

Agrarian Identity and Socio-Economic Transformation: Changing Livelihood Patterns among the Kurmi Community in Bengal

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Abstract- The Kurmi community has historically maintained a strong agrarian identity, with agriculture forming the foundation of its socio-economic and cultural life in Bengal. However, rapid socio-economic transformations over recent decades including land fragmentation, technological change market expansion and climate variability have significantly altered traditional livelihood patterns. While agriculture continues to remain important, many Kurmi households are increasingly diversifying into non-farm employment, seasonal migration and small-scale business activities to ensure economic stability. The relationship between the Kurmi people in Bengal's evolving livelihood tactics and their agrarian identity is examined in this study. It draws attention to the ways that rural development policies, declining landholdings and environmental challenges are promoting occupational diversification. According to the report, adaptive economic practices are reshaping agricultural identity rather than erasing it. The study adds to larger conversations on rural development, community identity and socioeconomic mobility in modern Bengal by evaluating these changes.

Keywords: Kurmi Community, Agrarian Identity, Socio-Economic Transformation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Agrarian communities in India have historically played a central role in shaping rural economies, social hierarchies and cultural identities. Among these, the Kurmi community occupies a significant place as a traditionally agrarian social group known for its strong association with cultivation, land productivity and rural self-sustaining economies. Historically classified as a cultivating caste within the lower Gangetic plains, the Kurmis were widely recognized for their agricultural skill, efficient soil management and strong work ethic, which enabled them to sustain local food systems and rural stability across generations. The very term "Kurmi" is often

linked to *krishi karmi*, meaning agricultural worker, highlighting the deep civilizational link between community identity and agricultural labour.

Land reforms, colonial agricultural policy and post-independence rural development initiatives all influenced the Kurmi community's agrarian identity in Bengal, which developed within a complicated socioeconomic and political environment. Many Kurmi households, which have long relied on small-scale farming, raising livestock and forest-based supplemental incomes, have historically used agriculture as a symbol of their cultural and social standing in addition to their work. Crop diversity, agricultural expertise and community-based labour systems were crucial for maintaining regional economies and fostering social cohesiveness.

However, over the past few decades, rural Bengal has undergone significant structural transformation, resulting in major shifts in livelihood patterns among agrarian communities. Land fragmentation, declining farm profitability and the gradual process of depeasantisation have reduced the proportion of households directly dependent on agriculture. Studies indicate that more than 65% of rural households in West Bengal do not own agricultural land, while small and fragmented landholdings dominate the agrarian landscape, limiting productivity and long-term economic security. These structural changes have compelled many rural communities, including the Kurmis to diversify their income sources by entering wage labour, migration-based employment, informal sector work and service-oriented occupations.

India's shifting rural employment dynamics are further reflected in recent workforce data. Although a significant portion of rural workers are still employed in agriculture, trends toward wage labour

and self-employment are growing, indicating hybrid livelihood options as opposed to only relying on agriculture. Traditional agrarian social structures in West Bengal have been reshaped by migration and occupational diversification, which have been exacerbated by job losses in the informal sector and dwindling chances in rural employment initiatives.

Against this backdrop, the transformation of Kurmi livelihoods must be understood not merely as an economic shift but as a broader process of identity negotiation. As younger generations move towards education, urban employment and non-farm occupations, the traditional agrarian identity is being reinterpreted rather than abandoned. The community continues to maintain cultural connections to land, agriculture and village-based social networks even as economic realities push toward diversification.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To examine the transformation of agrarian identity among the Kurmi community in Bengal by analysing historical dependence on agriculture and the gradual shift in occupational patterns due to modernization, land fragmentation, and policy changes.
- To analyse changing livelihood strategies by exploring the community's movement towards non-farm employment, migration, education-based professions and engagement in new economic sectors.
- To assess the socio-economic impact of livelihood diversification on household income, social mobility, gender roles and community status, highlighting how these changes are reshaping traditional social and cultural structures.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-method research design combining limited primary data with a stronger emphasis on secondary sources to examine agrarian identity and changing livelihood patterns among the Kurmi community in Bengal. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and informal discussions with selected members of the Kurmi community, including farmers, agricultural labourers and youth engaged in non-farm occupations.

To provide a more comprehensive historical and socioeconomic backdrop, the study mostly uses secondary sources. Government census records,

NSSO data, agricultural surveys, policy documents, scholarly publications, ethnographic research and historical literature about caste-community dynamics and agrarian transformation in Bengal are examples of secondary sources. To monitor changes in employment trends, reports from socioeconomic surveys and rural development departments were also examined.

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis and comparative socio-historical interpretation. This approach helps to connect micro-level livelihood changes with macro-level processes such as market expansion, technological change and rural socio-economic transformation.

IV. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE KURMI COMMUNITY IN BENGAL

The Kurmi community has historically been recognized as an agrarian and peasant-based social group with strong roots in cultivation and rural production across eastern India. Traditionally known as skilled farmers, Kurmis played an important role in agricultural expansion, land clearance and food production. In Bengal, especially in the Junglemahal region covering present-day Purulia, Bankura, Jhargram, and Paschim Medinipur the community developed a close association with land-based livelihoods and rural economy. Historical records and colonial observations often described Kurmis as hardworking agriculturalists with strong local ecological knowledge and farming skills. Over time, they became an important cultivating population in the agrarian social structure of eastern India.

The Kurmi community's identification and historical classification have been complicated and contentious. Sections of the community were occasionally categorised as belonging to tribal or distinct ethnic groups in colonial and early census records. For example, in some records, they were listed as Scheduled Tribes in the early 20th century but they were removed from such lists after independence and are currently typically classified as Other Backward Classes (OBC) in the majority of states. The community's sociopolitical presence in eastern India was reflected in their participation in a number of agrarian and anti-colonial campaigns. Kurmis shaped their contemporary socio-economic and political trajectory by forming social and political associations throughout the 20th century to

enhance representation, seek acknowledgement and establish identity.

V. AGRARIAN IDENTITY AND CULTURAL PRACTICES

Agrarian identity forms the core of the socio-cultural life of the Kurmi community in Bengal, where agriculture is not only an occupation but also a marker of social status, cultural continuity and community solidarity. Historically recognized as skilled cultivators, Kurmis have been associated with land clearing, intensive farming and market-oriented cultivation, contributing significantly to regional food production and rural economies. Their expertise in soil management, irrigation and mixed cropping systems enabled them to cultivate crops such as rice, wheat, millet and pulses, reflecting their adaptability to ecological conditions.

The Kurmi community's cultural customs are closely linked to the cycles of agriculture. The community's spiritual connection to the land and nature is highlighted by festivals like Karam, Tusu Parab, Bandna and Chait Parab, which are strongly tied to planting, harvesting and seasonal changes. Numerous Kurmi communities have historically adhered to nature-based belief systems like Sarna, which place a strong emphasis on trees, holy groves and ancestral spirits in order to uphold ecological principles and communal harmony.

Moreover, agrarian life structures gender roles, kinship patterns and collective labour systems within Kurmi society. Both men and women actively participate in farming activities, reflecting a cooperative agrarian culture. Despite ongoing socio-economic transformation and diversification of livelihoods, agriculture continues to shape Kurmi identity, sustaining cultural memory, ritual life and social organization across generations in Bengal.

VI. SOCIO-ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION IN RURAL BENGAL

The socio-economic landscape of rural Bengal has undergone significant transformation over the last few decades, shaped by agrarian change, livelihood diversification, migration and policy interventions. Historically, rural Bengal was characterized by a predominantly agriculture-based economy supported by small and marginal farmers. Land reforms such as Operation Barga played a crucial role in restructuring agrarian relations by securing

the rights of sharecroppers and redistributing land, thereby initially strengthening peasant agriculture. However, in the post-liberalization period, structural changes in the rural economy have gradually reduced the centrality of agriculture as the primary source of livelihood.

The reduction in agricultural profitability and growing land fragmentation are two of Bengal's most noticeable rural change trends. Today, a significant number of rural households are either landless or have very small landholdings, which forces them to rely on non-farm or wage work. According to reports, only a small percentage of rural families rely primarily on self-employment in agriculture and the majority do not own agricultural land. At the same time, more people are diversifying their sources of income by working in the services, small-scale trade, construction and unorganised sector.

Despite this transition, non-agricultural employment has largely expanded within the informal sector, often lacking social security and stable income. A high proportion of rural workers in non-agricultural sectors continue to work in unorganized employment, reflecting uneven development and persistent rural vulnerability. Moreover, limited local employment opportunities have intensified migration, with many rural youth moving to urban centres or other states for work.

Meanwhile, government social programs, connectivity and infrastructure development have all helped to gradually raise living conditions in rural areas. Some rural households have been able to adopt varied livelihood options as a result of increased access to markets, credit and education. Therefore, the complicated shift from agrarian reliance to multi-sector livelihood patterns seen in rural Bengal's socioeconomic change is characterised by both chances for migration and enduring structural obstacles.

VII. CHANGING LIVELIHOOD PATTERNS AMONG THE KURMI COMMUNITY

The Kurmi community has historically been recognized as a predominantly agrarian social group, closely associated with cultivation, land

management and agricultural innovation. Traditionally, Kurmi households depended on farming activities such as paddy cultivation, vegetable farming and allied rural occupations. Agriculture was not only an economic activity but also a key marker of social identity and cultural continuity. Land ownership, farming skills and participation in local agrarian systems shaped the socio-economic status of the community in rural Bengal and other parts of eastern India.

However, significant socioeconomic changes in recent decades have affected the Kurmi community's patterns of livelihood. Urbanisation, educational growth, agricultural technology advancements, and declining landholdings are some of the factors that have decreased reliance on farming alone. A growing number of members, particularly younger generations are working in non-agricultural fields such government service, private employment small company, transportation and unorganised labour markets. Long-term and seasonal migration has emerged as a crucial livelihood tactic for maintaining economic stability.

Despite these changes, agriculture continues to play an important supporting role in rural Kurmi households. However, livelihood diversification has increased social mobility and reshaped traditional agrarian identity. The transition reflects broader rural transformations where caste-based occupational rigidity is gradually giving way to skill-based and market-oriented economic participation indicating an ongoing process of socio-economic restructuring within the community.

VIII. IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION AND COMMUNITY RESPONSE

Land ownership, cultivation methods and a close connection to agricultural output have long been the foundations of the Kurmi community's agrarian identity in Bengal. The Kurmis were historically regarded as a peasant farming caste and their strong ties to the soil provided them with social standing, cultural validity and financial security. However, this identity has been drastically altered in recent decades due to structural changes in the rural economy, including decreasing agricultural profitability, land fragmentation migration and the growth of non-farm jobs. Farming alone no longer defines an agrarian identity instead, a variety of

livelihood options and educational mobility are becoming more and more important.

The Kurmi community has responded to these shifts by implementing flexible tactics to preserve their shared identity while negotiating modernity. In order to maintain customs, plan cultural events and promote sociopolitical recognition, community organisations, caste groups and local leadership initiatives are essential. Additionally, there is a deliberate attempt to strike a balance between tradition and advancement, embracing education and occupational diversification while preserving customs, festivals and community networks.

Therefore, the Kurmis' identity development is a continuous process of balancing tradition and modernity rather than just a deterioration of their agrarian roots. In the context of Bengal's larger socioeconomic landscape, the community's response demonstrates resiliency, smart adaptability and a growing grasp of social mobility.

IX. CONCLUSION

The Kurmi community in Bengal's changing patterns of livelihood are indicative of a larger change in agricultural identity influenced by migration, education, market forces and technological advancement. Diversification into non-farm industries has changed conventional economic structures and social ties, even if agriculture still has cultural and social value. These shifts draw attention to issues with identity preservation and rural sustainability as well as prospects for upward mobility. Designing inclusive development policies that facilitate economic adaptation while honouring local customs requires an understanding of this shift. The Kurmi experience serves as an example of how rural people manage modernity while preserving aspects of their sociocultural heritage.

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