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## Spatial Patterns of Ethnic Voting: Analyzing the Rajbangsi Influence Zone in West Bengal Assembly Elections, India

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### Introduction

Ethnic politics are deeply intertwined with the diverse social fabric of India, which comprises several religious, linguistic, and cultural groups. With over 2,000 ethnic groups, identity plays a key role in defining political allegiance and party dynamics. In most Western contexts, ideology is the guiding force; in India, ethnicity, religion, and language are considered to be the critical pivot points of politics, forging a distinctive form of identity-based politics based on socio-economic and historical realities (Varshney, 2002). Ethnic politics emerges from the mobilisation of specific groups to secure resources, recognition, and representation. Because Indian state boundaries were mostly drawn along linguistic and cultural lines, the political salience of ethnicity became institutionally reinforced (Chandra, 2004). For instance, looking at the case of language-based movements in Maharashtra or caste politics in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, identity has become the driver of both local and regional alignments (Jaffrelot, 2003). The emergence of the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra and the DMK in Tamil Nadu has shown how ethnic pride, based on regional and linguistic affinities, has shaped India's political evolution. While the cornerstone of ethnic politics is religious or linguistic recognition, it nevertheless influences national-level contestations when parties and leaders try to align themselves with specific communities to widen their electoral support (Brass, 1991).

Against this broader background, West Bengal is a special case, with a sense of cultural and linguistic identity inextricably entangled with the complex overlay of caste and religion. Bengali cultural identity is politically appealing yet divided by religious differences between Hindus and Muslims (Chatterjee, 1993). The shared cultural and linguistic heritage of West Bengal with Bangladesh, since the latter became an independent country with independent Bengali-speaking nation in 1971, has imparted a particular character to identity politics within the state.

This study situates the Rajbangsi community in this complex ethnic-political milieu and examines the influences of socio-political grievances, ethnic aspirations, and strategic party mobilisation on voting behaviour and partisan alignment in West Bengal. Therefore, ethnicity deeply structures electoral outcomes in West Bengal through continuous negotiations on recognition, autonomy, and socioeconomic advancement, which shape political strategies, voter preferences, and wider patterns of governance.

### Background

The Rajbangshis' ethnic politics North-bengal is no less imbued with the

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historical search for political self-governance, cultural recognition, and socio-economic upliftment. The Rajbanshis, one of the most well-known ethnic groups in eastern India, trace their ancestry to the sixteenth-century Koch or Kamatapur Kingdom, which ruled large parts of present-day North-bengal and Assam from its capital at Koch Behar. British ethnographers like S. Endle (1911) and G.A. Grierson (1990) classified the Koches within the broader Bodo ethnolinguistic family (A.C. Choudhury, 2009). Internal differentiation, however, emerged as sections of the Koch population embraced Hinduism and began identifying themselves as Rajbanshi (C.C. Sanyal, 1965; S. Bandyopadhyay, 1998). While the 1891 Census included Rajbanshis under the generic “Koch”, the 1901 Census recognised Rajbanshi as a distinct identity, symbolising resistance against colonial homogenisation and asserting cultural singularity.

Thus, by the late nineteenth century, the Rajbanshis had undertaken the movement of Kshatriyaisation to contest caste marginalisation and claimed ritual and social elevation. Nabin Chandra Sarkar, Haramohan Roy, and Ray Saheb Panchanan Barma institutionalised the Kshatriya Samity in 1317 B.S. (1912–13) under Panchanan’s leadership to mobilise and integrate the community under the Kshatriya identity through rituals like the Upanayan ceremony (Basu, 2003; Debnath, 2016). Panchanan’s initiative, involving collaboration with B.R. Ambedkar for Scheduled Caste representation into the Imperial Legislative Council formed the early political assertion for this community. Post-independence Bengal further marginalised these aspirations as upper-caste elites consolidated their cultural and political hegemony. (P. Barman, 2007)

The merger of Cooch Behar with West Bengal in 1949 created more alienation among the Rajbanshis, who undertook successive Uttarkhand, Kamatapur, and Greater Cooch Behar Peoples’ Movements (R.K. Barman, 2012). While land reforms by the Left Front briefly brought sections of Rajbanshis within the ambit of agrarian politics, administrative apathy and uneven development revived autonomy demand movements (Ghosh, 2013; Das, 2009).

Against this historical background, this study pursues four major objectives.

I) To analyse how ethnic identity shapes Rajbanshi political consciousness and voting behaviour.

II) To investigate how the demands for cultural recognition, linguistic revival, and administrative autonomy have affected the political scenario North-bengal;

III) To investigate the strategies through which political actors instrumentalise Rajbanshi identity for electoral mobilisation;

IV) To explore how socioeconomic deprivation interacts with ethnic politics to reshape collective aspirations and patterns of political participation.

Together, these aims attempt to cast light on the processes of ethnicization and political negotiation through which Rajbanshi identity is still being reshaped within the changing subnational politics of West Bengal.

### **Description of the Study Area**

The Rajbanshi-dominated constituencies North-bengal include the districts of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, and parts of Darjeeling. The Rajbanshis constitute a major share of the population in these areas, often ranging between 35 and

60 percent. Cooch Behar and adjoining tracts of Jalpaiguri have traditionally been the socio-cultural and political nucleus of Rajbangsi identity formation and mobilization. The study covers 19 ACs-Mekliganj, Mathabhanga, Cooch Behar Uttar, Cooch Behar Dakshin, Sitalkuchi, Sitai, Dinhata, Natabari, Tufanganj, Dhupguri, Maynaguri, Jalpaiguri, Rajganj, Dabgram-Fulbari, Kumargram, Alipurduars, Falakata, Matigara-Naxalbari, and Phansidewa-which together are taken as the core of the Rajbangsi influence zone. (Figure 1)

The constituencies selected for detailed investigation are based on several elements: (i) a comprehensive review of literature on the community’s socio-political history; (ii) voter lists and candidate profiles of Assembly Elections between 2006 and 2021; (iii) demographic data from District Census Handbooks and Scheduled Caste statistics from the 1931, 1961, and 2001 Censuses, especially the SC-14 Report on Scheduled Caste population by religion; (iv) field interviews with community leaders and members of Rajbangsi organisations such as the Kamtapur People’s Party and the All Koch Rajbanshi Students’ Union; and lastly, (v) media reports from The Telegraph, Ananda Bazar Patrika, and Times of India.

Furthermore, the spatial distribution of the Rajbangsi cultural and institutional centres, such as Thakur Panchanan Barma temples, Kshatriya Samiti offices, and Rajbangsi welfare organisations, has been mapped to delineate the community’s influence zone. This multi-source spatial approach allows for the exact identification of the Rajbangsi-dominated electoral landscapNorth-bengalengal and provides insights into how ethnicity, geography, and political behaviour come together in the region’s evolving electoral dynamics.

**Materials and Methods**

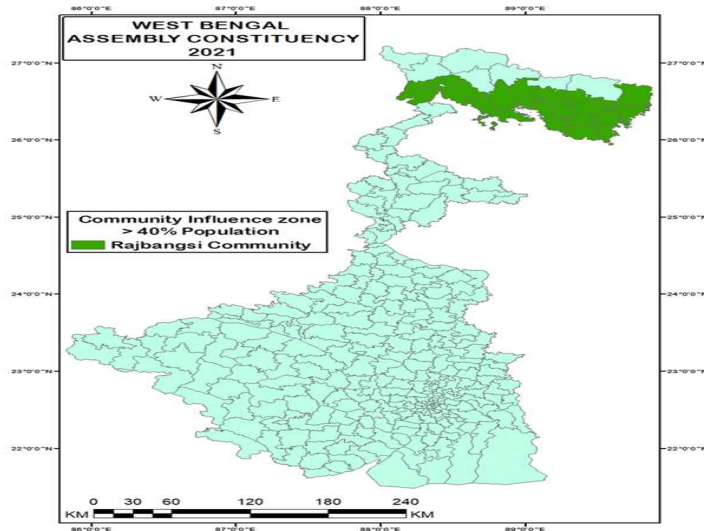


Figure 1

This study analyzes the complex interplay between ethnic identity and voting behaviour of the Rajbangsi community, which, although a historically significant group, remains politically marginalised in North-bengal. This study explains how Rajbangsi identity, cultural assertion, and regional consciousness influence electoral choices, party alignment, and participation in democratic processes. It also examines how political parties instrumentalise this identity in their mobilisation strategies and how such strategies shape vote share, candidate selection, and patterns of ethnic mobilisation.

A mixed-methods approach was used, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses. The quantitative part relies on secondary electoral data collected from the Election Commission of India and the Chief Electoral Officer of West Bengal. These data constitute the empirical basis for analysing the patterns of spatial and temporal voting across Rajbangsi-dominated constituencies in the 2011, 2016, and 2021 Assembly Elections. Statistical and spatial mapping techniques were used to trace the variations in vote share, party performance, and electoral volatility across the Rajbangsi influence zone.

The qualitative dimension is based on fieldwork in the Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, and Darjeeling districts. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with community leaders, political activists, and members of Rajbangshi organisations such as the Kamtapur People's Party (KPP) and Greater Cooch Behar People's Association (GCPA). These provide valuable insights into community perceptions of recognition, economic deprivation, political representation and the symbolic dimensions of ethnic mobilisation.

These findings are supplemented by a careful review of the existing literature, different election manifestos of various political parties, and media reports published in *The Telegraph*, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, and *Times of India*. This integrated schema thus weaves together electoral data, qualitative narratives, and documentary evidence to underpin how ethnicity, geography, and political strategy interact with each other in influencing electoral outcomes within the Rajbangsi community in North-bengal.

### **Ethnic Voting Patterns**

The Rajbangsis have traditionally been an impoverished but politically aware community that has played the role of kingmaker in North-bengal's electoral politics for decades. In their long history of allegiance with the Left Front, largely on account of redistributive land reforms and promises of agrarian justice, the community grew disillusioned with limited regional development and poor representation. In addition, unrequited ethnic aspirations, such as the demand for recognition and autonomy under the Kamatapur movement, were added. Discontent over these features began to redefine the ethnic-electoral landscape in North-bengal and made the Rajbangsi vote a key factor in the political fortunes in this region.

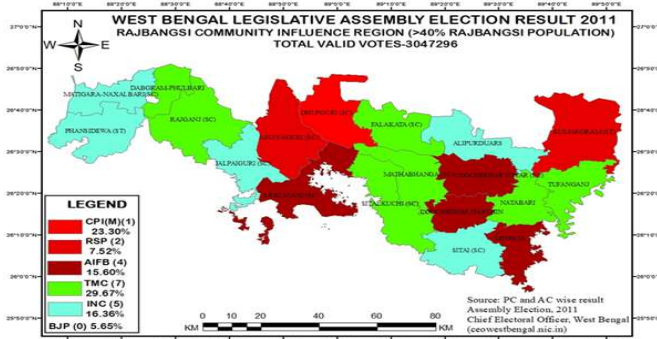


Figure 2

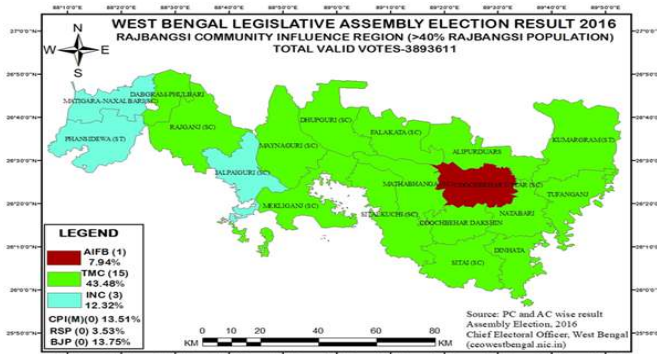


Figure 3

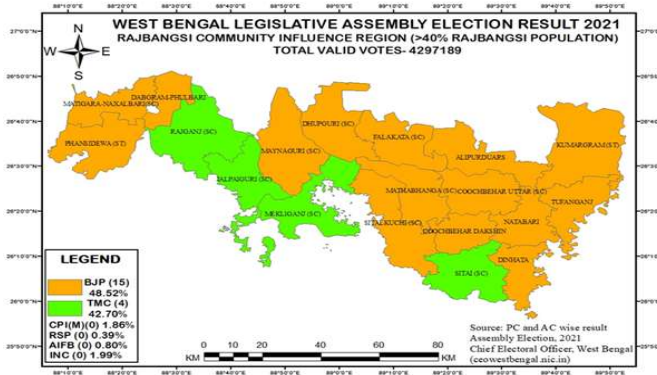


Figure 4

From Figure 2, the 2011 West Bengal Assembly Election marked a decisive turn in Rajbangsi political behaviour. The Trinamool Congress, led by Mamata Banerjee, thus emerged as a credible alternative with seven seats after more than three decades of Left dominance by articulating the grievances of marginal groups, including Rajbangsis. This fact, coupled with the rhetoric of “*Parivartan*” or change by the TMC, struck a chord across northern Bengal. In the constituencies where the Rajbangsis enjoy a preponderant influence, while the Left Front managed to retain seven seats, their vote share suffered serious erosion. The Indian National Congress won five seats, primarily from traditional Left strongholds, indicating a fragmented and transitional pattern of voting. This hope for better political inclusion and development consequently drove the Rajbangsi electorate, which substantially contributed to this change.

As shown in Figure 3, by the time of the 2016 Assembly Election, the TMC had consolidated its dominance in the Rajbangsi influence zone, winning 15 seats to show a deeper penetration into the community’s support base. The Left Front, once representative of the ideological and agrarian aspirations of the Rajbangsis, was reduced to a single seat, indicating a near collapse of its social coalition. The INC retained three seats but remained peripheral to the region’s changing political dynamics. The TMC’s consolidation was facilitated by extensive welfare schemes, region-specific infrastructure projects, and the symbolic recognition of the Rajbangsi cultural identity. In doing so, the party combined appeals in the name of development and identity through its inclusive narrative and decentralised approach, emphasising empowerment at the panchayat level and targeted welfare.

Figure 4 shows that the volatility and transformation of the Rajbangsi voting behaviour were further evident in the 2021 Assembly Election, where, contrary to the TMC supremacy of the last decade, the Bharatiya Janata Party emerged as a strong competitor by invoking issues of ethnic identity, regional neglect, and the demand for ST status in the case of the Rajbangsis. The BJP’s campaign of cultural recognition and administrative attention North-bengalengal, based on promises, resonated with sections of the disenchanted Rajbangsi youth and middle class. The saffron party captured 15 seats within the Rajbangsi influence zone, whereas the TMC retained four. The results signify a deep political realignment in which ethnic mobilisation overtook developmental rhetoric as the dominant electoral narrative.

From class-based support for the Left in the beginning to developmental alignment with the TMC and later identity-driven mobilisation by the BJP, the Rajbangsi vote followed a distinctive evolution across the 2011–2021 period. This pendulum-like swing between political poles underlines the intersectionality of ethnicity and regional politics in shaping democratic participation. The Rajbangsi case illustrates how, in ethnically distinct regions, patterns of electoral behaviour can no longer be explained by class or welfare alone, but must also make room for the strategic invocation of cultural identity, symbolic recognition, and territorial belonging as decisive instruments of political mobilisation.

Political Parties' Strategies

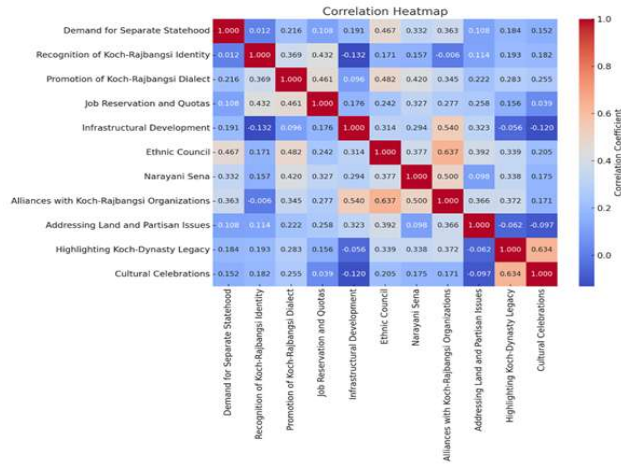


Figure 5

Figure 5 presents a correlation heatmap of the major variables influencing the political mobilisation of the Rajbangsi communiNorth-bengalBengal. The strong positive correlation between the promotion of the Koch-Rajbangsi dialect and job reservations and quotas ( $r = 0.461$ ) signifies that cultural and economic aspirations are interlinked and reinforcing. The high correlation between ethnic councils and alliances with Koch-Rajbangsi organisations ( $r = 0.637$ ) reflects the primacy of institutional and organizational cooperation in sustaining ethnic mobilisation in the Koch Bihar district. The strong association between highlighting the Koch dynasty legacy and celebrating culture ( $r = 0.634$ ) underlines how symbolic revivalism and cultural heritage serve as vehicles for identity assertion. Conversely, weak or negative correlations, such as between the demand for separate statehood and celebration of culture ( $r = -0.152$ ), point to a discontinuity between territorial aspirations and their cultural manifestations. The moderately negative correlation between the ethnic council and statehood demand ( $r = -0.467$ ) hints at a transition from radical claims of autonomy to institutional recognition through councils or development boards.

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.742
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	744.762
	df	55
	Sig.	.000

Table 2: Total Variance Explained

Factor	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings <sup>a</sup>
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total
1	3.640	33.095	33.095	3.182	28.923	28.923	2.813
2	1.794	16.306	49.401	1.335	12.140	41.063	1.891
3	1.418	12.887	62.288	.930	8.458	49.521	2.019
4	.848	7.706	69.994				
5	.817	7.429	77.423				
6	.568	5.160	82.583				
7	.489	4.444	87.026				
8	.475	4.315	91.342				
9	.439	3.992	95.334				
10	.269	2.446	97.780				
11	.244	2.220	100.000				

Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring.  
a. When factors are correlated, the sums of squared loadings cannot be added to obtain the total variance.

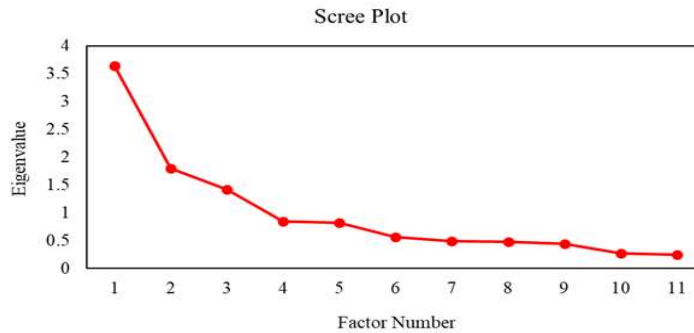


Figure 6

From Table 2 and Figure 6, These interlinkages are further refined through factor analysis and principal component analysis. The KMO value of 0.700 and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity ( $\chi^2 = 744.762, p < 0.001$ ) ensured the adequacy of the data for factor analysis. The distribution of eigenvalues (Table 6; Figure 2) identified three major components explaining 62.288% of the total variance, reflecting a balanced structure of political variables. The first component encapsulates demands for statehood and ethnic recognition, the second emphasises linguistic and cultural promotion, and the third covers institutional and developmental alliances. It is together, these components reflect the twin orientations of Rajbangsi mobilization-symbolic-cultural and pragmatic-developmental.

According to the 2011 Census, Rajbangsis comprise approximately 18% of West Bengal’s Scheduled Caste population and dominate approximately 75% of the SC population in North Bengal (Tewari et al., 2021). Their electoral sway extends to nearly 20 Assembly segments across Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, and adjoining districts ( Ray, 2024). To this end, political parties-Left, Trinamool Congress, and Bharatiya Janata Party-have consistently attempted to win over this significant vote bloc through different strategies of ethnic accommodation and recognition.

Here, the idea of Rajbangsi/Kamatapuri identity has been negotiated, both historically and contemporarily. While the Left Front had previously enjoyed prominence in North Bengal, its ideas of agrarian reforms, class unity, and economic redistribution gradually lost momentum due to negligence toward Rajbangsi-specific identity issues. SNorth-bengal however, TMC, under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee, adopted a welfare-oriented policy for this community, targeting socio-economic and cultural domains: flagship programs like *Kanyashree*, *Rupashree*, *Sabuj Sathi*, and *Lakshmir Bhandar* were strategically implemented to enhance the social security and women's empowerment of Rajbangsi households. This is concurrently supplemented by symbolic recognition, such as declaring a state holiday on the birthday of Panchanan Barma on 13 February along with the inclusion of the Rajbangsi/Kamatapuri dialects North-bengal and academia, symbolising cultural inclusion. The synthesis of welfare and symbolic gestures thus proposes the development of an integrated community discourse with the pride of ethnicity intact.

In contrast, the BJP instrumentalised the discourse of cultural autonomy and regional pride to consolidate Rajbangsi support. It invoked the legacy of the Koch dynasty, supported the Kamatapuri language, and partially endorsed the demand of the Narayani Sena as a means of positioning itself as a protector of Rajbangsi identity. Such claims have made promises of an autonomous council or a separate Kamatapuri state major mobilising appeals, reinforced by nationalist rhetoric on border security and anti-immigration sentiment. This ethnic-symbolic strategy has been magnified through collaboration with the Cooch Behar royal lineage and regional leaders. Although the BJP managed to make inroads in 2019, the growing loss of credibility due to unfulfilled promises on autonomy and statehood weakened its position vis-à-vis the TMC. On the other hand, however slow it may be, the welfare model of TMC managed to achieve continuous penetration through local networks and developmentally initiated inclusion. The continued presence of smaller ethnic groupings-the GCPA and the KPP-continues to splinter the Rajbangsi vote, illustrating the internal heterogeneity of the community. Thus, factor and correlation analyses reveal that the political mobilisation of Rajbangsi alternates between identity-based recognition and pragmatic developmentalism-a perspective that empowers and complicates their agency in West Bengal's evolving electoral landscape.

#### CONCLUSION:

This study investigates the intersection of ethnic politics and electoral behaviour among the Rajbangsi community in West Bengal. It finds that even though ethnic identity is not the sole driver of political choice, it remains pivotal for political mobilisation. This pride in Rajbangsi has been evoked rather determinedly by the Bharatiya Janata Party through its cultural and linguistic appeal, with the most pronounced demands regarding the recognition of the Kamatapuri language and a separate Kamatapuri state. However, socio-economic issues related to jobs, infrastructure, and welfare mark the electoral choices and make the development-oriented agenda pursued by the Trinamool Congress appealing. Divisions within the community along regional, economic, and religious lines impede unified ethnic voting, forcing political actors to adopt nuanced and localised strategies. The BJP can consolidate its gains by combining identity politics with tangible development outcomes, whereas the TMC can solidify its support through welfare policies coupled with acknowledgement of

culture. Policymakers should well advised to pursue an enabling framework which harmonises ethnic recognition with inclusive growth. This would provide a more constructive insight into the nature of ethnic mobilisation in India's electoral landscape through comparative studies with other communities, such as the Gorkhas and Matuas.

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