

## **Some aspects of livelihood pattern of Rabha Community in the Northern Part of West Bengal, India**

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### **ABSTRACT**

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living (Chambers and Conway, 1991). It is a matter of continuous change irrespective to all spaces and time frames. The Rabhas, as the indigenous tribes of West Bengal, are mostly occupied in North Eastern part of India, belong to the Indo Mongoloid group of people (Mitra, 1953). The livelihood patterns of the Rabhas are going into processes of change due to various internal and external forces. They become forest dwellers to the settled urban life. The change of natural settings and the economic environment along with the influence of culture of the other groups of the people especially in *Rajbangshi*'s and their social, economic and cultural lives are transforming in a typical way. The present paper examines those changes focusing on the complex realities of their present livelihood pattern considering these all contexts.

Key Words : Rabha community, Concept, Livelihood, Socio-cultural life

### **INTRODUCTION**

Conceptually 'livelihood' connotes the means activities, entitlements and assets, by which people make a living attempt to meet their various consumption and economic necessities, cope with uncertainties and respond to new opportunities (De Haan and Zoomers, 2003). Rabha is a scheduled Tribe community of Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura and West Bengal. The Rabhas are the indigenous tribal group of West Bengal, inhabiting in mainly Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Cooch Behar districts. The Rabhas refer to themselves as Koch and assert a connection to the historical Koch kingdom (Karlsson, 2000). In West Bengal, Geographically the Rabhas are divided into two groups, one inhabiting in the forest and hilly areas and the other residing in the plain land areas. Most of the forest dwellers Rabhas are practicing in their traditional livelihoods like forest product gathering, jhum cultivation, hunting, fishing and others age old activities. But most of the plain lands Rabhas are engage in modern agriculture and horticulture system, marketing, livestock and some white color jobs. Now the Rabhas have to come in close with other communities like Bangali and Ranjansis and naturally some change have taken place in their socio-economic life.

#### **About the study area :**

West Bengal is a state in India. West Bengal is the fourth most populous state in India. West

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Bengal (88,752 km<sup>2</sup>) is the only Indian state that extends from the Himalayan Mountain in the North to the Bay of Bengal in the South. The geographical location of the state is 27°13'15" to 21°25'24" north latitude and 85°48'20" to 89°53'04" east longitude. Most of the Rabha tribes are inhabited in Northern part of West Bengal popularly known as North Bengal specifically in the Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Cooch Behar districts. The North Bengal geographically lies between 29°40'20" to 27°13' north latitude and 87°45' to 89°53' East longitude. North Bengal is also characterized by higher portion of Scheduled Tribe population. Khuklung Basti and Gosaihat Banachaya of Dhupguri Police station, Murty, Gorumara Forest adjoining areas etc. are the Rabha villages in Jalpaiguri district. Haripur, Nagurhati, Talliguri, Rosikbill, Chengtimari, Bharia, Bansraja etc are the highly settled Rabha villages in Cooch Behar district. Dakshin and Madhya Kamakhyaguri, Uttar and Dakshin Mendabari, Nararkhali, Radhanagar, Hemguri (East Salbari), Kumargram and Nimti are the major Rabha villages in Alipurduar District.

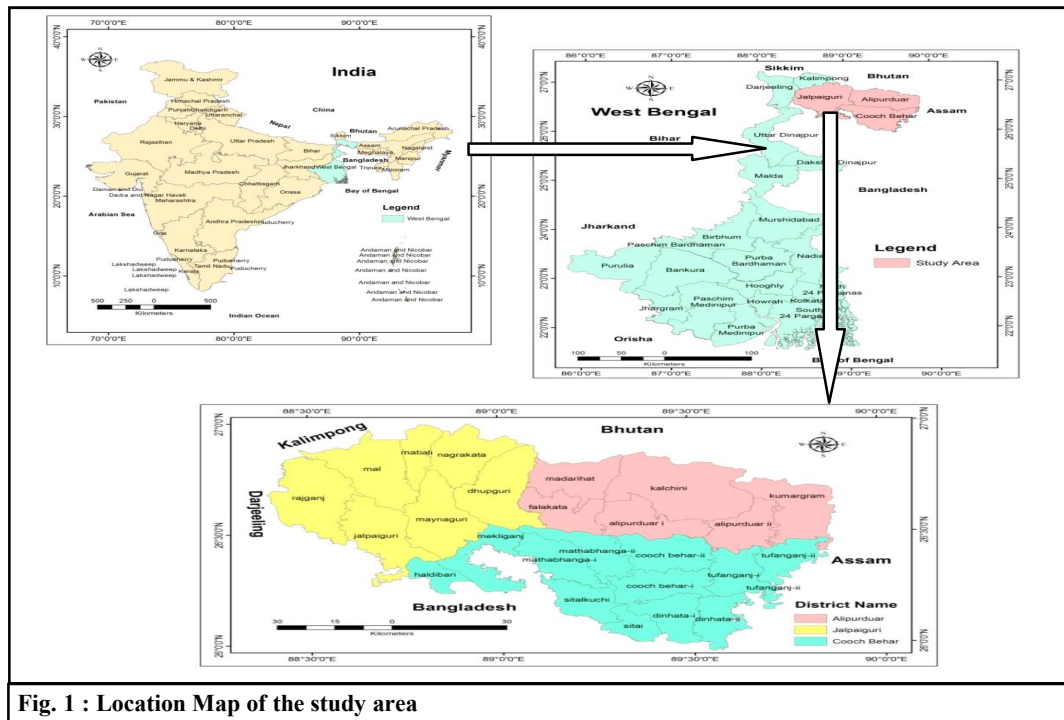


Fig. 1 : Location Map of the study area

## Literature Review:

Sidney Endle's (1910) in his book 'The Kacharis' describe the ethnographies remarks, on the Rabhas as in integral part of the Kacharis. He also discusses the traditional livelihood life of the Rabhas. Ramaiah (1981), in his book, "Tribal Economy of India (A case study of Koyas of Andhra Pradesh)" studies the economy of the Koyas tribe of Warangal district of Andhra Pradesh. He has shown the tribal economy in the district was dominant on pre agricultural based. But now some tribes involved in modern activities Bardoloi *et al.* (1987) edited the book 'Tribes of Assam part-I' which provides briefly description of the tradition, culture, livelihood pattern and socio-religious outlook of the Rabhas. Mathew Aertthayil (2008), analyses the means of livelihood is vital and basic for any people, especially the marginalized who often need to struggle to live and survive. Sen (2011), in his article 'Separation in North Bengal: Adding to Tribal Woes' studies the tribal economy

with special reference to land alienation. Dhanjoy Narzary (2014) in his article 'An Approach to Traditional Cultural of Rabha' shows that agriculture is the main way of livelihood adopted by the Rabhas. He has discussed the Rabhas are also engage in fishing, forestry, and mining and quarrying. He has also discusses the habitation, dress and ornaments, food and drink, rituals and religious and festivals of the traditional Rabha cultures. Manadev Roy (2016) in his article "A Historical Outline of the Rabhas of North Bengal" briefly discussed the original identity and the traditional livelihood condition of the Rabhas.

### **Objectives of the study :**

The major objectives of the studies are:

- To understand the traditional livelihood patterns and how it changes over time of the Rabha communities.
- To find out the relation between the changing patterns of occupation and socio-cultural life style of the Rabhas.

### **Source of data collection :**

Data are the important asset for any type of study and for policy formulation. The study is based on both primary and secondary data sources.

#### **Primary data collection:**

**Observation:** Both the participant and non-participant observation method was used for the collection of data. The different sources of livelihoods, cropping patterns, crop production, use of fertilizers and other forms of agricultural practices were carefully observed.

**Interview:** Structured and semi-structured interviews were conducted with the villagers, *Mondal* (Head) of the village, village shop's owners and interaction to village school's teachers. The villagers were interviewed to understand their changing sources of livelihoods. Special emphasis was given to include agricultural labors, landless people and women.

#### **Secondary data collection:**

The secondary data were gathered from books, articles, journals, published reports like census report, Report on Comparative Backwardness of North Bengal Region and others. Quantitative information with regards to land holding, demographic aspects, cropping pattern and irrigation system were also collected from village Panchayat office and District Statistical Handbook on Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts. The sources also provide a picture of livelihoods and their management system.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The present study is based on the intensive fieldwork conducted in Alipurduar, Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri District in West Bengal during the year 2017. Before the commencement of fieldwork, a pilot study was conducted in the study areas. Stratified Random Sampling was concerned with the selection of a sub set of individuals from the population to estimate characteristics of the whole population and around 150 samples were selected for this study. Various tools and techniques have been applied to collect the data such as interview, observation, village profile Schedule, household survey have also been applied. The location map was prepared by the use of ARC GIS software. The entire study is based on intensive field with a pre-structured interview scheduled were used for

data collection in the present study (source: Research Methodology: R.C. Kothari and Gaurav Garg).

#### About the community :

The Rabhas belong to the Mongoloid group of people have similarities with the other members of Bodo group such as Garo, Kachari, Mech, Koch and others. Playfair (1909) believes that most of the tribes belonging to Bodo group such as the Kacharis, the Garos, the Rabhas and the Koches migrated from Tibetan regions. According to him, the migration took place from that region to Brahmaputra valley and thence to the hills of Assam in the remote past. He further states that after migration from Tibetan region they occupied the Garo Hills and then they came to the plains. His book 'The Garos' maintains that the name 'Rabhas' or 'Rava', in Garo language its means 'called back' or 'recalled'. Hushing the king of Garos was called or invited back the Rabhas to teach the art of cultivation in the Garo hills (Playfair A., 1909, The Garos). The Rabha tribe comprises of the socio cultural groups like *Pati*, *Rangdani*, *Maitori*, *Titla*, *Bitlia*, *Daharia* and *Kocha*. They are distributed in Assam, Meghalaya and some parts of West Bengal.

#### Socio-cultural aspects :

**Food Habit of the Rabhas:** The staple food of the Rabhas is rice (Mar) and it is taken along with cooked vegetables, fish, meat and others. They are basically non-vegetarian. Fish and meat are prepared in different ways such as curry, fry, boiled and baked. Occasionally they take fried rice (*Mudi*), chapped rice (*Chida*). During socio-religious festivals the Rabhas are prepared in many dishes such as meat of pig, fowl, goat etc. The local rice beer (Chocko) is a part of their food. Traditionally they take their meals twice a day one in the noon and other in the evening. But now they are gradually change their food habits from the other communities and they take three meals in a day. According to their language breakfast is called '*Main-fani-sarni*'; lunch is called '*Rasan dupur*' and dinner is called '*Gasam sani*'. Some of the traditional dishes of the Rabhas are as given below:

**Phakay:** A type of food prepared by the powdering rice in a bamboo tube.

**Dzaokay (Jaokai):** Fried food prepared using mustard oil.

**Phiokehak (Fakchak):** The food prepared in a bamboo tube edible leaves.

**Bikai:** This type of food is baked with the help banana leaf.

#### Dress and ornaments:

The traditional dress of the Rabha is a part and parcel of their material culture and deserves special mention. The Rabhas love to use colorful dresses. Among the Rabhas clothing's varies from their economic conditions, social and political status and seasonal variation also seen. During summer, the male Rabhas wear a *Dhuti* in the lower part and shirt or *chadar* in the upper part. The female members of the Rabhas are wearing only *Sari* but occasionally they use *boluse* and *saya* along with *Sari*. In winter, they also wear coat, sweater etc. Little boys and girls' put on half pant sometimes the boy's only loin-cloth and the girl's short sari. But educated and Rich Rabha women wear Sari, Salowar, skirt, tops, Jeans etc. and the males are wear to Jeans, shirt and T-shirt in the same way as local Bangali peoples. Footwear is almost absent among the Rabhas excepting in few advanced people. Following are the some of the traditional dresses and ornaments of the Rabhas:

| Table 1 : Some traditional dresses and ornaments |  |
|--|--|
| Dress  | Ornaments  |
| Ryphan : Lungi/ Skirt                            | Nambri: An ear ring of gold/ silve ;               |
| Kambung/ Kambang : Scarf (like Bihu gamcha)      | Nakpoti: A nose ring made of silver;               |
| Pajar : Gamcha cloth used by men                 | Sandap Bokok : A bracelet made of gold or silver ; |
| Khopon : Turban used by men                      | Kata Baju : An armlet silver.                      |
| Khodabang : Cloth used by women on head.         | Hans or Hasa: A necklace made of solid silver;     |

(Source: Das, D.M.1960)

### Religion:

The Rabhas have some conventional religious belief and practices. The religious life of the Rabhas also concludes the basic animistic concepts and faith of other Mongoloid groups. The supreme God of the Rabhas is called Rishi that is also considered as just another name of *Mahakal* or *Siva*. *Kali*, *Shib*, *Kamaksha*, *Narayan*, *Sitala*, *Gangadevi* etc are the most important deities. Besides there are some other deities and spirits are *Biswakarma*, *Masan*, *Bura Thakur*, *Muria*, *Bishahari*, *Gabur* etc (Raha, M.K 1963). The present day Rabha religion may be characterized as a mixed type of Hinduism and Animism. During the early Forties of this state a strong movement for the *Hindunization* took place among the Rabhas. The main objectives of this religious movement of the Rabhas are to get a place in the Hindu society and to uplift the social position and status of their community people.

### Fairs and festivals:

Like the other tribal communities the Rabhas also have their own festivity. The agricultural based festivals are Baikho, Khoksi and Grawmbuda and religious festivals are Rontak, Hasang, Clangamara, Kalipuja, Dadan Mela and others. The Rabha tribes celebrate all the main festivals of the Indian Territory like Janmasthami, Durgapuja, Diwali, Idd, Independence Day and others. The main festivals of the Rabhas are: The *Baikho festival*, *Langa or Langa Mara*, *Farkhanthi festival*, *Hamjar*, *Hana Ghora* and *Dadon Mela* (Source: Sarma, 1983 and Datta, B.1995).

### Folk song and dance:

The Rabha people celebrate the Joyful events with dance, music and songs accompanied by the musical instruments like Karra, Flute and Singa in all festivals. The people dance in the name of their Goddesses such as Risibai, Baikho, Langa and others. The folk dance is called 'Hanaghora'. On the full moon night of the Bahag (April) the Rabha youths perform a group dance called *Girkay*. In such festivals they like to drink *Jonga* to enjoy the festivals.

### House type:

The houses of the Rabhas are varying in their economic conditions. The Rabhas call their house as Nogou or Ghar. The floor are generally made by beaten earth and plastered with a paste of cow-dung, mud and water. The roof is made of shan grasses attached with a bamboo framework. Each house is generally provided with a door (Nogdur or Duar). No decorations are found on the interior or exterior surface of the walls. A typical house consist of a bed-room (Mojia, Akhni Nogou or Thakaaghar), one kitchen (Radom Nogou or pakherghor), One cattle shed ( Moshugul or Goalghor), one goat shed ( Tarum khopra or Chagalkhopra) and place of worship ( Bai dam Nogou). In recently the other type oh house which are constructed by Government welfare Department for those are quite different

from their own pattern. These are single room, two sloped, rectangular houses, the roof are made by tin and the floor is plastered by cement. Now-a-days some developed Rabhas made their houses to modern types, walls constructed with bricks and plastered with cement and sand.

### **Nature of livelihoods of the Rabhas :**

Earlier time most of the Rabhas depends on forest resources for their livelihoods. Their economy was subsistence in nature. As their forestry has failed to support their families food requirements and they are forced to look at alternative or supplementing livelihoods. Now agriculture is the main way of livelihood adopted by the Rabhas. The majority of communities are mostly based on agriculture as their survival. But mostly they have no sufficient land for agriculture. So many people work in agricultural labor and hunting, fishing, weaving and animal husbandry etc are the secondary occupations of the Rabhas. They make some musical instruments and sell these products in the market. Educated and well to do Rabhas have been engaged themselves in various Government services and some of them have also involved in business. But this percentage is very poor.

### **Agriculture and horticulture:**

Agriculture is their main occupation and paddy is their main crop. Near about seventy per cent people engaged in cultivation and agricultural laborers. Their primal agricultural system was called 'Tanjia' or 'Hamjar' that was a type of 'Jhum' cultivation. Gradually they become permanent cultivators from shifting stage. Three types land are generally recognized. This classification is done on the basis of the position and fertility of the land. The uppermost stratum or high land, the least fertile one is called *Danga*. The lower most, the most fertile one is called *Dobha* or *Dola*. The land between *Danga* and *Dola*, the intermediate type is *Debri*. The *Debri* type of land is considered as the most suitable type of land. They cultivated for varieties of vegetables, some pulses, oil seeds and interior type of jute and others. In recent they produce also some modern crops like hybrid type of Rice, maize, cauliflower, potato, millet, various corns, wheat, vegetables, 'Endi'(silk-worm) and others. Now they are engage in various Horticulture activities to apply some modern technology and chemical manure.

### **Ceremonies concerned with agriculture:**

The Rabhas perform some rituals in connection with different types of agricultural operation and these are done for the protection of crops from the evil spirits, evil eye, insects etc and also for good crops. This cycle of rituals starts with the first plough of the year in the month of vaisakh or Jaistha. This festival is known as *Viswakarma puja*. *Maihana* is the harvest festivals of the Rabhas and is performed just before the harvest of the paddy in the month of *Agrahana*. Like the other tribes, Rabhas also perform new rice festival or '*Mai Pidang Sana*'.

### **Livestock:**

Domestic animals and poultry birds like cattle, goats, pigs, fowls etc helps the Rabha family in their depressed economic condition. Duck, fowl, pig, goat, sheep, cow, buffalo etc are their domestic birds and animals. Not only the production of meat and milk but also the cattle are utilized in agricultural activities such as ploughing, leveling, trampling etc. The Rabhas of these areas in connection with the rearing of animals and birds have been much influenced by the neighboring castes and communities; more especially by the Rajbansi community. But now the established families of the community do not have interest in animal husbandry.

### **Marketing:**

For their day-to-day requirements the Rabha largely depend on the weekly markets which was locally called '*hats*'. These markets help them to sell their agricultural products like jute, paddy, mustard seeds, chilly pulses and others. Market days are also important for them to meet each other and share the news regarding the various events of the village. This has also created a lot of job opportunities for the village youths. Bonchamari, Nagurhati, Talliguri etc in Cooch Behar district and Dhupguri, Gosaihat etc. in Jalpaiguri district are the example of village hats of the tribal dominated areas in this region. State Government made in fishery market in Dakshin Changtamari of Cooch Behar district for the especially in tribal peoples in these areas.

### **Weaving:**

Weaving is one of the most important activity after the agriculture of the Rabha. The Rabha women are expert both spinning and weaving. The techniques of weaving are handed down across generation by generation. Almost every Rabha women has acute artistic sense and they create beautiful designs which reflect their skill, handwork and their patience. Besides the women are good weavers of handloom. Their test of color combination is really beautiful. But now-a-days their handloom products is backdated and costly then the power loom products. So they are becoming less interested in traditional weaving for day by day.

### **Hunting:**

Hunting at once played an important role in Rabha economy. From nomadic stage they hunt deer, wild pig, wild fowl, goat, cow etc. They use '*Fya*' (bow), '*Khapar*' (spear), '*Kaindam*' (stick) in the time of hunting. But now the forest had much been cleared and the hunting and collection of fuel are strictly prohibited. Still now some forest dwelling Rabhas practice ceremonial hunting three to four times in year. One of these hunts is held in the *Chaitra Sankrantis*, known as *Bisamoy*. Another ceremonial hunt takes place on the last day of the month of Pous that is *Til Sankranti* day, which known as *Phafsani*. But now these ceremonial hunts have lost their regularity in occurrence due to strict forest rules.

### **Fishing:**

Fishing is considered by the Rabhas both as a sport also an economic pursuit. Though most of them to catch fish mainly for their own consumption and small portion to sell in the local market. For fishing they use a number of nets and traps and these are: 1) ***Jhaku***- It is a hand operated cage trap made up of bamboo splits. 2) ***Jhoka or polo***: It is cone shaped hand operated trap made of bamboo splits. 3) ***Jalonga***: It is a rectangular basket trap having some internal valves. 4) ***Doksa***: It is a funnel shaped trap made up of bamboo splits.

### **Modern occupation:**

In most of the village's areas Rabhas are gradually change their occupational sector. With the help of modern education they are now able to compete with contemporary society. Now they have the capability to get the Governmental jobs like School teacher, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) workers, MKS teacher, Rural Health Centre employee, Govt. Transport workers, Asha *Kormi* and other official workers. Now they are produce more agricultural production with the application of modern technological device and knowledge. Some educated Rabhas also engage in small business and other tertiary activities. Modern occupation is providing them better access of livelihood and their life style is changing. These factors are also changing their socio economic life

concerned with value system.

### **Processes of socialization :**

The socialization of the Rabhas is governed by traditional social system having certain rites and rituals, social beliefs, practices and customs. Generally human life comes to be made up various stages in birth, marriage, advancement to a higher class, occupational specialization and death. Birth is the crucial transition of the human being all sorts of rites and ceremonies. The Rabhas follows many rules in regard of birth of a baby. The mother is treated as unclean till the date on which the umbilical cord of the baby falls. On the day of purification the mother is to give her baby's name. On completion of all these rituals the neighbors are entertained a grand feast usually by killing the pig. The marriage time the Rabhas follows various types of traditional rituals. Death is the last but great transition of the human life. Various rites are performed relation to death. On death, corpse is kept inside the house. After a period of ceremonial weeping, a little rice beer and water was given to the deceased. This offering was known as Chika Barai. The earlier days burial was conducted now-a-days they prefer cremation. As soon as the death takes place the immediate relatives and neighbors are informed. Ladies immediately bring rice and throw over the dead bodies and in the surroundings. The well-known ceremonies related to death are:

*Farkanthi*: A post-funeral ceremony observed by tying a holy knot for one night (Far).

*Toronga*: It observed by setting up a decorated serpent made of bamboo piece by the Rabhas.

*Hatapak*: Very expensive and ancient post-funeral ceremony observed for a week.

*Masuani Shradha* (Matsya-sparsha): Newly adopted post-funeral ceremony observed offering prawn and other fish to the deceased as well as the public. It is related with caste Hindus 'Matsya -Sparsha'.

### **Adoption of new political system within the traditional life- styles :**

Basically, the Rabhas have their own traditional *Panchayat* system. But after the introduction of modern *Panchayati Raj system* the traditional *Panchayat* system has less important but now they are compromising to each other. Now the activity of new organization is not only confined in political decision making but it has also active participation in social welfare works that means the form of activities has how been changed of both social and political organization. The new political system has become much influential that is breaking their old heritage of tradition system and has expended the various social welfare works. Besides social justice and jurisdiction the committee also deals with marriage, first rice giving ceremonies, funeral ceremonies, household's religious festivals and others. So the Rabha society has fast and rapid change going on their traditional life-styles. The new political organizations are helping the poorer families in the important familial programmers like marriage, death and treatments. Those committees control the village level or local administration and simultaneously with it they are involved in many other religious and social welfare activities. It is to be mentioned that the new political system is influenced by the members of different political parties.

### **Developmental activities :**

Recently many Rabha peoples are in direct contact to other communities like Rajbansis and Hindu Bangalis. So their traditional livelihood pattern has been modified to a greater extent. Tribal Development Community, Modern Panchayati Raj system, modernized education, Communication and administrations are having retained the principle elements and developmental activities of their better ways of life.

- All those organizations are providing the Governmental funds through various schemes for betterment of their livelihood patterns to increase their per capita income and occupational activities.
- To improve their education system Government provides various scholarships.
- The Mid-day Meal Programmed supplies free lunches on working days for children in primary and upper primary schools to reduce the dropout rates in students.
- To construct of roads and bridges in the rural remote areas.
- ICDS centre have been providing child care facilities and to improve the health and nutritional standards of mentally and physically challenged children's and also provide medicines, surgeons and maternity facilities in the Rabha villages for the betterment of their health.

In North Bengal many self Help groups (SHG) are there to improve in socio economic condition of the Tribal people the status of health, livelihood pattern and education have been increased among them.

**Table 2 : Particular of self help groups (SHG) in six districts of Northern West Bengal and total West Bengal**

| Sr. No.           | Name of range    | Total No. of SHG | No. of members | No. of female |
|-------------------|------------------|------------------|----------------|---------------|
| 1.                | Coochbehar       | 6992             | 62509          | 57000         |
| 2.                | Dakshin Dinajpur | 2584             | 23502          | 22542         |
| 3.                | Darjeeling       | 618              |                | 5006          |
| 4.                | Jalpaiguri       | 2378             | 23374          | 22719         |
| 5.                | Malda            | 12341            | 115487         | 101883        |
| 6.                | Uttar Dinajpur   | 8846             | 70126          | 63654         |
| Total West Bengal |                  | 158336           | 1280514        | 1152168       |

Source: Department of Cooperation of West Bengal, India, 2009

#### **Assets (Moveable and immovable) and property rights :**

Tangible properties means ornaments, clothing's, cash, food grains, furniture's and like these and the intangible properties are land properties and houses. Traditionally, daughter inherited both the tangible and intangible properties but this rule has been completely changed. The tribal social structure has amended laws regarding the inheritance of property. According to modified laws, son will be the sole owner of his parent's property but the tangible properties like ornaments, clothing's, handlooms etc of the mother will be inherited by the daughter. This rule is still in practice. If a man has no daughter, the tangible property of his wife will be inherited by his daughter-in-law.

#### **Conclusion :**

The Rabhas of West Bengal are minor in number but they have a rich distinct tradition, language and organizations. They are characterized by social and economically back ward. They are faced many problems like low literacy rate, low sex ratio, low work participation rate, many health problems and others. But now- a- days the Rabha people have come in contact of the Hindu majority; as a result there have been various socio cultural transformations among the other communities. Recently the youth of Rabhas engaged in service and small business. At present their sources of livelihoods are diversified. The villagers are no more depending on forest product gathering and agriculture only. Introduction of various developmental schemes by Government and emergence of small industries in locality have given alternative sources of livelihoods for the villagers. But still now some traditional livelihood patterns and socio-cultural life style are practices in some forest dwelling Rabhas.



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