



SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF THE RABHA COMMUNITY IN WEST BENGAL: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

Known as a Scheduled Tribe in India, the Rabha community is an indigenous population that mostly lives in West Bengal's northern districts, especially Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri. The community, which has historically relied on agriculture and forest-based livelihoods, has been going through major socioeconomic changes brought on by globalization, modernization, and shifting environmental and regulatory conditions. An overview of the Rabha people's current socioeconomic circumstances in West Bengal is given in this research article, which also looks at their social structure, traditional and modern economic activities, level of education and health, and the main obstacles to sustainable development. The essay, which draws from previous research, emphasizes the community's resiliency and vulnerabilities as they deal with shifting circumstances. An indigenous population that mostly lives in West Bengal's northern districts, the Rabha people faces a variety of socioeconomic difficulties. This essay explores their cultural customs, occupational trends, educational attainment, demographic distribution, and the urgent problems affecting their means of subsistence. The report attempts to give a thorough grasp of the current socioeconomic situation in the Rabha community by drawing on previous research and field surveys.

Keywords: Rabha community, West Bengal, Socio-economic conditions, Indigenous tribes, Livelihoods, Education, Health, and Development challenges.

Introduction

Numerous indigenous groups with distinct cultural traditions, social structures, and economic customs may be found in India. A Tibeto-Burman ethnic group, the Rabhas is primarily located in West Bengal's Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, and Cooch Behar districts. Their distinctive linguistic patterns and matrilineal traditions have historically preserved their cultural identity. However, their livelihood patterns and community structure have

undergone major changes as a result of contemporary socioeconomic pressures. One such group with a unique identity based on the Tibeto-Burman language family is the Rabha community, which is primarily located in Assam and West Bengal (Basumatāri, 2010). They are mostly found in the northern regions of West Bengal, particularly in and around forested areas. Because they engage in shifting cultivation and rely on forest products, their lives and means of subsistence have always been closely intertwined with the forest environment (Das & Raha, 1967). However, a number of internal and external forces have caused significant changes in the socioeconomic environment of the Rabha group in West Bengal during the past few decades. In order to give a thorough picture of their current socioeconomic situation and to shed light on their adaption tactics and ongoing difficulties, this article will combine the information that is currently available.

1. Demographic and Cultural Overview

In India, the Rabha people are categorized as a Scheduled Tribe (ST), and their main communities are located in the districts of Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, and portions of Cooch Behar. Their population in West Bengal was 27,820 according to the 2011 Census of India, but underreporting in tribal areas probably makes the true number higher. The Rabhas have historically followed a matrilineal system in which inheritance and ancestry are tracked through the mother's side, especially within the Moitra tribe. The prevailing patriarchal traditions of Christianity and Hinduism are progressively undermining this structure (Sen Chowdhury, 2021).

Oral traditions, festivals (like Baikho Puja), and language are all abundant in Rabha culture. However, linguistic assimilation and the younger generation's preference for Bengali or Hindi are putting the Rabha language, which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family, in risk of extinction (Debbarma & Das, 2020). Clan divides like Maitori, Pardhi, and Rongdani signify different religious customs and historical lineages. The homogeneity of their traditional holidays and rituals is impacted by the fact that some Rongdani and Maitori have converted to Christianity, while others adhere to Hinduism.

2. Educational Status

Although the Rabha tribe's educational attainment shows intergenerational progress, it still falls short of that of the broader population. While younger women and children are exhibiting higher rates of school attendance, Rabha women aged 40 to 70 had illiteracy rates above 82%, according to a household survey carried out in Rabha-dominated communities in the Jalpaiguri district (Sarkar & Rabha, 2021).

Among the obstacles to education are:

- Lack of tribal language instruction, which results in early dropouts because of linguistic disconnect;
- Economic hardship, which forces children to assist with household chores;
- Cultural alienation, where the curriculum does not reflect tribal values; and
- Distance to schools in forest-fringe areas.

A significant portion of the community is still underrepresented in higher education, even with the presence of tribal welfare hostels and scholarship programs (such as pre- and post-matric scholarships). Additionally, there is a gender disparity, with girls leaving school earlier because of early marriage, household duties, and a lack of facilities for menstruation hygiene in schools.

3. Specific Occupational Patterns

The economy of the Rabha people is mostly dependent on subsistence and is focused on:

- **Small-scale agriculture:** Using conventional techniques and little machinery to grow vegetables, paddy, and maize
- **Fishing:** A significant source of revenue for Rabha women, accounting for as much as 30–40% of household income in some places.
- **Handicrafts and Weaving:** Rabha women have historically woven cloth for family use, but there is still unrealized commercial potential.
- **Wage labor:** in construction and tea gardens, especially among landless households

More than half of Rabha households rely on more than one source of income, according to a field study conducted in North Bengal by Roy et al. (2019). However, food security is significantly impacted by landlessness and low land productivity brought on by dispersed holdings, inadequate irrigation, and soil erosion.

Young people, especially men, are moving in greater numbers to urban areas like Delhi, Assam, and Kerala to work as hotel employees, manufacturing workers, and security guards. Traditional family structures are under societal strain as a result of this migration, and reliance on the remittance economy has grown.

4. Livelihood Challenges

- Human-Wildlife Conflict:** Because the villages inhabited by Rabha are near Jaldapara National Park and Buxa Tiger Reserve, they are susceptible to elephant raids. These creatures sometimes hurt or kill people in addition to destroying homes and crops. More than 100 homes in the Alipurduar district sustained damage in 2022 alone (Chakraborty, 2022). Distress is exacerbated by the Forest Department's inadequate and delayed compensation.
- Food Insecurity:** According to a 2025 study, seasonal food insecurity affects around 70% of Rabha families in Jalpaiguri, particularly during the lean season (May to July). Low agricultural productivity, invasions by wild animals, and restricted market access are some of the contributing factors (Chakrabarty, 2025). High rates of underweight children and anemia in mothers are indicated by nutrition indicators.
- Insufficient Access to Welfare Schemes:** Despite the existence of several tribal development programs (such as MGNREGA, the Forest Rights Act, and PDS), effective access is hampered by bureaucratic obstacles, corruption, and a lack of knowledge.
- Climate Vulnerability:** Traditional agriculture is no longer dependable due to shifting rainfall patterns and river flooding in areas like Raidak and Torsa. Climate-resilient farming techniques have not yet been taught to Rabha farmers.

5. Socio-Economic Landscape

The Rabha community's traditional economy was mostly focused on subsistence farming, especially shifting cultivation (jhum) in the past and settled cultivation in the present. Because they provided food, building materials, and medicinal plants, forest resources were essential. Their subsistence methods also included hunting and fishing (Goswamy et al., 2024). Rabha women were the main practitioners of weaving, a traditional craft that supported both cultural expression and domestic requirements (Sen Chowdhury, 2021).

The Rabha community's commercial endeavors have expanded in modern-day West Bengal. Although agriculture still plays a significant role, many Rabha people now work for pay in

both inside and outside of their villages, doing jobs in construction, tea gardens, and other unorganized industries. Although they may still be underrepresented in white-collar positions, an increasing number are also looking for work in the public and private sectors (Sarkar, 2020). In regions with access to rivers and streams, fishing remains a supplemental source of income, especially for women (Chakrabarty, 2019). In order to provide alternate sources of income, several Rabha communities living close to tourist destinations have also begun participating in village tourism.

Economic vulnerability is still a major worry in spite of this diversification. The per capita income of many Rabha families is low (Chakrabarty, 2019). Their traditional livelihoods are impacted by problems such as restricted access to forest resources because of conservation measures, limited ownership of cultivable land, and frequently owning land on "Patta" that limits their rights. Additionally, communities living in flood-prone areas frequently experience property damage and agricultural losses, which exacerbates their economic instability. There are advantages and disadvantages to the shift from a forest-dependent to a more integrated economy, which calls for adjustment to new market dynamics and skill sets.

6. Social Structure and Cultural Transformation

Rabha society in West Bengal has historically been matrilineal, with women occupying important roles in the home and community and actively engaging in social and economic decision-making (Sen Chowdhury, 2021). Additionally, inheritance patterns indicated a preference for the female line. A gradual transition towards a more patrilineal structure has been brought about by modernization and increased interaction with nearby patrilineal communities, especially among Rabhas who reside in settled villages as opposed to those who live in more remote forest areas (Datta, Prakash, & Singharoy, 2022).

Rabha women frequently continue to participate actively in economic activities and make a substantial contribution to household income in spite of this shift. A trend toward moderate family sizes is also occurring in the traditional close-knit family structure, which may be impacted by shifting socioeconomic goals and greater awareness of family planning (IJHSSI, 2020). Through its language, music, dance, and traditional beliefs, the group preserves a rich cultural history (Basumatāri, 2010). But traditional traditions are also being impacted by industrialization and exposure to other cultures, raising questions about identity and cultural preservation.

7. Education and Health Status

The Rabha community has always had low literacy rates and scholastic backwardness. Socioeconomic limitations, limited access to educational resources, and possible language obstacles were some of the factors that contributed to this. Nonetheless, there has been a noticeable improvement in enrollment rates, especially among the younger generation, and a growing understanding of the value of education in recent years (IJHSSI, 2020). Despite traditionally having higher dropout rates among girls for a variety of sociocultural and economic factors, the gender gap in education is gradually closing (Sen Chowdhury & Das, 2024). However, issues like the standard of education, the travel time to schools in isolated places, and the requirement for culturally appropriate teaching resources continue to exist.

In terms of health, research has revealed particular health issues among the Rabha population. For example, studies have shown that the Haemoglobin E (HbE) variant is quite

common and can cause a number of different types of anemia (Bhattacharyya, Basak, & Mukhopadhyay, 2015). This emphasizes the necessity of focused health measures, such as genetic counseling, screening, and easily accessible medical facilities. Many people still struggle to have access to high-quality healthcare, especially those who live in isolated forest settlements. Although there is and is practice of traditional medicine, enhancing the general health infrastructure and incorporating it with contemporary healthcare systems are essential for enhancing community well-being.

8. Development Issues and Challenges

Numerous development obstacles that the Rabha community in West Bengal must overcome add to their socioeconomic disadvantage. Lack of stable land ownership and sufficient land resources for agriculture, their traditional backbone, is one of the key problems. Despite being intended for conservation, restrictions on their access to and use of forest resources frequently affect their livelihoods without offering enough alternatives.

Limited access to markets for their produce and skilled employment possibilities exacerbate economic fragility. Their terrible living conditions are made worse by the effects of climate change and natural disasters like floods. In rural Rabha villages, infrastructure development—such as roads, power, and communication networks—is frequently insufficient, which makes it difficult for them to integrate into the mainstream economy and restricts their access to basic services.

Social issues may arise from the shift from old systems to modern influences, as well as possible marginalization and prejudice. Ensuring fair access to high-quality healthcare and education continues to be a major challenge. Through capacity building and participatory development programs that honor and include their indigenous knowledge and cultural traditions, the community—especially women and young people—needs to be empowered (Amazon S3, 2024). Governmental entities, non-governmental groups, and the community itself must work together to create and implement culturally aware and sustainable development plans in order to address these complex issues.

9. Key areas and strategies to upgrade the status of the Rabha community

Given the socioeconomic circumstances and difficulties that the Rabha community in West Bengal faces, improving their status necessitates a multifaceted strategy that addresses important aspects of their lives. In order to ensure cultural sensitivity and community involvement, strategies should be customized to their unique setting, taking into account the distinctions between Rabhas who live in villages and those who live in forests.

The following are some crucial areas and tactics to improve the Rabha community's standing:

1. Diversification of livelihoods and economic empowerment:

- **Safeguard Resource Access and Land Rights:** Talk about land ownership difficulties, especially for individuals who own land on "Patta." Where practical and allowed by forest legislation, promote sustainable management and access to minor forest products while guaranteeing benefit-sharing arrangements.

- **Encourage Modern Agricultural Practices:** To increase production and climate resilience, promote better farming methods, access to better seeds, irrigation facilities (particularly in flood-prone areas), and understanding of sustainable agriculture.
- **Create Non-Farm Livelihoods:** Offer programs for skill development and vocational training that are suited to market demands, such as driving, handicrafts, tailoring, and fundamental technical skills. Encourage the formation of self-help groups (SHGs) and small businesses for pursuits such as food processing, animal husbandry (poultry, pigs, goats), and services associated with tourism.
- **Strengthen Market Links:** To guarantee fair prices and lessen exploitation by middlemen, make it easier for them to connect to marketplaces for their handicrafts, agricultural products, and other goods. Encourage projects such as tribal cooperatives for collective marketing, making use of already-existing structures such as the West Bengal Tribal Development Co-operative Corporation.
- **Encourage eco-tourism and cultural tourism:** Create eco-friendly travel programs that highlight Rabha customs, culture, and the environment while generating revenue and conserving their legacy. Assure community control and ownership of these projects.
- **Financial Inclusion:** To facilitate saves, investments, and access to capital for livelihoods, increase access to banking services, credit, and financial literacy initiatives.

2. Enhancing Education and Skill Development:

- **Improve School Resources and Infrastructure:** Modernize classrooms, libraries, and learning materials in schools located in Rabha-concentrated areas. Make sure there are enough qualified and driven teachers on staff.
- **Culturally Relevant Curriculum and Bilingual Education:** To make learning more relatable and interesting for pupils, include elements of Rabha history, culture, and language in the curriculum. Encourage bilingual education programs to close the gap between the home language and the medium of teaching, particularly in the early years.
- **Lower Dropout Rates:** Address socioeconomic issues and academic difficulties that contribute to dropouts, especially for girls, by implementing focused interventions including midday meals, scholarships, and counseling services.
- **Enhance Teacher Sensitivity and Training:** Train educators in culturally sensitive teaching methods and how to comprehend the unique requirements and backgrounds of tribal pupils.
- **Encourage Vocational Training and Higher Education:** Provide financial aid and scholarships to Rabha students so they can pursue specialized vocational training and higher education, which may result in greater job prospects.
- **Adult Literacy Programs:** Provide focused literacy instruction to adult Rabha members, particularly women, to enhance their capacity to access opportunities and information and to feel more empowered overall.

3. Enhancing Health and Well-being:

- **Increase Access to Healthcare Facilities:** In or close to Rabha communities, build or renovate primary healthcare facilities and sub-centers, making sure they are properly furnished and manned by medical professionals, particularly female health workers.

- **Attend to Particular Health Issues:** Put in place focused health initiatives to identify and treat common conditions such as the HbE variation and related anemia. To combat malnutrition, offer dietary guidance and assistance.
- **Encourage health education and awareness:** Run culturally relevant health education programs about common illness prevention and management, maternity and child health, sanitation, and cleanliness.
- **Integrate Traditional Healing Practices:** Using the expertise and confidence of the community, investigate responsibly combining traditional Rabha healing techniques with contemporary medical care.
- **Mobile Health Units:** Deploy mobile health units to reach remote Rabha habitations and provide basic healthcare services, diagnosis, and referrals.

4. Strengthening Social Structure and Cultural Preservation:

- **Support Community Institutions:** In order to allow them to participate more actively in local administration and development projects, it is important to acknowledge and fortify traditional Rabha community institutions and leadership structures. Support projects that document, preserve, and promote the Rabha language, music, dance, crafts, and oral traditions in order to foster cultural revitalization and preservation. Create museums or cultural centers.
- **Empower Women and Youth:** Keep encouraging Rabha women to actively participate in family and community decision-making processes. Give young people a voice and chances to develop their leadership skills.
- **Address Social Discrimination:** Put awareness campaigns into place to fight the stigma and social discrimination that the community faces.

5. Improving Infrastructure and Access to Services:

- **Build Basic Infrastructure:** Make investments to upgrade Rabha villages' basic infrastructure, such as all-weather roads, dependable electrical supplies, and clean drinking water.
- **Increase Connectivity:** To close the digital divide and make it easier to access information, education, and business possibilities, increase internet and telecommunications connectivity.
- **Ensure Access to Government Schemes:** Raise awareness of and make it easier for Scheduled Tribes to access a variety of government programs and social welfare initiatives, ensuring that benefits are distributed to the right people without facing administrative obstacles.

6. Ensuring Rights and Entitlements:

- **Rights Awareness:** Inform the populace of their constitutional rights, especially those pertaining to land rights, tribe welfare, and government service accessibility.
- **Legal assistance and Support:** Give community members access to legal assistance and support to help them deal with problems relating to exploitation, land disputes, and other legal difficulties.

- **Participatory Planning:** Assure that members of the Rabha community are meaningfully involved in the formulation and execution of policies and development initiatives that impact their daily life.

The Rabha community's status has to be improved through a consistent, comprehensive, and community-focused strategy that builds on their rich cultural legacy and strengths while addressing their unique vulnerabilities. For long-lasting good change to be achieved, cooperation between government institutions, civil society organizations, and the Rabha community itself is essential.

Conclusion

West Bengal's Rabha community is a thriving indigenous minority that is negotiating the challenges of socioeconomic transformation. They continue to encounter major obstacles in the areas of economic stability, land rights, resource access, healthcare, and cultural identity preservation, despite their persistence and adaptability in diversifying their sources of income and adopting contemporary schooling. Designing successful and fair development initiatives requires an understanding of their distinct socioeconomic landscape, particularly the differences between Rabhas that live in villages and those that live in forests. The precise effects of legislation, the success of ongoing development initiatives, and the community's own viewpoints on sustainable development and cultural continuity should all be the focus of future studies. Ultimately, fostering inclusive growth that respects their rights, traditions, and aspirations is essential for improving the socio-economic conditions of the Rabha community in West Bengal.

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