



# Indigenous Knowledge and Women Entrepreneurs among Rajbanshis: A Case Study

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## Abstract

*This the era of global market economy and disparities are ever increasing. Access to credit is a matter of fact. Micro-credit for women in developing and underdeveloped countries supports their empowerment. Case studies are taken from rural Rajbanshi womenfolk of northern West Bengal plains of India.*

**Key words:** Indigenous knowledge, women entrepreneurship, Rajbanshi women, vapa pitha, agriculture.

## Introduction

Traditional or indigenous knowledge is basically generationwise accumulation of traditional experiences, informal experiments through trial and error method, and intimate understanding of nature. This is actually related to mode of production that is again dependent on ecological resources, biodiversity and micro-environment. That production system might be pre-agricultural, agricultural, small scale farming, and other agro-based units, and finally trade links of so many types differentiated on the basis of type of the capital. Together, these production units postulate division of labour that again illustrates the entire social system and related belief-faith-fear system or the Supernature. In a sense, we can say that it is a combination of social, economic, political and religious institutions that also organize the society. As a whole, we can treat the cognate of indigenous knowledge of the aboriginal or native people in the form of a system. We can call it as the Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS). It runs parallel to the Western or Scientific Knowledge System and together they constitute the Global Knowledge System. Often IKS can contribute in filling up of the gaps in Scientific Knowledge System at least in terms of ethno-science or any hypothesis or the most believed facts tested on religious laboratory of survival. IKS also helps into achieving sustainable development as it can provide public services often at global scale. IKS is the cognate of traditional/indigenous knowledge traits that is very much functional and highly depends on cultural values, social norms and timely customs for prolonged sustenance.

Various Indigenous Knowledge traits are kept in safe by the womenfolk in North Bengal and together they could serve as an important Indigenous Knowledge System. These knowledge traits, role of women and entrepreneurial capacities of womenfolk are to be better emphasized. That would help in enhancing use of micro-credit and increase in the purchasing power of the neglected women (lesser gender?). Indigenousness

of a community should be treated in terms of its connection with the ground situation, Indigenous Knowledge System and response to globalization. In the last case, microfinancing is a relevant issue<sup>1</sup>. It is also a prime factor for ensuring sustainable development<sup>2</sup>. And this is to be justified here in the context of even growing Siliguri urban center. IK -on community basis and in the context of mode of production- incorporates various domains like agriculture and post-agricultural practices; animal husbandry and poultry; ethno-fishery; hunting and gathering; handicrafts, tools and techniques, nutrition, health care practices and bio-medicines, psycho-social care, natural and biological resource, management of environmental and bio-diversity resources, disaster mitigation, human resource management, saving and lending, poverty alleviation and community development as well as education and communication. We can also discuss the matter in the light of folk art and craft, folk cookery, folk technology, etc. Women in traditional society or indigenous community enjoying their folk life and with less input from modern way of living are more aware about their resources, experiments, indigenous knowledge, culture and identity, mode of production, social system and Supernature. They are an integral part of division of labour on gender. They can work in various production units besides their domestic works. Application of entrepreneurship among these women in the form of microfinance and/ or Self-Help Group (SHG) can promote economic empowerment. That could further facilitate saving and lending, poverty alleviation and community development. In a sentence, we can treat it as introduction of monetary economy in the traditional sector and mainstreaming the most vulnerable category that is women. Most of the Indian people are living in rural condition and so the women, but none of them can oppose universality of monetary economy. These people with their IK/IKS and low external input could primarily use this entrepreneurship as the most appropriate option. That would gradually bring in them within the domain of modernity but through a sustainable way with mutual respect between traditional and modern. Women entrepreneurship is however to

be tested here in urban context where chances of negotiation with modernity is much more exposed. Many rural people along with their gender-based indigenous knowledge are migrating towards urban centers in hope for a good life, opportunities and earning money. That would be an injustice if they shed off their IK/TKS completely in the paradox of modernity rather than capitalizing their production units and public services still viable and receiving demands in the new urban context.

Again, women are associated with more or less five economic sectors: financial corporations, non-financial corporations, general government, profitable household enterprise, non-profitable household enterprise, and non-profit institutions serving households. Non-market household enterprise and non-profit institutions are the most drastic among these. We should remember: women are not a minority but a marginalized majority; we cannot neglect their performances in agricultural, pre-agricultural and extra-agricultural domains. Women are often targeted for microfinance in the forms of entrepreneurship and SHG, as they are believed to be more punctual with proper use of the loan and returning back installments and loan in time. Here we can consider the following sectors: cattle rearing, poultry, handicrafts, weaving and knitting, kitchen gardens, various agricultural activities for own consumption, food processing, construction of houses, collection of fruits and seeds, honey, medicinal plants, tubers, yams, ferns, leafy vegetables, fodder and other minor forest produces, domestic production of bio-fuel and use of other non-conventional energy as well as fishing, hunting, water supply, small scale irrigation, etc. This vulnerable condition for rural women should be improved by bringing them into modernity and modern market economy. Success of microfinance in rural sector of India lies in what is the way the entrepreneurs deal with the money marketing agencies providing easy loans but with high interest rates as well as access to state-led subsidized credit programmes through nationalized rural banking and co-operatives at a situation of majority of small-scale and marginalized farmers being defaulters<sup>3,4</sup>. Self-help groups, microfinance and entrepreneurial activities can also do a favour in reaching the poorest while building financially self-sufficient institutions, and showing improvement in the lives of the poorest women and their families. These are vital in rural areas as well as the emerging peri-urban suburbs providing new economic opportunities<sup>5</sup>. Finance at micro-level can be the basis of microfinance with immense opportunities still to be discovered to huge extent. Mainstream financial discipline has to first understand its target group like rural and peri-urban poor, vulnerable sections and womenfolk so far underestimated but with willpower and sorts of skills for doing something at least at local level and with indigenous knowledge subjective to modern inputs. Financial organizations have also to understand environmental resources, modes of production and the complete indigenous knowledge system of their target groups and their liability<sup>6</sup>. World Bank is also very serious about a sustained, long-term and well-planned programme on involvement of the so-called lesser gender into the mainstream economy and

development of their traditional skills primarily by means of entrepreneurship<sup>7</sup>. If government could not conduct the entire process, NGOs with the aid of money marketing agencies, private business groups, and public-private partnerships could contribute here in. However, there would be some risk factors like fraud and government has to monitor and public be aware; rural banking may be a prime factor as happened in Bangladesh—a poor country in South Asia where most of the people living in countryside and also migrating to urban and peri-urban areas of different parts of the world<sup>8</sup>. Similar cases are there in Africa with more women involvement such as in Cameroon<sup>3</sup> or island country of Sri Lanka again in South Asia<sup>9</sup>. Women entrepreneurship initiates with and then home-based production systems as they done for time immemorial but mostly as domestic work, unpaid, bartered, and informal; now bargaining with patriarchal structure of the society and moving out of home and earning money that is often considered against the eternal values of any traditional society; and finally causing some complex social issues, gender conflict and politico-economic change however mostly in a controlled manner<sup>10,11,12</sup>. (Women) entrepreneurship again faces many challenges in countryside if compared with the situations in peri-urban suburbs and other rururban areas and local townships<sup>13</sup>.

**Hypothesis:** Indigenous knowledge associated with the womenfolk in countryside and of those who are now migrating towards the urban centers in this high time can no longer be underestimated but utilized in terms of women entrepreneurship followed by SHG and microfinance. Different traditional production units are actually in a network that could hardly be neglected but respected. We cannot exploit human resource in terms of gender bias. Microfinance and SHG can play a vital role. We cannot neglect the indigenous knowledge and its historicity; but would try to gain public services from these indigenous knowledge systems. We cannot trespass the realities of global market economy that provides both opportunities and challenges. We have to realize the demand of market, mould the production machinery according to the market, catch the market and expand the market. Both public and private institutions can facilitate this microfinance and encourage women entrepreneurship. This could bring in the neglected bulk into the mainstream economy (here, currency system and global market economy). The approach should be both economic and social-cultural. We have to keep in mind certain basic things that we have learnt from the market traditionally. Awareness is highly needed. Short term training and input of modern machines can also play pivotal role.

## Research Methodology

Case study and interview with semi-structured schedule are taken here. Observation and proper documentation with some secondary level data are other processes of data collection. Here, scope of entrepreneurship in respect to changing market economy and traditional/ indigenous production unit is to be justified.

**Table-1**  
**Particulars of Self-Help Groups (SHG) in six districts of northern West Bengal and total West Bengal**

Sl. No.	Name of Range	Total no of SHG Formed	No of members in SHG	No of female members
1	Cooch Behar	6992	62509	57000
2	Dakshin Dinajpur	2584	23502	22542
3	Darjeeling	618	5605	5006
4	Jalpaiguri	2378	23374	22719
5	Malda	12341	115487	101883
6	Uttar Dinajpur	8846	70126	63654
7	Total West Bengal	158336	1280514	1152168

The case study is going to be taken on Rajbanshi people of rururban areas of Siliguri urban area of West Bengal state of India. Siliguri is situated in Darjeeling district which is one out of total nineteen districts of the state and distinct within a sum of six districts of the North Bengal administrative zone. SHGs have deep influence among womenfolk of West Bengal state still primarily confined in rural sector and also expanding in peri-urban pockets also (Table-1). Siliguri suburbs spread into both Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts are not any exception. Siliguri has its specific hinterland including adjacent Bihar state, Himalayan countries of Nepal and Bhutan, Himalayan state of Sikkim, North Western pocket of Bangladesh country, entire West Bengal state, mainland India, and also serves as the gateway of North East India. This Darjeeling district has three Himalayan sub-divisions, besides the sub-Himalayan Siliguri sub-division. Siliguri Municipal Corporation (SMC) is located in this Siliguri sub-division and based on Mahananda-Balason water channel. It tends to expand rapidly into adjacent pockets like Matigara (Bairatishal) which was a major trade zone in colonial period when the British administration planned to set up Siliguri town. This urban area is also located near the Baikunthapur forest region and Phulbari-Rajganj watershed of neighbouring Jalpaiguri district facing towards North East India. Dabgram is an added area to SMC from Rajganj community development block of Jalpaiguri district. Siliguri has now been spread over this Dabgram-Phulbari area that also includes New Jalpaiguri rail station (NJP) and touches Indo-Bangladesh border. In close proximity, there is the only airport for entire North Bengal at Bagdogra in Matigara-Nakshalbari constituency touching the Indo-Nepal international border. Upper Bagdogra is again a proposed urban area. Siliguri Jalpaiguri Development Authority (SJDA) inspects developmental activities in greater Siliguri and Jalpaiguri the district town of neighbouring Jalpaiguri district. Changrabandha international trade point at Cooch Behar district is also not far away from Siliguri.

There of total 14,724,940 people in North Bengal, Rajbanshis have a population of 2,688,560 (18.26 %) <sup>14</sup>. Austro-Dravidian and Mongoloid racial elements mix up into the Rajbanshis-indigenous to North Bengal areas and basically agriculturists <sup>15</sup>. Rajbanshis of North Bengal constitute a complex social fold that is integral part of settled agricultural practices of that locality-plains and uplands <sup>16</sup>.

**Village hamlet:** Chaturacochh-Sipaipara under Phulbari-Dabgram legislative assembly of Jalpaiguri district. Nearby market areas are Ambikanagar-Santipara near New Jalpaiguri rail station and Rail Hospital under Bhaktinagar police station, added wards of Siliguri municipality, Paglahat weekly market, Phulbari market area, Dabgram industrial area, and X-XII battalion of State Armed Police Force again in Phulbari areas that connects Siliguri-New Jalpaiguri with Jalpaiguri district town. Phulbari is an international border and also a way to Panchagarh district of Rangpur Division of Bangladesh. In colonial period, Panchagarh was a part of Jalpaiguri district. Chaturacochh-Sipaipara is very near to Fuleshwari-Jorapani natural water course initiated from Siliguri-Dabgram settlement and Baikunthapur forest core. This water course soon merges into Mahananda River that in Phulbari-Phansidewa-Chatthat demarks the Indo-Bangladesh boundary. Teesta canal from Jalpaiguri district is also flowing nearby connecting Teesta and Mahananda. This canal crosses Siliguri sub-division of Darjeeling district and further extends into uplands of Chopra block of Islampur sub-division of Uttar Dinajpur district all surrounding around the topography of Panchagarh (now put into north eastern tip of Bangladesh).

## Results and Discussion

**Scope of women entrepreneurship among the Rajbanshis:** Rajbanshi men in countryside of North Bengal perform their work on mutual understanding among the close relatives or neighbours. The same process of sharing the work could be seen in case of child care; the villagers kept their children under the guidance of aged fellows in the village when parents have to move into the field. Men are involved in preparation of wooden plough from good-quality non-degradable shal plants (shorea). In labourious works in agriculture, Rajbanshis men have direct participation, especially in ploughing of field, cleaning of field, leveling of field, fertilizer and pesticide/fungicide/herbicide application. Women actively participate into sowing and harvesting. Harvesting and post-harvesting processes include cutting, picking, shifting production to threshing floor, threshing, winnowing the chaff, drying of grains, sieving, cleaning of grains, grading, and storage (raising the stalk). Sowing and hoeing are associated with raising nursery for seedling, weeding, transplantation, manure production and its application. Both genders take active part in splitting, thinning and gap filling, mixed cropping, irrigation, plant protection

measures as well as removing stalks and stubble. Apart from settled cultivation, Rajbanshis are well aware of mixed cultivation, crop rotation, shifting cultivation, slash-and-burn, and complex crop systems. Rajbanshi women are again involved in quality maintaining and storing of good quality seeds and food processing (viz. fish-cum-paddy cultivation). Sowing, harvesting and thrashing of paddy are mainly governed by the womenfolk. Women know well what distance to maintain between two bunches of paddy sapling. They also know what the number of saplings would be in each bunch depending on the weather of a particular year. The ripened crop after being harvested with the help of a sickle; they lay the crop down on the field in clusters. In this way, crop becomes sun-dried. Paddy straws have been burnt off so as to produce manure and destroy the pests before the next cultivation begins. In home on the thrashing floor plastered with cow dung, paddy is thrashed by hand. A pair of bullocks keeps running over these cereals and in this way, the grains get separated from the straw. Then the straw and the grain are raised on separately into the store. Rajbanshis yield exclusive variety of paddy, *dhariyal*, which is known for its pressed shape and therefore used exclusively in production of the preserved rice products (*muri*- puffed rice; *chira*- bitten rice; *khoi*- pressed rice). Dung-on-stick and dung cakes in dried conditions are the best quality fuel. Fuelwood and dry bushes (such as *futki*) also collected from neighbouring jungles. Areca is the main economic resource of every village. *Guwa* or *chegua* or *buguai* is the local name of areca. *Motihari* is the best variety of tobacco. Local cigar (*bidi*) and chewing tobacco are common practices for both men and women. Colours from soil types and *khoir* tree are produced. Regarding palm, cane, and date, they used to produce sugar, crystal candy and juice (soft and strong). *Buguri* or plum is also collected and preserved as pickle. Mango is also preserved. They can prepare sauce and jelly from semi-boiled tomato. They have come to know market demand of baby corn, broccoli and other vegetable varieties that women are now cultivating in kitchen garden. Controlled use of ant, termites and earth worm are friendly in gardening. Women also know well about floriculture at pots, bonsai, nursery, open garden, under shed, on fence. They practice pruning and watching wind course directions from mountains, they can guess time of flowering. Pest control by light trap as well as manuring by ash, rotten leaf and vegetable, cow dung, boiled tea leaf, egg shells, *neem* (azadirachta) cake and oil, mixed application of organic manure and chemical substance, adding of bone dust and raw rotten fish are practiced of Rajbanshi womenfolk. They know the inadequacy of salt in local environment and hence prepare salted puffed rice. They not only intake lime (*chun*) with areca nut and betel leaf (*pan*), but also apply it in pond purification. Ethno-toxicant from arum for fishing is also important. Those toxic substances cannot harm crabs as well as mosquito larvae eating fish varieties. Women collect fern, yam, rhizome, knolkhol and arum as well as leafy vegetables from marshland and canal areas. Women are involved in fishing in local ditches and small fishes there along with *nadiali* fishes in local streams are converted into dried fishes by just leaving the fish pieces in dry sun beam without using salt or turmeric. They have invented

various techniques for fishing of pond fishes, river fishes and fishes with extra respiratory organ. Activity of fishes, fish eating birds, frogs, snakes and ants are natural indicator of weather to them. Rajbanshi women are good with poultry and goat rearing, whereas cattle management is mostly managed by men elders of the family. Duck, goose and swans control the population of snails in the pond and actually help in fish cultivation; their stool is a good source of fodder for the fishes. They know about the shrubs like *bichhilara* controlling infectious diseases in poultry. They know about the grasses and herbs that increase the milk productivity of cows. Women are really good will kitchen garden in *uchu* or *danga* or upland places where they propagate vegetables and spices. Turmeric, zinger, peppercorn, chilly, cardamom, cabbage and broccoli, cauliflower, mustard, rapeseeds, sunflower, bitter gourd, gourd, potato, sweet potato, carrot, beat, *chal kumra* or *pani kumra* (pumpkin), lady finger, brinjal, snake gourd, cane and bamboo, jack fruit and guava, *kaon*, *marua* and maize are the basic items of highland. From jute, fibers are collected in special way. Hollowed jute sticks are used in roof manufacturing of traditional house. Fibers of jute and flex are raw material of clothe and sitting mattress (*dhokra*). Indigenous looms are generally used. *Sona* and *tita* are two important varieties. Leaves of later variety are consumed as vegetable for their bitter taste and medicinal importance. Fibers of the second type are generally used for making of mattress and such other rough products. The jute sticks are submerged in stagnant ditches with the help of floating trunks of banana inflorescence. Then those jute stems are washed with clean water of little streams and easily fibers are extracted leaving the hollow sticks (*pat kathi*). Both the products are dried: sticks are used in roof construction: they are light in weight and capable of air conditioning. They are also good source fuel. Fibers of *sona* variety are used in making clothes. Short and harsh fibers of *tita* variety are used for rough use. Jute and flex are cultivated during rainy season in lowlands submerged under flood water. And in late monsoon season when raining is being reduced, fibers are collected. Jute fibers are hanged at first and then thread is manufactured. The entire process is called *panjipara*. A slate stone chip of 9 inches diameter with a hole at the center is taken and a bamboo stick is pierced in through that hole. That tool is called as *takuri*. The stick is used as liver and by rotating this stick clockwise torque is created and it actually works as a spinning machine.

North Dinajpur is famous for its brinjals. Jute carpets and handicrafts of bamboo and wooden pieces are characteristic feature to this region. These are mostly performed by Rajbanshi womenfolk. *Vapa* rice cake is such identity of Rajbanshi womenfolk of Rajganj block next to sacred Baikunthapur forest. Areca, piggery, jute mattress, cattle herds, poultry, fern collection, horticulture and alcoholic beverages from rice ball are distinct features of Rajbanshi womenfolk of Siliguri Terai. *Dhokra* mattresses, duckery, fishing, betel, areca, *kasai* fragrance, use of medicinal weeds and wetland grasses, date liquor as well as preparation of pickles are features of Rajbanshi women of South Dinajpur. Goatery, Sheep, floriculture,

ornamental fish propagation, and vegetables are features of Rajbanshi women activities of Jalpaiguri highlands. Mekhla handloom, tobacco, natural dyes and silk worms were once distinct features of Mekhliganj subdivision highland of Cooch Behar. Chopra block of North Dinajpur, Siliguri subdivision, Rajganj block of Jalpaiguri and Mekhliganj subdivision of Cooch Behar are also characterized by pineapple and small scale tea garden. South Dinajpur is characterized by its chili and sunflower. Rajganj-Jalpaiguri area is featured by *futki* bushes used in fuel and local pulses like *Thakurkalai*. These North Bengal pockets of the watershed along with its heartland in North West Bangladesh (Rangpur and Rajshahi Divisions) were attacked from time to time. *Dhokra* also signifies a prickly shrub that was used for making barricades. Malda has relatively lower number of Hindu Rajbanshis. It was once a part of Rajshahi marshland. Mahananda-Ganges creates a floodland here which is good for paddy and jute. It has some highland also which is famous for mangoes and silk as against the potato, yam and so many vegetables of Barindland-Dinajpur. Further, Rajbanshi women of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar used to make fish balls, utilize taro and banana in various ways, propagate arum in kitchen garden, prepare delicate foods from leafy vegetables like *dhenki*, *dhemsi*, *oshni*, *lafa*, *bathua*, *khuria kanta* and so many others.

Of all these, it is to be seen here that how far *Vapa pitha* or *vakka* can help in entrepreneurship especially for those still outside any SHG and devoid of any aid from banking sector! Here, I would like to state a few case studies.

**Rajbanshi womenfolk producing Rice Cakes:** Rajbanshi women are mostly associated with domestic works, handicrafts, kitchen garden, agriculture, and food preservation techniques. These works are generally treated as unpaid and unorganized. The rice-rice cake interrelation shows the entrepreneurial capabilities of Rajbanshi womenfolk who treat rice cake as *Vapa Pitha*. Husked rice powder is taken in a small bowl, wrapped with a small piece of cotton cloth after placing a small crystal of sugarcane cake on it, and finally the filled-up bowl is inversely placed on a vapor chamber for few minutes. It is the vapor that saturates the bowl of rice powder into a semi-solid stuff. In this way the rice cake is produced and consumed hot. At a time, they used to prepare the cakes at home and sell them door to door. They did not have any monetary transaction at initial stage, but collected bowl of rice in exchange of rice cakes. In that type of transaction, they always had a surplus. That was a notion of ever profit making in business of fast food. In peri-urban and urban areas of Siliguri, among every community today, there would be some low-cost fast foods. Fast food market is rapidly changing in respect to market economy. This is easy money making part time work and place of (women) entrepreneurship outside SHG. Some franchisees of big fast food chains and bakeries and factories are also there. Restaurants and Bars are also increasing with few amusement parks. Scope of microfinance in terms of SHG or simple (women) entrepreneurship has been developed. Women

entrepreneurs can gainfully take up these food preservation and fast food units in their houses along with proper packing and distribution network. There may be a good demand for indigenous food items and preserved foods. In the largest urban center of North Bengal is Siliguri Municipal Corporation that still holds a weekly market of *muri* (puffed rice) and dried fishes (*sutki machh*) of so many kinds. Women entrepreneurs can gainfully take up this food preservation unit in their houses along with proper packing and distribution network. There they can form SHG also. There is a constant need for growing awareness of our indigenous or traditional heritage and learning the things that we know very well but usually neglect in respect to modernity. *Vapa Pitha* or steamed cake is not just a food item here but part of the Rajbanshi IKS still preserved by the womenfolk. It is a message to entrepreneurship and basic learning of how to maintain the profit margin for a vulnerable, rural, backward and forgotten section of the society. Women entrepreneurship cannot exceed over indigenous knowledge of how to prepare or preserve certain food items and the indigenous knowledge system of different foodways that have each own story, feelings and mirror of the society within.

*Case Study-1/ Informant: Mani Barman/ Gender: Female/ Age: 35 years/ Marital Status: Married*

**Information:** She is not familiar with preparation of *Vakka* and only learnt the process from her in-laws. She is preparing this rice cake for about ten years. She is actually a housewife and throughout the year she serves into the domestic works. Her husband, Anil Barman, at an age of 45 years is the main earning person. He is a carpenter. Wooden furniture and handicraft have a huge demand in Siliguri-New Jalpaiguri and surrounding rural pockets. This Rajbanshi family has direct marital relationship with Bengali caste groups. This couple has only one offspring and their daughter Pinky has recently been given marriage to a Saha family. Pinky has taken education from local school upto class VIII and given marriage at an age of 15 years. This is a case of early marriage which is a custom among the Rajbanshi peasants. However, this family has no cultivable land and they do not involve into production of paddy or fiber or vegetable or spice. Even, in their colony life, this family is far apart from setting up of a kitchen garden. Sister-in-law of Mani Barman is Shila Barman who has been given marriage to a Bengali caste Haldar family. She is staying a nearby area of Shantipara. This whole region is actually thrived on the Dabgram industrial area. New roads and bridges are now being built up. Packaged drinking water, animal feed and cardboard factories are there. A local dairy farm is there at Chaturagachh that supplies milk on regular basis to nearby sweet manufactures. Peoples are mostly Vaishnava who maintain cattle as their ultimate capital and pray to cow. Here, in Chaturagachh, these Rajbanshi and Bengali caste families do not possess individual animal husbandry. There is a *Horioum* temple is the village which is treated as a sacred place and cattle is reared there. Both Mani Barman and Shila Haldar are involved separately in preparation of *Vakka* rice cakes. In both

the cases, women buy rice from grocery shop rather harvesting paddy from their own field. On daily basis, the amount is minimum five to maximum ten kilogram (Kg.). This quantity could vary on demand of rice cake in market. Generally, new rice is used to prepare this *Vakka* or *Vapa* rice cake. North Bengal is an important rice bowl and people here can yield rice three times a year. They cultivate winter and summer and monsoon varieties. They treat these by *Boro*, *Aus* and *Amon* common names. Now, *Amon* and *Aus* varieties are generally propagated. *Vakka* is generally produced from *Amon* rice. So, preparation of *Vakka* or *Vapa* is a seasonal occupation. *Aman* or *Amon* is sowed in monsoon season and it ripens within the spring a bit earlier or late on the basis of their varieties. Rice is harvested in the field, brought into home, thrashed in the courtyard, soaked into water for whole of the night and then husked manually or mechanically to get the rice. Generally, manual husking is applied on the soaked rice and for direct decoating of paddy grains mechanical process is generally used. Whatever be the process, rice grains are collected in this way, dried, winnowed and stocked in jute bags. Often harvested paddy is stored in big bamboo baskets. Traditionally rice produced in this way was treated as *atop chal* or soaked paddy and was used for making *Vakka*. Rice is the main ingredient for preparation in preparation of this rice cake. This preparation of rice stock from harvested paddy is a tough job and it is performed throughout the season of late Spring. This season is as unique as monsoon. This is known as *Hemanta*. In Bengali and Rajbanshi calendar therefore there are six seasons and twelve months. These are *Greeshma* or summer (*Baishakh* and *Jaistha*), *Barsha* or monsoon (*Ashar* and *Shraban*), *Sarat* or spring (*Bhadra* and *Ashwin*), *Hemanta* or late spring (*Kartik* and *Aghran*), *Seet* or winter (*Poush* and *Magh*) and *Basanta* or autumn (*Phalgun* and *Chaitra*). *Hemanta* is a season when temperature is started falling down, but the weather is not as dry as winter. It is humid and causes dew dropping. Rice harvested and husked in these dusty days is often termed as *aghani* rice. Actually, rice cake preparation is generally initiated from the month of *Kartik* and continued for more or less six successive months. Therefore, this is a seasonal work and continued for *Hemanta*, *Seet* and *Basanta* seasons. But, now rice is directly purchased from the local grocery shop and therefore rice cake can be produced throughout the year. But it is prepared in this duration of *Hemanta-Basanta* (October-March). Rice grains purchased from local grocery shop for rice cakes are of low cost (Rs. 8 /Kg.). This rice is basically of non-*Atop* type. Besides rice, they have also to buy fuel sticks (*khori*), salt, and sugar cane cake (molasses) for rice cake preparation on water steam. Before rice cake preparation, Rajbanshis have to dust the rice grain into powder in their traditional husking machine. This is a labourious work. They first soak the rice in water in order to make them softened. This takes a few hours and only then they could dust the rice in husking machine. They generally husk the rice in their traditional *chham-gayen* served with a hand pulled leaver. But Mani Barman rather prefers to use husking machine with a foot-leaver. They start this husking process late at night and continue it upto the early morning. This manual process of

husking could be better performed in winter-autumn when temperature is low. In hot season, it is tough to do such a labourious work constantly without any interval. Rice cakes have a definite time span to be produced and consumed. Generally, new rice is preferred here. It is a domestic work and cakes are exchanged with other things through barter system that is now used for earning money. Rice cakes have a relation with cold weather. This food item is healthy, nutritious, profit making and in this time span of the year Rajbanshis perform their major religious practices and marriage ceremonies. It is a heavy diet also. This is the cultural values that keep this IK of rice cake preparation intact among the Rajbanshi folks migrated from agrarian countryside to urban, peri-urban and rururban areas. This has become a part of their folk life; and therefore, this production unit has been included into their cognate or IKS. A net profit of Rs. 250-300 (INR) is there. And in these six months, they could earn fifteen to twenty thousand rupees. This amount of ransom is handled by the womenfolk which enables them to take part into decision making body regarding family matters. They can spend the money in domestic work, purchase of daily commodities as well as education and marriage of their children. Mani Barman has spent her income in her daughter's marriage. In winter, Rajbanshis are more indulged in vegetable propagation with multiple harvests, perform their religious ceremonies and consume rice cakes. From Kalipuja that is the festival of worship of Mother Goddess Kali in *Hemanta*, rice cakes are available in the market on regular basis. In collection of the above data, I have been supported by Chandana and Dayal Barman (couple) who stay in neighbourhood of Mani Barman's household. They have admitted that rice cake preparation is not performed in all the homestead now; rather this is a new thing to other people coming from other places to these rururban pockets in search of job; most of them are now fond of this rice cake; it was previously a seasonal food item that is now subjected to fast food business; and this is helping in empowerment of women by providing them a purchasing power. People are not staying at earthen huts with wooden beams, jute sticks, paddy straw, bamboo, cane and dried broad leaves; but home prepared by using brick, asbestos sheet, tin, cement and bamboo thatch. Here, both husband and wife earn money. They do side earning and rice cake is a good instance.

*Case Study-2/ Informant: Khirola Singha/ Gender: Female/ Age: 35 years/ Marital Status: Married*

**Information:** Khirola is a housewife and wife of Suresh Chandra Singha (43) who works in a curtain factory. His monthly income is Rs. 4000-7000 (INR). He is an owner cultivator. He is originally from Bidhannagar area of Siliguri subdivision. This is a prime block in Mechi-Mahananda basin. This is also a foothill region and closer to Chopra upland and Varindland watershed. So, this place is also good for vegetables. In Bidhannagar, Suresh has cultivable land. He planted pineapple there and then has replaced it by a small scale tea garden. Other part of the land he has leased to another person and hence become non-cultivating owner. The

share cropper there cultivates paddy and vegetable for the last four year. This family is a clear evidence of country-town nexus. At a time, these people cultivate only local varieties of paddy in organic way. The yield has been severely decreased within a decade to one third after they initiated using chemical fertilizers and pesticides. They have lost their interest in agriculture and proceeded towards alternative occupation. They now know controlled use of chemical substances in agriculture and better emphasis on organic substances if soil fertility is to be restored. Khirola and Suresh have told me a story of naming of Vimvar which was new to me. Vim was a cultivator and cultivated the whole world and then returned back home with the entire harvested paddy. But there set up a fire in his granary or Var. He was upset, but after a few months later he found out that the grains were still germinative and consumable. They got a black texture. In this way, bush fallow cultivation was introduced to the region and black grain variety of rice was discovered. The folktale indicates towards an informal experimentation of paddy cultivation. Previously, Rajbanshis lived in joint-extended family structure, arranged a huge manual labourforce, occupied big farms and domesticate 20-25 cows considered as constant source of milk and manure and cow-dung fuel. The black variety of paddy was exclusive to them and offered in religious ceremonies. It is still cultivated in some pockets, costly and meant for self-consumption. It is famous for both taste and flavour. They call it *Kalo Nunia* (black textured *Nunia* paddy). They husked this and made *atop* rice. It is also known as *Bhog Dhan* or *Tulsi Dhan*. *Dhan* is the native term used for paddy. It is as auspicious as basil or *Tulsi* and offered (*Bhog*) in religious ceremonies. They boiled this *atop* of *Kalo Nuniya* in milk to prepare a delicious food item with sugar or molasses which is known as *Payas*. Rice cakes were also prepared from this rice. Still in festive season, they prepare rice cakes of this paddy, but that is not for sale. That would be then too costly for the common people. At earlier days, people liked to eat rice cakes with old vegetables cooked into soda extracted from banana leaf inflorescence. This dish of rice cake with vegetable was served again with fish curry with cauliflower. Generally, big catfish (*boal machh*) was chosen for the curry. That was a healthy food item. So, for Khirola rice cakes are meant for self-consumption. In homestead, she mixes up the rice powder with milk rather than water in order to provide a dusty to powdery texture (*suji*). This is the main ingredient in rice cake preparation at homestead for self-consumption. This could not be sold in existing market price. Rice cakes are much cheaper with only three rupees per piece and five rupees for two pieces. *Maida* is a supplementary of rice powder and it is finely milled and refined wheat flour, closely resembling cake flour, and used extensively in making Indian fast food. But it is not used in rice cake preparation as any supplement. Cheap rice of moderate quality instead of traditionally fragrant *aghani* paddy is used. Some water and few pinches of salt are added to the rice powder. Then this rice powder gets a powdery texture and used in preparation of *Vapa* cakes on water vapour.

However, she used to sell a few amount within the hamlet. She utilizes her earning in family spending. She however could not maintain such a profit margin as per the other sellers who go to local markets, weekly markets and peri-urban areas. Khirola has two offspring. Elder daughter has been given married and younger son Parbat Singha goes to the local school at Chaturacochh. He is a class VIII student. People here are optimistic and welcoming proposals for housing complex, market area, factory and residential school. Khirola is aware of market inflation. She says that the rice that is generally used for rice cakes has become costly from Rs. 8 to Rs. 15 (INR). So, in this winter she has no other option rather than to increase the price rate.

*Case Study-3/ Informant: Menoka Roy / Gender: Female/ Age: 30 years/ Marital Status: Married*

**Information:** Menoka and her husband Subodh (40) have three children Bimal (16), Bikash (13) and Bipul (12)- all are school students at class XI, VII and VII. This family in Chaturagochh is quite professionally indulged in preparation of rice cake. They work in whole of the late night together to produce larger amount of rice dust from water-soaked rice. They mix water and salt to this to have a powdery texture needed in rice cake preparation. They buy 10 to 12 bags of rice at a time (nearly 1 quintal). In season time, Menoka daily sells off rice cake of a net quantity of 5-6 Kg. Six days in a week they sell it in X-XII battalion of STATE ARMED POLICE FORCE camp. They also add coconut powder and coconut milk to make their product tastier. Their rice cake has a great demand. One day in a week they also go to the Paglahat weekly market. Their main targeted area is Dabgram industrial area and the STATE ARMED POLICE FORCE camp. They sell the cakes both at morning and at evening. In other cases, I have found that rice cake is generally sold at evening. Menoka however sells her rice cakes twice in daily basis: at morning from 6 AM to 10 AM and again at evening from 5PM to 10-11 PM. Menoka and her husband are working in unorganized labour sector on daily wage. They are generally employed in construction industry. Real estate is a growing industry in Siliguri urban areas, suburbs and urban extensions. Subodh is from Dewanjanj area of Haldibari and Menoka from neighbouring Ambari-Falakata area of Varindland watershed. They spend their extra income in house construction, education of their children and maintain daily livelihood.

Rajbanshi womenfolk as a part of agrarian society need good training for modern inputs, encouragement to use their traditional knowledge on local varieties and other practices, and then they can be easily micro-financed with an expectation of timely return and sincerity. This is a preliminary study. But what we need is a quantitative study at micro or macro level to get into the actual impact of micro-finance on the Rajbanshi women and their respective households containing of their husbands, children and other joint-joint-extended parts. Extra financial support, scope of schooling for their children and so many crucial points would come out. Poverty alleviation, food

security, gender equality, and community development are the other sides of this microfinance (table -2).

**Table-2**  
**Impact of microfinance upon womenfolk of Chaturacochh-Sipaipara hamlet under Phulbari-Dabgram suburb of Siliguri (study area)**

Impact of Microfinance	
Economic empowerment	Political empowerment
Employment for women	Increased status and changing roles
Income under women's control	Ability to negotiate change relations in gender
Women's micro-enterprise	Women's networks and mobility
Increased wage	Wider movements for social, political and legal change.... [women often avail mobile phones and other modes of communication; they could open a shop; they become more socially aware; they even participate in political activities; go to NGOs and health camps; they could spend the money in disease treatment and children's education as well as ceremonies in <i>rites-de-passage</i> ; they could join women organizations and discuss problems without any hesitation; they often protest against domestic and other violence and go to police stations and ask for legal aid; in such situation they do not return back to parent house and but stay at home; they participate in family decision and family programmes; they could access a wider outreach; etc.]
Increased income	
Savings and credit	
Women's decision about savings and credit use	
Repayment	
[women can open a bank account in rural banks or co-operatives or invest it in another way, can protest against alcoholism and fraud money marketing, if employed then ask for wage increase and additional support like one time fooding, they could repay their earning in next step and expand their economic activities; some women could together open a micro-enterprise headed by again women, seek bank aid or other financial assistance (formal and/or informal), create a chain system increasing further employment opportunities; besides working in group, one can open individual enterprise]	

### Conclusion

From this short discussion, probably the hypothesis could not be fully examined and justified. But this micro-level approach reveals that there is a lot of scope, enthusiasm, labourforce, needs and women entrepreneurship. In a planned way, these could be subjected to SHG and microfinance. Food processing is an important domain and many new things are to uncover here. Respect women, respect their gender oriented knowledge, convert them into useful services, and lead a sustainable life-that should be the motto in women entrepreneurship. Microfinance and SHG are two strong pillars. Rapid urbanization provides new challenges and opportunities. Entrepreneurs have to modify their production units according to the existing demands.

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