

Housing Culture and Vernacular Architecture Tradition of the Rabhas: A Brief Study

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Abstract:

House, as an architectural entity and as a place of residence is very important part of human existence. The house and architecture turns to be a key source and generator as well as depository of culture. The residential architectures or the vernacular architectures are designed to meet the general requirements of the people. However, besides accomplishing the practical demands and functions, these architectures bears varied significances. The architectural, social, and cultural significance of these architectures is immense. These architectures are centre of culture, tradition, and social bonding. Hence, the house and housing tradition of a group or ethnic community is important facet of the culture of the group as it can provide important clues and information on beliefs, knowledge, world view, tradition, culture etc. The Rabha, which is an autochthonous tribe of Assam, is remarkable for their rich cultural heritage. The Rabha tribe has seven clans or sub-tribes which possess individual socio-cultural traditions. This paper is an effort to survey the vernacular architecture stock of the Rabha tribe and ethnic architectural traditions and associated culture with special reference to some socio-cultural sub-groups.

Keywords: Rabha, vernacular architecture, housing culture, tradition, youth dormitory

Introduction:

The Rabhas are a distinct Indo- Mongoloid community living in the different part of Assam as well as in Meghalaya, West Bengal, and Bangladesh. The Rabhas ethnically belong to Mongoloid stock while linguistically they belong to the Tibeto Burman sub group of Sino-Tibetan family of languages. The legendary reference prevalent among the Rabha community holds that the Rabhas have migrated from the Tibetan region. The Rabhas are the earliest known inhabitants of Assam, West Bengal, and Meghalaya. The literary reference of the word 'Rabha' first appears in the *Baharistan-I-Ghaybi*, a mid 17th C. history in Persian language written by Ghaybi alias Mirza Nathan (Hakacham, 2010). The Rabhas racially belong to the greater Bodo group of race and L.A. Waddell holds that the Rabha 'is an offshoot of the Kachari tribe who has adopted a thin veneer of Hinduism, but thinner than the Koch' (Waddell, first published-1901, reprinted-1975). According to Hodgson, Rabhas are the people of the greater Bodo community (R. Rabha, 1974) while Dalton holds that "the Rabhas and the Hajongs of Goalpara are branches of the Kachari race who are connected to the Garos" (Dalton, 1973). According to B.C. Allen, "the Rabhas are a section of the Bodo race and appear to be an offshoot of the Garos" (Allen, 1905)

The Rabha is a generic term that refers to a number of socio- cultural and linguistic sub- groups of the community. Rajen Rabha holds that earlier, the Rabhas had no such group or division, and the divisions or clans of the Rabhas originated from the worship of the *Khokshi* or the *Baikho*. The present names of the divisions correspond to the duties assigned to them in the *Khokshi* or the *Baikho* worship. He has mentioned that altogether seven groups or clans viz. *Rongdania*, *Maitoria*, *Dahori*, *Chunga*, or *Chonga*, *Pati*, *Bitalia*, *Konch* (R. Rabha, 1974). However, there are differences of opinion regarding the number of sub groups of the Rabhas and their names among different scholars.

Objective of the Study:

The main objective of this study is to survey the vernacular architecture and associated socio-cultural traditions of the Rabha tribe. The study is undertaken with the prime objective of presenting a discussion on the vernacular architecture of the tribe and collecting the traditions and culture associated with the vernacular architecture. It thus intends to collect the architectural treasure, typologies, their disposition, associated traditions, and culture of the Rabha tribe. Since the Rabha tribe has different clans or sub-tribes, efforts are made for the collection of the housing culture of different clans and highlight their uniqueness.

Methodology:

This study is primarily qualitative in approach and outcome. The study is outcome of the primary data corroborated and supplemented by the secondary data. The primary data are empirical data collected through field studies instrumented through relevant field methods. The primarily field methods of observation and interview were used as scope and opportunity for the other methods were limited. On the other hand, the preliminary of the field study was accomplished through acquaintance to the subject through the study of the different secondary sources. The various forms of secondary sources turned useful in subsequent cross-verification of the data. Similarly, data from the authentic secondary sources were also incorporated in order to make the study more inclusive and authentic.

Literature Review:

There is plenty of literature on the topic of vernacular architecture as well as on the Rabhas. But most of the studies and publications on the Rabhas revolves around the ethnicity and traditional culture of the tribe. Thus the celebrated works like *Rabha Jana Jati* (1974) by Rajen Rabha mostly deals with ethnographic disussion on the tribe. However, he has also included some light on the traditional houses of the Rabhas but which is not as comprehensive as the topic is. Similarly *Focus on the Rabhas: Language, Literature and Culture* (2010) by Upen Rabha Hakacham, the Un-published PhD Thesis *Rabhas: A Sociological Study* by H. K. Goswami, (1984) also have incorporated many valuable resources relating to vernacular architecture as well as on it's associated culture and tradition. However, more comprehensive discussion on the topic was felt since the housing culture or the vernacular architecture of an ethnic group is an important facet of the traditional culture. Moreover, as topic of study, the vernacular architecture is a vast socio-cultural and material entity which demands separate study. Therefore, most of the existing studies and publications find limited scope to devout on vernacular architecture as the topic demands. Therefore, this study endeavours to incorporate the vernacular architecture tradition of different prominent sub groups or clans of the Rabha tribe as well as important cultural traditions associated with the house and architecture.

Customs and Traditions associated with Housing Culture of the Rabha:

○ Procedure of Selection of Plot prevalent among Rabhas:

The selection of plot for construction of house is an important aspect in the housing culture and vernacular architecture as it is prevalent in Assam. The Rabhas selects the plot of their homestead through some traditional practices. H.K. Goswami describes the procedure in detail:

In order to test the suitability of any homestead land, they used to perform some magical rites for which they first provisionally selected a place for the construction of a house. Then, either the head of the family, after consultation with a magic-man or the magic-man himself placed in the evening in each four corners of this plot of land the *durba* (a kind of grass), basil leaves and rice, each equal in number to the total number of members in the family. If all these were intact, this plot of land used to be considered as sacred and suitable for building a house. But if the materials in any of the corners were found disturbed, the site was usually abandoned. This belief is abandoned with the spread of enlightenment. At present, the enlightened

and educated Rabhas are constructing their houses at any place considered to be suitable. (Goswami, 1984, p. 174)

○ **Foundation Ceremony:**

The foundation ceremony is an important aspect of traditional architectural tradition of the ethnic communities of Assam. The Rabhas also ceremonially starts the construction of a house. Thus, an auspicious day is selected (usually Thursday) to plant first post. Usually the northeast corner post is planted first after offering a *sharai* (oblations) near the pit. There wraps a strip of red cloth or a new *gamocha* (traditional towel) and fastens a bamboo bow and arrow at the top end of the post. In an another system, as mentioned by Goswami (1984), sacrifice of a fowl is made in the name of Risi Bai and chants the following mantras:

He svirgini risi, Nango bati soy mane,

Nago ardia, ching jate name tonga mana,

Okobana nake nango arditā,

Jate ching sana mana,

Neme Tonga mana,

Okobana nango arditā, he svirgini risi,

Nango to mangsa rakhaita

(Meaning, O God Risi, we are propitiating you, with the sacrifice of the tender fowl, to get your blessings. Bless us, so that in this new house we can have peace and prosperity. Forgive us, if we have done something wrong to displease you) (ibid).

○ **Houses and Disposition:**

The Rabhas in general show affinity with the non-tribal population in respect to the number of houses in a homestead, house construction technique, disposition and lay out of the houses in a homestead, and materials used in their vernacular architecture. Thus, they construct the houses around a courtyard. The main house, called *barghar*, is constructed towards the north of the courtyard in east-west direction. The other residential house called *batghar* or *batchora*, is constructed to the south of the courtyard, which is also used to accommodate a guest. The other houses are the byre, barn, kitchen, cages for domesticated animals etc.

Rabha (1974) mentions that previously, the families of a same barai used to live together in a place and the houses were constructed parallel in line around a central courtyard of 100 cubit size. Similarly, their byres were constructed in a different place in similar manner. The houses were constructed in east-west direction, measuring 75 cubits in length and 20 cubits in breadth. A veranda was attached to the houses if necessary. The house was partitioned to make different rooms of different name and function. The various rooms are: *soja* (rooms for son and daughter-in-law), *bardam* (fireplace for the married son), *nokchunkkai* (room for the main couple/ parent), *bardam* (fireplace for the main couple), *toklar* (room for mature children), *mai-jhamp* (granary room), *tograb* (room to store wine pitcher), *nok-pimung* (the kitchen), *budabhabai* (altar space/ room for worship), *rontak/ rontuk* (room to store pitchers of rice), *rakhanok* (firewood store), *tonhor* (room for fowl, duck, pigeon), and *dobbka* (room to house pig, goat). The house used to have a vacant room in the middle, where guests were entertained (R. Rabha, 1974, p.19-20). He further mentions that the Rabhas gave up such scheme of house after the attack of Rabha principality 'Rongdan' ruled by King Parsuram by Tashlimakha, the General of Mirza Nathan in the 17th century. During this attack, the houses of the Rabha people were burnt and the people, who fled to the jungles and hills, started temporary settlement and structures for residence, giving up the earlier traditional scheme.

According to Goswami (1984), the Rabha house is divided into different rooms like *nokchung*, *nokpimung*, *moja*, and *tagrang*. The *nokchung* is the biggest room of the house, which is used by the couple as their bedroom while the middle room (*nokpimung*) is the kitchen of the house. The house has another room called *moja*, which is the children's room as well as the guest room. A corridor between the back wall of the house and kitchen (*tagrang*), which serves as a passage between the *moja* and *nokchung*. The house does not have any veranda either in the front or in the rear. The houses sometime possess two fireplaces (*bardam*), which remains burning throughout the day. They construct a separate structure called *guli* at one end of the courtyard that houses the cattle. However, they do not construct a separate structure as granary, rather they store the agricultural products in bamboo made packets called *maidop* and store them on a bamboo platform.

The traditional architecture of the Pati Rabha:

The Pati Rabhas (e.g. of the Dhekiajuli region) construct separate structures of different name and function in a homestead. Thus, they construct a *barghar* to the north of the courtyard that faces the south or eastern cardinal direction. The kitchen possesses two rooms one of which is used for cooking while the other room is used as the bedroom of main couple. To the west or south of the *barghar*, they construct another structure called *marghar*. Another house called *bahira-ghar/ choraghar* is also constructed in the homestead to entertain and accommodate the guests. The granary (*bhakhri*) is constructed to the east of the *barghar*, in same line. The granary is sometimes divided into two parts, or two separate structures are constructed. In one of such structure, they keep *demni* or *duli* (a large bamboo container) to store varieties of rice while in other structure, the rice for daily consumption is stored. The general technique of construction of the house is generally similar across the state which is dependent on the typology and construction materials used in the architecture.

The traditional architecture of the Totla Rabha:

On the other hand, the house of the Totla Rabha is slightly different. Their main house is known as the *barghar*, which is constructed in north-south direction. The main door of this house remains to the east direction. The house possesses two to three rooms. The main couple of the family uses one of the rooms of this house. On the other hand, the rest of the rooms are used as bedroom for the children while guests are entertained in one of these rooms.

The kitchen is constructed to the north of the *barghar* in east-west direction and the door is kept to the south cardinal direction. The kitchen has two rooms, one of which is possesses the hearth, which also possesses an altar in the northeast corner. the other room is used as the dining room.

The affluent people construct two more houses known respectively as *choraghar* and *udong-ghar*. These two houses remain alternately to the eastern side of the *barghar* and to the southern side of the courtyard. Thus, if the *choraghar* is constructed to the eastern side of the *barghar*, then the *udong-ghar* is constructed to the southern side of the courtyard or vice-versa. The *choraghar* is a spacious house comprising of two or more rooms. The other house called *udong-ghar* is an open house without any enclosing walls. The agricultural products are stored here temporarily for few days.

The Totlas construct the barn to the eastern side either in east-west or north-south direction but the door faces the western cardinal direction. The byre is constructed to the southern side which does not have any enclosing walls. The other subsidiary structures such as *dhekishal* (husking peddle shed), *tatshal* (loom shed), *kharighar* (firewood store), cages are constructed to the backside of the house. Earlier, the *dhekishal* was established inside the *barghar* which used to have a fireplace. Generally, an elevated shelf is constructed above the fireplace where different bamboo implements are kept (Rabha R. C., 2009).

The traditional architecture of the Koch Rabha/ Kocha Rabha:

The Koch or Kocha Rabha is another prominent and important socio-cultural group of the Rabha tribe. The clan is remarkable for the cultural heritage and traditional culture. However, in regard to the ethnic or vernacular architecture, there are slight variations from place to place. This variation is noticed in regard to the names of the various compartments of the main house. However, the main house is known by the same name and this is called *barghar*. A short discussion of the vernacular architecture of the clan is provided below:

○ Koch Rabha architecture:

The Koch Rabhas construct a main house called *barghar*, constructed in east-west direction. The house is partitioned into two rooms. The eastern room is called *noo* or *poursi* while the western room is called *nousour* or *jinou*. The owner of the house stay resides in the *noo*, where guests are also entertained. On the other hand, the *nousour* is regarded as very auspicious area and outsiders are not allowed to enter to this area. For the accommodation of the guest, they construct a separate house. On the other hand, there construct separate structures for cattle, pig, goat, fowl and duck, pigeon etc (R. Rabha, 1974).

○ Kocha Rabha architecture:

The Kocha, which is one of the groups of the Rabha, have their characteristic layout of vernacular architecture. They construct a main house in the homestead, known as the *barghar*, which is constructed in east-west direction facing the south. The *barghar* is partitioned into three rooms. The first or the easternmost room is called *nog*, which is the bed room of main couple of the family. The middle room is the *nogsur*, used as the drawing room, where guests are received and entertained. The last room *fankar* is the kitchen, which houses the altar of the traditional deity Rontok in one corner. This room is regarded as a sacred area and so people of other community are not allowed to enter the kitchen. They construct the barn (*maibook*) to the south-east of the *barghar* while the byre (*muchugool*) is constructed to the south-western side of the courtyard. Another room is annexed to the western side of the byre, to keep the firewood and other domesticated animals (Rabha R. C., 2009).

The traditional architecture of the Dahuri Rabha:

The main house of the Dahuri or Dahori Rabha is known as *barghar* or *danger-ghar*. This house is constructed either in east-west or north-south direction and the main door faces the east or southern cardinal direction. The house is consists of number of rooms of different names. The first room of the house is known as the *kamshali* or *xuwanikotha*, where a guest is received. The next room is known as the *moja* or *mojia*, which is used as the bedroom by the principal couple of the house. This room possess a fireplace at one of the corners of the room while there plant a post called *bichikhuta* in the middle of the room, where worship is offered. The next room is called *bhatghar* or *bhitar*, which is internally partitioned at one side. The inner side of the partition is used as the kitchen, where hearth is established while the other half of is used for dining. A person of other community is not allowed to enter the *bhitar* room and one can enter the inner room only after taking bath. It is believed that if a person enters the cooking space without a bath then the 'God of house' (*Grihadevata*) gets offended and in such case, the person suffers from eye problem. Another house called *alga-ghar* is constructed by the Dahuri Rabha in the homestead. It is the second important architecture of the homestead. This house also possesses number of rooms which are used by the children as the bed room. The guests are also accommodated in this house (Rabha R. C., 2009).

Rabha Youth Dormitory: Naksa-Nagou:

The youth dormitory, generally known as *dekachang* (and *gabharuchang*) is an important and integral part of cultural heritage of tribes of Assam and north-east. Like different tribes of the region, the institution of youth dormitory was also prevalent among the Rabhas. However, presently, the institution of youth dormitory

or *deka-chang* is no longer prevalent among the Rabhas of Assam. However, the Rabhas are also scattered in West Bengal and Bangladesh, where they are a major tribal community. And among the Rabhas of West Bengal, there is the reference of the existence of *deka-chang*. The youth dormitory of the Rabha was called 'Naksa-Nagou'. Manadev Roy has mentioned about the institution thus:

The Rabhas have a long-established 'Naksa-Nagou' that is youth dormitory. From ten (10) to marriageable age (18 to 25), the boys have to live in the dormitory where ladies are not allowed to enter. This house is also a training centre for the Rabha boys before getting married. The leader of the house is called 'Taraonaksa' and he is selected or elected by the villagers of the Rabha society. The members of the house also participate or co-operate in social programmes. Even this house is used as guest house and also as a court of justice. Still it is prevailing in the Rabha society of Northern Bengal. (Roy, 2016, p. 652).

The institution of youth dormitory possesses diverse positive virtues and was an important media of transmission of different traditions, skills, and culture. The changing social condition and situations have gradually made the institution out of context leading to discontinuation and elimination of the institution.

Conclusion:

The housing culture of a community is an important aspect of traditional culture. Rabhas, being a major tribe of Assam, is remarkable for the cultural traditions and heritage. However, due to the working of the processes of acculturation and assimilation, many elements and assets of the culture has lost its strength and discontinued thereby. In spite of withstanding with the processes of social changes, many of the Rabha sub-tribes or clans have their individual housing culture and tradition. There is need of more intensive study of the housing culture of the Rabha tribe, which will unearth many more aspects of the traditional culture of the tribe concerned.

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