

## Empowerment of Dooars based Mech and Rabha Women

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DOI:10.54741/SSJAR/6.2.2026.334



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Empowerment of tribal women refers to strengthening their participation in the overall society. Due to modernisation, they are influenced by their neighbouring communities and the role of women is also changing gradually. The aim of this study was to understand the present status of women in the Mech and Rabha societies. The study considered these two tribes for the study because both of them belonged to the same race, named the Bodos. The Rabhas are traditionally matriarchal and the Meches are the most developed tribe of Alipurduar in terms of educational and socio-economic conditions. Data have been collected from some Mech and Rabha-dominated villages of this district and specially from those areas where these two tribes live together. The study aimed to explore the participation of Rabha and Mech women in education, employment, religious practices, politics and the decision-making process within the household as well as in the larger society. For this, focus group discussions were conducted in some schools of the study area and later purposive sampling was followed to gather data through participant observation, semi-structured and unstructured interviews. In addition, all their religious and cultural events were attended to understand the role of women during these events. Transcripts were prepared for each participant including event. Later, Braun and Clarke (2006)'s thematic analysis was applied to analyse data qualitatively.

**Keywords:** mech, rabha, women, empowerment

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<b>Manuscript Received</b> 2026-02-02	<b>Review Round 1</b> 2026-02-20	<b>Review Round 2</b>	<b>Review Round 3</b>	<b>Accepted</b> 2026-03-07
<b>Conflict of Interest</b> None	<b>Funding</b> Nil	<b>Ethical Approval</b> Yes	<b>Plagiarism X-checker</b> 4.32	<b>Note</b>
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## 1. Introduction

In Indian society, empowering women means their economic security, skill formation, capacity building and equal participation in decision making process. Empowerment provides women with equal opportunities in all sectors where gender equality plays an important role in uplifting them (Das, 2016). In order to know about women's empowerment among the tribes, the study considered the Rabhas and Meches because traditionally the Rabhas followed matriarchy but now they are experiencing a transition towards patriarchy. Whereas the Meches are considered the most developed tribe in terms of education and socio-economic condition in Dooars and they always followed patriarchy till now (Datta, 2018). This study will shed light on the empowerment of Rabha and Mech women living in Dooars while Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar are the primary districts of this region. These two tribes are among the major tribes of Alipurduar. Roy (2017) stated that 70% of Rabhas living in West Bengal are settled in Alipurduar. At the same time, Datta (2018) found that Meches mainly live in Alipurduar and they are the most developed tribe in this region. Therefore, this study has limited itself to Alipurduar only. The Rabha and Mech tribes are one of Indo-Mongoloid, Tibeto-Burman origin communities living mostly in Assam and the Dooars of West Bengal. The Bodos migrated from Patkoi Hills between India and Myanmar and gradually settled in entire Assam, North Bengal and Bangladesh. They were further subdivided into four groups: Mech, Rabha, Koch and Garo. So, they all belong to the same race called the Bodos (Sanyal, 1973). However, those who are identified as Meches in North Bengal are recognized as Bodos in North-East.

Traditionally, Rabha women holds the highest position in the family as well as society, they weave, do fishing, cultivate, collect fuel wood from nearby forest and takes major economic decisions independently (Chowdhury, 2021). Mongolians were one of the first communities who used to do spinning and weaving, so the Rabhas and Meches were not exceptional. The Rabha women used to plant and grow cotton and made cotton thread out of it to make their cloths. They proudly wear *Lufun* (self-made and hand-woven cloths) such as *Kambang*, *Fakchek* and even sell these products outside (Biswas, 2014; Roy, 2017; Datta et al., 2022).

In contrast Mech women used to harvest Endi worms and cocoons to make thread out of it to make Endi shawl, popularly known as *Endisri*. Their famous handloom products are *Dokna*, *Gamcha*, *Muga*, silk cloths etc. what they make for their own use. However, long ago they used to export these products to neighboring countries like China and Tibet. In Rabha and Mech society, all women need to learn weaving from their mother and grandmother, otherwise they were neglected in their respective societies (Basumatary, 2013; Roy, 2017; Mandal, 2018). In Assam, Rabha women are now using modern tools in spinning and weaving rather than indigenous methods (Narzary, 2014). Apart from weaving, they also made bamboo handicrafts such as hand fan, broom, pots, fishing items, railing etc (Roy, 2017). On the other hand, Mech women were very efficient at soil folk craft, but now the art has decreased in their society (Narzary, 2019). Now, Rabha women from forest villages are benefitting from several Self-Help Groups. These groups are helping them to meet emergency financial needs such as medical treatment, marriage, house construction, house and shop repairing, trade investment, paddy business, purchasing animals etc (Datta et al., 2022).

Agriculture is the main source of livelihood in the Rabha and Mech societies. Apart from handloom and agriculture, fishing is also a source of income in their society and women do community fishing with handmade tarps. 32% middle aged (35-50) Rabha women do fishing for both consumption and earning purposes. They use bamboo made fishing implements such as *Jhakoi*, *Burung* and *Tapei* to catch fish from streams, rivers, rivulets, wetlands etc (Roy et al., 2018). According to Roy et al. (2024), 39% Rabha middle-aged women are involved in fishing apart from agriculture. Long ago, they used to go to hunting as well. They compete with men in the medical field also, they can treat difficult health issues such as cholera, fractures, malaria and help pregnant women during delivery (Roy, 2017). Mech women are also very efficient traditional healers and they can treat jaundice, skin issues, cough, cold, headache, malaria etc. They collect different parts of different plants like Tulsi, banana, marigold, *Siju*, tamarind, basil, jasmine etc. to prepare medicines (Mwchahary and Nath, 2015; Daimary and Nath, 2018; Goyary, 2019; Boro, 2022; Boro, 2024; Roy, 2024). Mech women specially the married ones go to fishing regularly during the rainy season.

Fishing is more of a fun to them than food. For this, they use *Jekri*, a split bamboo conical-shaped artefact along with *Kobai*, a split bamboo pot to keep fish (Basumatary, 2013; Bhuyan et al., 2021).

Rabha households were originally followed matriarchal system of inheritance and the younger daughter gets the major share of the property and the single daughter gets the lion's share of the property. Now they are transitioning towards patriarchy, which is not a new phenomenon, M. K. Raha mentioned this transition in 1989. So, women are only getting properties such as ornaments, household materials and weaving implements, nothing else and men who are not shifting to their in-law's houses, are getting the right over land (Narzary, 2014; Chowdhury, 2021). In forest villages, the youngest daughter used to get movable properties of her mother while the immovable properties like land and house were owned by the forest department. But now private lands of tribes including Rabhas are awarded to men as per the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Act, 2006 (Datta et al., 2022). In Andu Bana Basti, near Chilapata, Rabhas are now getting *patta* for their lands. However, lands belong to women, but government officials are mentioning names of males on paper due to their lack of awareness and Rabhas are also not correcting them due to their transformation towards patriarchy (Chowdhury, 2021). On the other hand, the Meches follow patriarchy from the beginning which is why only the son had the inheritance right over his father's land and daughters had no right (Sarkar, 2022). If a man had no son, his entire property was passed on to his nearest male relative (Sarkar, 2017; Mandal, 2018; Roy, 2022).

Now, political and social awareness among the Rabha women has improved that increased their participation from household decision-making to legal rights awareness. However, their involvement in community-level governance and larger politics is restricted due to traditional gender norms (Chowdhury, 2021; Datta et al., 2022; Parvin & Guha, 2025). In recent years, Rabha women have begun to be elected in Garm Panchayet alongside men in forest villages (Datta et al., 2022). Mech women played a crucial role in the political sector from the beginning. When the 'All Bodo Students Union' was demanding a separate state for Bodos during the 1970s.

Pramila Rani, the first female Bodo leader, played a significant role at this time. The Bodo women formed the 'All-Assam Women Welfare Federation' along with the 'All Bodo Women Welfare Federation'. Fifty to sixty Bodo girls from each district of Assam completed basic nursing training to treat injured people during 1989-90 (Basumatary, 2013).

Due to matrilineal tradition, the Rabha women hold higher positions in the family as well as in society. The newborns are identified and named after their maternal 'Gotras' or 'Housuk' as per matrilineal custom. (Biswas, 2014; Roy, 2018; Chowdhury, 2021). In Andu Basti, Alipurduar, Chowdhury (2021) found that there were 1000 Rabha males for 1081.63 Rabha females. They accept a girl child gracefully because they carry forward the lineage. Despite patriarchal tradition, in the Mech society, women have always been highly valued and having a girl child was considered a matter of pride. In case of marriages, the groom must be younger than the bride (Singh & Basumatary, 2017). Earlier in the Mech society, mothers used to settle marriages and a day before the marriage, people from the groom's side visit the bride's house and pay the bride price called "*Jan*" and bring her to the groom's house, where the marriage took place (Sanyal, 1973; Sarkar, 2017). Basumatary (2013) found that educated Mech women are now selecting their spouse if they don't prefer arranged marriages. They do not have more than three children and they usually prefer a nuclear family to enjoy privacy and freedom.

Traditionally, Rabha and Mech are both Animistic, while the non-converted ones are highly influenced by neighbouring Hindus. *Rungtuk* and *Basek* are the major deities of the Rabhas. The foundation of '*Runtuk Baye*' is traditionally undertaken by the female head of the family and the responsibility of its worship rests with her throughout her entire life (Biswas, 2014; Roy, 2017). Rabha women worship their deities as the main priest (*Michik Deosi*) along with the male priest (*Miya Deosi*) (Roy, 2017). Whereas in the Mech society, only men could become priests and women mainly worship household deities. There is a separate altar for the "*Mainao*" Goddess, where only women can worship. Earlier, there was another type of religion called "*Moni Bathou*", a blend of "Bathou" and "Vedic traditions" initiated by Mech women (Basumatary, 2013).

Dance and music play an important role in Rabha and Mech society like other tribal communities. Most Rabha women of all ages wholeheartedly participate in both singing and dancing (Biswas, 2014; Datta et al., 2022). Women from both the communities dominate folk dances completely while the men mainly play traditional musical instruments. The famous dance forms of Rabhas like fishing dance, cultivation dance and war dance are performed by women during cultural events, what are supposed to be performed by male dancers, indicating women's power in Rabha society (Roy, 2017; Roy et. al., 2018; Datta et al., 2022). Although *Bharigan* is a famous performing art of Assam-based Rabhas but women cannot perform there. Only men can perform there as Sutradhar (the lead singer) or *ojha* or any other funny character (Bhuyan et al., 2024). In case of Meches, women dance and sing with the group in an open space during festivals, conferences, ceremonies or to welcome guests. *Bagurumba* is their most popular and attractive dance form (Basumatary, 2013).

The Rabhas mostly live near forest areas, so often they cannot attend schools due to the fear of wild animals such as elephant, leopard, bison etc. The government schools mainly follow Bengali and private schools follow English and, in both cases, Rabha students are not getting the opportunity to study in their mother tongue. In addition, Rabha girls are discouraged to attend schools in most families rather they are engaged in household activities. They are also married at a very young age (Das & Roy, 2024). In contrast female literacy among the Mech people was always higher than that of other tribes living in the Dooars (Datta, 2018). It is quite visible in their lifestyle, family size and concern about their children's education (Basumatary, 2013). Bhattacharyya (2019) explored two different Mech villages: agriculture (Mahakalguri) and forest-based (Mech Basti in Apalchand forest) to know about the present condition of Mech women. In the forest village, it was found that the nearest schools and hospital are far away from them. The students often face wild animals as the road to school passes through an elephant corridor. They are mostly first-generation learners and their mothers are involved in agriculture, rearing, selling home-made liquors, collecting *salh* leaves from forest and make different items from it.

While in an agricultural village, most of the women were educated and many are benefitting from self-help groups, some are also working in health sectors, ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services), teaching etc. Basumatary (2013) found that the less educated and unskilled Mech women are joining informal sectors such as handloom, handicraft, bidi factories, garments factories, construction sites etc.

## 2. Objectives

To understand the empowerment of women in the Rabha and Mech communities living in Alipurduar.

## 3. Methodology

In order to conduct this study, the researcher has chosen a few Mech and Rabha-dominated villages of Alipurduar such as Mendabari, Chilapata, Satali, Poro Basti, Nimitjhora and Rajabhatkhawa. Data have been collected through focus group discussions from the Rabha and Mech students. Later, purposive sampling was followed to collect data through participant observation, semi-structured and unstructured interviews. All the religious and cultural events of each community were attended from April 2025 to February 2026 to understand the role of women. The purpose of the study was clearly explained to each participant and their consent was obtained before the interviews were recorded. Collected data was handled with strict confidentiality and the identities of participants were not disclosed anywhere. After collecting all the data, transcription was prepared for each participant as well as the event. The transcripts were reviewed several times to understand the context. Later, the thematic analysis method was applied given by Braun and Clarke (2006), to identify themes and analyse data qualitatively.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### Theme 1: Educational Empowerment

#### Sub-Theme 1.1: Academic Performance

**Case 1:** Koushik Das, a 47-year-old assistant teacher from Nimitjhora High School shared his twenty-two years of experience with Rabha and Mech students:

*Earlier, Rabhas were not interested in education at all. They were happy with their forest-based lifestyle and parents were also not aware about their children's academic performance. Now parents are sending them to school but they are not as aware as Mech parents. If five boys and five girls from the Rabha community took admission in the 5<sup>th</sup> standard, only one boy along with all the girls will complete their school education. On the other hand, I have seen that Mech students are most developed in this religion from the tribal community, none of the other communities can beat them. Girls from both the communities are more serious about education than boys specially the Rabha boys.*

**Case 2:** In Rajabhatkhawa Junior High School, it was found that Rabha students mostly get passing marks in the secondary exam and very few of them got above 45% means second division.

It was also found that girls from Mech and Rabha both communities, are more sincere compared to boys regarding their career. For example, researcher met a Rabha boy of the 10<sup>th</sup> standard at Nimtijhora High School who was reluctant to be something in life. He was saying multiple times that he wants to be nothing, even to his teachers with a shy smile. Girls on the other hand, attend classes regularly, whereas boys hardly come to school and leave before school hours. In most schools, the ratio between boys and girls was very poor. For example, there were ten girls and two boys from the secondary level in Mendabari High School from the Mech community in Mendabari. Whereas there were six Rabha girls and no Rabha boys from secondary level in Rajabhatkhawa Junior High School during the focus group discussion. The Teacher-In-Charge of the school said in this regard:

*I have seen that Rabha boys are not much serious about studies, they don't come to school on a regular basis and are very addicted to mobile phones nowadays. Girls, on the other hand, are very innocent, clam and soft-spoken. They are very sincere specially the Christian ones. However, most Rabha parents marry off girls at a very young age, even before completing their studies and after marriage, they don't continue their studies. In many cases, I meet the parents and scare them that I will inform the police if they marry off their daughters before they turn eighteen. Although girls sometimes ran away so I cannot blame parents always.*

### **Sub-Theme 1.2: Aspiration**

**Case 1:** In Dipsing Academy, the researcher met only one Rabha girl from secondary level, who was actually from Cooch Behar and stayed at the hostel, said that she wants to be an IAS officer. Two Mech girls, one of her classmates said that they wanted to be lawyer and professor respectively. The other Mech girls said that they haven't decided anything yet but their parents said they can pursue any career that they liked.

**Case 2:** During all the focus group discussion with the Mech students in government and private both kind of schools, it was always found that Mech girls were more confident than boys regarding their career choices. Even those who haven't decided anything yet, still they had the courage to believe they will achieve something before getting married. Mostly they are interested in defense, teaching, nursing and banking sectors.

In Mendabari High School, researcher met a Mech girl, who loudly said that she wants to be a commando and she was aware of the criteria to achieve this position. She said:

*After the secondary board exam, I will take admission in Balika Siksha Mandir High School in Alipurduar. I will stay in hostel and join the NCC and simultaneously, I will prepare myself for the Indian Army.*

Rabha girls of the same school said that many local Rabha girls of their locality are completing their college education but the number is less compared to Meches. Their family members also encourage them to complete their studies before getting married. They said that they want to join NCC after school and later want to join the army like most of the Mech girls. It was always noticed that tribal students are mostly interested towards defense. However, the Rabha girls were not as confident as the Mech students. They were a little bit shy while discussing their future plans. Same thing was noticed in Rajabhatkhawa High School, only one girl said she wants to be a dancer while six of her female classmates were silent.

### **Theme 2: Social Empowerment**

#### **Sub-Theme 2.1: Political Involvement**

Long ago, there were Mandals or village headman who managed the Rabha and Mech villages and only men used to hold this position, even though the Rabhas followed matriarchy system.

Now both the communities have evolved politically so the elected Pradhan and Panchayet take that responsibility. However, the Mech women were active in politics from a long time but the participation of Rabha women is started in recent years due to women's seat reservation.

**Case 1:** In Dakshin Poro, the researcher met an ex-Panchayet named Priyanka Rabha. She shared her experience:

*I am actually from Barobisha and came here to Poro after my marriage. After some years of my marriage, I became the Panchayet. I had no idea about politics. My father-in-law was active in politics and some members of his party told him to nominate me as I was more educated than local Rabha women and the seat was reserved for scheduled tribe women at that time. So, I nominated and won (smiled). I have attended some meetings and that's it. Now the seat is reserved for scheduled caste people so the present panchayet is not from our community.*

**Case 2:** Birendra Nath Katham was the first MP of the Jalpaiguri district, which was reserved for scheduled tribes (Mandal, 2006). It shows Meches actively participated in modern politics from the beginning so did the women of the community. Biman Narjinary, a Mech journalist from Satali said in this regard:

*Meches were the rulers of this region. So naturally they have leadership qualities. There are many Mech women involved in politics, who worked as Pradhan, Panchayet even you may hear of Snigdha Saiba, the Sabhadhipati of Alipurduar, who was elected in 2023. She was my school friend and was working as a school teacher. There is also Chandra Narjinary, Pradhan of Mendabari Gram Panchayet. They both are from the 'Rai' family of the Mech community, who were the traditional administrators of the Mech communities in different areas.*

**Case 3:** Jyoti Suba, a panchayet member of Mendabari Gram Panchayet, shared her experience in politics:

*In 2013, first time I became a member and now it's my 3<sup>rd</sup> tenure. At that time, women didn't want to be involved in politics. But now there are nine women out of eleven members in the panchayet while five of them are Meches and there is also one Rabha woman.*

*There are twenty-two females out of thirty-four members in the Kalchini panchayet samiti and most of them are Meches.*

### **Sub-Theme 2.2: Financial Independence**

Both Mech and Rabha women are financially empowered but the pattern is different.

**Case 1:** Many Rabha women are involved in agriculture, fishing and handicraft while educated Mech women are working in teaching mainly and a few are employed in private sector, while the less educated Mech women have moved to urban cities where they are working in call centers, parlors even as house helps.

In case of Rabhas, the Teacher-In-Charge of Rajabhatkhawa school said:

*I have been working here since 2014 and I have seen that the Rabha people are highly dependent on forests. So, they don't move to urban cities like other tribes, not even the men.*

**Case 2:** Mech women only do fishing for fun which was noticed only in Satali but fishing is a tradition of Rabha women. Now they don't do much fishing due to strict forest rules and the fear of wild animals. Rabin Rabha, a 50-year-old Rabha Men from Andu Basti near Chilapata, said that:

*Two years ago, 10-12 women went to fishing in winter and one of them died due to a bison attack as she couldn't see the bison due to fog.*

Badal Rabha, a 70-year-old Businessman from Dakshin Poro, who runs a small hotel near the picnic spot of Poro, said:

*I started my hotel with 15-16 Rabha women, now they own their hotel. There are many women from my village who work at the picnic spot. Every day 10-12 Rabha women of my village go to fishing in the Poro river in a very early morning even before sunrise. They mainly do fishing for consumption but sometimes sell them to locals also if they have excess.*

**Case 3:** Mech women are less involved in agriculture compared to Rabhas. Gita Rabha, a 40-year-old teacher of Dipsing Academy, said in this regard:

*Rabha women are very active in agriculture. Plugging is done by men but soiling, harvesting these things are done by women.*

The same thing was noticed multiple times during field visits in Rabha Basti, Mendabari. For example, if there was one man in an agricultural field, there were twenty women engaged in the same work.

**Case 4:** Many Rabha women are still practicing handloom in Rabha Basti near Mendabari while the researcher found very few aged Mech women from Khoyardanga, who are involved in handloom. They came from Assam, where Mech women still learn handloom and later, they married in Bengal. So, they continued the legacy but their children find it less profitable so they don't learn these traditional practices anymore. A Rabha handloom worker in Mendabari said:

*Many women from our village do handicrafts, they purchase raw materials from Jaygaon (a nearby town) and sell the products. The young girls are still learning handicraft from their mothers if their mother knows handicraft and continues it till now. Otherwise, they don't, but some of them learn from their neighbours if they are interested.*

**Case 5:** In Mendabari, a few Rabha women recently started honey cultivation for which they got a 25000/- subsidy under the Agricultural Technology Management Agency (ATMA) scheme, a central government initiative. Biman Narjinary, a Mech journalist from Satali, who helped women to get this subsidy, said:

*We try to raise awareness among the women about various government schemes to empower them. Earlier, we have also helped sixteen women to get their handloom machine and tried to export these products outside as well. I have seen women keep their words compare to men, who always have excuses and cannot meet their goals on time.*

The Meches always prioritized education for which many of them including women are working as teachers in primary and high school. They used to live in agricultural villages whereas Rabhas preferred forest villages more where they used to work in forest based unorganized sectors like fishing, forest labourers etc. During field visits, it was also seen that many Mech and Rabha women are working as traditional healers, own small shops and sell rice beer to support the family. It was always found that they spend their earnings on their children's educational expenditure.

### **Sub-Theme 2.3: Participation in Community Activities**

In order to know about the participation of women in community activities, the researcher has attended many events in each community. The West Bengal-based Hindu Meches mainly celebrate *Bwisagu* and the converted Meches as well as Rabhas attend only religious conferences. While the Hindu and Christian Meches also participate actively in the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. On the other hand, a few Hindu Rabhas celebrate *Runtuk* Puja. Earlier, they used to worship *Runtuk* only at their households but now to preserve their religion from conversion, they established a *Runtuk* temple at Andu Basti near Chilapata. The researcher has attended all these events from April 2025 to February 2026. At first, *Bwisagu* was attended at Rupmoni Bathou temple, Pashchim Satali on 21<sup>st</sup> April, 2025 with a puja, where only women and their young girls attended, including a few female priests, although the main rituals were performed by a male priest. A cultural celebration also took place on the same day on a large ground beside P. C. Mittal High School. A Mech cultural group from Bodoland performed there along with different local tribal communities such as Rabha, Toto, Garo, Limbu and Adivasi. Eighteen Mech girls performed on instrumental music and seven Mech boys played traditional musical instruments, all wore their traditional attire but in West Bengal, only Mech women wear the traditional dress. On the same day, four Rabha men sing the traditional songs while playing their traditional instruments and twelve Rabha women perform their famous fishing dance form. It was quite visible that all the Mech members from Assam were young and all the local Rabha artists were middle-aged. Later, researcher attended two religious conferences in November 2025 and it was found that most of the women from different tribal communities wear their traditional attire, the men only wear jeans, casual pant, shirt or t-shirt. They never wear their traditional attire and a few of them only wear the traditional *Gamocha*. During *Rungtuk* puja, it was seen that the main priest was a male and the locals said in this regard:

*We have a female priest in our village, but she learned the rituals from her husband who was a very knowledgeable priest but she doesn't know much. So, we bring the main priest from Kamkhyaguri. He was actually from our village but moved there after marriage due to matriarchic family structure.*

The event was attended on 14 February 2026 at Andu Basti near Chilapata forest, which started around 7 am. First, some Rabha men collected bamboo from the nearest village and then one of them prepares some beautiful bamboo items for the puja while women cleaned the *Rungtuk* temple premise along with the outer area where they worship their traditional deities in four small temples. The women cut fruits and vegetables and prepared *Chakot* (homemade liquor), together while men prepared the khichuri and sabji as prashads. It was noticed that there were two male priests and two aged females helped them during the rituals. All the women wore their traditional attire although they modified it. After completing the rituals, only the women offer *Chakot*, dhup-dhuna and *chnamrito* to the deities. They all have *Chakot*, dance together, men played dhol, flute and kartal while singing one of their traditional songs. A few aged women were also smoking bidis but men didn't.



**Figure 1:** Rabha women are dancing during *Rungtuk* puja in Andu Basti, Chilapata



**Figure 2:** Mech women worshipping at Rupmoni Bathou temple, Satali

### Sub-Theme 2.4: Women Safety

Women's safety is the foundation of women's empowerment as it ensures their active participation in social, economic and political life. Researcher herself is a woman and she collected data walking alone in different Rabha and Mech villages and she always felt safe in their surrounding and never face any kind of disturbance. Many of their settlements were in deep forest areas specially the Rabha settlements such as Poro Basti, Mendabari and Rajabhatkhawa. Even though there was electricity in the houses, there was no street light. So, when the Rabha and Mech women were asked about whether they felt any discomfort while walking alone, they always said that they never felt any awkwardness. During data collection in Rabha villages, it was noticed that many women alone bring cows home from distant pasture in late evenings. In Poro Basti, Rabha women go for fishing daily at a very early morning. In forest villages, women said that they never walk outside at night due to the fear of wild animals but not the fear of any criminal activities. In backward Mech villages, women said that they never heard of any news related to snatching, molestation, domestic violence etc. Women from both communities said that they rarely heard of any domestic violence-related news once in ten or fifteen years. They couldn't even recall the incidents. During religious or cultural events, they consume homemade liquor together and enjoy the events fully, but none of them disrespect women. These cases show how safe tribal women are in their locality which is the true essence of women's empowerment.

### Theme 3: Household Environment

#### Sub-Theme 3.1: Gender Dynamics in Family

**Case 1:** Rabhas of West Bengal are facing a transition from matriarchy to patriarchy for a long time and when the women of Rabha Basti, Mendabari was asked about it, a female school teacher of Dipsing Academy replied that:

*I think now Rabha men want to dominate us (smiled).*

Her Rabha male colleague interfered and said:

*Not like that, because we are adopting other people's culture.*

**Case 2:** The less educated local handicraft workers and folk artists of the same area said:

*We support patriarchy. Earlier, men used to stay at home and they didn't go outside much. But if they cannot work outside, then the family cannot grow financially (here, they meant to say that in other communities, men mainly work outside, so they developed. Therefore, Rabha men need to work outside and then only they can be developed as women cannot go far away from their village).*

**Case 3:** In case of decision-making, they all said:

*Long ago, the Rabha women used to make all the major decisions on their own but now we consider men's opinions as well and make decisions after consulting with our husbands.*

**Case 4:** The same thing was noticed in Mech households as well specially in backward areas, where children irrespective of their gender learn household activities such as cooking, washing and cleaning from a very young age. Because in these areas, both parents had to leave home early morning to work outside. For example, in Rajabhatkawa School, all the Rabha students said that their mothers are more involved in agriculture, they mainly bring fuels from the nearby village and cook for us. Fathers work as daily labourers, so they have to leave home at an early morning to work in the Alipurduar town area.

**Case 5:** In Mendabari, research met a poor Hindu Mech family who had only one male child and the father said the reason:

*Due to poverty, my wife and I have decided that we will not have any more children.*

It shows how much he considers his wife's opinion. In most of the Mech houses, it was found that, husband and wife both sat together and freely shared their opinion on different issues. The Mech women were very opinionated, irrespective of their educational qualifications. Whereas the aged Rabha women were more confident than the young women who were very shy and less interactive.

### **Sub-Theme 3.2: Parents Priorities in Education**

**Case 1:** In Rabha families of Mendabari, it was noticed that they send their male child to English medium private or government schools, they prefer to send their daughters to government schools. When a Rabha woman of Rabha Basti, Mendabari was asked about it, she replied:

*Most of the nearby Rabha parents send their children to the nearby English Medium School which is Dipsing Academy. Those who can afford it, send both their children to the private school. However, most of the girls study in the local government school (During focus group discussion in Dipsing Academy, initially there were 8-10 Rabha boys from different classes and all were locals while only one Rabha girl was there, who was not local and stayed at hostel). My elder son is studying at one of Mission school in Barobisha and my younger daughter is in the local government primary school.*

Will you also send her to the same school where your son is studying now?

*No... we cannot afford the expenditure.*

Why so?

*Because girls are getting different scholarships in government school and boys don't. However, girls are more sincere and studious than boys (smiled).*

A Rabha girl student of Mendabari High School said the same thing that her younger brother studies in Dipsing Academy, the nearby English medium private school. When she was asked about it, she replied:

*I asked my parents why they sent my brother to the private school and not me; they told me that they were struggling financially when I was young. So, they couldn't afford to send me there.*

However, her eyes spoke louder than her parents didn't prioritize her education compared to her brother.

**Case 2:** This kind of situation was never found in Mech families living in the study areas. They always prioritized education irrespective of gender, those who can afford, send all their children to English medium private schools otherwise they choose reputed government schools such as Mahakalguri Mission High School, McWilliam High School, Newtown Girls High School etc. and send them to school hostel. In case of English medium schools in Mech dominated villages, there were almost an equal number of boys and girls of the Mech community such as in Dipsing Academy, Cornerstone School and Kendriya Vidyalaya (Hasimara).

It was also noticed that boys from both communities studying in government schools, cannot clear the secondary board exam and move to other states to join odd sectors such as construction sites, hotels, garages etc. Therefore, both teachers and parents tend to have higher expectations for girls than for boys.

## 5. Conclusion

Despite many obstacles, these tribal women have come a long way and with good educational support they can be empowered in each field. The problem with the present system is that it is not empowering people. The boys are not completing their education and they migrate to other states while the women specially the Rabhas are marrying at a very early age. The Mech girls were more ambitious than the Rabha girls, but the economic opportunity is very limited. The present education system needs to be bilingual in tribal dominated areas because language is the main constraint and the system needs to include their traditional informal education system such as ayurveda, agriculture, handicrafts etc. in the school curriculum as per the recommendations of NEP 2020. It will not only empower women economically, but also ensure their ethnicity as well. Moreover, when women are educated, the entire community will be developed, as a mother is the first teacher of the child.

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