

# Assessing tribal development: Socio-cultural and economic progress of the Rabha community in North Bengal

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## Abstract

This study evaluates the socio-cultural and economic progress of the Rabha community in North Bengal, highlighting their dynamic responses to changing contexts. Through a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods, the research assesses the community's advancements in education, healthcare, and economic diversification. The findings reveal notable progress in education and healthcare, with increased participation in formal education and utilization of modern healthcare facilities. However, challenges persist, including poverty, limited access to resources, and inadequate infrastructure. The study emphasizes the need for targeted interventions and community engagement to address these challenges and capitalize on opportunities for sustainable development. By harnessing their cultural heritage and natural resources, the Rabha community can strive towards a more equitable and sustainable future, balancing modernization with preservation of their unique identity.

**Keywords:** Tribal Development; Rabha Community; Socio-Cultural Progress; Economic Development; Sustainable Livelihoods; North Bengal

## 1. Introduction

Tribal development is a vital component of India's growth narrative, with North Bengal's diverse tribal communities, including the Rabha, playing a significant role in the region's socio-cultural landscape (Das, 2018). Despite their rich cultural heritage, these communities have historically faced multifaceted challenges, including poverty, limited access to essential services, and marginalization (Xaxa, 2018). This study seeks to evaluate the socio-cultural and economic advancements of the Rabha community, examining their cultural identity, livelihood strategies, and resource accessibility. By doing so, it aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of tribal development in India and inform policy initiatives that foster inclusive growth and social justice.

### 1.1. Review of literature

Tribal development is a complex and multifaceted issue, characterized by challenges such as poverty, limited access to education and healthcare, and marginalization (Xaxa, 2018). Assessing tribal development is crucial for understanding progress and identifying areas for improvement, enabling policymakers to design effective programs addressing specific community needs (UNDP, 2020). The socio-cultural progress of tribal communities is deeply rooted in their cultural identity and traditions, as evident in the Rabha community's rich heritage in North Bengal, which plays a significant role in shaping their identity and social structures (Rabha, 2020). Economic development, focusing on sustainable livelihoods and income generation, is vital for tribal progress, yet communities face challenges in accessing resources and markets, hindering their economic advancement (Das, 2018). Furthermore, tribal development is also marked by challenges like land rights issues, displacement, and exploitation, which can undermine their overall well-being and development (Kumar, 2018). However, opportunities exist for promoting development through initiatives

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such as education, healthcare, and sustainable livelihoods, which can help foster inclusive growth and social justice among tribal communities. By understanding these dynamics, policymakers and development practitioners can design targeted interventions that address the unique needs and challenges of tribal communities, ultimately contributing to their socio-cultural and economic progress.

## 1.2. Objectives

- To assess the socio-cultural progress of the Rabha community in North Bengal.
- To examine the economic development and livelihoods of the Rabha community.
- To identify challenges and opportunities for promoting tribal development in the region.

## 2. Data base and methodology:

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to evaluate the socio-cultural and economic progress of the Rabha community in North Bengal. Primary data collection involves surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions with 65 households in Rabha Busty, selected through purposive sampling. Secondary data is drawn from existing literature, government reports, and census data. The collected data is analyzed using MS Excel software and presented through charts, diagrams, and cartographic techniques, providing a comprehensive understanding of the community's development dynamics.

## 3. Discussion and analysis

### 3.1. Distribution and Demographics of Rabhas in India and West Bengal

The Rabha community in India is predominantly concentrated in Assam and its adjacent states, including Meghalaya, West Bengal, Bihar, and Sikkim (Rabha, 1998). In West Bengal, the Rabha population was recorded at 27,820 as per the 2011 Census, accounting for 0.53% of the state's total tribal population. The majority reside in Jalpaiguri district (52.07%), which includes both Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts. Notably, the Rabhas in Western Duars can be categorized into two groups based on their ecological setup: Forest Rabhas, who inhabit reserve forests, and Village Rabhas, who live in villages away from forests, both belonging to the Kocha Rabha section (Raha, 1974). The distribution of Rabhas in West Bengal is significant, with considerable populations also found in Coochbihar (13.66%) and Uttar Dinajpur (18.69%) districts.

**Table 1** District wise Distribution of Rabha Population in West Bengal

Name of the District	Total Population (Persons)	
	Total Number	Percentage (%)
Darjiling	44	0.16
Jalpaiguri	14,487	52.07
Koch Bihar	3,801	13.66
Uttar Dinajpur	5,199	18.69
Dakshin Dinajpur	1,351	4.86
Maldah	1,294	4.65
Murshidabad	625	2.25
Birbhum	103	0.37
Barddhaman	43	0.15
Nadia	67	0.24
North Twenty-Four Parganas	433	1.56
Hugli	22	0.08
Bankura	18	0.06

Puruliya	02	0.01
Haora	18	0.06
Kolkata	27	0.10
South Twenty-four Parganas	27	0.10
Paschim Medinipur	248	0.89
Purba Medinipur	11	0.04
West Bengal (Total)	27,820	100.00

Source: Census 2011

### 3.2. Socio-Cultural Progress of the Rabha Community

The Rabha community in North Bengal has demonstrated significant socio-cultural progress, characterized by the preservation of their rich cultural heritage and traditions alongside notable advancements in education, healthcare, and social mobility. Despite challenges, the community has successfully maintained its unique cultural identity, encompassing language, customs, and festivals, while embracing modernization and development. This progress is reflected in increased participation in education, healthcare services, and community initiatives, contributing to overall well-being and empowerment. Our study, conducted among 65 households in Rabha Busty, considered key indicators to assess this progress, providing valuable insights into the community's development dynamics.

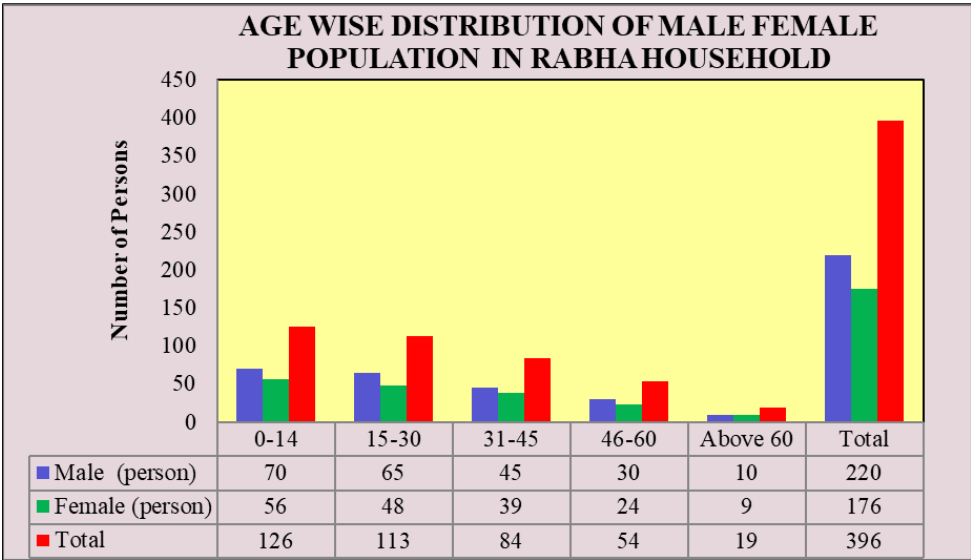
### 3.3. Demographic Structure

The survey of 65 households in Rabha Busty, summarized in Table 2, shows a total population of 396 individuals, comprising 220 males and 176 females, and provides insight into the age-wise male-female distribution within the Rabha community. Notably, males outnumber females across all age groups, resulting in an overall male-female ratio of 55.6% males and 44.4% females.

**Table 2** Distribution of Male Female Population

Age Group	Male	Male (%)	Female	Female (%)	Total
0-14	70	55.6	56	44.4	126
15-30	65	57.5	48	42.5	113
31-45	45	53.6	39	46.4	84
46-60	30	55.6	24	44.4	54
Above 60	10	52.6	09	47.4	19
Total	220	(55.6)	176	(44.4)	396

Source: Field Data



**Figure 1** Age and Sex Distribution of Rabha Household Population

The demographic profile indicates a relatively young population, with the highest concentration in the 0-14 age group. This pattern has significant implications for the community's social, economic, and health dynamics, underscoring the need for targeted interventions to address potential disparities and foster overall well-being.

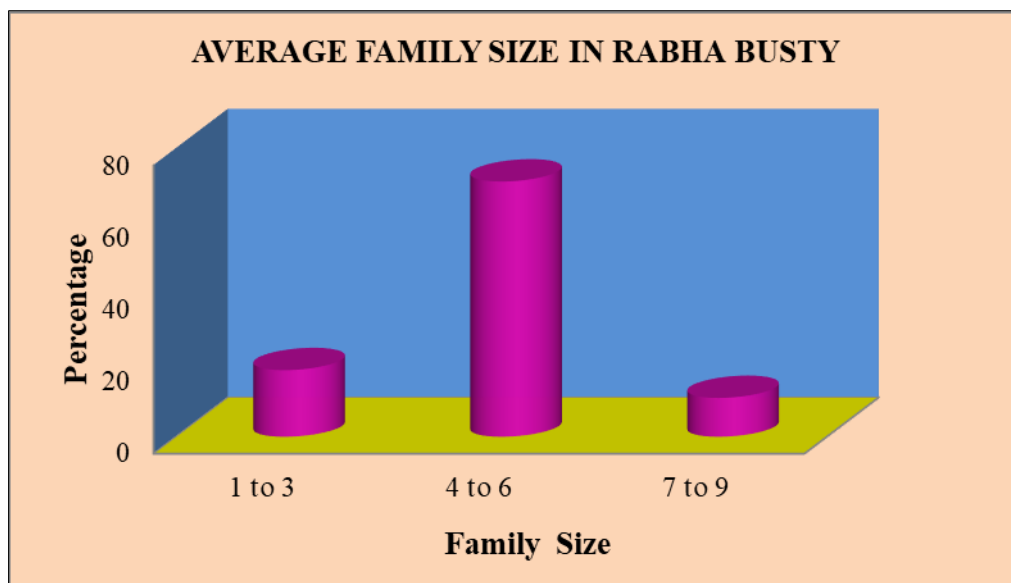
**3.4. Family Structure**

The Rabha community's family organization exhibits distinct characteristics compared to other tribal groups. Traditionally, they adhere to a joint family system, with a unique blend of matrilineal and patrilineal structures. Historically, the Rabhas have lived in close-knit groups, fostering strong clan bonds. Their agricultural practices, including subsistence farming and shifting cultivation, necessitated larger family units where more members could contribute to farming activities. This joint family system has been reinforced by various cultural practices, highlighting the importance of family ties and collective living in Rabha society.

**Table 3** Family Size of Rabha Busty

Family size	Number of Household	Percentage (%)
1 to 3	12	18.46
4 to 6	46	70.76
7 to 9	7	10.76
Total	65	100

Source: Field Data



**Figure 2** Average Household Size among Rabha Busty Residents

The data on average family size in Rabha Busty (Figure 2) shows that most families (70.76%) comprise 4-6 members, indicating a moderate family size. In contrast, smaller families (1-3 members) account for 18.46%, while larger families (7-9 members) make up 10.76%. This pattern reflects the community's traditional joint family system and cultural values, highlighting the prevalence of moderate-sized families among the Rabha population.

### 3.5. Education Level

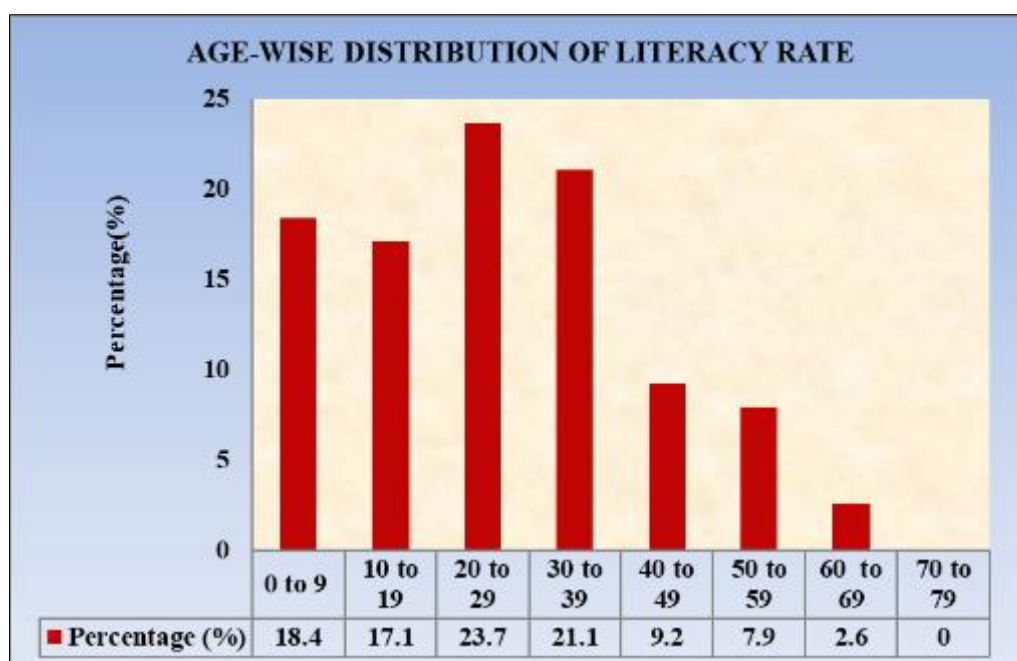
Education is transforming the Rabha community in West Bengal, enabling them to build self-confidence, improve economic prospects, and achieve a better standard of living. Historically isolated, many Rabhas are now pursuing formal education and diverse occupations. Government initiatives and NGOs have played a significant role in promoting education, which is increasingly valued for community development and individual progress.

**Table 4** Age-Wise Literacy Rate in Rabha Busty

Age Group	Number of Literates (Persons)	Percentage (%)
0-9	14	18.4
10-19	13	17.1
20-29	18	23.7
30-39	16	21.1
40-49	7	9.2
50-59	6	7.9
60-69	2	2.6
70-79	0	0
Total	76	100

Source: Field Data

The age-wise literacy rate among the Rabha community reveals a notable trend, with the majority of literates concentrated in the younger age groups. Specifically, the 20-29 age group exhibits the highest proportion of literates (23.7%), followed closely by the 30-39 age group (21.1%). This suggests a positive trajectory of educational attainment among the younger generation, which is likely to have a profound impact on the community's socio-economic development. The declining literacy rates in older age groups underscore the importance of continued educational initiatives to ensure sustained progress and empowerment within the community.



**Figure 3** Distributions of Literacy Rates across Different Age Groups

### 3.6. Language

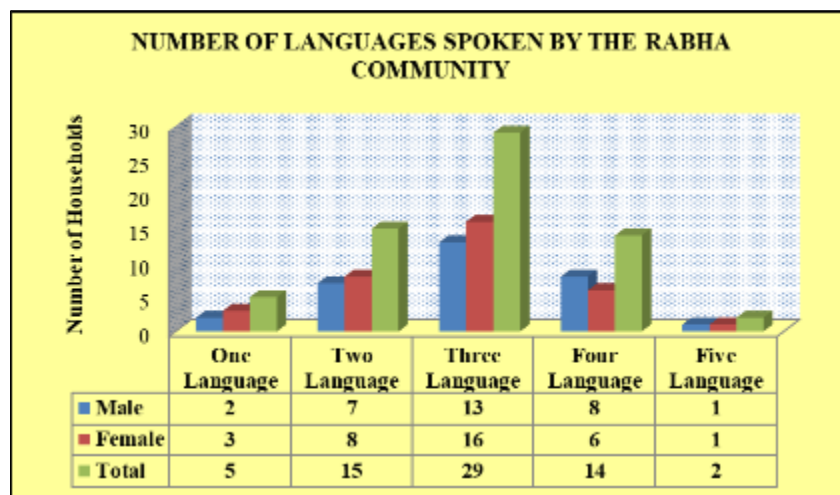
The Rabha language, part of the Tibeto-Burman group of the Sino-Tibetan family, is closely related to Garo and Boro languages. While Rabhas traditionally speak their own language, globalization and modernization have led to a decline in monolingual Rabha speakers, with many becoming bilingual or multilingual. This shift facilitates community development and integration but also poses a threat to the preservation of the Rabha language, particularly among younger generations, potentially leading to its gradual diminishment over time.

**Table 5** Number of Language Spoken by Rabha Community

Number of Language they speak	Household Respondents		Total
	Male	Female	
One Language	2	3	5
Two Language	7	8	15
Three Language	13	16	29
Four Language	8	6	14
Five Language	1	1	2

Source: Field Data

The linguistic profile of the Rabha community exhibits a remarkable degree of multilingualism, with a notable proportion of individuals demonstrating proficiency in multiple languages. The data reveals that merely 5 individuals (2 males and 3 females) are monolingual, whereas the majorities possess linguistic versatility. Specifically, 15 individuals (7 males and 8 females) are bilingual, 29 individuals (13 males and 16 females) are trilingual, 14 individuals (8 males and 6 females) speak four languages, and 2 individuals (1 male and 1 female) are proficient in five languages.



**Figure 4** Languages Spoken in Rabha Community

This linguistic diversity underscores the community's adaptability and exposure to various cultural and linguistic influences, likely stemming from their geographical location and socio-economic interactions. The findings highlight the complex linguistic landscape of the Rabha community, emphasizing the significance of language in shaping their identity and facilitating communication within and beyond their community.

### 3.7. Religion and Festivals

The Rabha community's religious practices reflect a blend of traditional Animism and influences from neighboring communities. While they maintain their conservative beliefs and customs, they have increasingly participated in idol worship, such as Durga Puja, and other festivals. Their traditional practices involve worshiping spirits associated with natural objects and rituals tied to agriculture, hunting, and healing. However, their clan-based totemic connections to forest plants and animals have gradually eroded due to ecological disturbances, resulting in a cultural shift. The Rabha community celebrates a diverse range of festivals, including traditional agricultural-based events like Baikho and Grawmbuda, as well as religious festivals such as Rontak and Kalipuja. They also observe major Indian festivals like Durga Puja, Diwali, and Janmashtami. Key Rabha festivals include Baikho, Langa Mara, Farkhanthi, and Dadon Mela, showcasing their rich cultural heritage.

### 3.8. Health Care

The Rabha community's healthcare practices vary by location. While most villages utilize rural health centers, older individuals in forest areas of Alipurduar district often prefer traditional treatment methods. In contrast, Rabhas in non-forest villages predominantly access modern medical facilities in government hospitals, with 80-90% availing these services. Awareness and utilization of government health facilities are higher in Christian-dominated villages.

### 3.9. Economic Development and Livelihoods of the Rabha Community

The economic development and livelihoods of the Rabha community are critical aspects of their overall well-being. Traditionally, the Rabhas have relied on agriculture, forest-based activities, and manual labor for their livelihood. However, with changing times, they have diversified their income sources, engaging in occupations such as farming, dairying, and small-scale entrepreneurship. Despite these advancements, the community still faces challenges related to poverty, limited access to credit, and inadequate infrastructure. Assessing the economic progress of the Rabhas is essential to identifying areas for improvement and developing targeted interventions that can enhance their livelihoods and contribute to their socio-economic development.

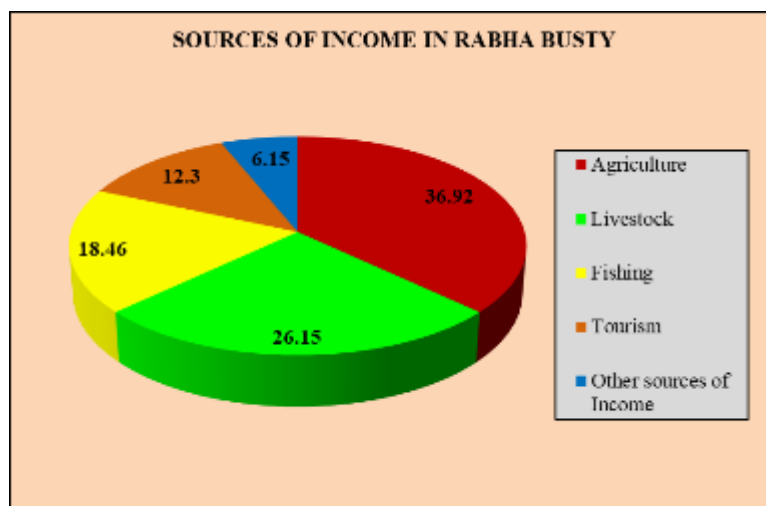
### 3.10. Economy

The Rabha community's economy has transitioned from a subsistence-based, forest-dependent livelihood to agriculture-based survival. Due to deforestation and insufficient forest resources, they have shifted to alternative livelihoods, with many working as agricultural laborers, fishermen, weavers, and animal husbandry practitioners. Despite agriculture being the primary occupation, most Rabhas are landless. A small percentage of educated and affluent community members have ventured into tertiary activities and business, but this remains limited. The following Table 6, showing the occupational Structure of the Rabha Busty.

**Table 6** Occupational Structure of Rabha Busty

Sources of Income	Number of Houses	Percentage (%)
Agriculture	24	36.92
Livestock	17	26.15
Fishing	12	18.46
Tourism	8	12.30
Other sources of Income	4	6.15
Total Households	65	100

Source: Field Data

**Figure 5** Rabha Busty Livelihood Sources

The Figure 5 represents occupational structure of the Rabha community reveals that agriculture is the primary source of income for 36.92% of households, followed by livestock (26.15%), fishing (18.46%), and tourism (12.3%). A small percentage (6.15%) relies on other sources of income. This data highlights the community's diversification of livelihoods beyond traditional agriculture.

### 3.11. Housing Condition

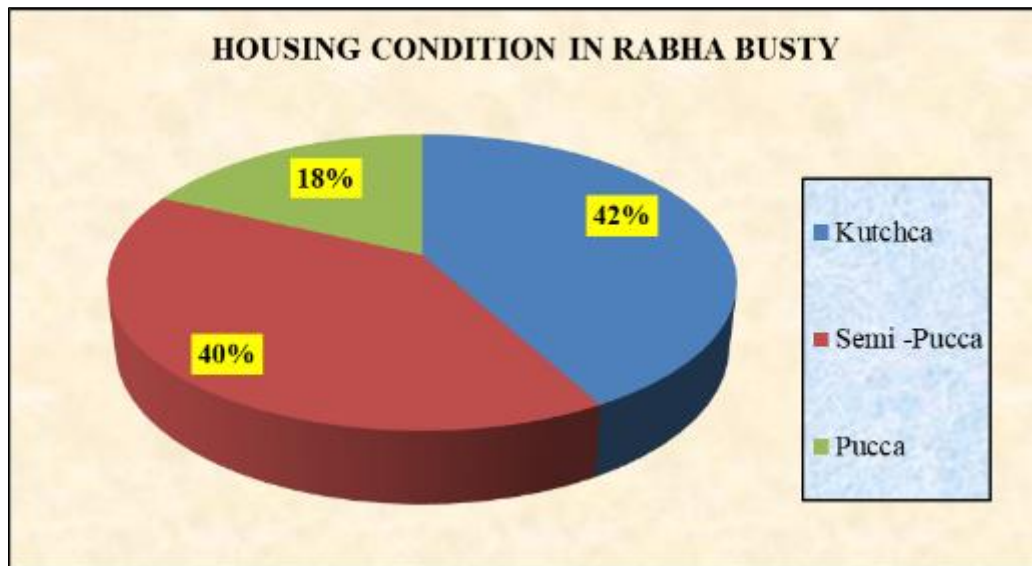
The housing conditions of the Rabha community reveal a pressing concern, with many households residing in makeshift dwellings or kutcha houses, often lacking basic amenities such as sanitation, clean water, and electricity. The prevalence of poor housing conditions is closely linked to poverty, limited access to resources, and inadequate infrastructure. This not only affects their health and well-being but also perpetuates social and economic disparities. Improving housing conditions through sustainable and culturally sensitive initiatives could significantly enhance the quality of life and dignity of the Rabha community, ultimately contributing to their overall socio-economic development and progress.

**Table 7** Type of houses in Rabha Busty

House Type	No. of Household Respondents	Percentage (%)
Kutchca	27	42
Semi -Pucca	26	40
Pucca	12	18
Total	65	100

Source: Field Data





**Figure 6** Rabha Busty Housing Conditions Overview

The survey of 65 households reveals a concerning picture of housing conditions among the Rabha community in North Bengal. A substantial proportion of households, 42%, reside in Kutchca houses, which are often makeshift or temporary structures, while 40% live in Semi-Pucca houses, lacking access to sturdy and secure dwellings. Meanwhile, only 18% of households enjoy the benefits of Pucca houses, highlighting a significant gap in housing quality. These findings emphasize the urgent need for targeted initiatives to upgrade housing conditions, improve living standards, and enhance overall well-being. Bridging this housing disparity is essential for promoting socio-economic development and ensuring a dignified life for the Rabha community.

The Rabha community's economic system has undergone significant transformations, profoundly impacting their daily lives and livelihoods. Changes are evident in various aspects, including attire, dietary habits, income patterns, expenditure, housing, healthcare practices, and marketing systems, all influenced by technological advancements. Agriculture remains their primary source of livelihood, with a notable shift from traditional Jhum cultivation to settled agriculture. This transition has had far-reaching consequences on their entire livelihood process. Furthermore, educated Rabha individuals are increasingly diversifying their occupations, engaging in secondary and tertiary sector activities, reflecting a gradual shift towards a more diversified economy.

### 3.12. Challenges, Opportunities, and Potential for Rabha Community Development

The Rabha community in North Bengal, India, faces a multifaceted set of challenges and opportunities that significantly influence their socio-economic development. The challenges include limited access to quality education and healthcare, economic marginalization due to lack of employment opportunities, and environmental degradation resulting from deforestation and loss of traditional livelihoods. Additionally, the community struggles with land alienation, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to credit and markets. Despite these challenges, opportunities exist for sustainable development through initiatives such as eco-tourism, skill-based training, and preservation of traditional knowledge and cultural heritage. The community's rich cultural traditions and natural resources offer potential for entrepreneurship, economic growth, and cultural tourism. Effective governance, community engagement, and targeted interventions can help mitigate the challenges and unlock the opportunities, ultimately enhancing the socio-economic progress of the Rabha community. By leveraging these opportunities and addressing the challenges, the Rabha community can work towards a more sustainable and equitable future, preserving their cultural identity while improving their livelihoods and overall well-being.

### 3.13. Major findings

- The study reveals a notable demographic profile of the Rabha community, with a predominantly young population and a male-female ratio of 55.6% to 44.4%.
- The community exhibits a mix of traditional and modern practices, with a shift from joint family systems to nuclear families and increased adoption of modern healthcare facilities.

- Education is transforming the community, with a significant proportion of younger generations pursuing formal education and diverse occupations.
- The linguistic profile shows a remarkable degree of multilingualism, with most individuals speaking multiple languages, including their native tongue and other local languages.
- The community's economic system has undergone significant transformations, with a shift from traditional Jhum cultivation to settled agriculture and diversification of occupations.
- The study highlights the prevalence of poor housing conditions, with 82% of households residing in either Kucca or Semi-Pucca houses, lacking basic amenities.
- The community faces challenges related to poverty, limited access to credit, and inadequate infrastructure, which hinder their socio-economic development.

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## 4. Suggestions

### 4.1. Targeted Educational Initiatives

Implement programs to improve educational infrastructure, teacher training, and access to quality education, particularly for girls and women.

### 4.2. Healthcare Interventions

Enhance healthcare facilities, awareness, and utilization of government health services, especially in rural and remote areas.

### 4.3. Economic Empowerment

Promote sustainable livelihoods; provide access to credit, and support entrepreneurship and skill-based training to improve economic prospects.

### 4.4. Housing and Infrastructure Development

Implement initiatives to improve housing conditions, provide basic amenities, and upgrade infrastructure, including roads, sanitation, and clean water.

### 4.5. Cultural Preservation

Support preservation of traditional knowledge, cultural heritage, and linguistic diversity, while promoting modernization and development.

### 4.6. Community Engagement and Participation

Encourage community participation in decision-making processes, planning, and implementation of development programs to ensure their needs and perspectives are addressed.

### 4.7. Collaboration and Partnerships

Foster partnerships between government agencies, NGOs, and community organizations to leverage resources, expertise, and support for sustainable development.

By implementing these suggestions, the Rabha community can overcome challenges, capitalize on opportunities, and achieve sustainable socio-economic development while preserving their cultural identity.

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## 5. Conclusion

The study offers a nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural and economic progress of the Rabha community in North Bengal, highlighting their dynamic responses to changing contexts. The community's advancements in education, healthcare, and economic diversification are notable, yet challenges persist, including poverty, limited access to resources, and inadequate infrastructure. The findings emphasize the need for targeted interventions and community engagement to address these challenges and capitalize on opportunities for sustainable development. By harnessing their cultural heritage and natural resources, the Rabha community can strive towards a more equitable and sustainable future, balancing modernization with preservation of their unique identity. This research contributes to the discourse on tribal development, informing policy and practice that promotes inclusive and sustainable growth.

## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

### *Statement of informed consent*

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The study was conducted after obtaining requisite permissions from the local Panchayat authorities and securing informed consent from the heads of households, who provided voluntary agreement to participate in the research.

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