

A probe into the Socio-Economic and Cultural Transformation of the Forest Dwellers Rabha Community of Jalpaiguri District, West Bengal, in the 21st Century

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Abstract: Rabha' or 'Rava's are indigenous tribal group of dooars of West Bengal, Assam and Meghalaya state. They are also well known for their primitive and unique cultural heritage and livelihood practice like other tribal groups such as Toto, Mech, Bodo, Garo, and Bhutias of north Bengal. Rabhas are the second biggest forest village dwellers tribal community after Oraon in jalpaiguri district. A smaller part of Rabha people can speak, write and read two or more languages but traditional Rabha language are used among inter-community conversation. After the formation of new district Alipurduar, in Jalpaiguri the Ravas dwell only in four forest villages namely in Gosaiarhat forest village, Khuklung Basti, Mela Basti and Mogalkata forest village. They have an unrivaled socio-cultural characteristics and traditions. Some socio-cultural as well as economic transformations have been found among the forest dwellers Rabha communities. Maximum numbers of older generation follow and maintain their tradition, cultural heritage and various rituals strongly. Whereas majority of younger generation are influenced by Bengali culture and globalised fashion trends but in social festival or in community programme they feel comfortable to use their own language, dresses, ornaments and other traditions

Key Word: Tribal groups; Forest dwellers Rabha; Socio-Economic transformations; Forest village.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Rabhas are inherently very simple, honest, peaceful and quiet in nature. According to H.H. Risley and A.C.Haddon's classification of Indian Races- the Rabhas are classified as mongoloid race. On the basis of socio-cultural-economic status Rabhas of north Bengal are of two types i) The forest dwellers Rabha unit and ii) Plain land Rabha unit. In jalpaiguri district 18.80 percentages of total population belong to ST community. Among this S.T community 1.72 percentages form the Rabha community or **0.325** percentages of total populations of Jalpaiguri districts constitute Rabha community. (Census2011

). The indistinguishable characteristic feature of Rabha forest village is that it consists of only one community. In 2014 after carving Alipurduar district a total number of four forest Villages remain in jalpaiguri where the Rabha communities reside. Out of four forest villages 3 lies under the jurisdiction of Dhupguri police station and only one is located under Banarhat police station of Dhupguri block. Basically a greater part of this community are engaged themselves in primitive types of economic activities mainly hunting, pasture and food gatherings like fishing, grazing, collecting fire woods, fruits, mushrooms, seeds, medicinal plants and wild honey from the forest. Though slash and burn type of agriculture is the main practicing method of forest dweller Rabhas but now-a-days they are obliged to engage themselves with intensive subsistence types of agriculture.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The prime objectives of the study are

- a. To find out the present day socio-cultural and economic condition of Rabha community and its transformation in 21st century at district level.
- b. To understand the present livelihood pattern and changing life style of Rabhas in Jalpaiguri district.
- c. To suggest some remedies for their socio-economic up gradation to improve the socio-economic conditions of the Rabha forest dweller community.

III. DATA BASE AND METHODOLOGY:

The study is purely based on primary data sources collected from Khuklung, Gosairhat, Mogalkata and Mela Basti forest villages through primary field survey. Primarily schedule methods are used to collect the primary data. Except schedule method interview, observation and a pilot survey was done to gather more detail information about the study area. A total number of 50 house hold has been selected randomly and various questions were asked to the respondents to collect the socio-economic and cultural data. Secondary data is also collected from different open, reliable and authentic sources like Census data, States Bureau of applied economics and statistics, published articles and many government websites. After compilation, suitable cartographic techniques were used to represent the data. MS Excell-2007 software was used for data analysis and QGIS desktop 3.12.1 software was used for making the required maps.

The entire study can be divided into 2 segments

- i. Study of socio-cultural aspects: In this section different Socio-cultural parameters are analysed and discussed and
- ii) Study of economic aspects: In this segment economic features are analysed and interpreted.

IV. SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE:

A literary survey confers the important and valuable guide to ascertain or prescribe a problem. Multifarious researchers invest their time to continue different studies allied to the topic. Some conspicuous exertions are quoted below.

a. A.Biswas(2014) focuses the socio-cultural and livelihood scenario of Rabhas of Coochbehar district. He also focuses on the changing economic pattern of Rabha population and various traditional religious and social customs of Rabha community.

b. S.Bhattachariya(2015)observed that the Rabhas are mainly distinguished in two units namely the Forest dweller Rabha and plain land Rabha .He further interpreted the occupational, anthropological, social customs and rituals of the Rabha community.

c. M.Roy(2018) expounded the social movement of Rabha community and their backwardness in North Bengal.

d. A. Sarkar and Dr.T.Mistri in their first study depicted the changing pattern of traditional livelihood of Rabha community and in the second study they explained how the traditional religion of plain land Rabha community has been transformed and dimensional change happened.

V. LOCATION OF THE STUDY AREA:

The study area Jalpaiguri district is located in the northern part of the state of West Bengal. The district has international borders with Bhutan and Bangladesh in the northern and southern part respectively and district border with newly formed Alipurduar in the east, Coochbihar in the south eastern and Darjeeling in the west and north western. The latitudinal extension starts from 26°15'47" North to 26°59'34" North and longitudinal extension starts from 88° 23' 02" East to 89° 07'30" East. There are 7 blocks and 9 police stations consists 2 subdivisions namely Jalpaiguri Sadar and Mal after the formation of the new district Alipurduar from it. It has an area of 3386.18 sq.km and total population is 2381596 as per 2011 census. Presently four forest villages of this district are situated around Moraghat forest range where the forest dwellers Rabha units are exist.

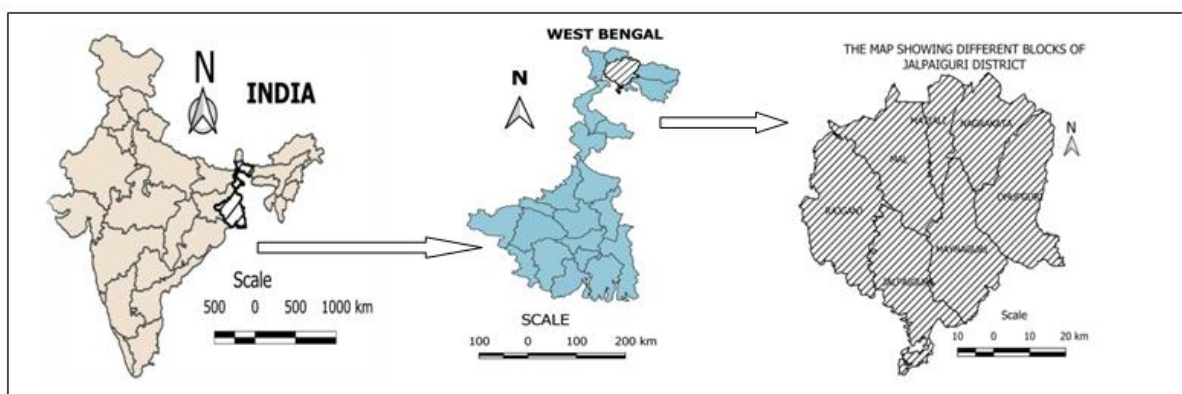


Figure1. Location map of the study area

VI. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

The Rabhas are indigenous tribe of North Bengal. Many scholar and researcher execute their valuable research on the Rabha community those are living in plain areas but significantly it is observed that there is a little research gap about the socio-cultural and economic transformation of forest dweller Rabhas. In this paper I have tried to find out the present socio-economic conditions and its transformations of forest dweller Rabhas those who reside in Jalpaiguri district.

VII. DATA ANALYSIS:

Population: According to 2011 census report in India 8.60 percentages of 1210 million people belong to S.T's of which 75 percentages are of primitive types and they are mainly engaged in food gathering and primitive subsistence types of agricultural based activities. In Jalpaiguri district 30.72percentages of the total 2381596 population is S.T category. The following table shows the total, S.T's and Rabha population during last six decades.

Table no.1

Census year	Total population	S.T population	% of S.T populations	Population of Rabha tribes	% of Rabha to total S.T's
1961	1359292	354741	26.10	4506	1.27
1971	1750159	428595	24.49	6578	1.53
1981	2214871	491791	22.20	4196	0.85
1991	2800543	589225	21.04	5282	0.90
2001	3401173	641688	18.87	10244	1.60
2011	3872846	731704	18.89	12586	1.72

Source: Census of India, 2011.*including Alipurduar districts.

From the above table it is clear that percentages of S.T population have been decreasing for last five decades but percentages of Rabha population have been increasing for last two decades. The following table shows the no of house hold and total population of Rabhas in Jalpaiguri districts

Table no.2

Name of the forest villages	Total no of household	Total population	Male	Female
1.Mogalkata Forest Village	92	658	323	335
2.Gossaihat Forest Village	88	407	213	194
3.Mela Basti Forest Village	66	384	183	201
4.Khuklung Basti Forest Village	105	535	254	281

Source: Rabha development Council.

Figure 2. Showing the actual location of four Rabha forest villages in Google Map which is situated around the Moraghat forest range.

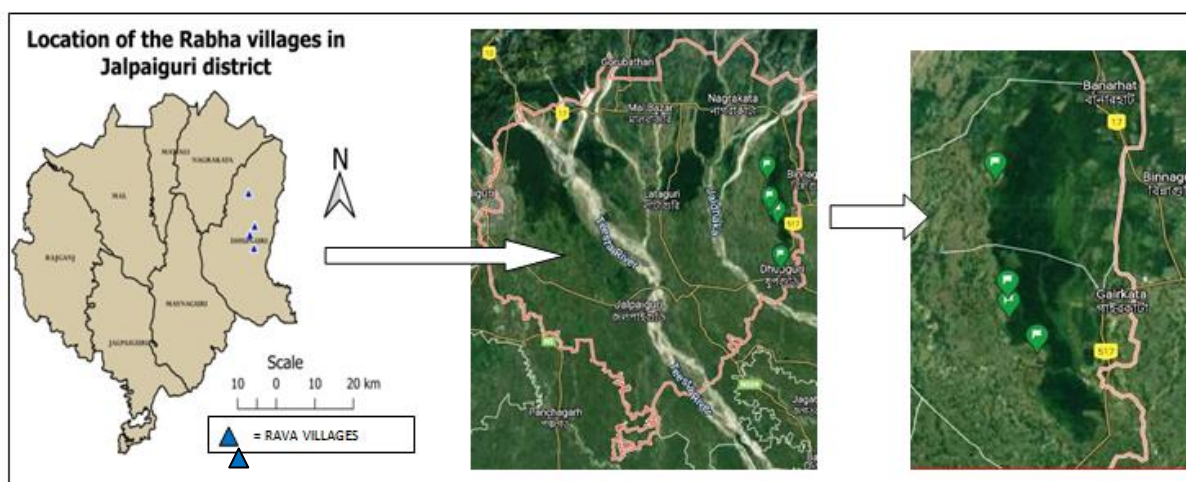


Figure 2. Showing the actual location of four Rabha forest villages in Google Map which is situated around the Moraghat forest range

Among the four forest villages total numbers of house hold is 351 where 1984 inhabitants are living. Mogalkata has the highest population and Mela basti has recorded the lowest number of population.

Age-Sex Composition: Age- sex composition may be summarised in terms of age groups. The age sex composition strongly influences the rate of growth and it has a profound effect on the social and economic conditions (Majid Husain, 1994). Door to door survey has shown different types of information regarding age sex composition of forest dwelling Rabha tribes. It is found that the majority of the population up to 18 years are girls. But after eighteen the number of females are not much higher in respect of male compare to the lower age group. The longevity of Rabha women is not so high than that of men. Perhaps the people those who die at the age of 51-66 year are due to the malnutrition, diarrhea, anemia, cholera and malaria.

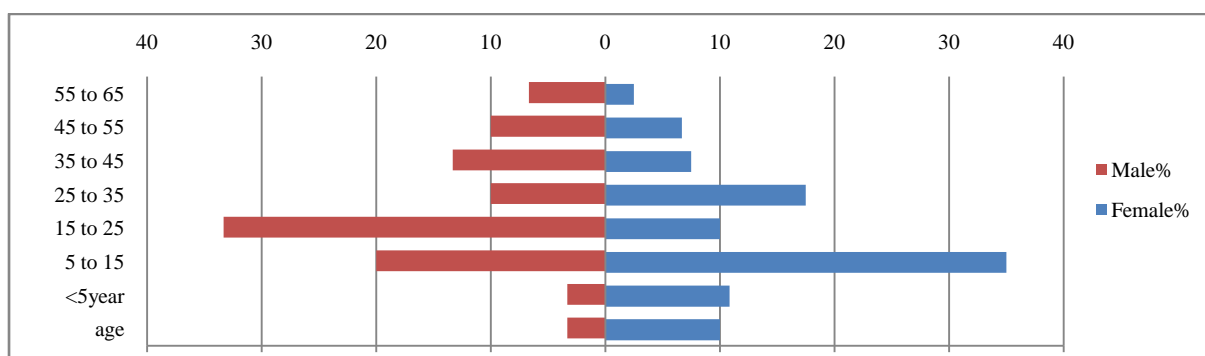


Figure-2. Age-sex pyramid showing the age-wise composition of male and female population

Another significant characteristic is that if we follow the pattern of the line of male population then the line is smooth where as in female population the line is irregular in the age group between 15-19. It is because of the area is of rural character and early marriage is the main reason of this irregularity.

Literacy status: Literacy reflects the socio-economic and cultural development of an ethnic group or a community. In general there is a positive correlation between the literacy rates and the standard of living. In the study area it has been founded that out of 210 persons, 144 persons are literate and 66 persons are illeterate. Therefore, the rate of literacy is 68.57 percentages. That mean 31.43 percentages people are recognised as illeterate category. As the rabhas are not concerned about the importance of professional degree, They have lack of interest acquiring such professional qualifications. According to the qualification the literate persons can be divided into following categories.

Table no.3

Educational Qualification	Number	Percentage	Percentage to total literate
Primary	63	30.00	43.75
Upper Primary	23	10.95	15.97
Secondary	30	14.29	20.83
Higher Secondary	21	10.00	14.58
Graduation	6	2.86	4.17
Post Graduation	1	0.48	0.69
Total Literate	144	68.57	100
Total Illeterate	66	31.43	--

Source: Field survey, March 2020

From the above table it is clear that upto 43.75 percentage among the literate persons have only a primary level educational qualification. 15.97 percentages have upper primary level of education, 20.83 percentages have secondary class level and 14.83 percentages have the higher secondary level of education. Only 4.17 percentages acquired under graduate qualification. In the whole study it is found that only one person qualify post graduation level of education which hold a very negligible 0.69 percentages.

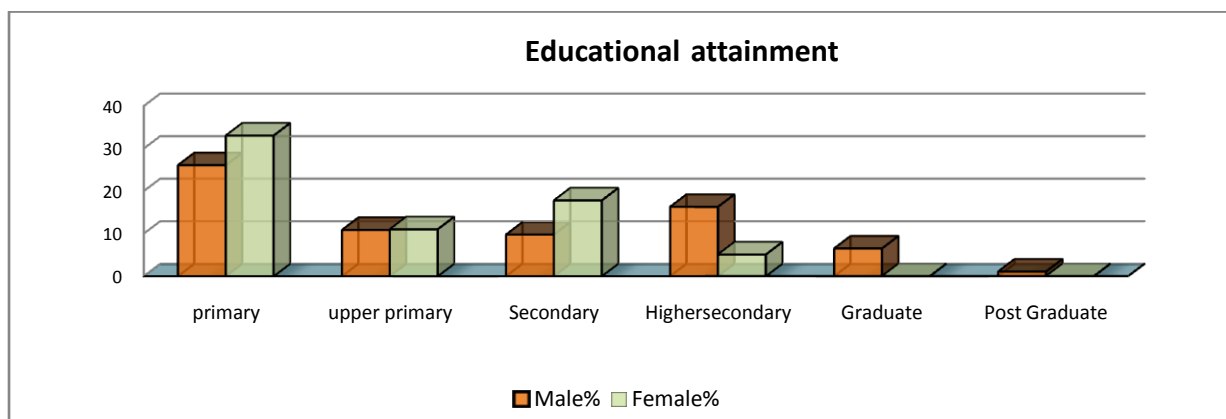


Figure 3. Showing the educational attainment of Rabha male and female population.

Another significant observation is that the literacy rate is low among the female population. 92.41 percentages of the female education are confined at the level of secondary class. there is no post graduate degree is found among the Rabha women.

Age of Marriage: Age of marriage is an efficacious measure of social development of a particular ethnic group or a community. In India the minimum legal age of marriage is 18 years for women and 21 years for men, since 1978. Though low age of marriage is legally prohibited in our country but still it is threadbare in some tribal groups in this country. In this study it is found that among the total respondents of 54.29 percentages recorded as married and rest 45.71 as unmarried. Among the married people 50 percentages are male and 50 percentages are of female population. The age of marriage of these couples are as bellows.

Table no.4

Age groups	Male		female	
	Numbers	Percentages	Numbers	Percentages
Below 18 years	18	31.58	36	63.16
18- 25 years	35	61.40	21	36.84
Above 25 years	04	7.02	0	00
Total	57	100	57	100

Source: Field survey, March 2020

From the above table it is obvious that among the Rabha community the child marriage is more common and it is significant that 63.16 percentages of Rabha women's are married below the age of 18 years and no one is married after the age of 25 years. Within the age of 25 years majorities of them are got married. Low literacy rate, less awareness, social backwardness and less spirited intension to acquire a profession leads this kind of marital status among the Rabha women. Very recently the child marriage has become thoroughly unpopular among the Rabhas due to rising of their education level. There is no widow or divorcee persons were found among the respondents of this study area.

Religious transformation: From the outset the Rabhas were animistic and they have some conventional religious belief and practices. (Roy,2016). In the early1940's of this state, a strong movement for the hinduism took place among the Rabha community to get a place in the Hindu society (Sarkar and Mistri, 2018). After 1970's the majority of Rabha tribes were transformed into Christian. Mainly this religious transformation took place among Rabha's in 1980's when baptize christian priests came from Meghalaya, Assam and Manipur to convert them into christianity and offered them a better education and prestigious level of social living. In this study it is observed that all forest dwellers Rabha communities of jalpaiguri district belong to baptize Christianity. The Rabhas' belief is that after taking Christianity they gained missionaries education, which is able to remove the prevailed superstition and prejudice from their social life. In this study it is also revealed that 25percentages of the guardians prefer the missionary's school for their Childrens education. Though the Rabhas are converted into Christian, still they belief some socio-animistic rituals which are deeply entrenched into their life.

Occupational structure: Primarily the occupational pattern of the forest dweller Rabhas are mainly conventional which was established on the basis of forest activities like collecting foods, honeys, fruits, various types of roots, tubes, fuel woods and hunting. Earlier they practiced shifting cultivation but now-a-days more

than 80 percentages forest dweller Rabhas are accustomed to primitive subsistence types of agriculture. Still now very few of them are dependent on collecting, gathering and hunting based activities. The chief crops grown are paddy in the rainy season and jute in summer. In the winter agricultural fields are remained empty but for their own need they grow some vegetables for their daily consumptions. No fruits or vegetables are sold by them at local market. The Rabhas ranch various types of domestic animals like cow, goat, pig and birds like pigeon, cock and ducks. The cattle's are reared for milk and pig, goat or cocks are reared for meat and egg. Most of the forest dweller Rabhas are skilful in hunting and fishing techniques. They developed different kind of traps, tools and fishing nets or hooks.

Recently some of them are engaged as forest guard by the forest department. Others are working as agricultural labour in the nearest village. It has been found that some young educated Rabhas migrated as labour to other states mainly in Kerala, Rajashthan, Gujrat and Maharashtra. The Rabha women are also engaged themselves as daily wage based agricultural labour or in construction labour. The wages of Rabha labours are very low only 150-200 rupees for women labour and 250-300 rupees for men labour per day. With the help of modern education they are now able to compete with contemporary society. Now they have the capability to get the Government jobs like School teacher, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) workers, MSK teacher, Rural Health Centre employee, Govt. Transport workers, 'Asha Kormi' and other official workers(Sarkar, Mistri 2018).

From the above table it is found that among the working people 82.11 percentages are engaged in agricultural based activities, 4.07percentages in private sector, 6.50 percentages in Government and 4.07 percentages are in other activities. Participations in high level profession or in public administrator among the Rabha's are nil up to last decade. Though negligible percentages are engaged in Government services but their grade is C or less than it. Very recently one joined as assistant professor of Bengali in a college.

Table no.5

Category	Number	percentages
A. Worker	123	58.57
i. Farmer /Agricultural labour	101	48.10
ii. Private job	05	2.38
iii. Government job	08	3.81
iv. Others	09	4.29
B. Non-worker	87	41.43
Total	210	100

Source: Field survey, March 2020.

Transformation of Social life: On the basis of habitat Rabhas are of two types the forest dweller Rabhas and the plain land Rabhas. The social life of forest dweller Rabhas and the plain land Rabhas are little bit different. Though the forest dweller Rabhas strictly maintain the matrilineal society system but the women give enough independence to the men that they can freely choose what they like. Some unique traditional music and dances are highly developed among the forest dweller Rabha groups. Rabhas perform their traditional singing and dancing on the occasion of their Community fest. Young generation are naturally more active and prominent in these festivals. They also put on their best cloths and silver ornaments in social occasion.

Most of the Rabha families are consists of husband wife and younger children. In earlier the Rabhas followed the tribal endogamy but right now it is not strictly maintained. Polygamy among the forest dweller Rabha is not only encouraged but also strictly banned. Marriage is strictly prohibited between near sanguinities kin. When husband dies the widow can marry but in majority cases they don't do so. Though in earlier a marriage is not consummated until a child is born to their pair but recently this system is abandoned. Rituals related to death and birth are more complicated in the earlier but now a days they follow the western Christianity funeral rituals.

Income structure: Economic structure is an effective tool to know the present scenario of a society, fail to which a society could not be progressed. An intensive study of early income and expenditure among fifty families reveals that out of 210 respondents 114 is economically active and rest 96 is dependent. On the basis of yearly income eight income groups has been created. It is found that more than 80 percentages of economically active people yearly earns less than 90 thousand rupees only because majority of them are mainly engaged in primary activities. 13.16 percentages yearly earns between ninety to one lakh eighty thousand. Only 2.63 percentages yearly earns more than two lakhs but less than four lakhs.

Table no.6

Income groups (Rupees/year)	Less than 30,000	30,000- 60,000	60,000- 90,000	90,000- 120,000	120,000- 150,000	150,000- 180,000	180,000- 210,000	More than 210,000
% of earning people	7.89	39.48	26.32	5.26	2.63	10.53	5.26	2.63

Source: Field survey, March 2020

The above table shows the various income level of forest dweller Rabha community, in earlier the Rabhas are engaged only in agricultural activities, but now-a-days their engagement in economic activities has been transforming and its reflects on income structure.

Major findings and problems of the study area:

The foregoing analysis shows that the four forest villages are slow but steadily developing in terms of social, economy and population. During the survey time different problems were noted. However, accessibility is being retarded of Khuklung and Mela basti due to the lack of bridge over the river 'Nonai'. As a result the habitats are bound to use the forest roads which are not suitable after the sun set. There is a dearth irrigation which hampers rabi cultivation. The economy of these forest villages purely based on agricultural activity but the farmers practice a primitive type of cultivation. Regarding the distribution of land there is considerable number of people who remain land less or very little amount of land. Jute cultivators almost every year face the problems of marketing of their products. At the time of harvesting paddy the crops are frequently destroyed by wild animals especially by elephants. Though Government has sunk a few masonry wells for drinking purpose but it is inadequate. Educational qualification among the Rabha women is not satisfactory especially at the age group of 40-50 years and above. Majority of Rabha people earn less than ten thousand rupees per month. There is a lack of consciousness about family planning birth control and health diseases.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS:

As like as plain dweller Rabhas, the forest dwellers Rabha's have a rich distinct cultural tradition, language and organisation but they are characterized as economically and socially backward class. Particularly it is observed that a brief transformation occurred among the Rabha tribes of Jalpaiguri district. It is undeniable that after taking Christianity there is a noticeable social development occurred among the Rabha community but not comprehensively. In 21st century the Rabhas begin to realize that they have the same ability and efficiency like others community to achieve some new things. Gonath Rabha received 'Banga Bhushan' award for his Excellency to preserve the Rabhas cultural tradition in 2017. Babucharan Rabha joined as an assistant professor in a College. Therefore it can be concluded that the transformation among the Rabha tribes has been noteworthy than any other major tribes of Jalpaiguri district in socio-cultural as well as in economic perspective.

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