



ISSN: 3049-2017
 IJMH 2026; 3(1): 11-15
 © 2026 IJMH
 www.themultijournal.com

Received: 18-12-2025
 Accepted: 08-01-2026
 Publish : 09-01-2026

Pintu Sarkar

Department of History,
 Chhatrapati shahu ji maharaj-
 University

Tribal Communities: An Ancient Communities Surrounding With River Torsha Of Cooch Behar District

Pintu Sarkar

Abstract

The tribal communities of Cooch Behar district in West Bengal represent an important component of the region's social and cultural diversity. Although numerically smaller compared to other population groups, these communities possess a rich heritage rooted in traditional occupations, indigenous knowledge systems, and close interaction with nature. Major tribal groups such as the Santal, Oraon, Munda, Rabha, Mech, Garo, and Bhumij have historically inhabited the rural and forest-adjacent areas of the district, maintaining distinct languages, customs, rituals, and social institutions. Over time, processes of modernization, economic change, and cultural interaction with non-tribal populations have significantly influenced their traditional way of life. Issues such as limited educational opportunities, economic marginalization, and cultural assimilation continue to affect these communities. At the same time, government initiatives and local efforts toward social welfare, education, and cultural preservation have contributed to gradual socio-economic transformation. This study seeks to provide an overview of the tribal communities of Cooch Behar district by examining their demographic presence, cultural practices, livelihood patterns, and contemporary challenges, highlighting the need for inclusive development that respects and preserves their unique cultural identity.

Key words: Tribal, Scheduled Tribes, Indigenous Culture, Social Structure, Culture, Heritage, Tribal Identity,

Introduction:

Cooch Behar district, situated in the northern part of West Bengal, is a region known for its cultural plurality and historical significance. Alongside the dominant Rajbanshi and Bengali populations, the district is home to several tribal communities that contribute significantly to its social and cultural landscape. These tribal groups, recognized under the Scheduled Tribes category, represent some of the earliest inhabitants of the region and possess distinct identities shaped by their close relationship with nature, land, and traditional ways of life. The major tribal communities found in Cooch Behar include the Santal, Oraon, Munda, Rabha, Mech, Garo, Bhumij, and a few smaller groups. Though their population is relatively limited compared to other tribal-dominated districts of India, their presence is socially and culturally important. Most tribal settlements are located in rural and semi-rural areas of the district, where people traditionally depend on agriculture, forest-based activities, and daily wage labor for their livelihood. These communities have preserved rich traditions expressed through folk songs, dances, festivals, rituals, and indigenous languages. However, modernization, economic challenges, and cultural assimilation have brought changes to their traditional lifestyles. Education, migration, and interaction with non-tribal populations have influenced their social structure, while efforts by the government and local organizations aim to improve their socio-economic conditions and preserve their cultural heritage.

Methodology

The study of tribal communities in Cooch Behar district involves a combination of qualitative and quantitative research approaches, aimed at understanding

Correspondence:

Pintu Sarkar
 Department of History,
 Chhatrapati shahu ji maharaj-
 University

demographic composition, social organization, cultural practices, and contemporary developments. The methodology is structured as follows:

1. Research Design

The research is descriptive and exploratory, focusing on both historical and contemporary aspects of the tribal communities. It combines secondary data analysis with primary data collection (where feasible) to provide a comprehensive overview of population composition, traditional life, language, customs, social structure, and interactions with regional culture.

2. Data Sources

a) Secondary Data:

- Census data: Primary Census Abstract (2011) and subsequent reports for demographic details, population distribution, literacy, and occupation.
- Government publications: Reports from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and the West Bengal Tribal Development Department for socio-economic indicators, welfare schemes, and Scheduled Tribe listings.
- Academic sources: Books, journal articles, and ethnographic studies detailing tribal culture, history, and social structure.
- Online resources: Verified websites such as the Anthropological Survey of India and tribal welfare portals for updated information on tribal communities.

b) Primary Data (if applicable):

- Field surveys and interviews: Structured and semi-structured interviews with tribal elders, community leaders, and residents to understand customs, rituals, and changes in socio-economic life.
- Observation: Participatory observation of village life, festivals, and occupational practices to gather qualitative insights into daily life and cultural identity.

3. Sampling

Since the tribal population in Cooch Behar is scattered, a purposive sampling method is adopted for detailed qualitative insights. Villages with a higher concentration of specific tribal groups—such as Santhals, Oraons, Rabhas, Mech, and Garos—are prioritized for field visits. For secondary data, the entire district-level dataset is analyzed to provide quantitative patterns and comparisons.

4. Data Collection Tools

- Questionnaires: For collecting demographic, occupational, and educational data.
- Interview guides: To record oral traditions, festivals, and cultural practices.
- Observation checklists: For documenting housing, dress, handicrafts, and rituals.

5. Data Analysis

- Quantitative data: Analyzed using statistical tools to present population distribution, literacy, occupational patterns, and tribal composition. Tables, graphs, and maps are used for clarity.

- Qualitative data: Thematic analysis is used to interpret cultural practices, social organization, challenges, and interaction with regional cultures. Comparative analysis highlights differences and similarities among the various tribal groups.

6. Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent is obtained from participants in case of primary data collection.
- Cultural sensitivity is maintained when observing rituals, festivals, and community practices.
- Data is presented objectively, respecting the privacy, identity, and dignity of the tribal communities.

7. Tribal Population and Composition

The tribal population of Cooch Behar district forms a very small proportion of the total population, yet it represents an important component of the district's social and cultural diversity. According to the Census of India 2011, Cooch Behar district had a total population of about 28.19 lakh, out of which only around 18,000 persons were recorded as Scheduled Tribes. This means that the tribal population constituted roughly 0.6 per cent of the district's total population, making Cooch Behar one of the districts in West Bengal with a comparatively low concentration of tribal communities. In contrast, the district has a very high proportion of Scheduled Castes, which numerically and socially dominate the demographic structure. In terms of composition, the tribal population of Cooch Behar is not homogeneous. It consists of several tribal groups who have migrated at different points in time or have traditionally lived in the surrounding regions of North Bengal and adjoining areas of Assam and Jharkhand. Among the important tribal communities found in the district are the Santhal, Oraon (Kurukh), Munda, Bhumij and Kora, many of whom originally migrated as agricultural labourers or forest workers during the colonial period.

7.1 Santhals :

The Santhals in Cooch Behar district form one of the most important tribal communities of the district, although their population is relatively small in comparison to other regions of West Bengal such as Birbhum, Bankura or Purulia. The presence of Santhals in Cooch Behar is largely the result of historical migration during the colonial period, when British administrators brought Santhal families from the Chotanagpur Plateau and Santhal Parganas to work as agricultural labourers, forest workers and helpers in tea gardens and newly reclaimed agricultural lands. Over time, many of these families settled permanently in the district. In Cooch Behar, the Santhals are mainly found in rural areas, particularly in blocks like Tufanganj, Mekhliganj and parts of Cooch Behar-II, where agricultural activities are dominant. They usually live in small village clusters rather than large compact settlements. Their houses are traditionally made

of mud walls and thatched or tiled roofs, though modern materials are increasingly being used.

7.2 Oraon :

The Oraon (Kurukh) community in Cooch Behar district constitutes a small but socially significant section of the tribal population. The Oraons are not indigenous to Cooch Behar; their presence in the district is mainly the result of migration from the Chotanagpur Plateau region, particularly from present-day Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and parts of Odisha. During the British colonial period, Oraon families were brought to North Bengal, including Cooch Behar, as agricultural labourers, forest workers and tea garden labour, and many of them later settled permanently in rural areas. In Cooch Behar district, the Oraons are largely concentrated in rural and semi-rural areas, especially in blocks such as Tufanganj, Mekhliganj and Cooch Behar-II. They usually live in small hamlets or mixed villages along with other tribal and non-tribal communities rather than in exclusively Oraon settlements. Agriculture is the mainstay of their economy, with most Oraon households depending on cultivation, agricultural labour and daily wage work. A section of the population is also engaged in plantation labour and seasonal migration to nearby districts in search of employment.

7.3 Rabha

The Rabha community in Cooch Behar district is one of the indigenous tribal groups of North Bengal and forms an important part of the district's tribal composition. Unlike migrant tribes such as the Santhals and Oraons, the Rabhas have a long historical association with the Duars and the northern plains of Bengal and Assam, and their settlement in Cooch Behar predates the colonial period. They are closely linked with the forested and riverine landscapes of the region, which have traditionally shaped their way of life. In Cooch Behar district, Rabha settlements are mainly found in rural areas, particularly in blocks such as Tufanganj, Mekhliganj and Sitalkuchi, often near forest fringes, rivers and low-lying agricultural land.

7.4 Munda:

The Munda community in Cooch Behar district represents a small but distinct section of the tribal population and is mainly a migrant tribal group. The Mundas originally belong to the Chotanagpur Plateau region of present-day Jharkhand and adjoining areas. Their settlement in Cooch Behar largely took place during the British colonial period, when Munda families were brought to North Bengal as agricultural labourers, forest workers and plantation workers. Over time, many of them established permanent settlements in the rural parts of the district. In Cooch Behar, the Mundas are primarily found in rural and semi-rural areas, especially in blocks such as Tufanganj, Mekhliganj and Cooch Behar-II. They generally live in small hamlets or mixed villages along with other tribal and non-tribal communities. Agriculture forms the backbone of their livelihood, with most households engaged as

agricultural labourers, marginal farmers or daily wage workers.

7.5 Mech

The Mech community in Cooch Behar district is one of the indigenous tribal groups of North Bengal and has a long historical association with the region. The Mech are closely related to the Bodo group of Assam and are considered among the earliest inhabitants of the northern plains of Bengal, including parts of present-day Cooch Behar. Their settlement in the district predates colonial rule and is closely connected with the riverine plains, forests and fertile agricultural lands of the area. In Cooch Behar district, the Mech population is mainly concentrated in rural areas, particularly in blocks such as Mekhliganj, Tufanganj and Sitalkuchi, often near the India–Bangladesh border and along river courses. Their villages are generally small and scattered, and Mech households often live alongside other tribal and non-tribal communities. Agriculture is the principal occupation, with paddy cultivation forming the economic base of their livelihood.

7.6 Garo

The Garo community in Cooch Behar district constitutes a small but culturally distinctive section of the tribal population and is closely linked with the broader Garo population of the Garo Hills of Meghalaya and adjoining areas of Assam and North Bengal. The presence of Garos in Cooch Behar is partly indigenous to the wider region and partly the result of migration over time, especially along forested tracts and river valleys. Their settlement in the district reflects historical movement across political boundaries that were fluid before the colonial period. Socially, the Garo community is well known for its matrilineal social system, which distinguishes it from many other tribes in Cooch Behar. Descent and inheritance traditionally pass through the female line, and the youngest daughter often inherits family property. Clan identity and kinship relations play a central role in social organization, although modern legal and administrative systems have influenced traditional practices.

7.7 Kora

The Kora community in Cooch Behar district forms a small and relatively less visible part of the tribal population of the district. The Koras are mainly known from the western parts of West Bengal and the Chotanagpur region, and their presence in Cooch Behar is largely the result of migration, particularly during the colonial period. They were brought or moved on their own as agricultural labourers and workers in newly reclaimed lands, forests and estates, and gradually settled in rural areas of the district. In Cooch Behar, the Kora population is mostly found in scattered rural settlements, often living alongside other tribal groups such as Santhals, Mundas and Oraons, as well as non-tribal communities. They do not form large compact villages of their own.

7.8 Chakma

The Chakma community in Cooch Behar district constitutes a very small and less prominent section of the tribal population. The Chakmas are originally associated with the Chittagong Hill Tracts region, which now lies mainly in Bangladesh, as well as parts of Tripura, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. Their presence in Cooch Behar is largely the result of migration, especially during the mid-twentieth century, when political changes, displacement and search for livelihood opportunities led some Chakma families to move into different parts of eastern and north-eastern India, including North Bengal. In Cooch Behar district, the Chakma population is scattered and limited in number, without forming large compact settlements. They are mostly found in rural or semi-rural areas, often living alongside other tribal and non-tribal communities.

7.9 Malpahari

The Malpahari community in Cooch Behar district forms a very small and relatively lesser-known segment of the tribal population. The Malpaharis are traditionally associated with the Rajmahal Hills and adjoining plateau regions of eastern India, particularly parts of Jharkhand and western West Bengal. Their presence in Cooch Behar is mainly the result of migration, especially during the colonial period, when members of this community moved in search of agricultural and wage-labour opportunities in the fertile plains of North Bengal. Socially, the Malpahari community follows a patrilineal family system, and kinship ties play an important role in maintaining social cohesion.

8.0 Bhumij

The Bhumij community in Cooch Behar district constitutes a small and migrant section of the district's tribal population. The Bhumij are originally associated with the Chotanagpur Plateau and adjoining regions of Jharkhand, Odisha and western West Bengal. Their settlement in Cooch Behar is mainly the result of migration during the colonial period, when Bhumij families moved or were brought to North Bengal to work as agricultural labourers, forest workers and in other forms of manual labour. Over time, some of these families established permanent settlements in the rural areas of the district. In Cooch Behar district, the Bhumij population is scattered and not territorially concentrated in any particular block. They usually live in mixed villages along with other tribal groups such as Santhals, Mundas and Oraons, as well as with non-tribal communities.

8.1 Doha

The Doha community in Cooch Behar district represents a very small and less well-documented section of the tribal population. The Dohas are generally considered a minor tribal group, and their presence in Cooch Behar is mainly the result of migration rather than long-term indigenous settlement. Historically, members of the Doha community

moved from neighbouring regions of eastern India in search of livelihood opportunities, particularly during the colonial and post-colonial periods, when agricultural expansion and labour demand increased in North Bengal. In Cooch Behar district, the Doha population is highly scattered and does not form compact or exclusive settlements. They usually live in mixed villages along with other tribal communities such as Santhals, Mundas, Oraons and Bhumij, as well as with non-tribal populations.

8.2 Kheuria

The Kheuria community in Cooch Behar district constitutes a very small and comparatively obscure section of the tribal population. The Kheuria are generally regarded as a minor tribal group, and their presence in Cooch Behar is mainly the outcome of migration from neighbouring regions of eastern India, particularly during the colonial period when labour demand increased in agriculture, forest clearing and rural estates. Unlike some indigenous tribes of North Bengal, the Kheuria do not have a long-established historical base in Cooch Behar. In the district, the Kheuria population is widely scattered and does not form compact or exclusively Kheuria villages.

8.3 Megh

The Megh community in Cooch Behar district forms a very small and marginal section of the tribal population and is among the lesser-known tribal groups of the district. The Meghs are generally considered a minor migrant tribal community, and their presence in Cooch Behar is mainly linked to historical migration from neighbouring regions of eastern India in search of livelihood opportunities. Unlike indigenous tribes such as the Rabha, Mech or Garo, the Megh community does not have a long-standing historical association with the district. In Cooch Behar, the Megh population is scattered and numerically insignificant, without forming compact or exclusive settlements.

8.4 Limbu

The Limbu community in Cooch Behar district constitutes a very small and migrant section of the tribal population. The Limbu people are traditionally associated with the eastern Himalayan region, particularly eastern Nepal, Sikkim and parts of Darjeeling district in West Bengal. Their presence in Cooch Behar is mainly the result of migration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Limbu families moved in search of agricultural land, service opportunities and wage employment in different parts of North Bengal. In Cooch Behar district, the Limbu population is scattered and numerically insignificant, without forming compact or exclusive settlements.

8.5 Cultural Identity and Heritage

a) Traditional Life and Occupations

The traditional life and occupations of the tribal communities in Cooch Behar district are closely intertwined with their natural environment, social structures, and cultural

practices. Although the tribal population of the district is small and diverse, certain patterns are common across most groups. Historically, the tribal communities—such as Santhals, Oraons, Mundas, Rabhas, Mech, Garos, Koras, and Bhumijis—lived in rural, forested, and riverine areas of the district. Their settlements were usually small villages or hamlets, often located near fertile lands, forests, and water sources, which allowed them to sustain a subsistence-based economy. Houses were traditionally made of mud walls, bamboo, and thatched roofs, reflecting locally available materials. Villages were organized around clan or kinship systems, with elders or traditional leaders managing social cohesion and dispute resolution. Agriculture formed the backbone of livelihood for most communities.

b) Language and Customs

The tribal communities of Cooch Behar district are linguistically and culturally diverse, reflecting both indigenous traditions and influences from migration and interaction with neighboring populations. Each community has maintained its distinct language, customs, and social practices, even while adapting to local conditions. Most tribal groups in the district are multilingual, using their own tribal language within the community and Bengali as the language of wider communication, education, and official purposes. Many smaller groups, like the Korā, Bhumij, Malpahari, Doha, Kheurua and Megh, often use local dialects but have largely adopted Bengali for daily communication. Among the Chakmas, Chakma language is used within the community, while the Garos also mix Bengali and English in education and trade.

Cultural customs among the tribal communities are closely tied to nature, agriculture, and social organization. Traditional rituals often revolve around planting and harvest cycles, river and forest resources, and ancestral worship. For instance, festivals such as Sohrai, Sarhul, Karma, Baha, Baikho, Wangala, and Mage Porob celebrate agricultural productivity, seasonal changes,

8.6 Social Structure and Challenges

The tribal communities of Cooch Behar district have traditionally maintained a distinct social structure rooted in kinship, clan systems, and community-based governance. Despite their small numbers in the district, these social frameworks have historically provided cohesion, regulated resource use, and preserved cultural identity. Most tribes, such as the Santhals, Oraons, Mundas, Koras, Bhumijis, and Malpaharis, follow a patrilineal system, where lineage, inheritance, and family responsibilities are passed through the male line. Clans (locally called *parha*, *gotra*, or *kili*) play a central role in marriage alliances, dispute resolution, and ritual obligations. .

Conclusion

The tribal communities of Cooch Behar district represent a rich and diverse cultural mosaic, encompassing both indigenous groups like the Rabhas, Mechs, and Garos, and

migrant communities such as the Santhals, Oraons, Mundas, and smaller tribes including Koras, Bhumijis, Malpaharis, Dohas, Kheurua, Meghs, Chakmas, and Limbus. Despite their relatively small numbers in the district, these communities have maintained distinct languages, customs, social structures, and cultural practices, while adapting to the broader socio-economic and cultural environment of North Bengal.

In conclusion, the tribal communities of Cooch Behar district reflect a resilient balance between tradition and modernity. They are communities rooted in their historical and ecological contexts, yet capable of engaging with contemporary social, economic, and cultural developments. Their continued efforts to preserve languages, rituals, festivals, and social norms, even amidst changing circumstances, highlight the enduring significance of tribal heritage in the region and underscore the need for sustained support to ensure their cultural, economic, and social well-being. The tribal communities of Cooch Behar, though numerically small, add distinctive cultural diversity to the district's social mosaic.

Reference:

1. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. *Census of India 2011: Primary Census Abstract – West Bengal*. Government of India, 2011.
2. Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India. *Tribal Development Report – West Bengal*. Government of India, 2015.
3. West Bengal State Tribal Development Department. *Statistical Handbook of Tribal Communities in West Bengal*. Government of West Bengal, 2018.
4. Guha, Amalendu. *Planter-Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in North Bengal, 1857–1947*. Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 1992.
5. Ghosh, Amalananda. *Tribal Communities of North Bengal: History, Culture, and Socio-Economic Life*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2000.
6. Roy, S. C. *The Tribes of Cooch Behar: A Study in Demography and Culture*. Kolkata: Anthropological Survey of India, 1987. Bose, N. K. *Tribal Life in the Duars: Social and Economic Conditions of North Bengal Tribes*. Calcutta: Naya Prokash, 1995.