

Social and Economic Status of Koch-Rajbongshi Women in the Dhubri District

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Abstract

This paper explores the social and economic status of Koch-Rajbongshi women in the Dhubri district of Assam, India. Drawing on field surveys, historical records, and secondary data, it analyses the dual dimensions of tradition and transition affecting these women. The Koch-Rajbongshis, an indigenous community with deep cultural roots, have historically followed patriarchal norms, which have shaped the roles and rights of their women. The paper evaluates the current socio-economic condition of these women in light of education, employment, health, property rights, and political participation. It finds that while there are signs of progress through literacy, governmental schemes, and self-help initiatives, significant gender disparities still persist due to socio-cultural constraints and economic dependencies. The study calls for targeted policy interventions, increased representation, and empowerment programs to uplift the condition of Koch-Rajbongshi women in Dhubri.

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1. Introduction

The status of women is a key indicator of a community's socio-economic development. Among the various ethnic groups in Assam, the Koch-Rajbongshis hold a distinct cultural and historical position. Concentrated predominantly in the western Assam districts, especially Dhubri, they represent a blend of tribal and caste features, with a rich legacy of language, dance, and customs. However, women in this community have traditionally been confined to subordinate roles. This paper seeks to analyze the current socio-economic position of Koch-Rajbongshi women in Dhubri, assessing the factors influencing their lives and identifying the barriers to their development.

2. Objectives of the Study

- To assess the social status of Koch-Rajbongshi women in Dhubri district.
- To analyze the economic conditions of women in the community.
- To identify key challenges and opportunities related to women's empowerment.
- To recommend strategies for improving their socio-economic standing.

3. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative and quantitative approach. Data were collected from:

Primary Sources: Interviews with 50 Koch-Rajbongshi women across five villages in Dhubri (Gauripur, Golakganj, Bilasipara, Tamarhat, and Halakura).

Secondary Sources: Census data, academic articles, NGO reports, and government records.

Sampling was purposive to ensure coverage of various age groups, marital statuses, and educational levels.

4. Historical and Cultural Background

The Koch-Rajbongshi community traces its ancestry to the ancient Kamata Kingdom. Historically agrarian and organized along clan lines, the society has been patriarchal in structure, though women participated actively in domestic and some ritualistic affairs. Cultural practices like Bihu and Bhawaiya songs often reflect women's roles and emotions, indicating their deep engagement in social life, albeit with limited authority.

5. Social Status of Koch-Rajbongshi Women

5.1 Education

Traditionally, girls' education was undervalued. However, recent decades have seen an increase in literacy, especially among younger women. According to the 2011 Census: Female literacy in Dhubri is 58.1% (lower than the national average of 65.5%).

Among Koch-Rajbongshi women in surveyed areas, around 35% had completed secondary education, but less than 10% pursued higher education.

5.2 Health and Sanitation

Healthcare access remains a challenge:

Many rely on local health workers or quacks due to inadequate healthcare infrastructure.

Malnutrition and maternal health issues are prevalent.

Menstrual health and reproductive rights remain taboo subjects in many families.

5.3 Marriage and Family Life

Early marriage is still practiced in some parts, though declining: 28% of interviewed women were married before the age of 18. Women typically take on the role of homemaker, caregiver, and agricultural laborer. Decision-making in family matters is predominantly male-driven, though educated women have started gaining more say.

5.4 Social Participation

Participation in cultural and community events is active, but leadership roles are rare: Women play central roles in traditional festivities but seldom occupy organizing roles. Panchayat representation is mandated by law but not always meaningful in influence.

6. Economic Status

6.1 Occupation and Income

Most Koch-Rajbongshi women in Dhubri are engaged in

Agriculture and Allied Activities: Nearly 60% work as unpaid family laborers in farming or fishing.

Weaving and Handicrafts: A traditional skill among women, yet mostly unorganized and underpaid. Government schemes: Some are beneficiaries of MGNREGA or self-help groups (SHGs), but awareness and access remain limited.

6.2 Property Rights

Property inheritance laws, though legally equal, are rarely enforced: Women typically do not claim ancestral land. Dowry practices are declining but still subtly influence marital arrangements.

6.3 Self-Help Groups and Microfinance

SHGs have emerged as a vital source of economic empowerment. Participation in microfinance schemes has helped women earn small incomes and gain confidence. However, many groups lack sustainability due to poor training and limited market access.

7. Government Schemes and Impact

Several government initiatives have targeted tribal and rural women: Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao: Some awareness but minimal implementation.

National Rural Health Mission (NRHM): Institutional deliveries have increased.

Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana: LPG access has improved cooking conditions.

Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS) and National Livelihood Mission: Impact is limited due to lack of targeted outreach.

There is a need for community-specific schemes tailored to cultural and economic realities.

8. Challenges Faced

Patriarchal Mindset: Deep-rooted gender roles limit mobility and choice.

Low Awareness: Limited knowledge about rights, government schemes, and legal protections.

Economic Dependency: Few income-generating opportunities.

Health Infrastructure: Lack of hospitals and female health workers in remote villages.

Social Stigma: Widows, divorcees, and single mothers face isolation and economic hardship.

9. Case Studies

Anima Roy (Bilasipara): A widow who runs a small weaving unit through a SHG, supporting her children's education.

Ruma Das (Tamarhat): A college graduate who teaches in a private school and leads women's awareness campaigns in her village.

Lalita Barman (Gauripur): A panchayat member facing resistance in exercising her role due to male dominance in local politics.

These examples show the possibilities and limitations of empowerment within the current framework.

10. Recommendations

Enhance Education: Scholarships, digital learning centers, and girl-friendly infrastructure in schools.

Vocational Training: Tailored to traditional skills like weaving, dairy, food processing.

Legal Awareness: Campaigns on property rights, domestic violence laws, and reproductive rights.

Healthcare Access: Deploy more female health workers and mobile clinics.

Political Mentoring: Training women panchayat members to enhance governance participation.

Monitoring and Evaluation: Localized surveys and data collection to track development indicators.

Conclusion

The social and economic status of Koch-Rajbongshi women in Dhubri reflects a complex interplay of tradition, underdevelopment, and emerging change. While many women remain caught in cycles of poverty and gendered expectations, some have begun to break barriers through education and self-employment. For holistic upliftment, it is essential that policymakers, NGOs, and community leaders work together to dismantle structural inequalities and foster a more inclusive development model.

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