

## Socio-Cultural Development among the Tribal Community: A study on Rabha ethnic community in North Bengal

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**Abstract:** Rabha tribal community is one of the Mongoloid groups of ethnic community found mostly in the areas of Assam, West Bengal, Meghalaya. They have their own unique culture, traditions and economic practices. Over the years a lot of transformation and developmental changes in terms of their culture, socio-economy and various traditional practices have been witnessed by various scholars. Change is inevitable and is bound to flow with the time, but some transformation may be productive for the community whereas few changes seem to have a detrimental effect towards the community. The paper tries to highlight on the various socio-cultural changes that have been witnessed among this Rabha tribal community over the years. The study is based on both primary and secondary data. As per the study it was found a rather deplorable transformation is witnessed in terms of their cultural practice but when it comes to their socio-economic life a very pragmatic and favourable consequence is witnessed in terms of Development.

**Key words:** Tribe, Development, Socio-cultural, economic, Transformation

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### I. INTRODUCTION

West Bengal is a home to variety of tribal community, it contributes to almost 6% of population in West Bengal. One such tribal community only found in the districts of Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Cooch Behar is the Rabha Tribal community. Rabha Tribal community are one of the primordial tribal communities existing in the area. They are basically forest dwellers and are concentrated in the dense forest zones of North Bengal, while some of them have settled along the fringe areas of the forest along with other communities. There is a lot of speculation and literatures regarding their origin Kar (2005) States that the Rabha's have most probably migrated from the Eastern part of sub-Himalayan region or may be from the Tibetan region after which they migrated towards the south and reached the north eastern part of India towards the Brahmaputra Valley region. According to Sarkar (2015) Rabha's have migrated to northern part of Bengal from Assam in order to find a much suitable habitat for settlement, as they moved westward from Assam, they reached the dense forest area of western Dauris in the Bauxa forest region and hence settled in this area. As the area was less populated and presence of dense forest facilitated them more, to practice hunting gathering and agriculture. Some scholars are of the opinion that the Rabhas have similarity with other Tribal communities such as Bodo, Garo, Mech, Kachari's to name a few. According to Grierson (2000) they have a linguist similarity with the Bodo group and they belong to Tibetan-Burman family of Language group. Besides North Bengal they are also found in the states of Assam Meghalaya and some literatures have also mentioned about their presence in Bangladesh. Rabha are basically Mongoloid people have short or medium stature, flat nose, brown skin, straight hair and a Mongolian feature with a strong built body.

#### Objective of the study:

The main objective of the study is:

1. To study about the socio-cultural and economic status of the Rabha tribal community in North Bengal.
2. To highlight on the development in their socio-cultural status.
3. To identify the impact of development in their life and cultural practices.

#### Data base

In order to conduct the empirical study on this tribal community, both primary and secondary data has been utilised, the primary data has been collected from the field on the basis of structured questionnaire and through door to door interview survey with the Rabha family. and the secondary data has been obtained from the various existing literature, through various offices, library and most importantly from the Anthropological society of Calcutta, Kolkata.

**Study area and sample size**

The study area has been selected on the basis of location, accessibility, approachability of the people of the village. For the study Mela and Mangalkata Rabha banabasti located in Jalpaiguri district of Dhupguri block under Salbari I gram panchayat area, has been selected. A sample of total fifty-five household has been taken for intrinsic study on this tribal community. The Selection of the sample has been done on the basis of simple random sampling method.

**Research Methodology**

For a comprehensive study on the socio-cultural development of the Rabha tribal community the following methodology was adopted:

**Pre-field:**Historical background of the Rabha tribes were studied from the various literatures. Pilot survey was conducted in the Rabha villages and the study area was selected. Questionnaire on the various socio-cultural aspect was constructed for the collection of primary and secondary data.

**Field:**During the field survey data from various offices were collected. With the prepared and structured questionnaire door to door field survey was conducted. Relevant visual photographs were captured during the field survey.

**Post-field:**The collected data from the field was compiled, analysed and processed using various statistical techniques, as well as graphical presentation were prepared and interpreted.

**General information of the study area**

**Name of the village:** Mela and Mangalkata Rabha Busty

**Location:** Salbari 1 Gram Panchayat, Dhupguri block, Jalpaiguri District

**Forest:**Khutimari forest under Moraghat Forest Range, and Totha para beat

**Educational institute:** 1 primary school

**Nearest township:**Dhuramari

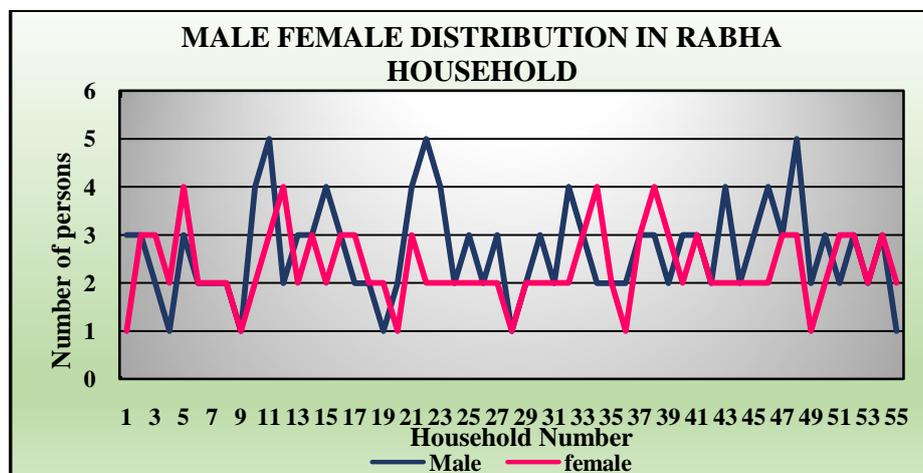
**Distance:** 2.5km

**Total Household:**Mela busty 36 houses &Mangalkata 125 houses total:164 household

**Social-Cultural and economic status of the Rabha tribal community in Rabha busty**

Tribal communities are one of the secluded sections of society and they have their own culture, traditions, customs and practices. They usually reside within their own social groups often identified with the race they belong. Rabha tribal community also have their own tradition socio-cultural practices which they have maintained since time immemorial. The socio cultural and economic status determines the living condition, the behavioural patten and the developmental status of the community as a whole, in order to determine the socio-cultural and economic status of the Rabha tribal community the following indictors has been taken into consideration for the study.

- Male female distribution



**Figure 1.1:** Male female distribution in Rabha household

From the above diagram we can see the proportion of male female distribution in individual Rabha household. It was found out of the fifty-five household surveyed most of the houses have more male members as compared to female members. The total male accounted in in fifty-five household was 147 and the total female accounted in fifty-five household were 128. even though the marginal gap between the male and female ratio is no very huge. Therefore, we can say the proportion of male population is more than the female population in Mela Rabha busty.

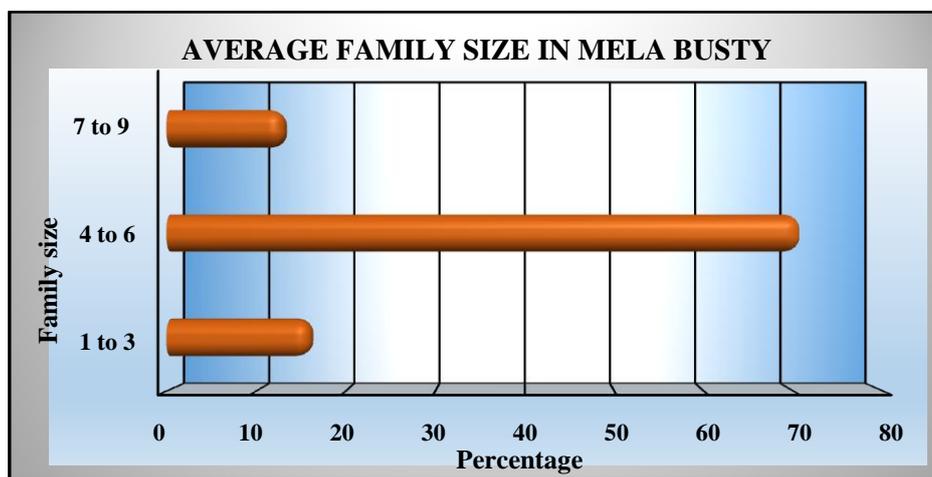
- **Family size**

Rabha tribal community has always been living in groups since time inception they have a very strong bond among their clan. Rabhas has always maintained a close family structure, since they were many agriculturalist and practiced subsistence farming and shifting cultivation, more family members meant more help in their agricultural practices. Therefore, they always stayed in a joint family system, various cultural practice shave also favoured their joint family system.

**Table 1.1:** Average family size in mela busty

<i>Family size</i>	<i>Number of households</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1 to 3	9	16
4 to 6	39	71
7 to 9	7	13
Total	55	100

*Source: Door to door field survey*



**Figure1.2:** Average family size in Mela busty

In Mela and Mangalkata Rabha busty it was found the average family size was with 4 to 6 members, 71 % of the household has moderate family size, 16 % of the household were living with 1 to 3 members in small family size and 13% were living with 7 to 9 members with big family size. Overall a moderate family size exists in Mela Rabha busty. They shift in the moderate family size is mainly due to increase in the educational level and the awareness relating to benefit of small family size among the Rabha population and some reason may be cited due to increasing number of inter caste marriages among the Rabha tribal communities.

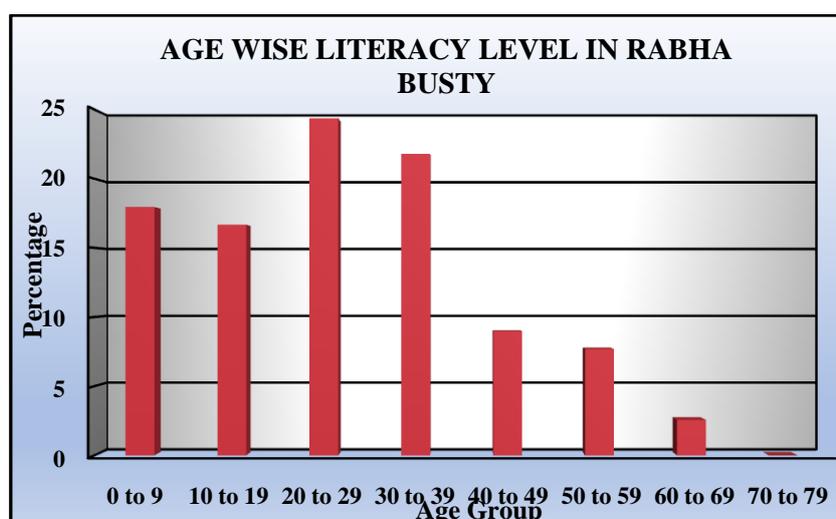
- **Educational level**

Education plays a vital role in the development of the community as well as upgradation of individual and their standard of living. Rabhas were basically forest dwellers and did not give much importance to education, but at present we can see a rising demand and number of literates among this community. Which is indeed a very good sign for the overall development of the community.

**Table1.2:** Age wise literacy level in Rabha Busty

Age group	persons literate	Percentage
0 to 9	14	18
10 to 19	13	17
20 to 29	19	24
30 to 39	17	22
40 to 49	7	9
50 to 59	6	8
60 to 69	2	3
70 to 79	0	0
total	78	100

Source: Door to door field survey



**Figure1.3:** Age wise literacy level in among the Rabha community

From the above data it was found that the literacy level was high among the younger age group as compared to older age group. Literacy level is highest among the age group of 20 to 29 as by this age they have already completed their education, as we climb into the ladder of age the rate of literacy declines and at the age of 70 to 79 the literacy level is almost nil. The high rise in the literacy level among the younger generation proves the facts that the Rabhas are now realising the importance of education for the wellbeing of community and as a result of which the younger ones are now attaining the educational level more seriously.

- **Economy**

Rabha tribal community has always been an agriculturist and practiced shifting cultivation, with passage of time they have started with subsistence agriculture. In North Bengal they mainly grow a variety of paddy such as Aman and Aus variety of paddy besides agriculture they were basically hunters and gatherers but due to various restrictions imposed by the government the practice of hunting has drastically reduced. They are very skilful in fishing as well in Rabha term fishing is known as *Na tayi* they catch fishes through their equipment's such as *plou, Duku*. If we look into the present pattern of occupational structure and source of economy among the Rabhas, it was found many are engaged in small business within the village by opening small shops etc, many of the people work as labourers in 100 days job through various schemes provided by the government like MGNREGA etc. The educated youth are either working outside the villages in various sectors some of them have also joined government sectors as well.

**Development of Socio-Cultural status and its impact among the Rabha community**

Over the years the Rabha tribal communities have experienced certain development and changes in their socio-cultural practices, as change is very much evident with time. Some major developments were seen in terms of their housing condition, now we hardly get to see the traditional houses of Rabha tribal community, as most of the houses have been renovated or has been transformed into more concrete structures. Certain differences is also noticed in terms of their literacy level, religious practices, cultural practices, languages etc.

The main reason as recommended by various scholars is mainly due to modernisation and globalisation and the community living in close proximity to other communities.

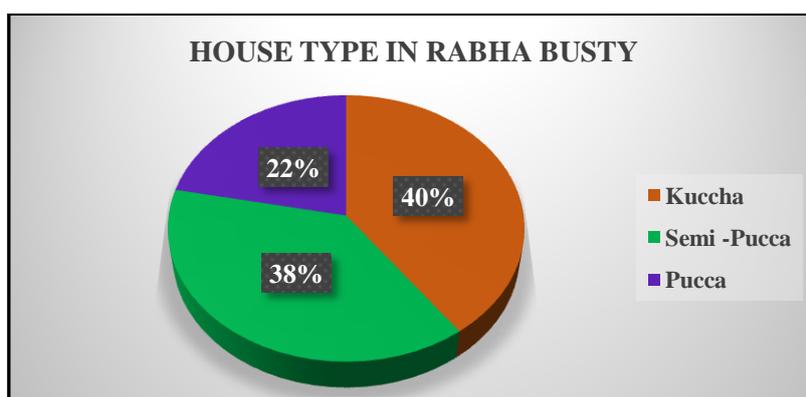
• **Housing condition**

Rabhas were basically forest dwellers and has their own house type, as they were mainly hired as plantation labourers by the forest department according to Sarkar (2015) by the forest department they were provided small kuccha houses by the forest department, the Rabhas themselves built small wooden house with the available forest product with separate kitchen and worship place with a courtyard in the middle. The house is built seven to eight feet above the group with high rise beam supporting the house, this was mainly to protect the house from floods and intrusion of wild animals. Over the years due to various government schemes such as ‘Amra Bari’ ‘Geetanjali’ to name a few they have built some semi pucca houses and while some economically stable Rabha has a pucca house. In Rabha Language the house is known as ‘Nugou’.

**Table 1.3:** Type of houses in Rabha Busty

<i>House type</i>	<i>No of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Kuccha	22	40
Semi -Pucca	21	38
Pucca	12	22
Total	55	100

*Source: Door to door field survey*



**Figure 1.4:** Existing house type in Rabha Busty

It was seen that that the village is still dominated by the kuccha houses, here kuccha house means it is built up of tin and wood. Semi-pucca house is built up of half concrete and half wood with a tin roof, whereas pucca house is represented by houses built of concrete structure. It was found that 40% of houses were kuccha, 38% were Semi pucca and 22% had pucca house a transformation was seen as the number of pucca houses is rising owing to various government schemes and due to the rising economic standard.

• **Language**

Rabha ethnic community have their own language and is often believed it has a linguistic similarity with the Bodo group and belong to Sino-Tibetan language group Kar (2005). In terms of Number of person speaking only Rabha language is drastically reducing, they Rabha tribe has now become bilingual and some multilingual due to globalisation and modernisation. This is in fact a positive sign as the tribal community is now developing and mixing with other communities and learning language but at the same time it is a threat to the community as the younger ones are speaking less Rabha language and therefore with generation it may pose a threat as the language may slowly diminish with time.

**Table 1.4:** Number of languages spoken by Rabha community

Number of languages spoken	No of household	Percentage
1 language	2	4
2 languages	8	14
3 languages	12	21
4 languages	18	32

5languages	17	30
Total	57	100

Source: Door to door field survey

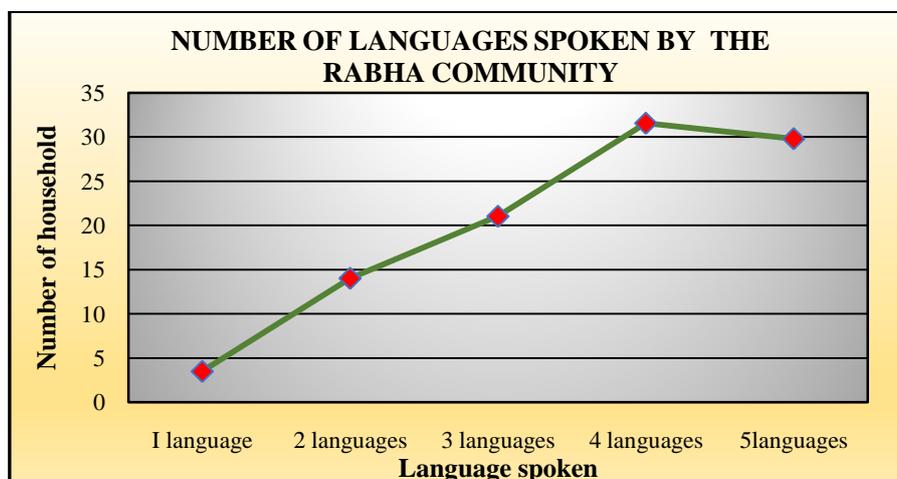


Figure 1.5: Number of languages spoken by Rabha Community

In Mela and Mangalkata Rabha busy it was found the number of person speaking different languages were more in number as compared to those speaking only Rabha language we can see only 4% of the household speak only Rabha language that too only the elders 14% speak two languages, 21% speak 3 languages and 32% and 30% speak almost 4 to 5 languages respectively. The younger generation are now becoming multilingual, developmental change can be witnessed in terms of the number of languages they are speaking, many Rabha people specially the young ones have become multilingual and they are interacting more with the other communities and exchanging and learning their culture and traditions.

## II. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Rabha tribal community have always tried to maintain their culture and tradition since their time inception in the region. Over the years owing to globalisation and modernisation a lot of changes is visible among this tribal community, the changes seem both positive as well as negative. It can be seen an increase in the number of literacy level among the Rabha tribal group, which is indeed a constructive development of the community which in turn helps in upgradation of the tribal group as a whole. The change in the family size proves the fact that they are becoming more aware about having a moderate family size which helps in easy maintenance of the family. Developmental changes can be encountered in term of house type in terms of various economic practice but somehow with this development, Cultural changes are also being witnessed in the community. As they are becoming multilingual and interacting more with other communities this may be a problem for their own language which might be deteriorating quickly. The Rabha tribal community has been witnessing this transformation over the years which has been constructive as well as detrimental to the community as whole.

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