

A Comparative Analysis of Rabha Society's Socio-Economic Landscape amongst Males and Females: Insights from a Household Survey

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Abstract

This study addresses a critical gap in existing literature on the Rabha people by conducting a comparative analysis between male and female members. Sixty Rabha households were surveyed ensuring an equal distribution of 30 male and 30 female respondents. The data collection process utilized a survey schedule to gather comprehensive information. The survey covered four forest villages namely MelaBasti and Mangolkata in Salbari 1 gram panchayat, located in Banarhat block, and KhuklungBasti and Gossaihat in Jharalagram 2, situated in Dhupguri block of Jalpaiguri District. This study explores socio-economic aspects and reveals differences in employment, education, and traditional practices between males and females emphasizing the need for targeted initiatives to improve opportunities for Rabha women. This study highlights a significant disparity in literacy levels, particularly among illiterate individuals aged 40 to 70, where approximately 82% are females. While males slightly outnumber females (53% to 47%) at the below secondary level, this gap widens at the secondary and higher secondary levels, with males constituting 57% compared to females at 43%, indicating a higher literacy status among male respondents. Interestingly, both male and female respondents in the youngest age group (20 to 30 years) are actively pursuing higher studies, suggesting a potential shift towards improved educational opportunities for younger generations. The study highlights the occupational dynamics within the Rabha community, revealing distinct patterns between male and female respondents. Male participants predominantly engage in farming, Government service and businesses, with minimal involvement in fishing activities, indicating potential cultural and societal influences on occupational choices. A significant portion (33%) of female respondents are homemakers, reflecting the community's emphasis on family and community life.

Keywords: Gender, Literacy, Occupation, Language Proficiency

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Introduction

There are diverse scholarly viewpoints regarding the origins of the indigenous Rabha matrilineal tribe. For example, Buchanon-Hamilton (1820) noted their association with the Pani-Koch “as cited by Mitra (1954: cxxxviii)” (Datta, Prakash, Singharoy, 2022: 721); Dalton (1872: 87), Endle (1911: 83), and others suggest a connection with the Kacharis. Porter (1933: 597) identified the Rabhas as part of the Great Bodo or Mech family. Gait (1892: 232) argued that while the Rabhas belong to the Great Bodo family, their specific affiliation with a single tribe like the Garos or Kacharis is unclear. It is possible that some Kacharis and Garos became Rabhas, akin to others becoming Koches, indicating the Rabhas' distinct tribal identity. Ethnically, the Rabha tribe is classified within the Indo-Tibetan group. They primarily inhabit three states: Assam, West Bengal, and Meghalaya. Das and Raha (1967: 1) characterize the Rabhas as a lesser-known Scheduled Tribe community in West Bengal. Raha (1989: 33) notes that since 1959, the Rabhas of West Bengal have been officially recognized as Scheduled Tribes. In West Bengal, they are concentrated in the districts of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts (52.1 per cent) and after the establishment of the new Alipurduar district, Rabhas in Jalpaiguri now primarily inhabit four forest villages which are Gossaihat, KhuklungBasti, MelaBasti, and Mogalkata (Sarkar, 2020: 9). There are two types of Rabhas based on habitat – forest dweller Rabhas and plain land Rabhas. The Rabha community, once confined to isolated forest villages, has undergone significant changes in recent times. They are now experiencing progress, development, and modernization, leading to increased exposure to the outside world. This exposure has resulted in higher literacy rates and educational achievements among the Rabhas. Their economic activities have diversified beyond traditional occupations like agriculture and forest labour. Additionally, there have been noticeable changes in their traditional cultural practices, including alterations in marriage patterns, traditional dances and music, traditional dress styles, weaving techniques, and inheritance of family property. Overall, these changes reflect the Rabhas' adaptation to a rapidly evolving socio-economic and cultural environment, marking a departure from their previous isolated way of life (Datta, Prakash, Singharoy, 2022: 724).

Importance/ Rationale of the Study: Studying the changes in livelihood patterns among the Rabha tribe is essential for both academic and practical reasons. On an academic level, it adds to the collective knowledge about economic activities, resource utilization, and traditional practices. This information is crucial for policymakers, NGOs, and other organizations aimed at enhancing the well-being of indigenous communities. On a practical level, it plays a vital role in preserving cultural heritage,

addressing social issues, and contributing to the overall well-being of the community. It fosters a holistic understanding of the community's dynamics, emphasizing the importance of cultural preservation amid socio-economic transformations.

Statement of the Research Problem: The specific objectives of this study include assessing the changes in occupational structure, and literacy status as well as gauging the differences in some aspects like occupation, literacy and language proficiency between males and females of the forest dweller Rabha community in Jalpaiguri district. By addressing these objectives, the study aims to understand the challenges and opportunities faced by the Rabha community in the context of evolving social and economic landscapes.

Review of Literature: In a study conducted by Biswas (2004), has delineated numerous shifts occurring within Rabha communities as a result of the materialistic changes brought about by globalization. These changes manifest in alterations to their clothing styles, methods of housing construction and utilization of various consumer goods. Additionally, the author highlighted a notable distinction in language usage among Rabhas residing in different geographical regions. While forest-dwelling Rabhas continue to predominantly use their traditional language "Kocha-Krow," those residing in the plains have largely adopted Bengali as their primary language of communication.

Biswas (2014) in his another study, provided an insight into the dynamics of tradition and transition within the plain land Rabha community through an anthropological lens. The study highlighted the intersection of new occupational engagements and the assimilation of Hindu rituals and customs, which have precipitated significant transformations in the social and cultural fabric of the plain land Rabha people. The author demonstrated the noteworthy, positive impact of the new educational initiatives on the the Rabha community, because parents are now actively involved in ensuring the education of both their sons and daughters. The author also observed substantial transformations in their daily social and cultural practices of the Rabhas. Whether consciously or unconsciously, they are now adopting modern clothing/ dresses and accessories changed their dietary habits and even altering their traditional methods of house construction. The study has also emphasized the impact of evolving occupational choices and the adoption of Hindu religious practices on reshaping various aspects of the social and cultural lives of the plain land Rabha community.

Sarkar and Mistri (2018) looked into the Rabha community's methods of subsistence in the northern region of West Bengal. They outlined a dynamic transition brought about by numerous internal and external causes in the manner of life of the Rabha

people. The research examined changes to the natural environments as well as the socioeconomic and cultural landscape of the Rabha neighbourhood. Mandal and Roy (2013) researched the social movement of the Rabha community. Mech, Hajong, Garos, Kochari, and other members of the Boro group are similar to the Rabhas, who make up the Indo-Mongoloid group. The study highlighted the socioeconomic difficulties that the Rabha people experience, illuminating the specifics of their backwardness and exploring the fundamental reasons that lead to their socioeconomic disadvantage. Research by Garima Baruah highlighted the socioeconomic difficulties that the Rabha group faces. The Rabha people's health, occupational position, annual family income, and level of education all fall short of ideal levels. Despite this, people continue to uphold customs and beliefs. The younger generation of Rabha people exhibits a discernible change, moving away from traditional agricultural pursuits and towards government employment and corporate endeavours. As a result, the sources of livelihood have become more varied. In order to move the Rabha community towards self-sufficiency in the modern period, it is necessary to confront and overcome the socioeconomic backwardness that now exists there. Achieving a more equal social position requires enabling the Rabha people to acknowledge their potential and effectiveness on par with other social groupings. A study conducted by Riti Moktan (2018) revealed that the Rabhas, identified as typical forest dwellers, form part of the scheduled tribe community. Their economic structure reflects a profound tribal essence. The majority of the Rabha community remains entrenched in primary occupations such as agriculture, fishing, and animal husbandry. Interestingly, they derive contentment from their engagement in these primary sectors, despite meagre incomes, limited alternative facilities, and a prevalence of rudimentary housing, contributing to a lamentable standard of living. However, there is a trend of gradually assimilating the culture and traditions of these neighbouring communities, raising concerns about cultural dilution. Additionally, the impact of globalization and modernization is evident in the growing popularity of eco-tourism among the villagers. Moktan and Kasemi (2020) concentrated their study on the socio-cultural development among the Rabha ethnic community in North Bengal. Their research aimed to shed light on the diverse socio-cultural changes that have unfolded within the Rabha tribal community over the years. The findings of the study reveal a somewhat lamentable transformation in terms of their cultural practices. However, in contrast, a pragmatic and favourable consequence is observed in the realm of their socio-economic life, indicating notable developmental progress. This dual perspective emphasized the nuanced nature of changes experienced by the Rabha ethnic community, with socio-economic advancements coexisting alongside cultural challenges. Roy et al. (2018) directed their attention to the Socio-cultural aspects of

Rabha tribes in the Terai-Dooars region of West Bengal, with a specific focus on documenting their traditional knowledge related to fisheries. The study involved a survey to understand the dynamics of Rabha tribal life in fisheries. The findings indicated that, beyond their primary engagement in agriculture, 39 per cent of Rabhas, particularly mid-aged women, are involved in fishing activities in rivers and streams. This study has highlighted the significance of fishing as a secondary or alternative source of livelihood for the Rabha community in the region. Kamal Sarkar (2020) emphasized the socio-economic and cultural transformation of the forest-dwelling Rabha community in Jalpaiguri District, West Bengal, in the 21st century. The Rabha, also known as Rava, represent an indigenous tribal group in the Dooars region of West Bengal, distinguished by their unparalleled socio-cultural characteristics and traditions. Sarkar's exploration reveals that the forest-dwelling Rabha communities have undergone significant socio-cultural and economic transformations, underscoring the dynamic changes occurring within this indigenous group in the contemporary era. Bidisha Bora (2020) has focused on the Development Model in Assamese rural areas, particularly by analysing the Rabha community in Baksa District. This research is an attempt to investigate the Assamese Rabha Tribe's self-sufficient growth model. The Rabha Tribe, a Scheduled Tribe Community, is promoting the idea of living in rural areas instead of moving to cities, and their projects hold great potential for the future. The report highlights the community's initiatives to promote self-sufficiency and create jobs, demonstrating their dedication to sustainable development in their particular setting.

Research Gap and Research Scope: In the context of the literature review on the Rabha people, it is evident that existing studies have primarily focused on various aspects of their livelihood patterns, changing occupational structures, cultural practices, educational scenarios, the status of women, and the overall societal dynamics. However, there appears to be a gap in understanding differences between male and female Rabha individuals across these dimensions. This study seeks to address this gap by undertaking a comparative analysis between male and female members of the Rabha community. By conducting a comparative analysis, the research intends to unveil the intricate nuances that contribute to the experiences of Rabha men and women, thereby facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of their community dynamics. The importance of such a comparative analysis lies in its potential to contribute to the broader discourse on gender equality.

Research Aims and Objectives

- (i) To know the socio-economic conditions of male and female Rabha people of Jalpaiguri district.

- (ii) To study the present occupational structure of male and female Rabha people based on their age in Jalpaiguri district.
- (iii) To study the educational status among male and female Rabha respondents
- (iv) To know the age at first childbirth among female Rabha respondents

Research Methods

The primary study is based on Field Survey and data is collected on a random basis with the help of informants of various aspects and from various age groups. Sixty Rabha households were surveyed (30 of them were male and 30 of them were female) and information was collected from them using a semi-structured survey schedule. Data was collected from four villages, namely MelaBasti and Mangolkata of Salbari 1 gram panchayat in Banarhat block and KhuklungBasti and Gossaihat villages of Jharaltagram 2 in Dhupguri block. An extensive analysis of the socioeconomic characteristics of the Rabha tribe was attempted in this study. The secondary data were gathered from a range of online resources, books, and journals.

Results

The survey schedule has been followed in the collection of the data. Classifying and tabulating the data is now necessary to analyse and interpret it.

Table 1: General Information of the Respondents

General Information	Number of Respondents		General Information	Number of Respondents	
	Male	Female		Male	Female
Age					
20- 50 years	24	25	Number of Languages they Speak		
50 – 60 years	04	02	Two Languages	08	06
Senior Citizens among the respondents (60-70 years of age)	02	03	Three Languages	14	17
Religion					
Christian	24	30	Four Languages	07	06
Hindu	06	00	Five Languages	01	01
Marital Status			Literacy Status		

Married	26	27	Illiterate	02	09
Unmarried	03	01	Primary Level	03	04
	01	01	Upper Primary Level	07	05
Widow/Widower			Secondary	09	07
Divorced	00	01	Higher Secondary	04	03
Type of Family			Graduate	04	02
Nuclear Family	16	15	Post Graduate	01	00
Joint Family	14	15	Occupation of the respondents		
Type of house they live in			Farmers	14	16
Kutch House	02	00	Labour	06	04
Pucca House	10	13	Government Service	04	08
Wodden House	09	05	Others	06	02
Semi Pucca House	09	12			

Source: Field Survey, May-June 2022.

Table 1 provides the distribution of males and females across different age groups. The age of more than 80 per cent of the total respondents were between 20 to 50 years. Among respondents aged 50-60 years, there are six individuals, consisting of four males and two females. In the 60-70 age group, there are five respondents in total, with two males and three females. Hindu religion was practised by only 10 per cent of the respondents. In the early 1940s, a notable religious shift occurred within the Rabha community, marked by a movement towards Hinduism, driven by a desire for integration into Hindu society. However, the initial change or transition in the religion gained momentum in the 1970s when a significant portion of the Rabha tribes embraced Christianity. However, the major transformation to Christianity took place in the 1980s, primarily facilitated by Baptist Christian priests from Meghalaya, Assam, and Manipur. During this period, the appeal of better education and an elevated social status associated with Christianity played a pivotal role in motivating many Rabhas to become Christians. In the context of marital status, the majority of the respondents were married. There are two different kinds of family structures among the Rabha respondents in this study. Nuclear families are made up of parents residing in the same home with their children. About 52% of the respondents in this study were members of nuclear families. Joint Families, on the other hand, are made up of two or more nuclear families that are related by blood and reside together. The intimate relationships between the many family branches are fostered by this type of family

structure. Table 1 depicts that approximately 48 per cent of the respondents were from joint families. It is important to note that the types of families among the Rabha tribe may vary based on factors such as geographical location, cultural practices, and historical influences. Additionally, as societies evolve, family structures may undergo changes influenced by external factors such as education, migration, and modernization. Survey data that has indicated that the majority of the respondents' families consist of 5 to 7 members.

In the surveyed areas, Rabha houses range from kutcha (temporary), pucca (permanent), and semi-pucca to wooden structures. A typical Rabha house comprises a bedroom, a kitchen, a cattle shed, a goat shed, and a place of worship. Traditionally, Rabha homes exhibit a unique architectural pattern. The government welfare department has, however, recently proposed an alternative dwelling type that is distinguished by rectangular, single-room buildings that have cement floors and tin roofs. These government-built homes differ from the typical housing design in Rabha. There has been a shift in the neighbourhood towards more modern living styles, as some wealthy Rabha residents have adopted current housing trends. The Rabha people's changing home stock demonstrates how they combine modern and traditional styles. In the present study, it was found that 38 per cent of the respondents reside in pucca houses, while 23 per cent inhabit traditional wooden houses. Only 2 per cent reported living in kutcha houses, and 11 per cent indicated semi-pucca houses as their dwelling. Table 1 illustrates that among the 11 respondents who were reported as illiterate, a significant majority, comprising nine individuals (81 per cent), were female. Notably, the educational attainment of male respondents surpassed that of their female ones. Specifically, 16 males had completed secondary education, seven had achieved higher secondary qualifications, and 6 had attained graduate degrees. Male respondents were more likely than female respondents to have completed higher education, spanning from secondary to postgraduate studies. The data makes it clear that a sizable fraction of Rabha residents do not actively pursue or prioritize higher education. Within the performed survey, it was noted that among the sixty respondents, a noteworthy finding was that people could speak five different languages: Bengali, Nepali, Hindi, Rajbansi, and Rabha. Interestingly, the majority of respondents, constituting 77 per cent, demonstrated proficiency in more than three to five languages. Specifically, 31 respondents reported proficiency in three languages, while 13 respondents were capable of conversing in four languages. In the context of this study, it was found that 50 per cent of the respondents reported that their families rely on agriculture for survival. This suggests a significant proportion of the surveyed population is involved in agricultural activities, highlighting the importance of this sector within the community. However, many Rabhas face challenges due to limited

land availability. Consequently, a significant portion of the population engages in agricultural labour, complemented by secondary occupations such as fishing, weaving, and animal husbandry. In this study, the data indicates that around 16 per cent of the respondents' families are involved in labour-related activities. Twelve families are engaged in government service, while only eight families are participating in various occupations such as fisheries, weaving, and businesses. This diversity in the types of occupations reflects the varied economic activities within the surveyed population. There seems to be a lack of awareness regarding the significance of government job security and future planning. This could indicate a need for initiatives to promote education and career awareness within the community.

Table 2: Age and Gender-wise Occupation of the Respondents

Occupation of the Respondents	Age Group	Number of Respondents		Total
		Male	Female	
Farmers	20-30	01	-	01
	30-40	03	-	03
	40-50	03	-	03
	50-60	02	-	02
	60-70	02	-	02
Labour	20-30		05	05
	30-40	04	03	07
	40-50		03	03
	50-60		01	01
Government Service	30-40	02	-	02
	40-50	01	-	01
	50-60	01	-	01
Private Job	20-30	03		03
Traditional Dancer	20-30	-	02	02
	30-40	-	01	01
Student	20-30	-	01	01
Business	20-30	01	-	01
	30-40	01	-	01
	40-50	02	01	03
	50-60	01	-	01
Fishery	30-40	01		01
Weavers	30-40	01	02	03

	40-50	01	-	01
	60-70	-	01	01
Home Maker	20-30	-	03	03
	40-50	-	04	04
	50-60	-	01	01
	60-70	-	02	02
TOTAL		30	30	60

Source: Field Survey, May-June 2022

Table 2 provides insights into the gender-specific nature of three occupations within the studied community. Farming emerges as a predominantly male occupation. On the other hand, traditional dancers and domestic work are exclusively occupied by female respondents. The data highlights that approximately 37 per cent of male respondents are involved in agriculture primarily focusing on cultivating paddy as their main crop. The study reveals that 40 per cent of female respondents are engaged in labour as their primary occupation. A present trend is the increasing participation of women in agriculture, aligning with the evolving roles and responsibilities of women in various sectors of labour. The data from Table 2 underscores a disparity in both the government and private sectors within the studied community. Specifically, only four male respondents are reported to be involved in the government sector, while no female respondents are engaged in government jobs. A similar pattern is observed in the private sector, with three male respondents from the young age group (20 to 30 years) where the table indicates a lack of female representation. Table 2 indicates that, among 60 respondents of various age groups, only five individuals are involved in the weaving sector, with three of them being female. This data suggests a decline in engagement with traditional weaving practices, emphasizing the impact of changing economic dynamics on cultural and artisanal traditions within the Rabha community. 33 per cent of female respondents are homemakers. It is possible that the Rabha community values community and family life highly, and that women view housework as essential to the family's well-being. Social norms and cultural values have a big impact on what people choose. Aside from that, women's professional decisions may be influenced by educational options.

Table 3: Age and Gender-wise Numbers of Languages the Respondents Speak

Numbers of Language, the Respondents Speak	Age Group	Number of Respondents		Total
		Male	Female	
Two Languages	20-30	-	02	02

	30-40	04	01	05
	40-50	01	02	03
	50-60	02	-	02
	60-70	01	01	02
Total		08	06	14
Three Languages	20-30	04	04	08
	30-40	05	05	10
	40-50	04	04	08
	50-60	01	02	03
	60-70	-	02	02
Total		14	17	31
Four Languages	20-30	01	04	05
	30-40	02	-	02
	40-50	02	02	04
	50-60	01	-	01
	60-70	01	-	01
Total		07	06	13
Five Languages	20-30	-	01	01
	30-40	01		01
TOTAL		30	30	60

Source: Field Survey, May-June 2022.

Table 3 shows respondent information, combining language proficiency and age groups. Language proficiency among the Rabha community is influenced by various factors, including cultural practices, educational opportunities, and exposure to different languages. The Rabha people traditionally have their own language, which is part of the Tibeto-Burman language family. Furthermore, a considerable number of respondents demonstrate multilingual proficiency, including languages like Rajbongsi, Bengali, Hindi and Nepali. The data is segmented for individuals speaking two, three, four, and five languages, further stratified by age. Across all categories, there are 30 male and 30 female respondents, a total of 60 across age and language proficiency. Within this, approximately 52 per cent of respondents are proficient in three languages. Male respondents of the age group 30 years to 40 years and female respondents of the age group 20 years to 30 years exhibit proficiency in two to five languages.

Table 4: Age and Gender-wise Literacy Status of the Respondents

Literacy Status	Age Group	Number of Respondents		Total
		Male	Female	
Illiterate	40-50	-	04	04
	50-60	01	02	03
	60-70	01	03	04
Total		02	09	11
Primary Level	20-30	-	02	02
	30-40	01	01	02
	40-50	-	01	01
	50-60	01	-	01
	60-70	01	-	01
Total		03	04	07
Upper Primary Level	20-30	-	01	01
	30-40	04	03	07
	40-50	02	01	03
	50-60	01	-	01
Total		07	05	12
Secondary	20-30	-	03	03
	30-40	06	01	07
	40-50	03	03	06
	50-60	-	-	-
	60-70	-	-	-
Total		09	07	16
Higher Secondary	20-30	-	03	
	30-40	02	-	
	40-50	01	-	
	50-60	01	-	
Total		04	03	07
Graduate	20-30	04	02	06
Total		04	02	06
Post Graduate	20-30	01	-	01
Total		01	-	01
TOTAL		30	30	60

Source: Field Survey, May-June 2022.

Table 4 illustrates a disparity among illiterate respondents, with the majority (approximately 82 per cent) being female, primarily aged between 40 and 70 years. At the level below secondary, the distribution differs slightly, with males constituting 53 per cent and females 47 per cent of respondents. However, at the secondary and higher secondary levels, this gap widens significantly where males represent about 57 per cent of respondents and females only make up 43 per cent. The table indicates a better literacy status among male respondents compared to females. Intriguingly, it also highlights that both male and female respondents in the youngest age group, ranging from 20 to 30 years, are actively pursuing higher studies.

Discussions

Ninety per cent of the responders from the Rabha populations in the study area are Baptist Christians, which is an intriguing finding from the study. The Rabhas think they have received access to missionary education through their embrace of Christianity. According to Choudhury (2019: 69), there have been notable changes brought about by the influence of Christianity. The Church now plays a larger role in areas like healthcare and education in addition to providing spiritual direction. Furthermore, it is now a major factor in fostering in people, especially the younger generation, a sense of civic responsibility and leadership. This drive cultivates an attitude that is oriented towards confronting the intricacies of contemporary society and accepting its obstacles.

The study provides data indicating that over 50 per cent of the respondents' families consist of 5 to 7 members. This suggests that the Rabha community tends to live in relatively large families. The information highlights a cultural or societal aspect where households in this community commonly include a significant number of members, potentially reflecting strong family ties or specific cultural norms regarding family size. In another study, it was found that in Melabasti and Mangalkatabasti, the average family size was 4 to 6 members. The Rabha tribal community has historically thrived in group settings, maintaining a robust bond among their clans since time immemorial. With a strong emphasis on agriculture and subsistence farming, the Rabhas have upheld a close-knit family structure that has served them well over generations. Their reliance on agricultural practices, including shifting cultivation, has necessitated a cooperative approach within the family unit. In this context, having a larger number of family members translates to more hands available to assist with agricultural activities, thereby ensuring the community's sustenance (Moktan, Kasemi, 2020: 6). In the earlier period, the Rabha community primarily relied on forest resources for their sustenance, leading to a subsistence-based economy. However, as the forestry

resources proved insufficient to meet their food requirements, the Rabhas were compelled to explore alternative or supplementary livelihoods. Presently, agriculture has emerged as the primary means of livelihood for the Rabhas, with a majority of the community relying on it for survival. There has been a shift towards cultivating modern crops among the male respondents, including cauliflower, potato, various grains etc. Moreover, the study reveals that a substantial portion, specifically 64 per cent, of the male respondents engaged in farming belong to the age group (20 to 50 years). This demographic distribution suggests that the younger generation within the community is actively participating in and contributing to the agricultural sector, potentially shaping the future of farming practices among the Rabhas. Surprisingly, the data indicates a contrast among male respondents, with only four out of 30 engaged in labour as their primary occupation. This suggests a significant disparity in the distribution of labour-related occupations within the studied community. The distinct patterns observed in the occupational choices of male and female respondents highlight the dynamic nature of gender roles and the changing landscape of employment opportunities within the community.

The difference in employment distribution suggests potential barriers or challenges that might be influencing the participation of women in both government and private sector jobs within the community. A possible explanation provided in the analysis is that the lower educational status of female respondents compared to males might be a contributing factor to their limited participation in the job of the government sector. Educational qualifications often play a crucial role in securing employment in certain sectors, and if there is a gap in educational attainment, it can impact the distribution of jobs between men and women. To address this gender disparity in government sector employment, potential interventions could focus on improving educational opportunities for women within the community. This might involve initiatives aimed at enhancing access to education, skill development programs, and efforts to address any systemic barriers that limit women's participation in the workforce, especially in government jobs. It appears from Table 2 that traditional dance is the main occupation for three female respondents within the Rabha community, and they fall within the age range of 20 to 40 years.

The study shows that mostly male respondents are involved in business and could be influenced by a variety of factors, including societal norms, cultural expectations, and economic circumstances. Societal expectations and traditional gender roles may influence perceptions about suitable occupations for men and women in the Rabha community. In their culture, Rabha women might be expected to fulfil specific roles within the household, which could limit their engagement in business activities.

Besides that, limited access and awareness to education for Rabha women may restrict their skill development and knowledge necessary for business endeavours.

Fishing holds dual significance for the Rabhas, serving both as a recreational activity and an economic pursuit. While many engage in fishing primarily for personal consumption, a portion of the catch is often sold in local markets to supplement their income. It's notable that, according to the study, only one male respondent is involved in fishing. The reasons for this limited participation can vary and may be influenced by factors such as individual preferences, other available livelihood options, or specific cultural dynamics within the community. Weaving stands as a significant activity within the Rabha community, ranking closely behind agriculture in terms of importance. The Rabha women show remarkable expertise in both spinning and weaving, preserving and passing down techniques through generations. This artistic tradition not only highlights the skill and patience of Rabha women but also serves as proof of their cultural heritage. Traditional handloom products, however, face challenges in contemporary times. They are often perceived as outdated and comparatively more expensive than products produced using power looms. The shift in preference towards power loom alternatives poses a challenge to the traditional weaving practices of Rabha women. This change in consumer behaviour is contributing to a gradual decline in interest and participation in traditional handloom weaving practices within the community. Therefore, it can be said that “the Rabha households acquire income from multiple economic activities in the study area and all activities are not equally important. While the farm sector contributes the income for the majority of the households, the non-farm sector too contributes their share” (Bora, 2023: 4066).

Limited access to education might influence Rabha women's occupational options, leading some to prioritize homemaking over pursuing careers outside the home. The Rabha community's social fabric and expectations regarding gender roles may contribute to the prevalence of women as homemakers. Social norms and community expectations can shape individuals' choices and behaviours. It is important to note that these reasons can vary among individuals, and not all Rabha women may choose homemaking for the same reasons. Additionally, the decision to be a homemaker is a personal choice, and women may navigate a balance between homemaking and other pursuits based on their unique circumstances and aspirations. Particularly, aged females (aged 50 years to 70 years) are proficient in two to three languages. Overall, it appears that younger individuals, both male and female, in the age group of 20 years to 30 years tend to have proficiency in more than three languages. In the contemporary era, there exists a compelling need for the Rabha people to transition from a state of relative disadvantage to self-sufficiency. Remarkably, Rabha individuals, especially

the youth, are embracing multilingualism, and actively engaging with diverse communities. This proactive interaction positions them to strive for equal social status, akin to other social groups.

Low levels of literacy among tribal women constrain their ability to access and comprehend critical information, such as health advisories, educational materials, and legal rights. This limitation is often associated with early childbearing, posing substantial health risks for both mothers and their offspring. A study focusing on this issue surveyed 30 female respondents. In analyzing the age at which these women experienced their first childbirth, it was found that 3.57% of respondents gave birth before the age of 15, while a significant majority (58.93%) became mothers between the ages of 15 and 20. Additionally, 37.50% of respondents had their first child between the ages of 20 and 25. Notably, some women entered into marriage before reaching the age of 18, resulting in earlier childbirth, a pattern largely attributed to limited family planning options and awareness within the community.

Conclusion

A total of sixty Rabha households were surveyed which is evenly split between male and female respondents. The majority of respondents were between 20 to 50 years old with limited representation in older age groups. There was a slightly higher proportion of males in the older age groups compared to females. The majority of the respondents were Christian. The community's religious shift towards Christianity was influenced by the appeal of better education and social status associated with the religion. Many respondents were from nuclear families, while a significant proportion belonged to joint families. Family sizes tended to be relatively large, with over 50 per cent consisting of 5 to 7 members. Rabha houses ranged from traditional kutcha and pucca structures to modern government-constructed houses. Farming is predominantly a male occupation, with approximately 37% of male respondents engaged in agriculture and they primarily cultivating paddy and shifting towards modern crops. Most male farmers belong to the age group of 20 to 50 years, indicating active participation from the younger generation. Female respondents are primarily engaged in labour-related occupations with 40% involved in labour as their primary occupation.

A significant disparity exists in both government and private sector employment, with few male respondents in government jobs and no female representation. Limited educational attainment among female respondents may contribute to this disparity highlighting the need for initiatives to improve educational opportunities for women. Traditional dance is exclusively occupied by female respondents, indicating cultural preferences and gender-specific roles. Male respondents are primarily involved in

business while only one male respondent is engaged in fishing. Cultural norms and societal expectations may influence occupational choices among the Rabha community, with limited female participation in certain sectors. Weaving which was a significant activity among the Rabha community shows declining engagement with only five individuals involved, three of whom are female. Economic shifts towards power loom alternatives pose challenges to traditional weaving practices, impacting cultural heritage and artisanal traditions. 33 per cent of female respondents are homemakers, reflecting the community's emphasis on family and community life. Limited access to education and cultural values may influence women's occupational choices, with some prioritizing homemaking over pursuing careers outside the home. The study provides insights into the language proficiency of respondents within the Rabha community. They traditionally speak their language which is part of the Tibeto-Burman language family. However, a significant number of respondents demonstrate proficiency in multiple languages including Rajbongsi, Bengali, Hindi, and Nepali. Respondents exhibit proficiency in two, three, four, and five languages, with approximately 52% proficient in three languages. Younger individuals, particularly those aged 20 to 30 years, show higher levels of multilingual proficiency. Male respondents from 30 to 40 years age group and female respondents aged 20 to 30 years exhibit proficiency in two to five languages. Elderly females are proficient in two to three languages. The youth, in particular, are actively embracing multilingualism and engaging with diverse communities, positioning themselves to strive for equal social status.

The study highlights a significant disparity in literacy levels among respondents, particularly among illiterate individuals where approximately 82 per cent are females aged between 40 and 70 years. At the level below the secondary, males slightly outnumber females (53% to 47%). But at the secondary and higher secondary levels, the gap widens with males constituting 57 per cent of respondents compared to females at 43 per cent. This indicates a better literacy status among male respondents. Interestingly, both male and female respondents in the youngest age group (20 to 30 years) are actively pursuing higher studies, suggesting a potential shift towards improved educational opportunities for younger generations. The study also examines the age at which female respondents experienced their first childbirth, highlighting the impact of low literacy on early childbearing. The majority of respondents gave birth between the ages of 15 and 20, with some experiencing childbirth before the age of 15. This pattern is attributed to limited family planning options and awareness within the community, emphasizing the importance of addressing educational and healthcare disparities to mitigate health risks associated with early childbearing among tribal women.

Recommendations

The government should prioritize the provision of educational facilities for the Rabha community. This includes establishing schools within their communities, ensuring the presence of qualified teachers, and facilitating access to quality education for all members. Education plays a pivotal role in empowering individuals and communities, opening doors to opportunities and fostering socio-economic development. Furthermore, the development of robust pucca road infrastructure is essential for enhancing connectivity and facilitating overall progress in Rabha areas. Improved road networks not only ease transportation challenges but also stimulate economic activities, encourage investment, and promote social integration. Moreover, there is a pressing need to raise awareness about the importance of education, particularly among the female members of the Rabha community. Empowering women through education not only uplifts individuals but also has a ripple effect on families, communities, and society at large. By ensuring equal access to education for all, regardless of gender, the government can pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable society.

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