



# Critical Analysis of Influence of Globalization among the Rabhas of West Bengal, India

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## ABSTRACT

Whenever we attempt to define any word having a “global” morpheme in it, that word entails a cognition that the term is affecting the whole world, be it “globalization”, “global market”, “global economy” or “global warming”. So, when we talk about globalization which itself is a process of interaction among people of the whole world (the basis of this interaction may vary from trading of goods to the exchange of revolutionary ideas); then we can't ignore the diversity of approximately 7.7 billion people. When such a diverse population interacts on any level then it is only natural that things are going to advance forward, as only a strong idea or innovation can actually become global. Hence any society coming under its radar is going to go under some kind of transition from its traditional self. This paper attempts to explain whether globalization has stimulated any transition among Rabhas or not? Rabhas are the tribal people of West Bengal, Assam and Meghalaya. In West Bengal Rabhas mainly live in Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar district. Referring themselves as “Koch”, Rabhas of Jalpaiguri were originally a forest-dwelling tribe, marked by its matrilineality. Scholars like M.K Raha in his book “Matriline to Patriline: A Study of the Rabha Society” (1974) and others have argued that Rabhas are undergoing transition. Even though the transition from matriline to patriline has been highlighted by several authors and scholars but there is a transition occurring at more than one level and this paper is an attempt to highlight such transitions.

**Keywords:** Globalization, Transition, Rabha, Revolutionary, Interaction.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term globalization has been used widely in economic sense ever since its conceptualization. It has been a significant marker of economic power and progress in both developed and developing countries. Any layman who read this term can perceive it as of something including whole world, as it has a morpheme “global” in it. We can say that globalization is the process of flow of goods, ideas, information, investments and trade between countries of whole world. If by globalization we mean the flow of goods and trades between countries then for India, this process is not new at all and goes back to proto historic time when Sumerian civilization and Indus Valley Civilization interacted on economic bases. For centuries and more we have been using products of other nations via import and export, in recent times globalization has gained momentum in its most economic sense ever since the adaptation of LPG policy in 1991. From there on the term has highly influenced a nation's identity and influenced its struggle for gaining the status of a developed nation. So at its maxima globalization occurs at a national level all over world and its impact mostly can be observed on national level when international policies about economy, environment, trade, investment, information technology (IT- sector), laws etc. are concerned.

The problem of a definite definition for globalization can't be ignored. Often this term is understood as a process of modernization, westernization and industrialization. This confusion arises because there are no definite parameters or criteria which represent globalization. Yes modernization, westernization and industrialization are some aspects of globalization but they don't depend on globalization to exist. They are independent processes which may or may not include globalization at all. So we have to understand here that these terms (i.e., modernization, westernization, industrialization) can't be used as synonymous of globalization in every possible situation and they need to be distinguished. The above-mentioned argument is necessary here because whatever changes we see happening in tribal areas are actually the impact of these processes and in this paper an attempt has been made to study the transition of Rabha tribe of Kodalbasti, West Bengal and to make a point that globalization is not operational on all levels of a nation.

## 1.1 The Rabhas

Rabhas are the tribal people of West Bengal, Assam and Meghalaya. In West Bengal Rabhas mainly live in Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar district, Jalpaiguri being the major inhabiting region of Rabhas with 70% of its total population living there. Rabhas are the Mongoloid tribes of India having linguistic affinity with Sino-Tibetan languages. Referring themselves as “Koch”, Rabhas of Jalpaiguri were originally a forest dwelling tribe, marked by its matrilineality. This paper is based on the Rabhas of Kodalbasti which is a village that falls under the Kalchini Block in Alipurduar district of West Bengal. Kodalbasti is a forest-based village which itself constitutes the part of Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary and comes under Cooch Behar forest division. Further Kodalbasti is itself a forest beat in Chilapata forest range. The whole area is spread across 1081.33 hectares and it is richly surrounded by forests. Two main rivers, Kulti and Torsha flows within this village and holds religious and economic significance for Rabhas.

In Kodalbasti the Rabhas are totally dependent upon forest. Approximately 400 Rabha families are there in Kodalbasti. Most of these families has now converted into Christianity. There are two churches one is the Baptist Church and another one is the Seventh Day Adventist church, the whole Christian section of Rabhas is divided into these two sects i.e., Roman Catholic and Protestant. The immediate neighbours of Rabhas in Kodalbasti are the Chotanagpuri diasporas i.e. The Oraon.

## 2. THE TRANSITION

Undoubtedly Rabhas has gone through transition in several aspects of their life due to the impact of various factors but does these transitions pass up to the level that we consider it as an impact of globalization? The question is left for open interpretation to the reader and for that I present here some of the major transitions occurring in the life of Rabhas.

### 2.1 Social Organisation-

Studying the transition among Rabhas from matrilineality to patrilineality has become a highlight of all studies concerning Rabhas, but In Kodalbasti this transition is not that much prevalent as much as the prevalence of Christianity. The social organization of Rabhas has been matrilineal always. Any form of social organization is not limited to only one aspect but it is multi- dimensional. As Rabhas were the shifting cultivators originally and totally dependent upon of forest for their livelihood but due to impact of British rule they got involved in the plantation work and recently due to implementation of modern laws they lost their right over forest. Now the present situation is as such that the forest department of the region provide employment only to male members of a family and that too at a very limited level so what actually has happened is the shift of power in the families of Rabhas as Male members has become the breadwinner. So this powershift is the main factor responsible for transition from matrilineality to patrilineality in some of the Rabha families. Earlier Joint families were found in Rabha society but now at present joint families are being disintegrated as a result of which large number of small families are emerging.

Implementation of modern law which has alienated Rabhas from their own forest and imposed restrictions on them is the root cause of this change.

### 2.2 Religion

Rabhas were animists by origin. They worshipped several spirits taking abode in forests and different areas of villages. Their highest deity is Rumbuk. But due to Conversion to Christianity Now only 26 families are left in Kodalbasti who are animists and call themselves as Hindu Rabha because they perform elaborate rituals.

The religious specialist is called as Huji. The Huji is chosen by whole Rabha society. This post is not hereditary. He is one of the most important people of Rabhas who is looked upon by fellow members with utmost reverence.

At present time conversion to Christianity has accelerated at a rapid rate. Hindu Rabhas now are converting because their elaborate rituals seem to be very expensive for them. They have to sacrifice animals which have a good economic value. And if Hindu Rabhas fails to perform any rituals then he starts living in constant fear of the wrath of the spirits. hence now Hindu rabhas are preferring to convert Christianity as this religion gives them a sense of security and mental peace.

**Sacrifice-** Originally the Hindu rabhas used to sacrifice pigs but now swan or koda are sacrificed instead. The reason might be the good economic value of the pigs.

### 2.3 Huji

Previously when most Rabhas were Hindu then number of capable sacred specialist or the Hujji were large too. But at present only 2 hujjis are there giving hint of the transition occurring within Rabhas in terms of religion.

So main factor which stimulates the transition in religion of Rabhas at present is Christianity. This religion is a safe abode for them which supports them on psychological level as they no longer fear from the wrath of their sacred spirits.

#### **2.4 Dress**

The traditional dress of Rabhas which Is Koch Lufun and Koch Lama is made, weaved and dyed manually but now due to impact of westernization western dresses are worn even on traditional occasions. Now the traditional dress of Rabhas are being made with mixed textile. Further Koch lama has become extinct. Women used to wear Lufun and Kaman but now at present they wear camlet and which is used now as traditional dress. So the transition in dressing pattern is due to westernization.

#### **2.5 Economic life**

The Rabhas are greatly dependent upon forest for earning their livelihood. Earlier Rabhas were shifting cultivators but later they were introduced to the new plantation system. It was around 1913 that the first plantation of timber began and Begari system prevailed under which Rabhas had to work for free for the rulers. There was a law that stated each family had to work in 1 acre of land without any wage. After the injustice of 59 years, Hazra system was introduced in which adults were paid Rs 2.5 and women got Rs 2 on the basis of work. In the colonial era British gave some hectares of land to forest dwellers working for them. But at present Rabhas don't have any right of ownership to those land too because a large tract of land was declared as tiger reserve in 1987 and the government has declared approx. 117 square km of area as national park. Also the Forest Right Act of 2006 has not been implemented and hardly any of its provision is seen to be accepted by forest department. Further they have been restricted to even enter forest and collect wood or timber or any edibles. Rabhas used to construct their house with timber but now due to inaccessibility of even non-timber forest product they are solely dependent upon gathering of woods from nearby areas. They have been declined even rights of planting trees in forest for cotton production so much of the plantation work has stopped. Also the area of land now being held by each family is getting lesser, disintegration of joint family being one of the reasons.

Earlier Rabhas could roam in the forest freely but due to strictness of Forest Department and newly constructed norms against forest dwellers they can't even enter forest without permission. Hence the change is sufferable as beneficiary provisions of the forest right act are not being implemented properly. At present the Rabhas are now settled seasonal cultivators which hardly make them capable of fulfilling day to day needs.

So whatever transition has occurred in the economic life of Rabhas is due to the restrictions imposed upon them and their inaccessibility to the forest.

#### **2.6 Political life**

The traditional panchayat system of Rabha is referred a Marab Son System. The word marab son means council of elders (Marab = man, Son= aged). This council of elders consists of elderly and abled persons headed by Mandal (official head man) who is also the traditional headman (Para). As the para, the headman of the bastee act with limited power, he has to act according to the direction of the Marab Son. But in the capacity of the Mandal he has more powers given to him by the Forest Department. The religious head dhami and dayasi are also members of this council. Marab son resolves the social and religious conflict.

The post of Mandal was hereditary before but now the most respected and capable man hold this post.

The traditional political system of Rabha has been replaced with the new modern Panchayati Raj system. The whole political structure of Mendabari Gram Panchayat is same as in other panchayats of the villages. The Mukhiya is the main political authority of the village who makes all important decisions regarding development and disputes.

So we see here that the transition in political system of Rabhas is due to the adaptation of Panchayati Raj system and adaption of national laws of India.

### **3.CONCLUSION**

We can't argue with the fact that globalization is indeed an intrinsic factor of economy at the national level but we have to understand this too, that the true impact of globalization in any society could be only seen as an active factor of change or transition if it is affecting the decision-making process of that society. When we talk on global terms then we see that the most observable example of globalization which is the Sector of information and technology, which make its services available to the whole world and from manufacturing of products to their marketing every aspect is considered on the basis of overall culture of

the nations that they are trying to give their services to. So, what is happening here is that the decisions are being made considering a large mass of the world. Also, the main medium of globalization is mass communication and it is only through the proper prevalence of means of mass communication that global viewpoints, ideas or global news is reaching all.

The above-mentioned data about Rabhas clearly depicts its factors of transition like the transition in religion from animism to Christianity is due to Christianization which is able to prevail among Rabhas as Rabhas themselves has chosen to adopt this religion as they can't afford now to fulfil all the rituals that Animist Rabhas has to do to please their spirits. This is also because of the transition in their economy which has been brought up by the the forest department as now Rabhas don't have any right of ownership over their forest which makes them vulnerable to situation and has created a situation of poverty for them. Earlier when Rabhas had access to the forest then they were a self-sustaining tribe but now due to imposed restriction and prohibitions they are unable to even earn their livelihood so how can they even think of performing elaborate rituals which requires to be done every second month? This has inculcated the fear of wrath of ancestors and this is why now Rabhas don't hesitate to convert to Christianity. So, we can see that here the imposed restrictions on Rabha has created a transition in their self-sustaining economy and now have made them dependent upon the mercy of forest department. Also, the transition in religion is due to Christianity which is itself an individual process. Yes the 2-3 local shops does have some goods of daily use which can be found in any shop or supermarket of city but the reality is that yes their use might be making their life a little bit convenient but at the higher level it is not creating any major changes, it is bound to happen as commerce has reached every corner of the nation but the overall impact is not note-worthy among Rabhas. It's not like the handmade products of Rabhas are reaching national or international market on regular basis. So even there we really can't see globalization in its most expected sense. The disintegration of Rabha Joint family is also due to economic reasons and adaptation of neolocal residence by the youth. The transition from matrilineal to patrilineal also seems to have its roots in the economic reasons which has been discussed earlier. These are the major transition or changes occurring among Rabhas at present and none of them seems to justify the vague process of globalization.

I would like to quote here the statement made by the 39th President of United States of America, Mr. Jimmy Carter "If you are totally illiterate and living on one dollar a day, the benefits of Globalization never comes to you",

This is true because we can't deny the fact that the middle and the upper class of society are the most influenced by the global culture. I am not saying that tribal are illiterate or poor, neither I wish to make any statement that can be considered controversial, I just intend to depart the point of view with which I am thinking about globalization as a youth of the nation.

With the data collected by the micro study of the Rabha tribe undergoing transition, this paper has highlighted all the factors responsible for the changes occurring at more than one level and globalization as a clear and prime factor really can't be observed.

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