabhas.

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## GLOSSARY

| <b>Local Term</b><br><b>(TotlaRabha)</b> | <b>Meaning in English</b>   |
|--|---|
| <i>agloti</i>                            | A part of a banana leaf from the tip used for offerings   |
| <i>Bej or oja</i>                        | A Tantric   |
| <i>Bihuwan</i>                           | <i>Assamese traditional cloth</i>   |
| <i>Biya</i>                              | Marriage  |
| <i>Biyoni</i>                            | Form of address between the parents of married couple ( <i>Biyoniis to address the female</i> )   |
| <i>Bohag</i>                             | The first month of the Assamese calender  |
| <i>Chutni</i>                            | paste formed by adding chilli and other ingredients   |
| <i>Deuri</i>                             | Local priest  |
| <i>Dheki</i>                             | akind of traditional grinder made of tree trunk, suspended by posts and balanced to the ground a little near one end used for stamping with the leg while the other end grinds simultaneously |
| <i>Foring/ Firung</i>                    | Grasshoppers  |
| <i>Gamosa</i>                            | A white rectangular piece of cloth with primarily a red border on three sides and red woven motifs on the fourth (other colours are also used)<br>(Taken from wikipedia)                      |
| <i>Gela</i>                              | Rice Spirit   |
| <i>Ghoti</i>                             | A traditional utensil made of bell metal and used for drinking water  |
| <i>Gohai</i>                             | Deity   |
| <i>Gohaighar</i>                         | House of the deity; temple  |
| <i>Hamajik</i>                           | Social  |
| <i>Hamka</i>                             | snail or escargots  |

|                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| <i>Jakhai</i>            | traditional fishing equipment   |
| <i>Jamlai</i>            | red ants  |
| <i>Jap</i>               | A thread blessed by chanting mantras to be tied round the wrist to ward off evil spirits.   |
| <i>Japripoka</i>         | Water Giant Bug   |
| <i>Jauka Pal</i>         | A group of little sprits usually in groups of seven   |
| <i>Jom</i>               | The God of Death  |
| <i>Jonga</i>             | Pitcher   |
| <i>Karaipoka</i>         | water scavengers  |
| <i>Khaloi</i>            | A traditional equipment to keep the fish catch  |
| <i>khorahi</i>           | implement made of bamboo and used for washing rice grains or vegetables.  |
| <i>Kumti</i>             | Cricket   |
| <i>Loru</i>              | Goad (made of bamboo)   |
| <i>MaghBihu</i>          | Also called <i>BhogaliBihu</i> . It is a harvest festival celebrated in Assam which marks the end of harvesting season in the month of Magh (January- February)(from Wikipedia) |
| <i>Meji or Bhelaghar</i> | A bonfire of dry hay lit during <i>MaghBihu</i>   |
| <i>Mekhela Chador</i>    | Traditional Assamese dress draped around the body.  |
| <i>Mod</i>               | Rice Beer   |
| <i>Mou</i>               | Honey bee   |
| <i>Naam</i>              | Prayer  |
| <i>Paan</i>              | Betel leaf  |
| <i>Padmini</i>           | Hindu Goddess Lakshmi (In Sanskrit- She who sits in Lotus)  |
| <i>Panijara</i>          | Water blessed by chanting mantras mainly to ward off evil spirits.  |

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| <i>Pira</i>         | Rectangular piece of wood with two legs usually of three to four inches height and used for sitting.  |
| <i>Prasad</i>       | Offering to the Gods and Goddesses usually of Gram and other fruits   |
| <i>Prayachit</i>    | Atonement   |
| <i>Saran Bhajan</i> | Religious instructions and mode of worship  |
| <i>Sarana</i>       | Initiation  |
| <i>Shivratri</i>    | a Hindu festival celebrated every year in reverence of Lord Shiva, the night of which occurs on the 14th night of the new moon during the dark half of the month of Phaguna (February/ March) |
| <i>SungaSundari</i> | Also known as <i>shindal or hidal</i> . Mixtures of grinded smoked fish, specific leafy vegetables and rice powder left for days and months together in a sealed bamboo.                      |
| <i>Supa/ Suba</i>   | Hamlet  |
| <i>Suwa</i>         | Impure  |
| <i>Tal</i>          | A musical instrument made of metal plates to be smashed against each other  |
| <i>Tabij</i>        | Talisman  |
| <i>Tokon</i>        | A baton   |
| <i>Topola</i>       | Bundle  |

## PHOTO PLATES



*A Totla Rabha man*



*Totla Rabha women sitting by the fire*





*An old Totla Rabha woman working in the fields.*



*Totla Rabha men thrashing mustard.*





*Totla Rabha man sieving mustard seeds.*



*A Totla Rabha man carrying nuts to the market*





*Totla Rabha women and children taking part in musical chair competition*



*A Totla Rabha woman returning from fishing*





*Rabha villagers taking part in Holi*



*Totla Rabha women taking part in tug-of-war.*





*Totla Rabha boys while hunting mongoose.*



*Roasting mongoose for consumption*





**Fried caterpillar**



***Crab hunting***





*A Totla Rabha woman collecting eggs of ants.*



*Collecting eggs of ants.*





*Snails to be consumed.*



*A Totla Rabha woman carrying offerings during Shivaratri Puja.*





*Rabha folk praying during Shivaratri Puja*



*The village deity is taken from household to household in 2 no. Kataligaon (Totla Rabha village).*





*The children are waiting for a share of the offerings.*



*The men are drinking rice beer after the offerings to Bura Bun Gohai.*





*The village folk while seeking blessings during purification ceremony.*



*An invited performer performs naam in a Totla Rabha village.*





*Totla Rabha women singing religious songs during a death anniversary.*



*Totla Rabha folk seeking blessings of Old Forest Deity (Bura Bun Gohai)*





*An Oja chanting mantras to cure disease.*



*Totla Rabha women performing Bahurangi dance.*



*Totla Rabha women performing Bahurangi dance.*



*Totla Rabha girls performing Hamjar dance during Independence Day celebration organised by Baksa District Administration in Bathoupuri, Baksa in 2017.*





*Totla Rabha women consuming rice beer after work in the fields.*



*Totla Rabha man consuming rice beer using a dried bottle gourd.*



*Informant Kameswar Rabha (85 yrs)*



*Informant Gopal Singh Rabha (58 yrs.) while being interviewed by the Researcher.*





*Informant Bijoy Rabha (55 yrs.)*



*Informant Barun Rabha (65 yrs.) while dancing after being drunk.*

**A STUDY OF THE SONGS AND NARRATIVES  
OF THE TOTLA RABHAS IN BAKSA AND  
UDALGURI DISTRICT**

**A THESIS**

**SUBMITTED TO GAUHATI UNIVERSITY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE DEPARTMENT OF FOLKLORE  
RESEARCH UNDER FACULTY OF FINE ARTS**



**BHUPEN RABHA**

**2021**

## Chapter VI

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The rich tradition of folklore of the Totola Rabhas is inherent in the life of the folk. The Rabhas have been living in close contact with other communities having different linguistic structure and way of life and have been highly influenced by their neighbouring communities. Their social life and customs have gained a mixed colour due to the non-native environment they have been exposed to. The analysis of the various songs and narratives prevalent among the Totola Rabhas are a living proof to their assimilation and innate identity though linguistically they have failed to keep a separate identity. This gives light to an excellent cultural synthesis prevalent among the Totola Rabhas. The Totola Rabhas have adapted to the environment and this has given rise to a unique identity quite distinct and different from the other Rabha groups. The cultural borrowing from the different neighbouring communities of Assam particularly in the field of oral literature, material culture, popular religion, myths, beliefs and superstitions gives the society a significant character.

It has also been observed that the growing impact of globalization and modernization on day to day life has come in the way of maintaining the authenticity of majority of the folklore forms and items. This impact is reflected in the folksongs and narratives as well. However, preservation of folklore items with maintenance of their originality is of utmost importance now. Therefore, the research undertaken had been a humble attempt to document, examine and explain the continuities and changes in the folksong and oral narrative traditions of the Totola Rabhas with an assimilation motif. The task is just a

minimal collection and analysis compared to the vast expanse of knowledge present mostly in unwritten form. There had been hurdles as the pace of modernisation has already eroded the undocumented knowledge present among the folk. Changes were seen in the originality of the narratives and songs. However, it is better to be late than never do it. It is of utmost importance to document the oral traditions so that at least in future generations, we know our contours through the documented perspectives.

In the preceding chapters, the researcher has tried to shed light on the different aspects of Totola Rabhas through their songs and narratives. It has been an endeavour to describe and analyse the materials making up the culture of the Totola Rabhas. The cultural affinity of the Totola Rabhas with their neighbouring communities cannot be ignored. It could be claimed that the Totola Rabhas have drawn a different colour despite a confluence of several other cultures and that the songs and narratives of the Totola Rabhas have evolved from its close assimilation with other communities. Therefore, they are found to be a lot more identical with the neighbouring communities.

The researcher started off with the following objectives in mind: -

- a. To document, examine and explain the continuities and changes in the folksong traditions of the Totola Rabhas with an assimilation motif.
- b. To examine how folksong as an epistemic resource capture the attitudes, concerns, contexts, aspirations and aesthetic sense of the Totola Rabhas.
- c. To explore the complexities of their worldview and their perspective about life and nature as highlighted in the oral narrative traditions of the Totola Rabhas.



- d. To study how the ethnic assimilation and amalgamation of the Totola Rabhas with their neighbouring communities contribute to the socio-cultural milieu in the Brahmaputra valley.

The researcher designed the present study to collect songs and oral narratives of the Totola Rabhas living in the districts of Baksa and Udalguri. The researcher used both primary and secondary data for the study. Survey method was used to identify villages inhabited with Totola Rabhas and ethnographic research methods were used to collect the data from the field and these were later used for qualitative interpretation and comparative study. Many a times, the researcher has analysed the collected folksongs from the standpoint of a cultural insider. Thus, the researcher has drawn material sustenance essentially not from enquiry rather from outside the field of enquiry.

According to the subject matter and nature of the folk songs current among the Totola Rabhas, some special characteristics were distinctly noticeable. They may be mentioned as listed below: -

1. Songs for religious occasions/ folk blessings
2. Folk songs influenced by the songs of the Pati Rabhas like Bahurangi.
3. Songs having common materials of Rabha way of life- marriage songs, love songs, Worksongs, Festive Songs, etc.
4. Songs fully shared by both the Rabhas and the Assamese, like *Moh Kheda Geet*, *BhalukNosowageet*, etc.
5. Incantations special to the Rabhas mostly for purification and healing.

There are festivals celebrated in common by almost all communities of Assam like Bihu, Mohoho, etc. Hence, there are common features in the songs and narratives. The

people have been living together sharing the same space and breathing the same air. Hence, commonalities in cultures is not a new phenomenon.

The first chapter is an introduction to the attempt of the researcher to explore the roles and meanings of songs in relation to the lives of the Totola Rabha people and to the cultural tradition and practice of which they are an integral part of. There has been an excellent cultural synthesis in the evolvement of the Totola Rabhas. As a result of their exposure to non-native environment, their social life and social customs have gained a different colour, which has now become distinct and quite different from the remaining Rabha groups. They have given up their language and at present and their common media of conversation is a variety of Assamese mixed with Rabha and Boro words and expressions. The culture of the Totola Rabhas which is a part of Indo Mongoloid culture, has contributed a lot towards the greater Assamese culture. The significance of the study emphasizes on the unique culture developed as a result of cultural synthesis and assimilation with the neighbouring communities. Literature review of folklore, folksongs and oral narratives has been presented in the chapter. The existing literature on the Rabhas in general is also being presented. The researcher has also added the limitations to the study.

In the second chapter, the researcher presents an ethnographic note on the Rabhas in General and the Totola Rabhas in particular. The Rabhas belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group of people and form a part of the great Bodo family which includes besides the Rabhas, the Kacharis, the Garos, the Lalungs, the Dimasas, the Hill Tippera, the Hajongs, the Mech, and others. Linguistically, they fall under the Tibeto-Burman group of languages of the Sino-Tibetan family of language. The Rabhas have been

Hinduised through the process of conversion. They are divided into nine groups of which the Patis form a majority. Apart from Rongdani and Maitori Rabhas, the Pati and Totola Rabhas, have almost dissolved themselves amidst either the Assamese or the Bodos.

There are legends about the origin of the word 'Rabha' and this is presented at length. The researcher presents about the migration and settlement of the Rabhas. The original home of the different groups of people belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family was in Western China near the rivers, Yang-tse-Kiang and Howangho from where hordes of them went down the courses of the Chindwin and the Irawadi and then the Brahmaputra and started settling down in the valleys of these rivers and also remote hills adjacent to the valleys. The researcher also presents an overview of settlement of the tribe in various parts of Assam. The livelihood pattern of the Totola Rabhas is also presented. Their construction of houses, weaving and clothing, food habits, rites de passage, administration, religious practices and dances are given an overview.

In the third chapter, Totola Rabhas and their Inter-Cultural relations with the neighbouring communities are presented. The Totola Rabhas have never lived in isolation. They have been in close contact with the neighbouring Assamese speaking and Bodo speaking population from time immemorial and consequently they have been highly influenced by these populations of the Brahmaputra valley. Racially the Boros and the Rabhas have long years of association. So, they have developed certain amount of cultural and linguistic similarities. In many cases the Rabhas are thought to be the Bodos because of their similarities in looks. They both belong to the mongoloid stock. Therefore, their physical affinities are closer.

Bora (2013) says that the Rabhas maybe different from the Bodos but their ways and culture are almost the same. Inter caste marriage among the Totola Rabhas is a common sight maybe due to lesser contact with people of their own kind. In most Totola Rabha villages, the mothers and wives, are from different communities including Boros, Nepalis, Karbis, Assamese, Garos, of which the Boros are a majority.

In the wake of Vaishnavite movement in Assam, many people belonging to Tribal origins, got themselves converted through a process where they took initiation or *sarana* under the Brahmin priest or Vaishnava Guru. They, then came to be known as SaraniaKachari. They not only got converted but also changed their surnames for Das, Sarania, Deka, Medhi, Choudhury, Hazarika, etc. They became a part of the Hindu society and they considered themselves as belonging to higher strata of society. The impact of the Saranias on Totola Rabhas is evident in many walks of life. This is so because they have been living in close proximity with each other. For example, it is now seen that *naam* is performed in Totola Rabha villages in occasions like birth, cleansing, Shivratri, Laxmi puja, etc. But there is a difference in the habits of eating and drinking. It is seen that even the ones who are performing offerings or *naam* indulge in drinking local wine, an act considered unholy by the Saranias or the Assamese. The Saranias while getting themselves converted have pledged to give up wine and pork. The Totola Rabhas for no reason will give up this habit of eating and drinking. It is seen that there has been an influence of other communities not only on the religious practices but other walks of life as well, eg., dressing pattern, language, food habits, songs, etc.

In the fourth chapter, the songs of the Totola Rabhas are presented. Folk songs of a community are very much a part of Folklore and speak a lot about the cultural traits of

that community. They are a form of communication in both day-to-day life and festive contexts, storing information, know-how, and values, and imbued with traditional wisdom and symbolic meaning, often used to express and interpret salient information, individual experiences and values.

The following categories of folk songs were found among the Totola Rabhas:

1. Devotional Songs/ Folk Blessings.
2. Songs of Love and Yearning
3. Marriage Songs
4. *BahurangiGeet*
5. Work Songs
6. Drinking Songs
7. Hunting Songs
8. Fishing Songs
9. Shepherd Songs
10. *Moh Kheda Geet/ BhalukNosowaGeet*
11. *BambolpitaGeet*
12. Lullabies/ Cradle Songs
13. Play songs
14. Incantations and Chants

The Totola Rabha, in addition to the Hindu Gods and Goddesses they believe in, still have their own deities and the ways to propitiate them. Through the religious songs, the simple life of the folk is highlighted. They don't have any complexities of using Sanskrit in their prayers to the deities as is seen in Hindu religion. They use simple

words and they talk to the deities in their normal language. This is highlighted in the folk prayers the priest uses while seeking the blessings of the deities.

*Bahurangi* is a dance form very popular among the Pati Rabhas but now due to inter-marriage between Pati and the Totola Rabhas, they are also prevalent among the Totola Rabhas as well. Their significance and appeal are in the expressive nature of the songs which are joined together in couplets representing different thoughts and therefore they are called '*jorageet*' where '*jora*' means 'to join'. The aesthetics of the *Bahurangi* songs is the ability of the composers to put different contexts in the same song. These songs were usually prevalent among the elderly men and women, mostly when they marry off their daughters. These songs did not speak of love but of other things in life. They usually started off when one gets drunk. It highlights the simple life of the village folk.

Love poetry or song has been present since ages in all communities. One can fathom and understand love, longing and loss through the love songs. Though the folk are illiterate they have their own way of expressing love and this has been handed down from generation to generation through word of mouth. The Totola Rabhas too are not behind in romance. They are indeed natural poets in the real sense of the term.

The Totola Rabhas are an agrarian community and it gets reflected in their songs and chants. Their day to day life and festivities are centred round their agricultural way of life. They follow traditional practices during various processes of agricultural starting from ploughing and sowing of seeds to the harvesting of the products.

The fact that the Rabhas were a hunting tribe is clear from their folksongs. Hunting does not all the time refer to the killing of animals for consumption but also for safety of their

population from predators. This is also one of the oldest forms of food acquisition. The Rabhas lived on food acquired from the forests. They were a hunting tribe in the past though hunting of wild animals is no more prevalent. The hunting songs prevalent among the Rabhas say it all.

Shepherds go out to the fields and remain almost for the whole day. They have a lot of leisurely time as their cows and buffaloes or sheep lazily graze in the fields. They mostly shout to each other in questions and answers usually teasing one another that might sometimes turn vulgar. This is usually done for fun. Shepherd song among the Pati and the Dahori Rabhas is known as *LakhorGeet*.

The Rabhas are very rich in lullabies. Lullabies are songs sung specially to lull a child to sleep or to pacify a crying baby. It can also be referred to as cradle song. These are songs sung only by women to lull their babies.

Folk games of each region and community are shaped not only by local environment but also culture. It depends a lot on physical space, materials available and also the seasons. This may determine when and where they are played and the props that are used. Folk games often incorporate cultural knowledge, values and skills that have emerged over time from the reciprocity between a particular society and its given environment. Folk games are present in almost all communities irrespective of which part of the world they live in. They are rich repositories of values and skills, inherited over time through experience and passed down from generation to generation.

In the fifth chapter, the researcher has documented oral narratives prevalent among the Totola Rabhas. The life of a tribal is associated with myths and traditions and without knowing them, we can never think of understanding their cultures and religions.

Malinowsky clearly stated that “Myth may be mythical in our perspective but to the native it is a living reality.” Myths are sacred and that they serve society as a charter for action. Myths were not necessarily connected to religious beliefs but were often secular stories. It would help to throw significant light on many aspects of their life. British classicist Geoffrey S.Kirk says that ‘myths denote stories with an underlying purpose beyond that of a simple story telling.....’ (Kirk, 1970).

Folk literature is a multi-layered source of knowledge and information and it touches an important nerve in the particular society and trains it to look beyond the specificities of the tale.

A popular myth about the creation of the universe says that in the beginning, there was only water and water everywhere. The Rabhas believe that the supreme deity *Risi* and his wife *Saripokare* are the creators of this universe.

There are also myths about the origin of the Rabhas. The names of the different sub-groups of Rabha tribe, based on folk-etymology, comes from ritual practices as well as occupations. Rajen Rabha, a noted litterateur, points out a myth that the different Rabha groups got their names from their responsibilities performed during their offerings to the supreme Goddess, Baikho.

*Bahurangi* is a most popular dance form among the Pati Rabhas but now due to inter-marriage between Pati and the Totola Rabhas, they are also prevalent among the Totola Rabhas. There is a myth that says the *Bahurangi* originated from Lord Indra herself.

The researcher has also managed to collect place legends and temple legends and other belief narratives and folktales prevalent among the Totola Rabhas.



The narratives suggest how simple the Totola Rabhas are. It reflects their worldview and their perspective about life and nature. The effect of modernization and assimilation among different communities has brought about a change in the ways of life and lore of the Rabhas. The present study emphasises how folksongs and oral narratives reflect the Totola Rabha's worldview and their perspective about their life, nature, aspirations, aesthetic sense and also their sense of poetic expression through the folksongs.

It has been found that most of the categories of the songs are no longer in use and it has been quite a task in documenting those. The songs were collected from aged men and women and there is always a fear that these traditions will soon die out. They were also collected from documented perspectives like books, magazines, journals, etc. there were changes and alterations in the songs due to the assimilation and modernization.

The religious songs are no longer sung as the women have aged and the present youth do not have an interest to learn those. Songs, borrowed from the neighbouring Assamese community, eg. *Naam*, are now prevalent in most of the villages.

Songs of love and yearning are no longer in use. Sociologist Indra Deva (1989) says that folksongs reflect and represent people's perception about situations, incidents and relationships. The situations, today, are no longer the same and the cultural traditions have given way to the modern way of life. People's perceptions have changed as a result of the impact of globalization and modernization. So, there are bound to be changes and alterations. Therefore, it is seen that the folksongs, be it songs of love, work songs, hunting songs, etc. are no longer the same and most of them remain merely as documented perspectives.

The marriage songs like *pani tola geet* sung while fetching water from the nearby river to bathe the bride or the groom, borrowed from the neighbouring Assamese, are still in practice.

The *Bahurangi* songs are now sung and the dances are performed during festive occasions and meetings. Meetings and functions, be it political or academic, organized by various organizations, today, seek to highlight the diversity of culture and they pay for performances. Cultural troupes are being brought in from various parts of the state on payment of a minimal amount. However, as *Bahurangi* dances are performed mostly by older women, they can neither leave home for long nor travel long distances. Therefore, they perform only in nearby places. Lines of the song are usually sung by the folk in a playful mood usually to tease someone or when they are drunk.

In the present context it is seen that *Bahurangi* songs are receiving acceptance by a wider audience because of the modern compositions. Songs such as *Dhuti Lem Lem*, *Sola Lem Lem* sung by the Assamese singer Zubeen Garg are widely accepted.

The hunting songs are also no longer sung as hunting is no longer in practice. However, the documentation highlights the tradition that was prevalent once upon a time. Same is the case with shepherd songs and fishing songs.

*Moh Kheda Geet* or *Bhaluk Nosowa Geet* are still in practice not in its actual form but as a celebration during the Assamese month of *Aaghon*. Young boys, dressed in leaves and with batons, go from house to house, singing and dancing. They collect rice grains and whatever the household has to offer and later enjoy a party with their collections. The courtyard is left with marks of batons all around. The families turn off all lamps when the performers come in.

*BambolpitaGeetis* still in practice in Tamulpur area. This is celebrated in the month of 'Bhado' of the Assamese calendar that falls between August and September during full moon night. The young and old take batons and go from house to house singing and dancing and collecting rice grains, money, etc. which are later used for feasting.

Lullabies or cradle songs are still in use. Play songs are still in practice among village boys and girls. However, the effect of media has had its toll on the traditional practices. The competitive education today and other recreational alternatives like smart phone, television and other media entertainments including e-gaming, social media, etc. have led to reduced opportunities and interest in traditional practices. Today, the increased focus and time dedicated to formal schooling and education, reduced independence and mobility of children and not to mention space restrictions, etc., these practices have given way to the more sophisticated and modern way of life. A question arises, "What if the traditional practices were to remain only as documented perspectives and our children never get a chance to feel its essence?"

Incantations and chants prevalent among the Totola Rabhas highlight their social context. The Totola Rabhas living in far flung areas still believe in *ojas* and *mantra* to cure themselves of illness. This is mainly due to illiteracy and superstitious beliefs prevalent among the folk. However, there are organizations actively trying to eradicate such practices and this has yielded results.

It is seen that the ethnic assimilation and amalgamation of the Totola Rabhas with their neighbouring communities contribute to the socio-cultural milieu in the Brahmaputra valley. Assamese culture is the end product of racial and ethnic assimilation and amalgamation of different ethnic groups of North East India (Baruah, 1911). The

Assamese society is a society, as the cultural historians perceive, formed by the synthesis of Aryan and tribal cultural elements. The main framework of Assamese culture was Aryan and this was further enriched by continuous addition of non-Aryan elements (ibid).

The continuities and changes in the folksong traditions of the Totola Rabhas has indeed played a role in assimilation with their neighbouring communities. Therefore, it is seen that despite differences, people have lived in peaceful co-existence.

### **Scope for further research**

As the pace of modernization gears up, it is seen that there are bound to be changes and alterations in the traditions. So, it is our ardent duty to do our part in conserving our folksongs and narratives. The present study is a small beginning in trying to help document and conserve the folksongs and oral narratives of the Totola Rabhas. There is a vast source of knowledge yet to be explored. And it must be done before they actually die out.

The songs can be further recorded and preserved in archives. This will aid in preserving and promoting the already eroding folksong traditions. It will also unravel the precious values and practices embedded in the songs of the Totola Rabhas. This has to be done quickly as the knowledgeable elders are perishing along with the knowledge they have and that too without disseminating it to the younger generations.

Digital community archives should be established and fellowships should be instituted for further research into the traditions of the minimal group which is often viewed from

a distance. This can prove to be a major step towards preserving their cultural expressions.

Festivals should be organized to address the well-identified and urgent need for generating awareness of the diversity of tribal culture and traditions. This could be a step towards establishing a self-identity and presence of the lesser known tribe, the Totola Rabhas.

It is seen that the developmental schemes in Rabha Hasong Council does not cover the Totola Rabhas as they are not the inhabitants in the region. Even the BTR government does not have any specific scheme for the development and upliftment of the Totola Rabhas who are marginalised. And as a result, the economic and social condition of the Totola Rabhas have remained the same. Therefore, initiatives should be taken by the govt. to uplift the Totola Rabhas.

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