

Baikho: Ritual Symbolism and Cultural Identity among the Rabhas of Assam

1. Bhaskarjyoti Boro (Corresponding Author)

PhD Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh

2. Dr. G. Kanato Chophy

Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh

Abstract

Tribal culture is deeply embedded in socio-religious beliefs, ritual practices, taboos, and symbolic traditions that collectively shape community life. Festival plays a crucial role in sustaining the intangible cultural heritage of indigenous societies by reinforcing social cohesion, ecological ethics, and collective identity. The Rabhas of Assam celebrate the Baikho festival as their chief socio-religious and pre-agricultural festival embodies a complex system of ritual symbolism. This paper examines the socio-religious dimension, folk narratives, ritual practices, and symbolic meaning associated with the Baikho festival. Using an interpretive and symbolic anthropological framework, the study highlights how Baikho serves as a vital cultural institution that sustains Rabha identity, social organization, and continuity in the context of cultural change.

Keywords: Festival, Identity, Religion, Symbol

Introduction

A festival is an occasion, generally social, wherein the members come out from their day-to-day life and take part in collective action (Singh, 2022). In this sense, festivals are always a key to preserving the intangible cultural heritage of an indigenous society (Ghosh et al, 2024). As a result, festivals are a significant part of human culture, as they are primarily observed for agricultural prosperity, religious purposes, social harmony, to honour great personalities or kings, and to mark new cycles of life. Each festival, with its unique theme, carries symbolic meanings related to social harmony and prosperity. The festivals celebrated by tribal

communities during different seasons provide insight into their cultures as a whole. According to Michailov (2025), “a festival is a context for a certain moment in which the atrical art finds itself. It is also a propellant for artistic interventions in what could become emblematic for certain artistic searches and experiences. A festival builds its moment and projects its experimental moments, thus also opening a horizon of artistic research through the creation of the immediate.” Festival plays a significant role in society, impacting economic development, tourism, urban transformation, and identity construction (Mutoni Uwase, 2025). Traditional tribal festivals express ancient beliefs, and connections with nature. They often highlight themes of original history, bravery, victory, and the worship or sacrifice to deities.

The ethnographic inquiries provide in-depth information on any cultural phenomena from its insight (Boro, 2024:54). The Baikho festival of the Rabhas in Assam, which illustrates the various socio-cultural meanings through its diverse practices. While the festival primarily linked to agriculture, it also holds significant socio-religious importance. The Baikho festival occurs in May and June (during the Assamese month of *Jeth-Ahar*) on the day of the full moon, taking into account the convenience of the community members. During this festival, the Rabhas pay homage to their chief goddess, Khoksi, and other deities. This article aims to explore the significance of the Baikho festival by examining its cultural symbolism, associated meanings, and its importance in reinforcing community identity.

The Rabhas: Cultural and Social Background

The Rabhas are an Indo-Mongoloid ethnic group with ancestral roots linked to migration from the Tibetan plateau. They are recognized as one of the scheduled tribes under the Indian Constitution, are primarily located in Assam. They predominantly inhabit the districts of Goalpara, Darrang, Kamrup, Baksa, Udalguri, and Kokrajhar. Within the Rabha community, there are several sub-groups, each residing in different areas with their own cultures and traditions. These sub-groups include the Pati, Rangdani, Maituri, Dahuri, Bitlia, Hana, Koch, Sunga, and Totla Rabha. While the Rangdani, Maituri, and Koch sub-groups have been influenced by Hindu religious culture, they have managed to preserve many ancestral beliefs and cultural practices to a considerable extent. The Pati and other sub-groups have largely blended their socio-cultural and linguistic aspects with Assamese Hindu culture. Rajen Rabha one of the Rabha litterateur opines,

"...a large group of Rabha people in their bid to reform their traditional socio-religious life under the influence of Hinduism, have separated themselves from their traditional society. 'Pati' means separation from the other groups and thus this group came to be distinguished as 'Pati Rabha' (Rabha, 2002:25)."

Prof. Bhuban Mohan Das identified nine Rabha subgroups. These are Rangdania, Maituria, Dahuri, Pati, Hana, Bitaliya, Kocha, Haloa and Modahi. Besides the above-mentioned sub-tribe, Sungas are distinct from the original legends of the Rabhas. Basumatary in the book *"The Rabha Tribe of North East India Bengal and Bangladesh"* highlights the cultural and linguistic features of the Rabhas. Basumatary mentions,

"There are eight sub-branches of the Rabhas. Among them, Maitori, Rangdani, and Koch or Kocha are the major sub-divisions of the Rabhas. They have been maintaining their language and culture. But other sub-branches have lost their native language. It is interesting to note that the three major dialect groups show certain linguistic variations concerning phonology, lexical set of words, and morphology to some extent. But cultural divergences are not found evidently among these dialect groups (Basumatary, 2010:8)."

The original history of the Rabhas is limited to be found in written form. But their original history and legends are prevalent orally among them in different forms like folk songs, folk tales, myths, legend and folk beliefs. As an animistic tribal group they not only believe in the existence of soul, spirit, and ghost but they worship the different elements of nature for different purposes. For each activity, they worship the related natural element as the responsible deities. Other than the chief deity Khoksi or Baikho, the Rabhas worship many deities like Daduri, Sisurani, Bahuboli, Champai, Tamai, Nakkati, Rongbudhi, Kancho, Tobarani, Khusuri, Sagsari, Marukhetri, Sipu darmang, Hasung, Baijuri, Fedar, Manigram-Monigram, Rakshi, Perasu, Kaeoti, Naeoti, Bindu thakur, Pindu thakur, Ghai rongdan, Sangkhati, Jalkuari, Sikabudi, Tura, Nandarishi, Kandarishi etc. Siva Darmang or Sipu Darmang is one of the chief Gods of the Rabhas. The Rabhas worship their king Dodan and the ancestral hero.

Linguistically Rabhas are Sino Tibetan family. In some phonology, they are almost similar to their cognates like Boro (Boro-kachari), Garo, and Tiwas of Assam. Though Rabhas speak their native language a few Rabha sub-group developed patois of Assamese and a few are in bilingual position. Koch in a linguistic study on Rabha dialects mentions,

"Rabha is a linguistic offshoot of Sino-Tibetan family of language, and it has three principle dialect groups, viz. Rangdani, Maitory, and Koch. The rest of the group, viz. Pati, Dahuri, Bitalia, and Hana have given up their dialects, due to the acculturation process in the medieval period in the Brahmaputra valley, and now they speak the patois of Assamese (Koch, 2014:1-2)."

Methodology

The study is based on ethnographic investigation conducted among the Rabha community in the Goalpara district of Assam, with fieldwork carried out during the Baikho festival. Primary data were collected using standard anthropological field methods and techniques, including observation, quasi-participant observation, and semi structured and in-depth interviews. In-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted with elderly community members, ritual specialists, and the village priest, who served as key informants and provided insights into ritual sequences, symbolic meanings and oral traditions. Informants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation across age groups and ritual role. The data were analysed using an interpretive and symbolic anthropological approach, treating rituals and narratives as culturally embedded texts informed by the theoretical perspective of Geertz, Turner and Schneider. Secondary information related to this article was gathered from books and journals.

Folk Narrative of Baikho and the Emergence of Rabha Sub-groups

The term Baikho originates from the local language, combining 'Ba' (chief) and 'Kho' (deity) symbolising the convergence of social hierarchy and sacred belief. Local folklore narrates that long ago, two sisters named Thopae and Neshae lived with their parents in Dobangkona village, near the Shillongatak hillock. One day, while collecting firewood, they came upon a fish lying mysteriously beside a forest well. Neshae wrapped the fish in a leaf and took it home. However, when her blind father touched it, the fish had become a stone. Believing it to be extraordinary, he instructed them to place it in the storehouse. The next day, when Neshae opened the storehouse, she beheld a radiant young woman seated inside. When she called her family, the figure vanished, leaving only the stone. Recognizing this as a manifestation of divine power, the family began worshipping the stone, and soon their lives were filled with abundance and well being. As news spread, the villagers too accepted the stone as a sacred and began worshipping it in the forest, where it remains revered to this day.

According to another narrative, a young girl once brought a smooth stone from a nearby stream and placed it in a *khok* (bamboo basket) beside the *mai-jham* (granary). That night, she dreamt of a radiant light emerging from the stone and entering the granary. The following morning, when the basket was examined, the stone was no longer there; instead, traces of blood were perceived. Upon entering the *mai-jham*, the stone was discovered resting quietly in one corner. Interpreting this event as a manifestation of divine presence, the community began to worship the stone as Baikho, the chief deity. Since the deity was believed to have appeared through the *khok* and was associated with the sudden perception of blood it came to be known as Khoksi.

Belief in deities and various ritualistic traditions are deeply embedded in the social system and serve to maintain social solidarity (Boro, 2025). Today, Baikho religious worship has emerged as the chief festival of the Rabha community. The traditional Baikho festival serves as a vital cultural lens through which the historical trajectories of the diverse Rabha sub-groups can be meaningfully understood.

Since ancient times, the Rabha have worshipped the Baikho deity as the guardian of communal well being and agricultural prosperity. In the early phase of Rabha society, internal sub-groups were absent; however diversification of ritual roles and activities associated with Baikho worship gradually contributed to the emergence of distinct sub-groups, enabling the collective and effective veneration of their chief deity.

Rangdani Rabha constitutes one of the prominent sub-groups of the Rabha community. According to folk narrative, during Baikho worship a section of Rabha society was entrusted with collecting stones from the foothills to be used as seating for ritual purpose. In the indigenous Rabha language, 'Rangka' denotes stone and 'dani' signifies donor from which Rangdani Rabha sub-group derives its name. The Maituri are designated groups within the Rabha society responsible for cooking rice and distributing it during communal meals. The term "Maituri" literally means "distributor of rice," derived from "Mai," meaning rice, and "torai," meaning distribution. The "Pati" appears to have acquired its name from its customary role in gathering leaves for collective consumption during the Baikho festival. In the local language, "Pat" means leaves, leading many researchers to conclude that the term "Pati" originates from this function. Another sub-group, known as the Dahuri, was assigned the responsibility of protecting food during communal meals by keeping away wild animals such as birds and dogs. Using long sticks for this purpose, and since 'dahuri' in the native

language denote a stick, the group came to be identified as the Dahuri Rabha. The Bitlia Rabhas are the groups known for providing entertainment through humour or other methods during communal rituals and ceremonies. They are skilled entertainers. It is believed that the Sunga are those within the Rabha society who provided bamboo shoots for making drinks, such as water or rice beer, during the Baikho worship, marriages, and funeral ceremonies. In ancient times, during Baikho worship, a group was responsible for cutting chickens for communal meals. In the Rabha language, "Tao" means chicken and "tan" means cutting. This led to the evolution of the term "Totana," which later transformed into "Totna," "Totola," and eventually "Totla."

Among the Rabhas, the Hana Rabhas reflect both functional and performative dimension of their culture. Traditionally responsible for the slaughter of pigs during communal feasts, the term 'Hana' is often linked to acts of inflicting harm. Oral legends further associated the group with horse-centred ritual dances performed during festivals, a legacy that survives in the *Hana Ghora* dance. This practice exhibits regional variation, with white *hana ghora* horse prevalent in South Kamrup and black *jari ghora* horses used in the Goalpara district.

The legend of the Koch Rabhas differs slightly from that of other subgroups. The ancestors of the Koch Rabhas were referred to as Kocche, and it is believed that the Kocche family was brought from a heavenly place or Tibet by a Rishi deity, whom the Rabhas regard as one of their chief gods. The Koch Rabhas have preserved their ancestral language and culture.

The Symbolic Significance of the Baikho Festival

The Baikho festival of the Rabhas holds significant symbolic meanings related to religious life, health, social unity, love, and agricultural prosperity. It is one of the chief festivals celebrated by the Rabhas, occurring in May or June on the day of the full moon. However, if a community member has recently passed away or a new baby is born, it is deemed impure to celebrate at that time, and the festival may be observed on a different day to accommodate the comfort of community members.

During the Baikho festival, the Rabhas worship their chief goddess, Baikho or Khoksi, along with other deities. The festivities are held in the jungle and near the riverbank close to the village. Baikho worship symbolizes the harmonious relationship between humans

and nature. The Rabhas revere natural elements such as air, water, fire, earth, and others, considering them incarnations of God. Life is formed from these natural elements, and after death, a person returns to nature. Thus, on the day of Baikho, the Rabhas simultaneously seek blessings from other deities for agricultural fertility, prosperity, and a healthy life.

The rituals of Baikho involve a priest and his assistant, who adhere strictly to ritualistic rules to please their supreme deity. The priest and those assisting him collectively referred to as "Baibra" perform dances on fire ash at the sacred site. One week prior to the Baikho worship, the selected "Baibra" are restricted from going outside, sitting on chairs, or sleeping near women, as a test of their dedication and patience for success. Sacrifice plays a significant role in the Baikho rituals, with pigs, chickens, and goats being offered to the deities. It is believed that through these offerings, they satisfy their chief deities and pray for agricultural prosperity, social well-being, and good health.

On the first day of Baikho, a group of villagers starts from the priest's household, visiting each home playing traditional musical instruments such as *dhal*, *daidi*, *brangsi*, and *khutital*. They sing "*huimaru*" songs, which recount the stories of their king Dodan, minister Marukhetri, and the ancestral figures. These songs preserve the glorious history of their kings and administration, fostering a sense of unity within the community.

In the Baikho worship a significant part is Khoksi dance. Khoksi dance is performed by the priest and the *baibra* on the burned fire ash. It is believed that if someone is injured while dancing on fire ash, it signifies misfortune for the community, as it is thought that the individual made a mistake during the worship.

A significant dimension of the Baikho festival lies in its role as a socially sanctioned space for young men and women to seek and choose their life partners. In this sense, Baikho transcends its religious character to emerge as a powerful symbol of love, social cohesion, and communal unity. Central to this aspect of the festival is the *Sathar*, performed on the sacred full-moon night, when young boys and girls gather along the Baikho corridor to participate in ritual dances and express mutual affection. As a pre-agricultural festival, Baikho provides a culturally legitimized context for the articulation of youthful emotions and the formation of marital alliances, closely linking fertility, human relationships, and agrarian prosperity. Rabha, in the article "*Sathar Geet aru Nitya*," draws a comparative parallel

between the Baikho festival of the Rabhas and the Assamese Bihu, noting striking similarities between the two. Rabha mentions,

"the Baikho festival of the Rabhas and the Assamese Bihu has lots of similarities. In the both festival it is believed that when the young boys and girl together dances in the field the agricultural productivity increases (Rabha, 2024:41)."

A Theoretical Interpretation of the Symbolism of the Baikho Festival

The Baikho festival, as documented through ethnographic inquiry, emerges not merely as a seasonal religious observance but as a complex symbolic system through which the Rabha articulate their cosmology, social organization, and collective identity. Geertz's (1973) interpretive approach conceptualizes culture as a 'web of meaning' spun by individual themselves, where ritual and religious practice function as symbolic model of reality. From this perspective, the Baikho festival may be understood as a symbolic system through which the Rabhas articulate their cosmology, ecological ethics, and moral order.

Turner's (1991) theory of ritual process further enriches the analysis of Baikho by emphasizing liminality and *communitas*. Baikho creates a liminal temporal space in which ordinary social structures are temporarily suspended, allowing participants to enter a sacred domain governed by ritual discipline and symbolic action. The restriction imposed on the priest and the Baibra, the collective dancing on fire ash, and the shared sacrificial practices exemplify liminal conditions that facilitate the emergence of *communitas*, a heightened sense of social unity and egalitarian bonding. Through this process, Baikho functions as a mechanism for reinforcing collective identity and renewing social cohesion within the Rabha community.

Schneider (1968) emphasis on culturally constructed meanings rather than biological or functional explanations, offers another critical lens. The emergence of Rabha sub-groups associated with specific ritual roles during Baikho worship illustrates how social differentiation is symbolically produced and maintained. The identities of Rangdani, Maituri, Dahuri, Pati and other sub-groups are not merely occupational but are deeply embedded in ritual symbolism, memory, and collective obligation. These symbolic role transform practical function into enduring markers of cultural identity.

Conclusion

The Baikho festival emerges as a vibrant and compelling embodiment of the rich cultural heritage of the Rabhas of Assam, showcasing the deep-rooted beliefs, traditions, and social dynamics that define this unique community. As an agricultural festival, it weaves a complex tapestry of spiritual reverence and cultural identity that reflects the Rabha people's intimate relationship with nature.

During this festival, the Rabhas engage in a series of elaborate rituals and ceremonies that honour their chief goddess, Khoksi, alongside other deities, creating a palpable sense of communal unity and spiritual fulfilment. Each act of homage whether it be the rhythmic dance, the melodic folk songs, or the sharing of traditional delicacies serves to reinforce social bonds and collective memory, breathing life into narratives that connect the past and present. The vibrant colours of traditional attire, coupled with the sounds of drums and bells, transform the festival grounds into a lively manifestation of cultural pride and identity, inviting both participants and onlookers into a world where tradition meets celebration.

As the Rabhas navigate the challenges of modernization and cultural assimilation, the Baikho festival becomes increasingly crucial in preserving their unique identity and heritage. It stands as a beacon of resilience, reminding the community of their ancestral roots and the values that have sustained them through generations. The festival's enduring relevance highlights the importance of cultural practices in promoting social harmony and fostering a sense of belonging among community members, reinforcing the idea that such traditions are vital to the very essence of Rabha identity.

By exploring its multifaceted socio-religious dimensions, we gain valuable insights into how the Rabhas perceive their connection to the land, the cosmos, and each other. It emphasizes their understanding of life as a holistic journey, where every ritual is steeped in meaning and purpose, resonating with themes of love, unity, and gratitude. In essence, the Baikho festival is not just a celebration; it is a dynamic expression of the community's resilience, continuity, and unwavering spirit. It underscores the fundamental role that cultural heritage plays in shaping the identity of the Rabhas and fosters intergenerational connections that are essential for the transmission of knowledge and values. As researchers and enthusiasts of anthropological study, it is imperative to promote and honour such events, ensuring that the cultural narratives of the Rabha people endure and thrive for future generations. In doing so, a richer and more nuanced understanding of the diverse cultural

landscapes that enrich the world is fostered, celebrating not only the uniqueness of the Rabhas but also the universal themes that bind us all as human beings.



Figure 1: The Baibra taking Choko (traditional rice beer of the Rabhas).



Figure 2: The khoksi dance performed at the fire ash at the Baikho festival.



Figure 3: The Sathar dance performed by the young boys and girls.

References

- Basumatary, P. (2010). *The Rabha Tribe of North East India Bengal and Bangladesh*. New Delhi: Mital Publication.
- Boro, B. (2024). Exploring the Folk Beliefs and Agricultural Practice of the Bodos of Kamrup District, Assam. *Lokaratna*, 17
- Boro, B. (2025). Illness as an Act of the Deity: Perspective from Tribal Religion in India. *Antrocom Journal of Anthropology*, 21 (2), 229-239
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Ghosh, A.; Kisku A. and Chakrabarty, P. (2024). Proposing Tribal Heritage Protection through Ethnotourism: A Study on Disom Sendra Festival of Ajodhya Hills in India. *Journal of Sustainability Research*, 6(2):e240008. <https://doi.org/10.20900/jsr20240008>
- Koch, J. (2014). *Rabha Dialects: A Linguistic Study*. Unpublished Ph.D Thesis. Guwahati: Gauhati University.
- Michailov, M. (2025). The Festival as an Interconnected Network. *Concept*, 30(1), 32-40 <https://doi.org/10.37130/gdr4ek80>

- Mutoni Uwase N. (2025). Understanding the Cultural Significance of Festivals and Celebrations. *Research Invention Journal of Research in Education*, 5(2): 78-83
<https://doi.org/10.59298/RIJRE/2025/527883>
- Rabha, R. (2002). *The Rabhas*. Guwahati: Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language, Art & Culture.
- Rabha, L.C. (2024). Sather Geet aru Nitya. In Chiranjeeb Chakrabartee (ed.) *Manselenka*. Dudhnoi: 25th Dudhnoi Annual Baikho Festival by Dudhnoi Anchalik Rabha Student's Union.
- Schneider, D. (1968). *American Kinship: A Cultural Account*. University of Chicago Press.
- Turner, Victor. (1991). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.