

PARTICIPATION OF DALIT WOMEN IN DECISION MAKING PROCESS IN BANGLADESH

Submitted by

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Dalit community in Bangladesh, also referred to as Harijans or Scheduled Castes, remains significantly excluded from mainstream society. Historically marginalized and subjected to systemic discrimination, they have been confined to low-paying rural occupations. Despite legal protections, barriers to education and healthcare perpetuate their socio-economic exclusion. However, encouraging signs of progress have emerged as Dalits diversify into entrepreneurship and education, supported by improved access to resources. Grassroots movements are increasingly advocating for policy reforms to enhance Dalit inclusion and representation in Bangladeshi society.

This research focuses on assessing the participation of Dalit women and girls in household, financial, and political decision-making. It aims to identify barriers to their involvement and propose targeted interventions to enhance their roles in decision-making processes.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to explore the decision-making participation of Dalit women and girls, specifically from the Rishi and Robidas communities, in both urban and rural contexts. The study utilized surveys, participant observations, focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KIIs) across various locations in Dhaka. By incorporating both male and female perspectives, the research provides a nuanced, gendered understanding of social dynamics and the barriers faced by Dalit women.

Findings

Jigatola Rishipara: Urbanization has brought noticeable transformations to this community. Modest tin-roofed homes have given way to semi-pucca, partially brick structures, reflecting the community's adaptation to an evolving urban landscape. Traditional leatherworking has diversified into shoe repair, handicrafts, and small businesses. Gender roles are also shifting, with women increasingly working in sewing centers, garment factories, and pursuing education. However, longstanding traditions such as temple gatherings and dowry practices persist, albeit in modified forms.

Lalbagh's Robidas Para: Situated near the historic Lalbagh Fort, this community faces more acute economic and social challenges. The decline of the shoemaking trade has led to pronounced economic pressures and weakened social cohesion. The Panchayat, once a vital local governance body, is no longer functional, leaving a void in community support. Women encounter significant barriers in accessing education and employment. Although organizations like Nagorik Uddyog are working to address entrenched patriarchal norms around marriage and inheritance, these challenges continue to restrict women's rights and independence.

Boro Bhawal Rishipara: In this rural community, strong social ties persist despite economic difficulties. Many residents own land and engage in various livelihoods to adapt to changing

circumstances. However, low education levels, compounded by social stigma and financial constraints, limit opportunities, particularly for women. Leadership roles within the Panchayat remain dominated by men, restricting women's influence in decision-making and property ownership. Nevertheless, shared festivals and robust support networks help sustain the community, reinforcing a sense of unity amidst adversity.

Recommendations

The urban Rishi community has benefited from increased social interactions, which have helped reduce caste-related stigma. In contrast, the Robidas community is experiencing social disintegration. Despite limited government and NGO support, Dalit women continue to face deep-rooted marginalization, underscoring the urgency for systemic reforms and genuine inclusion.

To create a more equitable society for Dalit women, this study recommends:

- Strengthening family support systems to encourage women's participation.
- Enhancing economic opportunities for women through targeted programs.
- Promoting active involvement of women in local governance structures.
- Addressing social barriers through community-wide awareness campaigns.

By implementing these measures, the aim is to empower Dalit women, amplify their voices, and pave the way for meaningful change within the community.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Dalit women and girls have historically endured profound exploitation, oppression, and violence, with minimal control over their bodies, incomes, and lives (Singh & Vashistha, 2018). The intersection of caste-based discrimination and patriarchal norms has intensified their suffering, creating conditions of extreme subjugation. Promoting their participation in decision-making processes is both challenging and vital, as their inclusion fosters pathways toward equality and social justice. Their perspectives have the potential to enrich policies and initiatives, making them more inclusive and representative.

The Dalit community is deeply patriarchal, adhering to conservative values that impose severe restrictions on women's rights, mobility, and freedoms. Strong patriarchal norms within families severely restrict Dalit women's autonomy, often denying them a voice in household decisions. Many internalize these norms, perceiving their subordinate roles as natural and refraining from asserting their rights to participate or express themselves (Rowshan & Khan, 2016). Positioned at the intersection of caste, class, and gender hierarchies, Dalit women face compounded discrimination and violence, leaving them particularly vulnerable. Many girls are forced into early marriages (as young as 10–12 years old), lack financial independence, and are forbidden from leaving their homes unaccompanied. Social norms surrounding purity further limit their autonomy, including restrictions on marrying outside their caste.

Dalit women and girls have thus faced enduring discrimination based on intersecting factors of caste, gender, and socio-economic status, which have systematically entrenched their marginalization (Rahman & Hasan, 2018). These challenges are perpetuated by socio-cultural norms and patriarchal structures, reinforcing unequal power dynamics within households and communities (Kabir et al., 2019). Consequently, their exclusion from decision-making forums leaves them with limited opportunities to influence outcomes (Hossain & Ali, 2021).

Governance within these communities often operates through Panchayats—male-dominated councils that make decisions for the entire community, excluding women from participation or

representation (Islam & Parvez, 2013). Participation in decision-making processes is a crucial yet underexplored area for Dalit women and girls in Bangladesh. This encompasses financial matters, healthcare decisions, household purchases, marital arrangements, and political engagement. Despite legal frameworks promoting gender equality and social inclusion, systemic barriers persist, hindering their active involvement in these processes (Kabir & Rahman, 2020).

Understanding the impediments to Dalit women's and girls' participation in decision-making is vital for crafting effective interventions and policy recommendations that promote inclusion and empowerment. Addressing these barriers requires a nuanced approach that considers the intersectionality of caste, gender, and socio-economic factors (Rahman et al., 2022). Identifying structural, cultural, and institutional obstacles can help stakeholders design targeted interventions to foster their meaningful participation in decision-making spheres (Ahmed & Islam, 2019).

In Bangladesh, Dalits—often referred to as Harijans or Scheduled Castes—occupy the lowest rungs of Hindu social hierarchies, predominantly engaging in professions considered unclean or degrading (Uddin, 2015; Chowdhury, 2009). This socio-economic positioning exposes them to systemic exclusion, poverty, and limited job opportunities, resulting in widespread marginalization and discrimination. Politically, Dalits face acute underrepresentation, which exacerbates their vulnerability to oppression from dominant groups in mainstream society (Rowshan & Khan, 2016).

The size of the Dalit population in Bangladesh remains a point of contention. While some sources estimate their number to be around half a million (Parvez & Islam, 2014), others suggest a broader range of 3.5 to 5.5 million (Chowdhury, 2009). A survey by the Department of Social Welfare placed the population at approximately 4.35 million (FAIR, 2015). This variance in population figures is compounded by ambiguities in defining who qualifies as Dalit. Terms like "Dalit" and "Harijan" are often used interchangeably, further complicating the classification.

This study aims to explore the participation of Dalit women and girls in decision-making processes, focusing on financial decisions, household matters, and political involvement. It seeks to identify barriers limiting their participation and propose actionable interventions and policy recommendations to enhance their involvement and empowerment in these areas.

1.2 Changing Pattern of Dalit Community

Historically marginalized and subject to discrimination, Dalits have witnessed significant transformations in recent years, reflecting shifts in their communities' dynamics. One notable aspect of this change is the diversification of Dalit occupations. Traditionally associated with roles such as agricultural labor, leatherwork, and sanitation, Dalits are increasingly exploring alternative livelihoods. Entrepreneurship, education, and skilled trades are among the emerging avenues pursued by Dalits, indicating a desire to break free from traditional stereotypes and explore new paths to socio-economic empowerment.

Education and awareness have also played pivotal roles in shaping the changing landscape of Dalits in Bangladesh. Improved access to education has empowered Dalit youth with knowledge and skills, enabling them to challenge societal norms and aspire to higher achievements. This emphasis on education has not only expanded opportunities for Dalits but has also raised awareness about their rights, entitlements, and pathways to socio-economic advancement.

Dalit communities have witnessed a surge in social mobilization and advocacy efforts. Grassroots movements, civil society organizations, and Dalit-led initiatives have emerged as powerful agents of change, amplifying Dalit voices and advocating for policy reforms. This mobilization reflects a growing sense of collective identity and solidarity among Dalits, driving efforts to address discrimination, inequality, and social injustice.

Political participation and representation have also seen gradual progress among Dalits in Bangladesh. Initiatives aimed at enhancing Dalit representation in governance structures and electoral processes seek to address historical marginalization and ensure equitable political participation. Despite persistent challenges, including barriers to access and systemic discrimination, the increasing political engagement of Dalits signals a positive trajectory towards greater inclusion and representation.

Furthermore, cultural empowerment has emerged as a significant aspect of the changing pattern of Dalits in Bangladesh. Reclaiming and celebrating their cultural heritage, traditions, and identity, Dalits have fostered a renewed sense of pride, belonging, and resilience within their communities. Cultural events, festivals, and initiatives aimed at preserving and promoting Dalit culture serve as catalysts for social cohesion, identity formation, and community resilience.

1.3 Objective

The literature review reveals a notable gap in research specifically exploring the participation of women in decision-making processes. While several studies have examined various aspects of the lives of Dalit women (Ref), there is a scarcity of research addressing their level of participation in decision-making and the obstacles they encounter. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing exclusively on the participation of Dalit women in decision-making processes, investigating the extent of their involvement and identifying the issues and barriers that impact their participation. The key Objectives of the Thematic Research are as follows:

1. To know the participation of Dalit women and girls in decision making process in terms of-
 - ii) Participation in decision regarding spending earnings of them and their family;
 - iii) participation in major household decisions regarding their own health care, family planning, major household purchases, marriages of their children, visits to their relatives; and
 - iv) participation in decisions regarding political issues.
2. To identify the factors limiting the participation of Dalit women and girls in decision making.
3. To suggest some actionable interventions and policy recommendations for increasing the participation of Dalit women and girls in decision making.

1.4 Methodology

The study employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participation of Dalit women and girls in decision-making processes. This mixed-methods approach is ideal for exploring complex social dynamics and obtaining detailed, context-specific insights. Data collection involved a combination of Social Surveys, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and participant observation.

The research focused on the Rishi and Robidas communities in both urban and rural settings in Dhaka city and the nearby Keraniganj area. The urban study sites included the Jhigatola Rishi para in Dhanmondi and the Lalbagh Robidas para in Dhaka, while the rural site was located in Boro Bhawal, Keraniganj, on the outskirts of the city. A total of six FGDs were held across these

locations, with two FGDs conducted in each area—one with male participants and another with female participants. This design ensured that both male and female perspectives were captured.

For participant observation and Key Informant Interviews (KII), two comprehensive checklists were developed based on an extensive literature review. The checklist was refined through a pilot test involving four respondents (two males and two females) at the Nagorik Uddyog office in Lalmatia, Dhaka. This pilot phase helped ensure the clarity and relevance of the questions.

In addition, a thorough social survey was conducted across all study sites to understand the current socio-economic dynamics of these communities. This survey method was particularly effective for documenting and assessing the experiences of Dalit communities in relation to their material and non-material environments, resources, and the factors influencing their livelihoods and decision-making processes.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

1.5.1 *Intersectionality*

This study utilizes intersectionality as its core theoretical framework to examine the participation of Dalit women in decision-making processes. Developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality posits that multiple social identities—such as caste, gender, and class—intersect to shape unique experiences of oppression and privilege. By emphasizing these overlapping identities, intersectionality provides a comprehensive lens through which to understand the compounded discrimination faced by Dalit women.

In the context of this study, intersectionality is essential for revealing the dual discrimination that Dalit women experience, both due to their gender and their marginalized caste status. This intersectional marginalization profoundly affects their roles and participation in household and community decision-making processes. While women in general face gender-based barriers, Dalit women encounter additional caste-based discrimination that further limits their opportunities, autonomy, and access to decision-making spaces. By applying an intersectional framework, this study moves beyond examining gender and caste in isolation, exploring how their interconnection creates complex layers of discrimination.

The intersectional approach also enables the study to analyze how caste- and gender-based discrimination restricts Dalit women's involvement in economic, household, and political

decisions. This framework allows for an exploration of the specific socio-cultural and economic barriers that Dalit women face, differentiating their experiences from those of Dalit men or women from higher castes. In particular, the study investigates how traditional caste norms and gender roles within Dalit communities limit women's decision-making power, with a focus on how these constraints vary between urban and rural contexts.

1.5.2 Social Exclusion

In addition to intersectionality, this study draws on social exclusion theory to further explore the participation of Dalit women in decision-making processes. Social exclusion, as discussed by theorists such as Amartya Sen and Hilary Silver, highlights the systemic marginalization of individuals and groups from key areas of societal engagement, including economic, social, and political spheres (Sen, 2000; Silver, 1994). This framework allows the study to uncover the structural and institutional barriers that prevent Dalit women from fully participating in decision-making.

Social exclusion theory is particularly valuable in the context of Dalit women, as it illustrates how caste-based discrimination, when combined with gender inequality, creates profound barriers to their participation in both household and community decisions. Dalit women are often excluded from crucial educational and economic opportunities, which are essential for acquiring the skills, confidence, and agency needed for active decision-making roles. By applying social exclusion theory, the study can systematically identify the various layers of marginalization that Dalit women face, ranging from social stigmatization to institutional neglect.

1.6 Rationale of the study

This study addresses the critical underrepresentation of Dalit women in decision-making processes within households and communities. Despite existing research on Dalit women's socio-economic conditions, health, and education, their participation in decision-making remains underexplored. Given their dual marginalization as both women and Dalits, this study seeks to amplify the voices of Dalit women, highlight systemic inequalities, and identify actionable interventions to enhance their roles in decision-making. By doing so, the research contributes to a broader understanding of empowerment and equity for marginalized communities.

The first chapter introduces the study by outlining the problem statement and providing the necessary background to establish its significance. It highlights the key issues faced by the Dalit community in Bangladesh, emphasizing their marginalization and the socio-economic barriers that perpetuate their disadvantaged position.

The second chapter reviews existing literature on the Dalit community, synthesizing prior research and studies conducted by organizations and scholars. This chapter also provides a concise overview of the Rishi and Robidas communities, laying the groundwork for their in-depth exploration in subsequent chapters.

The third chapter explains the methodology adopted for this study. It details the qualitative approach, research design, and data collection techniques, such as Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and participant observation, used to gather rich and nuanced insights from the Dalit communities.

The fourth chapter examines the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents across the study areas. It provides an in-depth analysis of the demographic, economic, and social profiles of the participants, shedding light on the structural factors shaping their daily lives and opportunities.

The fifth chapter presents qualitative findings from the Rishi community in Jhigatola, Dhaka. It explores key themes such as marginalization, traditional gender roles, and the socio-economic challenges unique to this community.

The sixth chapter focuses on the Robidas community in Lalbagh, Dhaka, offering a detailed account of their socio-economic realities and cultural practices. Special attention is given to the influence of religion and the role of community leadership in shaping their experiences.

The seventh chapter explores the rural Rishi community in Boro, Bhawal, and Kamrangirchar, contrasting their lived experiences with those of the urban Dalit communities discussed earlier. This chapter examines how the rural context affects their opportunities and challenges, providing a comparative perspective.

The final chapter concludes the study by summarizing its key findings and implications. It offers actionable recommendations for addressing the challenges faced by Dalit women, aiming to enhance their participation in social, economic, and political spheres. This chapter also provides policy recommendations to inform and guide community development initiatives.

CHAPTER TWO

DALIT COMMUNITY IN BANGLADESH

2.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on tracing the origins of the Robidas and Rishi communities through literature and interviews with community members. It presents recent statistics on the Dalit community in Bangladesh, explores the myths and oral histories of these communities, and examines how these narratives have contributed to their untouchable status. Additionally, the chapter discusses the geographical locations of Dalit communities, their work, and their economic conditions.

2.2 Dalit in Bangladesh: An Overview

The term "Dalit," derived from the Sanskrit word meaning "ground," "suppressed," "crushed," or "broken to pieces," was first used by Jyotirao Phule in the 19th century to describe the oppression faced by the "untouchable" castes of Hindu society. The term has since become a self-adopted political identity for caste groups in South Asia historically marginalized within the Hindu Varna system (Rahman, 2016). The Dalit community is not a specific caste but rather a collective of marginalized groups who, due to religious, social, and economic factors, have faced

extreme discrimination. The term "Dalit" literally translates to "deprived," encapsulating the severe social and economic challenges they face. Dalits often work under harsh conditions for minimal compensation. Academically, the term encompasses all low-caste groups who experience marginalization and discrimination.

In Bangladesh, Dalits are divided into two broad categories: Bangali Dalits and Non-Bangali Dalits. The history of Dalits in Bangladesh is rooted in the country’s social hierarchy, which has been influenced by both pre-colonial practices and British colonial policies. The partition of British India and the creation of East Pakistan, followed by Bangladesh’s independence in 1971, presented additional challenges for Dalits, as the country faced significant social and political upheaval. Despite legal frameworks intended to address caste-based discrimination, the implementation of such measures has been inconsistent, and Dalits continue to face systemic socio-economic inequality.

Historically, Dalits have struggled with landlessness, limited access to education, and economic vulnerability. Many remain engaged in traditional jobs that further entrench their marginalization. While constitutional amendments and statutory provisions have been made to guarantee Dalits' rights, meaningful political participation remains limited. However, recent years have seen an increase in activism and the rise of Dalit leaders advocating for social justice and structural change. Efforts to challenge traditional values and combat caste-based discrimination have led to a growing awareness of Dalit issues in the country. The future of Dalits in Bangladesh depends on sustained efforts to address historical injustices, promote social inclusion, and ensure the effective implementation of legal protections.

Recent statistics indicate that between 3.5 to 6.5 million Dalits live in Bangladesh (IDSN, 2023). In Dhaka and Narayanganj districts, the population exceeds 13,000, according to a report by Nagorik Uddyog.

Table 1: Dalit Communities in Dhaka and Narayanganj Districts

SL	Location	Communities	Total Family	Total Population
Dhaka – City Corporation				
01	Doyagonj Wari City Colony, (Telegu) Tikatuli Gandaria Dhaka	Telugu	300	1,000

02	Doyagonj Wari City Colony, (Telegu) Tikatuli Gandaria Dhaka	Domar, Kanpuri	260	800
03	Gopibag Railway Sweeper Colony, South Kamlapur, Dhaka	Kanpuri, Dom, Telugu, Lalbegi	300	1200
04	Lalbagh Shoshanghat Colony, Lalbagh, DhaKa	Dom, Domar	40	130
05	Lalbug Rabidaspara, Dhaka	Rabidas	30	100
06	Lalbug Rishipara, Dhaka	Rishi	240	750
07	Vagolpur Jelepara, Dhaka	Rishi	250	1050
08	Canpur Jelepara, Dhaka	Rishi	130	440
09	Pulpar Rishipara, Dhaka	Rishi	70	230
10	Jigatola Rishipara, Dhaka	Rishi	70	235
11	Loharpool, Rabidaspalli, Dhaka	Rabidas	24	80
12	Katherpool, Sutrapur, Dhaka	Rabidas	20	65
13	Gandaria Dakghor Rabidaspara, Dhaka	Rabidas	35	110
14	Luxmibazar, Puran dhaka	Rabidas	40	140
15	Bawniyabad Rabidaspara, Mirpur-11.5	Rabidas	160	500
DHAKA (KERANIGANJ)				
16	Bhawal Rishi para	Rishi	120	690
17	Namosudropara Baro Munira	Namo Sudro	115	560
18	Namosudropara Choto Munira	Namo Sudro	70	350
			Total	8,430/-
Narayanganj -City Corporation				
19	Ishdail City Colony, Narayanganj	Kanpuri, Dom, Hela	40	250
20	Tanbazar City Colony, Narayanganj	Kanpuri, Dom, Hela	220	1400
21	Kanchpur Dom Colony, Kanchpur, Narayanganj	Dom, Domer	50	250
22	Ekrampur City Colony, Bondor (port), Narayanganj	Kanpuri, Dom, Domar	100	450
23	Modongonj Sweeper Colony, Modongonj, Narayanganj	Kanpuri, Dom, Domar	40	200
Other locations in Narayanganj District				
24	Casara R abidaspara, Narayanganj	Rabidas	120	600
25	Baburail Rishipara, Narayanganj	Rishi	50	250
26	2 no Dhakeswari, Narayanganj	Raut	21	110
27	Fatulla Sweeper Colony, Fatulla, Narayanganj	Kanpuri, Dom, Domar	35	175
28	Chittogong Road Sweeper Colony, Fatulla, Narayanganj	Kanpuri, Dom, Domar	130	600

29	Boilkhana Horijon Colony	Domar	40	210
30	Chittaranjan Cotton mill Horijon colony	Lalbeghi/Balmiky	23	115
31	Ekrampur Jelepara	Jele	80	320
32	Enayet Nagar Sonakandha Rishipara	Rishi	300	1500
33	Fatullah Rishipara	Rishi	35	175
	Total		=	6,605/-

Source: Nagrik Uddoyg, n.d.

Many Dalits residing in urban areas are employed in low-paying, hazardous jobs, such as street sweeping, septic tank cleaning, and toilet maintenance, in both public and private sectors. Due to their marginalized status, they are forced to take on these grueling tasks, which are among the most dangerous and poorly compensated in the country. When crimes are committed against them, they often do not receive fair treatment or legal protection. Most cases are resolved through informal, biased channels, leaving them without recourse. Additionally, many Dalits face social stigmatization, with limited access to education and being influenced by superstitions, child marriage, and dowries. They frequently endure severe human rights violations, including kidnapping, rape, and torture (The Daily Star, 2017).

Dalits in Bangladesh also face systemic discrimination in terms of land access and housing. They are often denied access to clean water and sanitation facilities, which are reserved for non-Dalits, and are relegated to living in unsanitary colonies and slum areas. Government initiatives to provide essential services such as water and sanitation have largely ignored the needs of Dalit communities, further exacerbating their socioeconomic hardships. Many Dalits are landless, living in makeshift homes on abandoned fields or government-owned land near highways and pastures. They are vulnerable to violence, forced conversions, land grabs, food insecurity, and extreme poverty (IDSN, 2023).

Dalit families often reside in cramped, multi-generational homes, where the population has significantly outgrown the available space. For example, a Dalit family that was allocated housing forty years ago may now house two additional generations in the same small dwelling, with 12 to 14 people living in a single room. Dalit settlements are often devoid of basic amenities such as restrooms and toilets, and are plagued by open sewers, uncollected waste, and blocked

waterways. The lack of access to electricity and running water further exacerbates the already dire living conditions in these overcrowded homes (ESDO, 2008).

2.3 Rishi Community

The Rishi community in Bangladesh is found in both urban centers, such as Dhaka and Chittagong, and rural areas, particularly in the southern districts of Jessore, Satkhira, Bagerhat, and Jhenaidah, as well as in Jaipurhat and Manikganj. Although they primarily identify as Hindu, many Rishis have also converted to Christianity. Historically, their livelihoods have revolved around working with raw materials like leather, cane, and bamboo. In urban areas like Dhaka and Chittagong, their main occupations include leather processing, shoemaking, and shoe repair, though their work varies across urban and rural contexts.

The Rishis, renowned for their leatherwork, have long faced discrimination and are often labeled as “untouchable.” In both Hindu and Muslim communities, they are socially marginalized, with others maintaining physical distance from them in public spaces. They are frequently excluded from social and religious events and often find themselves unable to sit in local tea stalls. Despite earning incomes that may rival or surpass those of other working-class groups, such as rickshaw pullers or barbers, the Rishis are still regarded as part of the lowest social class, both in urban and rural settings.

This physical exclusion reinforces their marginalization in religious, cultural, political, and economic spheres. The spatial separation of the Rishis from the rest of the village reflects their precarious, marginalized status within society (Zene, 2007). Interestingly, the Rishis themselves interpret their low status as a consequence of a “fall from grace” (Zene, 2007). This belief is rooted in the idea of a curse, a narrative that is reflected in stories about their harsh realities. The experience of exclusion begins in childhood and continues throughout their lives. As children, they are often denied opportunities to interact with peers, and even when they manage to attend school, they face stigma and neglect from classmates and teachers. This mistreatment extends to their families, with even children from other communities showing disdain toward Rishi elders. Over time, many Rishis internalize this treatment, attributing it to bad karma, and take solace in myths passed down through generations that highlight their noble heritage in the distant past (Zene, 2007: 262).

Dr. Cosimo Zene, an anthropologist, has noted that the experiences of the Rishis in Bangladesh mirror those of Rishi communities in Tamil Nadu, India, where he has studied their history, myths, and societal positioning (Zene, 2004; 2006). The Rishis' name evokes memories of ancient sages who meditated in the forests and received the Vedas. In some regions, they are still called "Bouno gottro," or "people of the jungle." However, as forests are cleared, others encroach upon Rishi land without hesitation. In village life, the Rishis are often blamed for incidents like theft and receive little support from civil or legal authorities. According to myths, the Rishis are portrayed as so greedy that they would even "steal the cow's meat" during the Gomedh Jogyo sacrifice, a vivid illustration of the deep-rooted stigma they face.

While many Rishis have sought upward mobility through Sanskritization, transitioning into agriculture and abandoning their traditional occupations of skinning dead animals, tanning, and leatherwork, their stigma persists. This is reflected in the internal divisions within the Rishi community, which is segmented into three self-defined groups: Bhodra, Sidur, and Hogla samaj. These divisions are more territorial than hierarchical, promoting endogamy, mutual exclusion, and concerns about purity. While some within the community argue for a common Hindu "cultural ideology," the Bhodra samaj, the largest group, positions itself above the other two to improve their social standing. This strategy, however, is not an embrace of caste ideology but an effort to combat segregation. The Bhodra samaj seeks to move from the periphery back to the center of society. Their aim is to bridge the gap between themselves and the rest of society, reclaiming their place as part of humanity. They eagerly adopt the symbols, myths, religion, caste, purity, and rituals that are used to signify someone as a fully recognized member of society.

2.3.1 Social Mobility and Identity Transformation within the Rishi Community

The Rishi community has made significant strides in breaking free from social stigma by diversifying their professions. Many have transitioned into occupations such as barbering, rickshaw pulling, and open-water fishing, moving away from their traditional roles in leather processing and drum-making. These shifts have allowed them to earn a more stable income, with barbering, in particular, becoming a key avenue for both economic stability and social interaction. As more Rishis adopt these new livelihoods, their social standing has gradually improved, and today, their inclusion within local communities faces little resistance. However,

the process of gaining full social acceptance is still ongoing for some members of the community.

Despite these positive changes, the Rishi community continues to face challenges due to their dietary habits, particularly their consumption of beef. Both caste Hindus and Muslims harbor mixed feelings toward the Rishis, disapproving of their dietary practices. At the same time, the "reformed" Rishis, who have distanced themselves from these practices and sought education, are met with suspicion and discomfort. For some, the abandonment of their traditional occupation of skinning animals—a practice that has historically marked them as untouchable—becomes a point of contention. These Rishis are viewed with unease by both the wider society and their fellow community members, even though their former occupation helped contribute to the wealth of other, "pure" businesspeople.

The Rishi community's continued consumption of beef, particularly in times of famine, highlights the deep-seated stigma they carry. Historically, the consumption of beef became associated with untouchability, especially from the early medieval period onward, as noted by Jha (2002:114). During the late 19th century, the cow protection movement gained momentum, often fueling Hindu-Muslim tensions and shaping social perceptions of the Rishis. The ethical and religious principles surrounding cow protection in Hinduism, along with socio-economic factors, have further solidified the negative stereotypes associated with the community, particularly regarding their dietary practices.

Despite these obstacles, the Rishi community has been gradually transforming its socio-economic landscape. Traditionally relegated to roles deemed "impure" by broader society, such as leatherworking and shoemaking, the Rishis faced exclusion from public spaces like tea stalls and schools, and were often marginalized in religious practices. Over time, however, many Rishis have embraced new livelihoods that allow for greater social integration and economic opportunity, such as barbering, which facilitates cross-community interaction. These changes have contributed to the slow dismantling of some of the stereotypes that have historically kept them marginalized (Rahman, 2019; Akter, 2018).

Furthermore, the community has increasingly distanced itself from practices viewed as polluting, including skinning dead animals and consuming carrion, a process that aligns with Sanskritization. This shift is part of a broader attempt to adopt the customs of higher-status

groups in order to improve social standing. By abandoning caste-designated roles and dietary habits, the Rishis are not only seeking acceptance but also challenging the deeply entrenched social norms that have relegated them to the margins of society for generations. However, this pursuit remains complicated by the enduring effects of a social order that continues to marginalize them based on perceptions of "dharma" and "karma" (Zene, 2007; Akter, 2018).

2.3.2 Marginalization and the Role of Women in Rishi Community

Research on Dalit communities in Bangladesh has garnered increased attention, especially from NGOs, UN agencies, and international donors. These studies predominantly address the structural and social issues that Dalits face, focusing on their systemic marginalization and the human rights violations they endure. While the Bangladeshi government has begun to acknowledge Dalit issues in policy discussions, these efforts have largely been limited to employment quotas, leaving broader structural challenges unaddressed.

Rahman (2016) highlights that urban Dalits face significant obstacles in securing resources necessary to meet basic needs, resulting in low incomes and limited economic opportunities. They often lack access to land, credit, and loans from formal financial institutions. While they have some social capital through kinship networks, Dalits remain largely excluded from broader social and cultural institutions, such as schools, clubs, and alumni associations. This exclusion prevents them from accessing crucial forms of capital—economic, social, and cultural—that could enable upward mobility. The lack of cultural capital, in particular, is a major hindrance, as many urban Dalits lack the skills and education necessary to compete in the country's competitive job market. Despite these challenges, Dalits maintain strong aspirations for a better life, dreaming of improved living conditions and greater opportunities (Rahman, 2016).

The growing academic focus on urban Dalits includes significant work by Uddin (2015), who analyzes Dalit vulnerability using Nancy Fraser's (2007) theoretical framework. Uddin argues that without full recognition of Dalit identity and cultural distinctiveness by both the state and society, even well-meaning initiatives from international donors will struggle to effectively address Dalit issues. Ainoon and Hasan (2015) also contribute valuable insights into the socio-economic conditions of urban Dalits, examining their marginalization within broader society.

Our study found that Dalit women face a unique form of marginalization due to the intersection of caste, gender, and economic status. This combination of disadvantages severely limits their

ability to participate meaningfully in decision-making at both the family and community levels. In households, financial control typically remains in the hands of male family members, relegating women to minor decisions, such as what to wear. As one woman explained, her husband decides how money is spent, emphasizing the patriarchal control over family resources (Rahman, 2016). While women may have some influence over decisions related to childcare or healthcare, they rarely have authority over more significant matters, such as family planning, education, or marriage of children. This reflects the broader societal norms that restrict women's autonomy, leaving them with little opportunity to exercise control over critical household decisions (Uddin, 2015).

Dalit women's participation in the community is similarly limited. Though some women are involved in local women's associations or NGO programs, their roles are often passive, with little decision-making power. Participation in Panchayat governance is almost nonexistent for most women, who rarely attend meetings or engage in leadership selection. One woman remarked, "I've never attended a meeting, but I know who our Panchayat leaders are," underscoring the exclusion of women from both formal and informal decision-making processes (Ainoon & Hasan, 2015). Deep-rooted cultural and social norms that prioritize obedience to male family members discourage women from pursuing more active social and political involvement. Nevertheless, there are emerging signs of change, particularly among younger women, who express a growing desire for greater engagement, signaling a slow but ongoing shift in attitudes toward women's roles in decision-making (Rahman, 2016).

2.4 Robidas Communalities

The Robidas live predominantly in the northern and southwestern districts like Sylhet, Jamalpur, and Khulna. They are usually categorised as belonging to the Dalit or lower-caste groups. The Robidas have traditionally worked in agriculture, especially farming and animal husbandry, although many have moved to cities like Dhaka and Chittagong in pursuit of opportunities for employment. Robidas have expanded their economic activities in these urban settings, with many engaging in informal occupations such as street hawking, daily wage labour, and small-scale business ownership (ESDO, 2008).

Like their predecessors, Bangladeshi Robidas have a long history of working with leather. This, according to Brahmin upper caste hindu, also serves to justify their notion that the Robidas are

born in a much lower caste due to their past life's "heinous deeds". Because of these preconceived ideas, the Brahmins discriminate against the Robidas, demeaning them and trying to prevent them from participating in religious activities. However, it is evident that both communities have distinct perspectives about their own and one another's behaviours, which can have a variety of negative effects (Das, 2023).

Beyond outward appearances, the Robidas community is seen as symbolically "filthy" because of their living conditions, their traditional occupation, their consumption of pork and dead cows, and other factors. The Robidas community considers the caste system to be nothing more than a tool for exploitation, whereas the upper caste (the Brahmins) feels that it is God's will and should be honourable by everyone (Das, 2023)

The Robidas face long-standing caste-based prejudice and social marginalisation, just as other Dalit communities in South Asia. The stigma of being "untouchable" keeps the group on the outskirts of both rural and urban society. Robidas families are usually restricted to separate living quarters on the periphery of rural settlements, far from the primary social and cultural centre. They continue to work in the unorganised sector in cities, where they encounter major obstacles to both social and economic advancement (Zene, 2007). The Robidas are frequently left out of mainstream social and religious events, despite their contributions to the local economy, especially in industries like construction and street vending (Ghosh, 2013). This social marginalization is compounded by the community's traditional occupations, which are often perceived as "polluting" by higher caste groups, reinforcing their exclusion from key social rituals and religious ceremonies (Zene, 2007).

The Robidas' fight for upward mobility is still very difficult. The Robidas community has not yet formed a concerted effort to address their systemic marginalisation, in contrast to many Dalit communities that have embraced Sanskritization tactics to rise in social standing (ESDO, 2008). Insufficient political mobilisation and unity hinder significant social transformation. The continuous marginalisation of the community emphasises how urgently structural changes are needed to address caste-based discrimination and advance social inclusion for Bangladesh's Dalit communities (Ghosh, 2013).

2.4.1 Social Mobility and Identity Transformation within the Robidas Community

Compared to the Rishi, the Robidas community has encountered greater obstacles in their search for identity reform and social mobility. Even while there are some professionals in the community, their main focus has been on personal growth rather than cooperation. This individualism has made it more difficult to create community-wide strategies for overcoming marginalisation due to caste. The Robidas are still more secluded and are having difficulty overcoming established caste barriers, in contrast to the Rishis, who have actively participated in cultural events and group activities. It is challenging for the Robidas community in the Lalbagh region to get in touch with the influential people who reside in Wari, Dhaka. They often stated in conversation with Robidas in Lalbagh that they rarely receive assistance from Robidas from Wari.

Galtung's (1990) concept of structural violence helps explain how caste-based discrimination is perpetuated through social structures that limit access to resources and opportunities. The Robidas, while having individuals who have broken into professional fields, continue to face stigmatization at the communal level. Bourdieu's (1986) notion of social capital can also be applied here, where social mobility for the Robidas is restricted due to limited social networks and opportunities for interaction beyond caste boundaries. Their reluctance or inability to collectively address caste stigma through community action, unlike the Rishis, reflects the deeper entrenched inequalities they face.

Robidas community's lack of collective cohesion prohibits them from cooperating to enhance their social position. Sen's (1999) concept of capabilities, which emphasises the importance of education and collective agency in achieving social mobility, can be applied here to show how, despite some individual success, the Robidas have been unable to capitalise on community-wide educational and economic advancements.

2.4.2 Marginalization and the Role of Women in Rishi Community Conclusion

Women's marginalisation in the Robidas community reflect the greater problems that Dalit women experience throughout South Asia. Robidas women are doubly marginalised as a result of the gendered dynamics of caste-based discrimination. This is because they are both Dalits and gendered. Dalit women suffer from compounded forms of marginalisation that are not understandable through a singular emphasis on either caste or gender, as per intersectionality

theory (Crenshaw, 1991). This is especially visible in the Robidas community, where women are frequently excluded from leadership roles and decision-making processes within their families and the larger group.

Pateman's (1988) gendered citizenship theory emphasises the exclusion of women from formal and informal power systems in patriarchal countries. This is obvious in the Robidas community, where women have minimal representation in local governance groups such as the Panchayat. While some women have succeeded in breaking into professional professions, the community has yet to build collective mechanisms that encourage women's participation in decision-making. This exclusion feeds a cycle of marginalisation in which women's voices are silenced and their duties are limited to home settings. The absence of strong community support networks, like women's organisations or collaborative places for dialogue and activism, has intensified the isolation of Robidas women. Agarwal (1994) contends that the empowerment of women in governance and communal arenas is crucial for challenging patriarchal systems and guaranteeing fair resource access. The lack of these structures in the Robidas community emphasises the necessity for a transformation in social attitudes and institutional procedures to facilitate increased participation of women in all facets of community life.

The prevalence of early marriage and restricted educational possibilities for females in the Robidas community exacerbates the marginalisation of women. Sen (1999) emphasises the significance of education in promoting social transformation, asserting that for Dalit women, education serves as a vital tool for overcoming gender and caste discrimination. Addressing early marriage and prioritising girls' education can significantly challenge established customs and equip women with the means to break free from cycles of poverty and marginalisation.

1.5 Conclusions

The deeply ingrained social, cultural, and economic hurdles that still restrict the involvement and upward mobility of marginalised communities are reflected in the experiences of these communities, especially the Rishi and Dalit women in Bangladesh. For the Rishi community, despite attempts to transition from traditional vocations and food habits, the social stigma rooted in caste-based perception and cultural standards persists as a significant barrier. The growing diversification of livelihoods and the progressive collapse of prejudices indicate a modest yet continuous process of socio-economic change.

Dalit women have heightened marginalisation resulting from the interaction of caste, gender, and socioeconomic status. The increasing scholarly and policy focus on Dalit concerns is encouraging; nonetheless, substantial progress is sometimes obstructed by enduring patriarchal norms and the inadequate acknowledgement of Dalit identity within the wider society. Notwithstanding these hurdles, indications of growing transformations are evident, especially among younger generations, who are progressively pursuing greater involvement in social and political spheres.

CHAPTER THREE

RISHI AND ROBIDAS IN DHAKA: MATERIAL CONDITION OF LIVING

3.1 Introduction

The three communities—Jigatola Rishi Para, Lalbagh Robidashpara, and Boro Bhawal Rishi Para—paint a rich picture of local life, with distinct types of homes, everyday conditions, and access to essentials. These differences reveal not just economic levels but also the choices and compromises people make based on what's available, affordable, and practical. From housing and sanitation to food habits and household items, each aspect of life in these communities

reflects broader themes of income, resources, and priorities. Here’s a closer look at each of these elements and what they tell us about life in each area.

3.2 Types of Residence

Housing structure is a critical indicator of economic stability and resilience against environmental challenges. Boro Bhawal Rishi Para, the largest community with 102 households, shows a significant number of tin-shed houses (46), alongside 33 concrete buildings and 23 semi-pakka houses. This mix suggests that while some households have invested in more stable housing, a substantial number still rely on temporary structures, which may offer minimal protection against weather and environmental threats. Jigatola Rishi Para has a concentration of concrete buildings, reflecting relatively better economic resources, while Lalbagh Robidashpara has a more modest spread of 10 houses, mainly in tin-shed and semi-pakka formats. These variances highlight how income and access to construction resources influence residence types, with Jigatola and Boro Bhawal showing some capacity for investment in durable housing, whereas Lalbagh remains comparatively under-resourced.

Table 2: Types of residence

Community	Building	Tin-shed	Semi-pakka	Total
Jigatola Rishi Para	60	2	5	67
Lalbagh Robidashpara	3	1	6	10
Boro Bhawal Rishi Para	33	46	23	102
Total	96	49	34	179

(Source: Fieldwork, February 2024)

3.3 Flooring Material: Comfort vs. Affordability

Flooring material also sheds light on household comfort and affordability. In Boro Bhawal, the reliance on earth or sand flooring (64 households) is significant, showing how natural materials often fill the gap where financial resources for sturdier materials are unavailable. Even in Jigatola, which generally has concrete residences, many households still have earth or sand floors, although a few have upgraded to sand-only floors for improved durability and comfort. The prevalence of wood planks, palm, and bamboo floors in 30 households in Boro Bhawal

suggests a small move towards enhanced comfort, potentially signifying aspirations for better living conditions within financial constraints.

Table 3: Floor Materials

Community	Earth/ Sand/ Dung	Sand	Wood/ Palm/ Bamboo	Total
Jigatola Rishi Para	53	14	0	67
Lalbagh Robidashpara	10	0	0	10
Boro Bhawal Rishi Para	64	8	30	102
Total	127	22	30	179

(Source: Fieldwork, February 2024)

These materials, while inexpensive, are a practical solution for those aiming to improve their floor quality without investing in concrete or tiles, which are typically more costly.

3.4 Roofing Material

The choices in roofing materials across these communities emphasize disparities in construction quality and durability against the elements. Boro Bhawal, which has a large community of 102 households, relies heavily on thatch, palm leaves, and other natural materials for roofing in 66 homes. These materials, while readily available and affordable, offer minimal resilience against harsh weather, possibly posing long-term risks in terms of protection and maintenance costs. In Jigatola, a substantial number of households (35) use cardboard roofing—a practical yet inexpensive solution but one that lacks durability. Such materials may be more susceptible to damage, illustrating economic constraints and limited access to more permanent roofing options. This reliance on affordable roofing materials across communities points to broader financial limitations that may impede efforts to build resilient, weatherproof homes.

Table 4: Roof Materials

Community	Thatch, sod, mat	Bamboo	Card board	Total
Jigatola Rishi Para	12	20	35	67
Lalbagh Robidashpara	6	1	3	10
Boro Bhawal Rishi Para	66	16	20	102

Total	84	37	58	179
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(Source: Fieldwork, February 2024)

3.5 Wall Materials: The Balance of Durability and Affordability

The wall materials used by these communities further reveal socio-economic factors affecting housing quality. For instance, Boro Bhawal’s substantial use of cement walls in 43 homes, despite its predominantly tin-wall structures, reflects an attempt by some households to invest in more durable materials when possible. Jigatola Rishi Para, by contrast, shows a high dependence on tin walls (37), with only two homes constructed with cement. Cement walls are often costlier, requiring more resources and labor, which could explain why only a minority of households across these communities can afford them. These patterns indicate that families with slightly better financial means may opt for more durable materials, even as the majority remain reliant on affordable, less durable options.

Table 5: Roof Materials

Community	Bamboo with mud	Tin	Cement	Total
Jigatola Rishi Para	28	37	2	67
Lalbagh Robidashpara	4	6	0	10
Boro Bhawal Rishi Para	28	31	43	102
Total	60	74	45	179

(Source: Fieldwork, February 2024)

3.6 Toilet Facilities

In these three communities, toilet facilities vary widely, reflecting differing levels of infrastructure and access. Jigatola Rishi Para has a relatively high number of indoor toilets (41) compared to outdoor ones (26), suggesting better privacy and sanitation standards. This setup indicates that families here may have greater resources or access to indoor plumbing, enhancing their daily comfort. In contrast, Lalbagh Robidashpara heavily relies on outdoor toilets, with only 2 indoor facilities out of a total of 10, likely due to financial constraints and limited infrastructure. Boro Bhawal Rishi Para presents a balanced mix, with more outdoor toilets (67) than indoor (35), pointing to a community where access is available but indoor options remain

limited for many. Together, these figures illustrate how economic resources shape basic living conditions across the three areas.

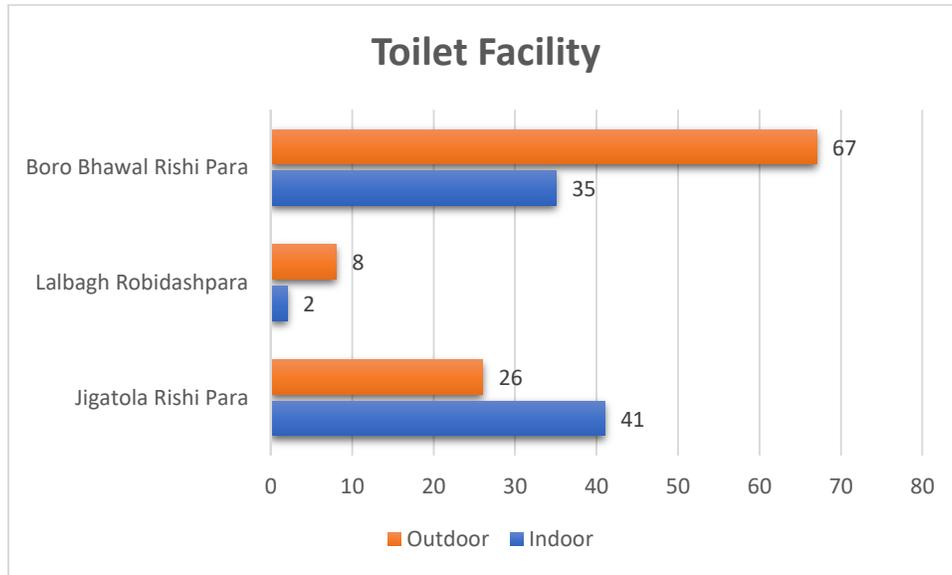


Figure: Place of Toilet

(Source: Fieldwork, February 2024)

The availability of personal vs. shared toilets is a revealing indicator of both community infrastructure and living standards. In Boro Bhawal, there is a fairly even split between personal and shared toilets, suggesting an improving level of sanitation access. In Jigatola, however, shared toilets outnumber personal ones, hinting at possible issues related to hygiene and privacy that may affect residents' quality of life. Lalbagh Robidashpara, with only two personal toilets for the entire community, heavily depends on shared facilities, underscoring its limited sanitation infrastructure. This pattern points to ongoing challenges in enhancing privacy and hygiene across these communities, particularly where personal toilet access is limited.

Table 6: Types of Toilet

Community	Personal	Shared	Total
Jigatola Rishi Para	30	37	67
Lalbagh Robidashpara	2	8	10
Boro Bhawal Rishi Para	54	48	102
Total	86	91	179

(Source: Fieldwork, February 2024)

3.7 Household Possessions

Household possessions provide further context to each community’s relative material wealth. For instance, high rates of television ownership in all areas—over 90% in Jigatola and Boro Bhawal, and 90% in Lalbagh—suggest that televisions have become a priority and accessible to many families, regardless of financial limitations. However, items like water pumps and refrigerators reveal disparities. In Jigatola, 80% of homes have refrigerators, signaling better financial conditions, while Boro Bhawal’s lower access (37%) to water pumps reflects a financial constraint. The possession of basic furniture, such as tables, wardrobes, and sofas, varies significantly, suggesting differences in household wealth. These patterns indicate that while some modern amenities are common, others remain inaccessible to lower-income households, underscoring the complex balance between economic capability and lifestyle.

Table 7: Household possession

in %								
Communities	Mobile	TV	Water Pump	Refrigerator	Table	Wardrobe	Sofa	Normal (button) phone
Jigatola (n=66)	68	92	62	80	68	53	26	43
Lalbagh (n=10)	60	90	30	80	60	50	0	60
Boro Bhawal (n=102)	54	92	37	92	56	51	24	54

3.8 Dietary Patterns

The dietary patterns in these communities indicate a reliance on affordable staples, with vegetables like potatoes and leafy greens being the most commonly consumed, reflecting both availability and cost. Potatoes are a near-universal item, consumed by 95% of households, while leafy greens are also widely popular at 87.22%. These choices suggest an emphasis on lower-cost, readily available vegetables as essential components of daily meals. Protein sources, however, are less prevalent; fish and eggs, consumed by only 55% of households, and meat (40%) point to possible financial limitations that make protein less accessible to a significant portion of the population. Dairy products and fruits like mangoes or papayas, eaten by fewer households, further illustrate these economic constraints, as they are likely seen as occasional

rather than daily necessities. Tea and coffee consumption is limited, with only 12.78% of households partaking, possibly due to cost or cultural preferences.

Table 8: Dietary pattern in last 7 days

Item	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Potato	171	95.00
Leafy green vegetables: spinach and/or other greens	157	87.22
Carrot, squash, sweet potato	135	75.00
Onion, tomato, cucumber	123	68.33
Fish	99	55.00
Eggs	99	55.00
Meat: goat, beef, chicken	72	40.00
Milk and other dairy products	67	37.22
Banana, apple, lemon, guava	65	36.11
Mango, papaya	52	28.89
Sugar or sweet products: sugar, honey, sugarcane, sweets	46	25.56
Tea, coffee	23	12.78

**(Multiple responses taken)*

(Source: Fieldwork, February 2024)

3.9 Conclusion

Together, these indicators provide a layered understanding of the three communities, each navigating distinct economic and structural challenges. Boro Bhawal Rishi Para, with its large population and varied housing types, shows some level of investment in cement walls and wood or bamboo floors, indicating a community in gradual transition. Jigatola Rishi Para’s reliance on concrete buildings suggests slightly higher financial stability, although limitations remain in flooring and roofing choices. Lalbagh Robidashpara, being the smallest and least resource-intensive, highlights a need for improved infrastructure, especially in sanitation. The disparities in diet and household possessions further emphasize these socio-economic patterns, revealing

how financial limitations impact housing, diet, and access to basic amenities across these communities.

CHAPTER FOUR

RISHIS IN JIHATOLA, DHAKA: EXPERIMENTAL URBAN EMPOWERMENT

“We are Hindus, as people call this Hindu para. What to do with this Dalit identity? We are striving to attain many of the rights that are entitled to us and we have achieved many.”

-A Rishi women from Jhigatola

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the evolving dynamics of the Rishi community in Jigatola, a neighborhood in Dhaka where tradition and urbanization collide. The community, traditionally known for leatherworking, is undergoing a significant transformation as its members diversify into various professions, including shoemaking, small business ownership, factory work, and employment in NGOs. The push for higher education and improved economic opportunities, especially among the younger generation, contrasts with the community's efforts to preserve its cultural heritage, including its traditional social structures and gender norms. At the same time, external threats, particularly encroachment by developers, and the persistent issue of land ownership, remain key challenges for the Rishis. The community's central decision-making body, the Panchayet, continues to govern social order, though new initiatives, such as a female-led shadow Panchayet, signal a growing inclusivity and the evolving role of women in shaping community decisions. This chapter delves into the complex interplay between heritage and change, highlighting how the Rishi community in Jigatola is adapting to the demands of a modernizing world while striving to retain its identity.

4.1 Location and Housing Conditions

Jigatola Rishipara is nestled in a densely populated area near the Jigatola bus stand, surrounded by high-rise buildings and a mixed neighborhood of both Bengali and Rishi residents. The community's visibility is often obscured by its urban surroundings, making it a challenge for outsiders to locate without specific directions. Historically, Rishis lived in tin-shed houses, but many now reside in semi-pucca buildings or rented accommodations, with about 150 families living in the area. The dense settlement patterns reflect the ongoing urban migration that has shaped this community's growth. Many of the Rishis migrated from rural areas such as Keraniganj and Bikrampur, seeking economic opportunities and relying on established community networks. The shift from rural occupations to more diverse urban livelihoods marks a significant transformation, as members increasingly engage in professions like shoemaking, handicrafts, garage work, and even factory employment, signaling a shift toward integration into the broader urban economy.

4.2 Family Structure and Land Use

Family structures in Jigatola Rishipara are predominantly nuclear, although a few joint families remain. With limited land available, many families build additional floors to accommodate extended members. The average household size is modest, with families living in cramped quarters, typically averaging around 10 square feet per person, furnished with basic items. The arrival of the Rishis in Jigatola is traced back approximately 80 years, during which time they have faced significant migration-driven pressures. Traditionally known for leatherwork, their occupations are now increasingly diverse, reflecting the adaptability of the community. Women have gradually entered the workforce, participating in activities such as sewing, selling clothes, and garment factory work, expanding their economic opportunities within the urban context.

4.3 Social and Cultural Norms

Despite their evolving economic roles, the Rishis maintain a strong commitment to their cultural norms. Inter-caste marriage remains prohibited, and marriage to individuals from outside the Hindu religion often results in social exclusion. The community's Panchayet, a governing body, enforces these customs, maintaining order and discipline within the group. The community temple serves as the focal point for religious activities and Panchayet meetings, reinforcing both spiritual and social bonds. Women, however, continue to face restrictive norms. Menstruation, for instance, limits women's participation in religious practices, as they are prohibited from entering the temple during this time. Additionally, gender roles are strictly adhered to, with women needing parental approval for education or employment. The traditional expectation is for women to remain indoors after evening, especially widows, whose mobility is highly restricted. These norms, though longstanding, are beginning to face challenges from within the community, particularly from the younger generation who are pushing for more progressive attitudes toward gender roles and opportunities.

4.4 Utility and Infrastructure Challenges

The community faces several infrastructure-related challenges, particularly in terms of utility services. The gas supply is inconsistent, especially after morning hours, which limits cooking to one meal a day. Though the community has access to water and electricity, the irregular gas supply remains a significant hardship. Despite these challenges, there is a noticeable shift toward the pursuit of higher education, largely driven by the efforts of a few Rishi youth attending

public universities. However, economic constraints often compel young men to prioritize work over education, creating a tension between the desire for academic advancement and the immediate need for financial stability. This conflict underscores the ongoing struggle for upward mobility within the community.

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4.6 Role of the Panchayet and Community Mobilization

The Panchayet remains a cornerstone of community life, addressing local issues and maintaining social order. The presence of a "Shadow Panchayet," a female-led council initiated by Nagorik Uddyog, is a significant step toward empowering women within the community. While the traditional Panchayet remains a male-dominated institution, the shadow council provides a platform for women to voice their concerns and participate in decision-making. The Rishi community stands out among other Dalit groups for its higher level of community mobilization and engagement. Through alliances with NGOs and the active involvement of community members, the Rishis are better equipped to advocate for their rights and address the challenges they face. This interconnectedness with external organizations has strengthened their resilience, enabling the community to navigate the complexities of urban life and safeguard its cultural and social interests.

4.7 Conclusion

The Jigatola Rishi community represents a distinctive instance of persistence and transformation within the broad urban environment of Dhaka. Although conventional norms and cultural values persist in influencing the community's social structure, the younger generation's pursuit of

education and economic progress signifies a notable change in the community's direction. The diversification of professions beyond leatherwork, the rising participation of women in the labour sector, and the growing need for higher education collectively indicate a transformative narrative of empowerment. Nonetheless, the neighbourhood continues to contend with infrastructural difficulties, especially over unreliable utility services and restricted property access. The Panchayet's position, while crucial in maintaining order and tradition, is evolving, demonstrated by efforts such as the female-led shadow Panchayet that promote enhanced diversity. The Rishis' navigation of the contradictions between legacy and modernity provides unique insights into the challenges and opportunities confronting marginalised people in Bangladesh as they seek to establish their place in an increasingly urbanised society.

RISHIS IN BORO BHAWAL: A CONTRASTED RURAL CONTEXT

5.1 Introduction

Boro Bhawal Rishipara, located in Taranagar Union, 4 No. Ward, Keraniganj, is a tightly knit rural Rishi community just outside the Dhaka City Corporation. Comprising over 115 households, the majority are nuclear families, though a handful of joint families also exist. Despite its proximity to Dhaka, the community feels socially isolated, creating a distinct identity that sets it apart from surrounding areas. The para is almost exclusively inhabited by Rishis, except for nine Muslim families who live nearby and have erected physical boundaries to separate themselves, emphasizing the social division.

5.2 Living Conditions

According to participants in focus group discussions (FGDs), this community dates back to the British colonial era. Unlike urban Rishi communities, the residents of Boro Bhawal Rishipara own their land, which provides them with a degree of stability and economic security. Extreme poverty is rare here, and the Panchayet plays a pivotal role in supporting those who are less fortunate.

Community solidarity is strong, as evidenced by the collective celebration of traditional Hindu festivals such as Kali Puja, Loknath Puja, Surya Puja, and Saraswati Puja. This shared cultural practice reinforces a sense of belonging and unity, which is markedly different from the fragmented social fabric observed in urban Rishi settlements like Jigatola.

5.3 Occupations and Education

Boro Bhawal Rishipara showcases a diversity of professions, both traditional and contemporary. While some residents remain engaged in the animal skin trade and shoemaking—historically central to Rishi identity—the majority have shifted to other occupations. These include roles as laborers, workshop employees, drivers, welders, auto-rickshaw operators, farmers, small business owners, and members of band parties.

However, educational attainment remains low in this community. The stigma of untouchability and enduring economic hardships have restricted access to higher education, limiting opportunities for upward mobility. Similar to other Rishi communities, dowry practices are

widespread, and traditional Hindu marriage rituals are strictly followed, reflecting a strong adherence to cultural norms.

5.4 Culture and Property Rights

Property and financial dynamics within households reveal deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. Furniture, livestock, savings, and land are predominantly controlled by men, while women have only user rights over personal items such as jewelry. Even when ornaments are provided as dowry from the bride's family, women's control over these items is limited. Land ownership is culturally regarded as a male domain, leaving women economically dependent.

5.5 Governance

The Panchayet remains a central institution of governance in the community, with male members—referred to as *matbors*—managing its affairs. The Panchayet president oversees activities such as organizing religious festivals, setting dowry amounts, resolving disputes (*shalish*), and securing aid for those in need. Women are traditionally excluded from the Panchayet, as leadership roles are perceived as the exclusive domain of men.

However, with the support of Nagorik Uddyog, a Dalit Nari Forum has been established to advocate for women's rights. This group works to prevent child and early marriages, provide pre-primary education, and respond to emergency needs. Despite these efforts, participation in national politics remains minimal, as many fear the potential consequences of political involvement.

5.6 Conclusion

There is a big difference between the Rishi population in Jigatola and the one in Boro Bhawal. The urban Rishis have greater access to varied employment prospects, advanced education, and contemporary social dynamics, but the rural Rishis depend on land ownership and strong internal cohesion to preserve their identity. Rural governance systems such as the Panchayet exhibit stronger traditional authority but are less efficient in incorporating women into leadership positions, in contrast to the urban Rishi's shadow Panchayet. Cultural norms about property and gender roles are well established, indicating the restricted economic and social autonomy of women in both contexts. The existence of organisations such as the Dalit Nari Forum indicates that transformation is getting started, even in rural settings. In contrast to the more fluid and

advancing environment of urban Rishis, which was looked at in the previous chapter, this chapter emphasises on how rural Rishis deal with their particular challenges.

CHAPTER SIX

ROBIDAS COMMUNITY IN DHAKA: BREAKING DOWN THE TRADITION

6.1 Introduction

Lalbagh Robidas Para, a community comprising around 20-25 families, is situated beside eminent Lalbagh Kella. This place has significant architecture dating back to the Mughal era in Bengal. Within this community, seven families reside on Devottar land. The remaining 13 families inhabit rented accommodations owned by Muslim landlords. Most of the families are nuclear, with a few joint families. Additionally, a small Shiv temple is housed within one of the properties situated on the Devottar land. The community members assume that their ancestors were brought here from India to perform shoemaking activities during the British colonial regime. They were primarily shoemakers at first. Their origin is traced back to Uttar Pradesh, India. They still contain some cultural attributes of their region of origin.

6.2 Living Conditions and Social Structure

The living conditions in Lalbagh Robidas Para are characterized by cramped households and overcrowding. The seven families residing on Devottar land occupy particularly small dwellings, each comprising a single room. The limited space available necessitates creative solutions for storage and accommodation. To optimize the constrained living area, families often raise their beds and utilize the space underneath for storing belongings. In instances where the family size expands, such as through marriage, makeshift partitions are erected within the confined quarters to accommodate additional members. Lalbagh Robidas Para does not have a functional Panchayat structure in place. When it is not present, an elderly community member known as the "Panchayet" assumes informal leadership. Because there isn't an official council for the community, this person is considered to be its de facto leader. Residents' feeling of communal togetherness has deteriorated as a result of the lack of a Panchayat structure. There are few opportunities for group meetings in the absence of formal religious rites or community events, which erodes the connections that bind the community.

6.3 Economic Challenges

The community's perception of disintegration is made worse by economic limitations and related difficulties. Concerns over the steady deterioration of identity and community ties have been expressed by many members. The lack of a functioning Panchayet system and group activities makes inhabitants feel even more isolated and detached. People find it difficult to preserve a sense of solidarity and connection in the absence of a cogent structure for community involvement and decision-making. The majority of people in the Lalbagh Robidas Para work in the shoe and barber businesses. The community has relied on these customary means of subsistence for many years. But over time, there has been a noticeable fall in the number of people actively pursuing these occupations. A few people in the community work in different small-scale jobs and the flower industry. These alternative livelihoods provide a variety of work options inside the community. The decline of traditional professions is a reflection of larger shifts in the economy. Fewer people are working in the traditional jobs that formerly supported the community as other businesses and economic possibilities arise.

6.4 Gender Roles and Women's Empowerment

Women have always been prohibited from working outside the house. This restriction most likely resulted from the community's long-standing gender norms. However, these cultural norms have been called into question by recent initiatives by organizations like Nagorik Uddyog aiming at women's empowerment. The mobility of women searching for work outside the home has clearly grown as a result of these actions. Still, there is societal shame attached to this change. Even now, going outdoors for employment might be seen as a disgrace to male family members by some women. This view emphasizes the continuous conflict that exists within society between changing notions of gender roles and cultural norms.

6.5 Educational Opportunities

The community has very little educational opportunity and a poor level of educational achievement. Only one female member has had the chance to enroll in Jagannath University over the years. The majority of women in the neighborhood complete their primary schooling, frequently by taking advantage of free educational programs. However, societal expectations and financial limitations beyond primary school pose serious obstacles to pursuing further education. Many women are unable to enroll in high school due to the costs of education and prevalent

cultural norms, which limit the educational opportunities available to female community members.

6.6 Language and Culture

The Lalbagh Robidas Para group mostly speaks the Puran Dhakaiya Bengali dialect. However, they use the Bhojpuri language in their homes, signifying their Indian origins. Since the community lacks an established Panchayat system, conflicts and disputes are usually settled via the mediation of a respected elder. He is trusted to resolve conflicts and maintain peace in the community. Furthermore, a woman community member who is associated with Nagorik Uddyog occasionally takes part in efforts to resolve conflicts. Her participation reflects a growing understanding of the value of gender-inclusive methods of dispute resolution. Parents and other community elders usually have the last say when it comes to marriage, especially for girls. Although the woman may be asked once if she is willing to marry, the elders of the family and community have the final say in the matter. Additionally, a few women from the village were married off in India. Within the Robidas community, marriage is strictly regulated. It is culturally forbidden for Robidas members to marry members of other Hindu castes. In general, the community does not approve of these kinds of marriages. A member runs the risk of losing their membership and being cut off from the family if they decide to marry someone outside the group. As a result, marriages in Lalbagh Robidas Para with members of other groups are unusual.

6.7 Dowry Practices

Though they live within the mainstream community, they don't have access to many services, including natural gas. They have water, electricity, and other facilities from the city corporation. Some aspects of the dowry system are still in place during the marriage ceremonies. While not expressly identified as dowry, traditional practice mandates the bride's family to pay to the groom's household. Usually, this gift takes the form of home décor for the groom, which is seen as more of a customary act than a dowry. In addition, the bride's family often provides the groom's family with furniture, including beds, refrigerators, televisions, and ornaments as part of the marriage pact. While such gifts may be viewed as presents or gestures of goodwill, they are also consistent with traditional dowry practices. Notably, according to religious customs, women in the community are not entitled to inherit property from their parents' home.

6.8 Financial Support Systems

Community members frequently get loans from a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that operate in the area of Lalbagh. These loans provide a financial resource for those who are in difficult financial situations or who need additional cash for a variety of reasons, such as planning a ceremony or paying for an unexpected expense. These loans can be taken out by members of the community to pay for major events such as ceremonies or celebrations or to ease short-term financial strain. Considering the financial hardships that are common in the community, these loans offer essential assistance to those in need of financial support.

6.9 Dietary Changes

Vegetarianism has become rare among the Robidas community. Most of the people have switched to a meat and fish diet; very few people are still vegetarians. This change in food choices is indicative of more general adjustments in the community's lifestyle and eating customs. Non-vegetarian cuisine is widely consumed by community members due to a variety of factors, including changing dietary choices, shifting cultural influences, and increasing availability of meat and fish.

6.10 Cultural Transformation and Adaptability

Currently, the Robidas community is going through an enormous cultural transition. The lack of a Panchayat system, which was previously an essential component of community governance, has resulted in the erosion of traditional processes for the resolution of disputes and the formation of collective identities. Urbanisation and economic pressures have further affected the social fabric of the community, compelling individuals to adjust to the requirements of contemporary metropolitan life.

Despite the fact that these shifts provide difficulties, they also serve as evidence of the community's adaptability and ability to adapt to changing social and economic environments. These transformations, despite the fact that they are frequently challenging, demonstrate the capacity for resilience in maintaining cultural components while yet welcoming change that is essential.

6.11 Conclusion

Tradition and change meet in Lalbagh Robidas Para. Once established in their ancestral business and regulated by a strong sense of communal solidarity, the community now faces difficulties from urbanisation, economic pressures, and the disintegration of traditional systems like the Panchayat. Changes in gender roles, nutrition, and livelihoods have shown adaptation despite disrupting their way of life. The community still struggles with fundamental difficulties like low education, economic marginalisation, and strongly entrenched cultural norms that inhibit social mobility, especially for women. Despite NGOs and empowerment efforts, these problems underscore the need for more inclusive policies and targeted support to conserve the community's legacy and help its members prosper in a fast changing metropolitan context.

Lalbagh Robidas Para's story is not only one of hardship but also of fortitude and adaptability. In urban marginalised groups, traditional customs must adapt to modern demands. The community's transformations teach it how to balance cultural preservation with socioeconomic integration.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PARTICIPATION OF DALIT WOMEN IN DECISION MAKING

7.1 Introduction

Dalit women represent one of the most marginalized groups in society, facing a compounded form of discrimination due to their caste, gender, and socioeconomic status. This intersection of oppression severely limits their participation in decision-making processes, both at the familial and community levels. High rates of illiteracy, child marriage, and early motherhood are commonplace among Dalit women, alongside limited autonomy in personal and public spheres. Patriarchal societal norms confine their freedom of choice and expression, further reinforcing their subjugated status. In many households, men hold the role of primary breadwinners, leaving women economically dependent on them. This economic dependence poses significant risks for women, especially in the case of abandonment or widowhood, as they often lack the resources or support systems to navigate such crises. This chapter explores the extent and nature of Dalit women's participation in decision-making across three distinct communities.

7.2 Power Structure

Our study reveals a temple-centered power structure within both the Rishi and Robidas communities, with both groups sharing similar dynamics regarding the influence of religious institutions in their lives. In these communities, decisions made within the temple are considered sacred, and members are expected to abide by them. Community leaders, often synonymous with the Panchayat leaders, play a central role in such decision-making processes. However, women's representation in community leadership remains minimal; they are often relegated to supporting roles, rather than being involved in core decision-making. During focus group discussions (FGDs) with women in Jhigatola, participants highlighted their limited engagement in Panchayat meetings:

"We are not called during Panchayat meetings. Sometimes we participate if necessary, or if there's a dispute resolution event and the leaders need our opinion. Apart from that, our participation in the Panchayat is not regular."

7.3 Financial Choices

While a few women exercise control over household spending, the majority remain financially dependent on male family members. One participant shed light on this reality, stating, “My husband decides how we spend the money.” In households where the head of the family is typically the husband or father, financial decision-making is overwhelmingly male-dominated, leaving women with little agency over economic matters. As a result, many women struggle to save money or make significant financial decisions. Even in minor expenditures, such as purchasing cosmetics or clothing, women often have limited influence. One woman remarked, “I only use the money my husband gives me to choose what clothes to buy.” This indicates that while women may have control over small, personal purchases, they remain excluded from broader financial decisions within the household.

7.4 Important Decisions in the Home

There is considerable variation in the level of women’s participation in significant household decisions. In some households, women play an active role in healthcare decisions, especially concerning their children. One woman expressed a sense of shared power in child-rearing decisions by saying, “I am always asked where to take my children when they are unwell.” However, when it comes to matters such as family planning, women’s voices are often marginalized. While some women are encouraged to share their opinions, many feel pressured to accept decisions made by male family members regarding the number and timing of children. Women’s involvement in decisions about their children’s education and marriage is often advisory rather than authoritative. Many women noted that while they are encouraged to voice their thoughts, the final decision rests with their husbands. As one participant explained, “I offer my suggestions, but it’s my husband who decides.”

7.5 Social Engagement

Women’s roles in community engagement are far more constrained than those of men. Although some women participate in local women’s associations (samities) or religious groups, their involvement is often minimal. Many women work as beneficiaries in NGO programs, yet rarely take on leadership or organizing roles. As one participant mentioned, “I attend the NGO meetings to learn, but I am not part of the organizing,” emphasizing the clear division of roles and authority in these spaces. Women's participation in Panchayat governance is even more

limited. The majority of women expressed that they have no influence in electing or voting for Panchayat members and rarely attend Panchayat meetings, which are predominantly male-dominated. As one woman stated, “I’ve never attended a meeting, but I know who our Panchayat leaders are.” This exclusion from both formal and informal decision-making processes within the Panchayat reflects a broader cultural divide that keeps women marginalized in governance structures.

7.6 Barriers to Participation

Women’s participation in decision-making is heavily restricted by a combination of social, cultural, and familial norms. Gender discrimination remains pervasive, limiting women’s ability to freely express their opinions or desires both in public and private spaces. Societal expectations around the roles of wives and mothers further constrain women’s involvement in decision-making outside the home. The cultural emphasis on obedience to male family members and loyalty to family structures often discourages women from seeking autonomy or engaging in broader social activities. Even when opportunities arise for women to participate, many are hindered by a lack of confidence or fear of disapproval.

In Jigatola, however, a subtle change was observed among younger women, who expressed a growing desire for greater involvement in decision-making. One respondent shared, “Things are slowly changing. I may not make the big decisions now, but I feel more comfortable sharing my thoughts, even if they aren’t always followed.” While these shifts are gradual and still constrained by entrenched patriarchal norms, they signal a nascent movement towards more active participation by Dalit women in their communities.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the challenges encountered by the Rishi and Robidas communities, showing the distinct strategies they have adopted in striving for collective welfare and social mobility. The Rishis demonstrate a more progressive position, as their involvement in band parties increases contact beyond their immediate social networks. This involvement has been essential in eradicating caste-based stigma. Conversely, although the Robidas community comprises professionals like doctors and engineers, their emphasis has predominantly been on personal growth rather than communal activities, leading to stagnation at the community level.

The variety of professions among the Rishis has facilitated their social mobility, enabling them to pursue avenues of advancement that dramatically differ from the stagnation seen in the Robidas group. Both groups continue to grapple with the issues of low educational attainment and persistent economic hardship, with Dalit women encountering the most significant obstacles. The daily experiences of Dalits, particularly women, show an alarming absence of support and recognition despite constitutional assurances of equal rights, which underscores the discrepancy between legislation and practice.

In response to these challenges, national and international NGOs, alongside donor agencies, have worked to promote Dalit integration and empowerment. The Bangladeshi government has also implemented limited measures, such as a job quota system for Dalits, but these initiatives remain insufficient without a comprehensive framework that addresses the root causes of systemic inequality. Social change for Dalits, driven by factors such as population growth, technological advances, and access to education, has been slow. Many Dalits, historically branded as 'untouchables,' remain entrenched in traditional occupations that limit their opportunities for upward mobility. They continue to face significant barriers in accessing basic services, such as land, healthcare, and education, further compounding their marginalization.

Dalit women's empowerment depends on increasing awareness of the particular challenges they encounter. Empowering these women not only increases their sense of independence but also promotes community development, establishing a basis for a more equal society. The Panchayat

system, though persistent, has evolved in response to social changes, frequently portraying the complex nature of power dynamics inside these communities.

In the end, Dalits' path to real inclusion and equity—especially for Dalit women—is a continuous one that calls for cooperation. By recognising their rights and enhancing their voices, we can strive to create a society where everyone, irrespective of caste or origin, have the opportunity to prosper. To foster a more equitable and inclusive society, particularly for Dalit women, the following actionable steps are proposed. These recommendations aim to empower women, enhance their participation in various sectors, and promote gender equality:

1. **Strengthen Family Support:** Families should be encouraged to recognize and support the equal rights granted to both genders by the government. Open discussions within families about gender equality can help create a supportive environment, allowing women to exercise their rights more effectively.
2. **Encourage Economic Participation:** Promoting women's economic participation is crucial. This can be achieved through targeted skill development programs, improved access to microfinance, and support for women-led enterprises. These measures will enable women to contribute to their households and communities, enhancing their economic independence and social standing.
3. **Break Social Barriers:** Women should be encouraged to challenge restrictive social norms and structures. Their active participation in politics, education, and the workforce is essential for building a balanced and progressive society. Efforts to promote women's leadership in various sectors should be prioritized.
4. **Engage with the Panchayat System:** Women's direct engagement with Panchayat members is vital for ensuring their voices are heard in local governance. Regular forums or meetings can be established where women can raise their concerns and contribute to decision-making processes, ensuring their perspectives shape community development.
5. **Raise Awareness Among Men:** Educating male family members about women's rights is crucial. When men understand and advocate for women's rights, they can help create an environment that fosters gender equality, rather than one that hinders women's autonomy and participation in decision-making.

6. **Elect Female Representatives:** The Panchayat system should include provisions for at least one female representative to ensure that women have a direct voice in local governance. This will support gender-balanced decision-making and ensure women's concerns are addressed at the community level.
7. **Reform the Panchayat System:** The Panchayat system must be reformed to be more inclusive, ensuring it reflects the needs and rights of all community members, especially women. Reforms should include consultations with local councilors and women's groups to develop structures that actively promote women's leadership and participation.
8. **Promote NGO-Led Initiatives:** Encourage greater participation in NGO-led initiatives aimed at enhancing women's roles in the community. These programs provide essential resources, support networks, and platforms for women to share experiences, advocate for their rights, and collaborate on solutions.
9. **Combat Stigmatization and Discrimination:** Social stigmas and superstition that hinder women's advancement must be actively addressed. Community awareness campaigns, educational workshops, and initiatives like the "Shadow Panchayat" can help change perceptions and create a more supportive social environment.
10. **Empower Women to Speak Out:** It is essential to build women's confidence and encourage them to vocalize their experiences and stand against oppression. Training programs and community support networks can provide women with the skills and confidence to effectively exercise their agency and challenge social inequalities.
11. **End Early Marriage:** Strong efforts should be made to end the practice of early marriage. Community awareness campaigns, along with educational initiatives that highlight the negative impacts of early marriage, can help shift cultural norms. Additionally, providing support for girls' education can prioritize their long-term empowerment.
12. **Establish Women's Panchayat Groups:** Consider establishing women-specific Panchayat groups within communities that focus exclusively on issues related to women's empowerment. These groups can provide a dedicated space for women to

collaborate, share resources, and advocate for their rights, ensuring they have a formal platform for decision-making within the broader community structure.

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ANNEX

1. Common Terminologies

Understanding familial relationships is essential in the context of the Rishi community. The following terms are commonly used to refer to family members:

- **Father:** *Baba, Babu*
- **Mother:** *Ma*
- **Brother:** *Dada*
- **Elder Brother:** *Borda*
- **Middle Brother:** *Mejda*
- **Small Brother:** *Chotda*
- **Grandmother:** *Thammi, Thakuma*
- **Grandfather:** *Thakurda, Thakurbhai*
- **Uncle:** *Boro Jetha (Elder of father), Mejho Jetha, Jetha Moshai, Kaka*
- **Aunt (Paternal):** *Boro Jethima, Mejho Jethima, Kakima, Kaki, Khuri Ma*
- **Aunt (Maternal):** *Pishi Ma*
- **Uncle (Maternal):** *Pisha, Pisha Moshai*
- **Sister-in-law:** *Boudi, Boro Boudi, Choto Boudi*
- **Mother of Sister-in-law:** *Maiya Ma*
- **Father of Sister-in-law:** *Taloi*
- **Aunt (Maternal):** *Mashi*
- **Uncle (Maternal):** *Meso, Meso Moshai*

2. Typical Daily Routine

The daily routines of the community reflect their cultural practices and values. Below is a typical schedule:

Time	Activities
6:00 - 7:00 am	Wake up, cooking, and cleaning
8:00 am	Waking up the children
9:00 - 10:00 am	Breakfast
10:00 am	Morning ritual (puja)
11:30 am - 12:30 pm	Cooking lunch
2:00 - 3:00 pm	Lunch
3:00 pm onwards	Walking, gossiping
Evening	Puja (ritual)
Everyday worship	Lord Bishnu
Sunday	Worship of Shiv
Thursday	Worship of Laxmi
During monsoon	Worship of Durga
9:00 - 11:00 pm	Dinner and sleep

3. Study Tools

Participation of Dalit Women and Girls in Decision Making Process

FGD Guidelines

Date:	Location:	Number of Participants:
Facilitators:		
Household and Community:		
Household: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Can you tell me about the structure of your family? (Have to fill up the table made for survey)2. Describe your household.		
Neighborhood: <ol style="list-style-type: none">3. Can you tell me about your neighborhood?<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Within colony• Surroundings of colony (neighboring communities)• Relation with neighboring communities		
Community: <ol style="list-style-type: none">4. Can you tell me about the origin of your community?5. Can you describe the structure of your community?<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How many Khanas in colony?• How many families in colony?• Class division by occupation, religion, class•		
Domestic Division of Labor <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Tell me about the typical daily routine of men.2. Tell me about the typical daily routine of women.3. What types of typical household chores are done by men?4. What types of typical household chores are done by women?		
Gender-based Norms <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Men's must do activities:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Earning livelihood• Doing daily groceries• Other activities		

2. Women's must do activities:

- Cooking
- Cleaning
- Child rearing
- Take caring elder
- Other activities

3. Men's must not do activities:

4. Women's must not do activities:

- **During menstruation (*)**
- During pregnancy
- Performing religious rituals
- Going out
- Marrying someone
- Other activities

Cultural Rights/Property Rights

1. Describe the rights of men and women regarding

- Jewelry
- Utensils
- Furniture
- Cattle
- Poultry
- Pet
- Others

Access and control over resources and services

Land Ownership

1. Can you tell me about the land ownership in your community?
2. How it is different for men and women? Describe the extent of rights in terms of-
 - Access
 - Control
 - Use
 - Sell

Women's own:

3. What is considered to be women's ownership?

Access and control over resources

4. Briefly tell me about the access of men and women to these possessions:
 - Communal (Tube well, School, Mondir, Community Center, Toilets, Bath places etc.)
 - Cultural (Holy Book, myth, stories)
 - Community space (common land)
5. Briefly tell me about the control of men and women to these possessions:
 - Communal (Tube well, School, Mondir, Community Center, Toilets, Bath places etc.)
 - Cultural (Holy Book, myth, stories)
 - Community space (common land)

Marriage system and Dowry:

Marriage:

1. Can you tell me about marriage system of your community?
2. Point out the ceremonies of marriage of your community?
3. What is expected from groom in the marriage?
4. What is expected from bride in the marriage?

Dowry:

5. Is dowry prevalent in the marriage system in your community?
6. Tell me about the patterns of transaction (dowry) in the marriage system. / What types of transactions usually are taken place in your marriage?

Food and Diet

Shopping:

1. Do you buy groceries/necessary items on daily basis?
2. Who decide to buy?
3. Specify items on daily shopping list

Meal pattern:

4. What do you eat normally in a single day? Specify:
 - Breakfast
 - Lunch
 - Dinner
 - Snacks

Festive Food:

5. Do you cook any particular food during any festival?
6. Tell me the cooking process of it.

Income and Expenditure

Source of income:

1. What is your primary source of income?

Community's Occupation:

2. What are the main occupations of people in your community?

Monthly income and expenditure:

3. Probable income of a family in normal size in a month.

4. Probable expenditure of a family in normal size in a month.
5. Community class structure based on income.

Prevalence of NGOs

NGOs:

1. Is any organization working in your community?
2. Name of the NGOs
3. What types of functions are carried out by NGOs here?
 - loan
 - savings
 - micro-credit
 - education
 - others (specify)

Participation in Decision-Making in Domestic Level

Financial Decisions:

1. Who manages family finances?
2. How much influence do you have in these financial decisions?
3. Can you describe your involvement in decisions regarding the spending of your earnings?
4. Do you have savings? If yes, where?
5. Who make the decision of monthly savings?
6. Who make the decision of any loan?
7. Who make the decision of purchasing women's clothes, ornaments, cosmetics etc.?
8. Who make the decision of major household purchases?
9. Who make the decision regarding buying property?
10. Who make the decision regarding selling property?

Other Household Decisions:

11. In your household, are you actively involved in making decisions related these:
 - health care: regarding decision for treatment, decision of selecting Doctor
 - family planning: decision regarding when to conceive, no. of children, the agent of contraceptive
 - marriages of your children
 - education of children
 - visits to your relatives, friends
 - gifting relatives, friends
 - going out, enjoying movies
 - control over TV
 - Location of household
12. Share your experiences and contributions in these decision-making processes.

Participation in Decision-Making in Social Level

1. Are you a member of any of the following bodies :

- educational institutions
- religious institutions (Mondir)
- committee of organizing religious ceremonies/puja
- *shamity*
- NGOs

If yes, extent of attending meeting of those bodies?

2. Have you ever attend any programs organized by NGOs?
3. If yes, role in the programs.
4. If no, reasons

Participation in Decision-Making in Public Level

Panchayet and Women's participation

- **Formation:**
 1. How panchayet is formed?
 2. How does a community select/elect member of panchayet?
- **Role:**
 3. What role a panchayet plays in the community? [main functions, activities.]
- **Women's participation:**
 4. Are you ever a member in the Panchayat system?
 5. Do you participate in the voting process of Panchayat?
 6. If yes, how do you decide to choose someone to vote?
 7. Do you attend the salish of Panchayat?
 8. If yes, do you express your opinion in the Salish?
 9. If no, reasons of not attending the salish.

City Corporation Election and Women's Participation

10. Are you ever a member in the local government system (city corporation/union parisad/ward member)?
11. Do you participate in the election of local government system (city corporation/commissioner/union parisad/ward member)?
12. If yes, how do you decide to choose someone to vote?

Participation in National Politics:

13. Are you an active member of any national political parties?
14. If yes, activities
15. If no, reason

Participation in meetings, protest marches or rallies:

16. Do you ever participate in any meetings, protest marches or rallies?

- If yes, theme of meetings, protest marches or rallies.
- Which body was the organizer?
- Who pursue you to attend?
- Reasons of attending
- If no, reasons of not attending.

Factors Limiting Participation

Barriers to Participation:

1. Describe your experiences of discrimination:

- By father
- By mother
- By brother
- By sister
- By other family members
- By community
- By Panchayat
- By culture
- By others (specify)

2. How did gender discrimination hinder your participation in decision making process?

Suggestions and Policy Recommendations

Potential Solutions:

1. What could be done to improve the participation of Dalit women and girls in decision-making processes?
2. Are there any specific initiatives or interventions that you like to be implemented, if you are empowered?

Policy Recommendations:

4. What are the things need to change by the-
 - Government
 - Community
 - Local authority
5. What are the changes that can be practically negotiated to the authorities?
 - List of actions/changes
 - List of expected outcomes

Observation Checklist

1. Household Structure

- a. Number of members per household
- b. Family dynamics (nuclear, extended, etc.)
- c. Housing types (single-family homes, apartments, etc.)

2. Water Supply

- a. Sources of water (public taps, wells, etc.)
- b. Water quality (clear, contaminated, etc.)
- c. Accessibility to clean water

3. Electricity

- a. Availability of electricity
- b. Legality of electric connection
- c. Extent of load shedding

4. Sanitation Condition

- a. Toilet facilities (types, availability)
- b. Waste disposal methods

5. Clothing Pattern

- a. Traditional clothing worn (both genders)
- b. Changes in clothing based on age or occasions

6. Age-Sex Composition

- a. Demographics breakdown (age groups, male/female ratio)
- b. Roles based on age and gender

7. Temple

- a. Presence of religious structures
- b. Role in community life

8. Sacred and Profane Spaces

- a. Identification of spaces designated for religious or cultural significance
- b. Distinction between sacred and everyday spaces

9. Condition of Nearby Market

- a. Type of market (permanent, periodic)
- b. Goods available, market conditions

10. Adjacent Community

- a. Relationship with neighboring communities

- b. Similarities or differences in living conditions

11. Public Space

- a. Parks, gathering spots, or communal areas
- b. Usage and condition of these spaces

12. Hygiene Condition

- a. Personal hygiene practices observed
- b. Cleanliness of public areas

13. WASH Facilities

- a. Availability of washing, sanitation, and hygiene facilities
- b. Usage and maintenance of these facilities

14. Clinic

- a. Healthcare accessibility
- b. Services offered, condition of medical facilities

15. Community Mapping

- a. Geographical layout of the community
- b. Key landmarks, infrastructure, and their significance

Field Photos

