

RABHA ETHNIC COMMUNITY OF NORTH BENGAL: ANALYSIS ON THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

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Abstract: *In-depth study upon any ethnic group of people requires fulfillment of several aspects. A meticulous study on the nature of man-environment relationship is of prime importance. Rabhas are one of the vulnerable tribal community found in the northern districts of West Bengal they have their own culture and tradition. They have their own unique ways of day to day life which has contributed significantly upon their culture and dress pattern as well as their practice of rituals. In order to study about their socio economy and standard of living the paper has been prepared taking varying variables. And the results have revealed a very deplorable living condition of this ethnic community. Under the impact of modernization and cross-cultural mixing certain ostensible changes are also found among this ethnic group in the present day.*

Key word: *Rabha, Socio-economy, modernization*

Introduction

Rabhas are one of the indigenous ethnic tribes belonging to the Indo mongoloid clans and is linguistically related to Sino-Tibetan group. They are often considered to be a part of larger Bodo or Mech community. They are mainly found in the northeastern part of India comprising Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, and Tripura and in the northern part of West Bengal mainly in Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar district to be precise. Some groups of this community also live in the eastern part of Alipurduar district of North Bengal. The Rabhas form a unique and distinct community having their own language cultural life literature and also having rich cultural heritage and traditions. This group is identified as Schedule Tribe. The Rabhas of West Bengal are an indigenous tribe found to have been influenced by different cultural and linguistic communities to a large extent. As a result of adaptation of cultural and linguistic elements from other communities and repudiation of their own identity, some of the clan groups of them have shifted to the Hindu Asomiya caste to a great extent. However, some of them are in the process of mobilization to survive and preserve their inherent culture and language. This part of North Bengal is a multiethnic and multilingual area of West Bengal.

Objectives of the study

The Tribals of West Bengal are in a very slow process of economic and social transformation. Mainly the Rabhas are the most secluded section in the north Bengal region with very limited burgeoning opportunities'. Major objectives of this study can be cited as follows:

- To study the socio-economic status of the Rabha tribe of Kodal Busty.
- To ascertain about their living standards occupational structure and the housing conditions.
- To asses on their living condition and the impact of modernization.

Research Methodology

Methodology of any type of research generally depends on aims and objectives of the study. This can be stated as follows:

A. Pre-field work

- The study area was identified.
- Relevant literature and maps were studied
- Questionnaires were prepared for the questionnaire survey.

B. Field work

- through investigation was done
- Questionnaire survey was conducted on their life and economy structure
- Relevant secondary data from different centers/ office were collected.
- Visual expressions of livelihood of the people seasons were recorded.

C. Post-field work

- After the fieldwork, the primary and the secondary data collected from different offices and generated through questionnaire survey in the field were tabulated.
- Then the analysis of the data was done with the help of various methods by using different statistical techniques.
- The report was prepared on the basis of analysis and interpretation of data and information.

THE RABHAS OF ALIPURDUAR DISTRICT

The concentration of Rabhas in India is mainly confined in the states of Assam and West Bengal. Among them Assam has the highest concentration of Rabhas settled in the forest and the plain land of Golpara, Kamrup etc. In West Bengal we find Rabha's mostly in the northern part covering mostly the area of Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts. Rabhas of Alipurduar district speak their own

language and maintain their own cultural heritage. They are mostly confined in the forest areas of Chilapata. However as a result of modernization and globalization certain changes are found to have occurred in their life and culture, owing to such changes they are facing a problem of identity crisis. Very little amount of systematic study has been conducted so far upon this community.

SOCIO ECONOMIC SCENARIO OF THE RABHAS IN KODAL BUSTY

Kodal busty is located in the Chilapata forest area of Alipurduar district. It is a small almost compact settlement within the forest area often referred to as forest village with almost 300 houses. The nearest market is Hashimara, Hamilton and Kalchini almost 10kms from Kodal Busty. They have a mixed culture within the village with advashi also residing in the village. The rabhas of this village are the focal inhabitant of this village. This area comes under the West Bengal forest department and are under the authority of the forest department. In order to study about their socio economic status the following variables have been selected for the study.

• **HOUSING CONDITION**

Shelter is one of the basic needs of life, in order to scrutinize the status of a people the housing condition is often analyzed. From the survey conducted out of the total 50 houses interviewed in Kodal Busty, it can be seen 92% of the houses were Kuccha and only 8% of the houses were pucca. Pucca out here does not mean a concrete building, they have cemented walls with Tin roof. Kuccha houses are mainly wooden houses some are made of bamboos as well. One interesting thing noticed while doing the survey was that all the houses were built almost eight feet above the ground with a through fare when asked about such housing structure. It was mainly built in order to protect them from the attack of wild animals.

Table 1: Housing condition of the Kodal Busty Rabha People

<i>House type</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Kuccha	46	92%
Pucca	4	8%
Total number of family interviewed	50	100%

Source: Data collected from the field through door to door survey

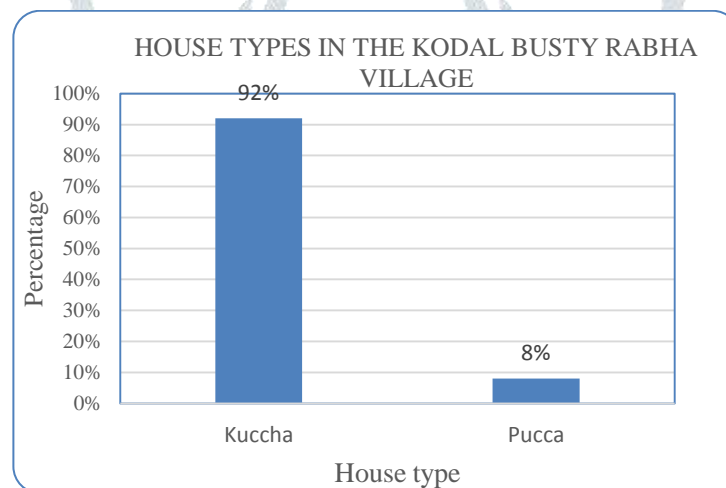


Figure 1: House types of the Rabha people in Kodal Busty

• **STANDARD OF LIVING**

One's standard of living is closely related to the household assets one owns. It determines the quality of life one is living. With the sample survey of fifty households the result procured is as follows. Only the most essential item was selected for the analysis like mobile phone, TV, fridge, cooking gas and rice cooker. Out of the five items selected none of the houses owned all the items.

Table 2: Household gazettes (mobile phone, TV, Fridge, Cooking gas and rice cooker) owned by the Rabha Family of Kodal Busty

<i>No. of gazettes owned</i>	<i>Nos. of Respondents</i>	<i>%</i>
1 Items	14	28
2 Items	15	30
3 Items	18	36
4 Items	3	6
5 Items	0	0
6 Items	0	0
Total No. of families interviewed	50	100

Source: Data collected from the field through door to door survey

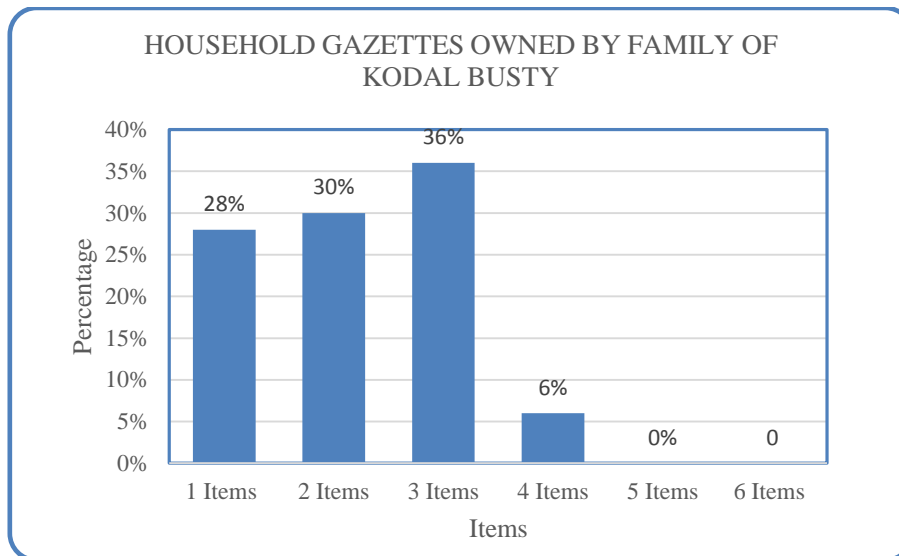


Figure 2: Household gazettes owned by the family of Kodal Busty

From the above table and figure, we can see that maximum of three items is owned by the majority of family (36%). 30% owns three items, 28% owns only one item and 6% owns four items. Thus highlighting on a very deplorable living standard.

• **ECONOMY**

Economy or income of the family is determined by the occupation one is engaged in. Kodal busty Rabha village is a forest village and they are mainly engaged in primary activities like agriculture fishing cattle rearing etc. From the table it can be seen. 38% of the population is engaged in agricultural activity. 28% earn their livelihood through livestock rearing 16% by fishing in the nearby river, 14% are now engaged in the village tourism job and the rest 65 are working outside the village some may be in government sector or private sectors.

Table 3: Table showing the occupational structure of the Rabhas in Kodal busty

Source of income	Kodal busty	Percentage
Agriculture	19	38%
Livestock	13	26%
fishing	8	16%
Village tourism	7	14%
Other source of income	3	6%
Total house surveyed	50	100%

Source: Data generated from the field through door to door survey

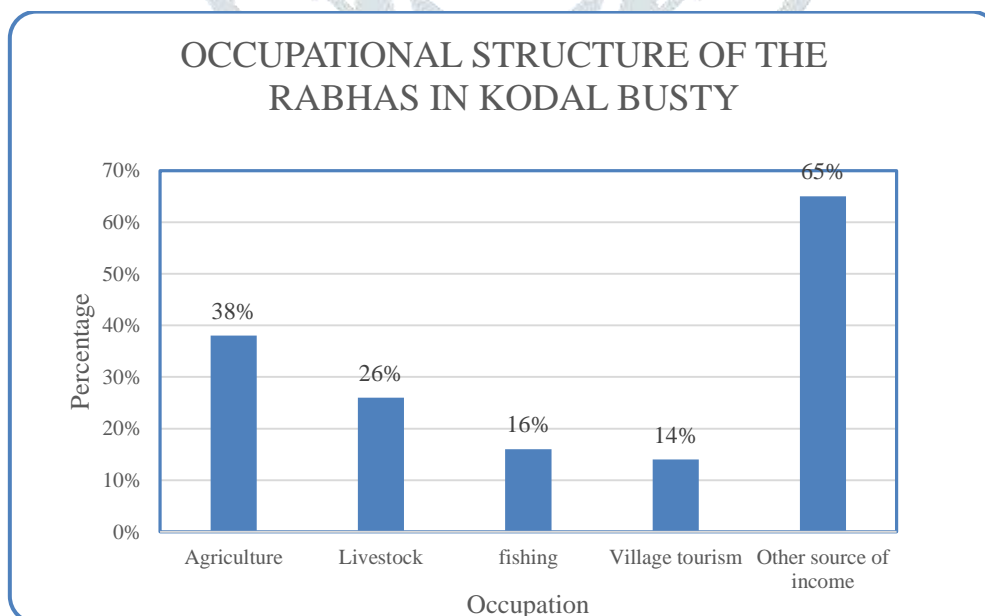


Figure 3 : Occupational Structure of the Rabhas in Kodal Busty

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

From the study conducted it can be seen that Rabhas are a typical forest dweller and belong to the schedule tribe community. The essence of tribalism can be seen within them with their economic structure. As most of them are still engaged in the primary occupation of agriculture, fishing and animal husbandry, highlighting on the fact they are happy and convinced working in the primary sectors. With very low income

and less alternate facility and with abundance of kuccha houses their standard of living is a lamentable. This Rabha village has a multi ethnic characteristics, they are staying in harmony alongside with other caste people in the same village and are slowly adopting their culture and tradition which is a growing matter of concern. With the impact of globalization and modernization the concept of eco-tourism is also becoming popular among the villagers.

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