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SOCIO-ECONOMIC STRUCTURE AND HOUSEHOLD INCOME DYNAMICS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF THE KAIBARTA COMMUNITY OF HAJO, ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

The socio-economic structure of a community refers to its economic and social composition in terms of education, income, occupation, living conditions, age, sex, household size and the resources and opportunities available to its members. Such information is essential for policymakers to design effective public policies aimed at improving overall welfare. In a country like India, it is particularly important for the government and other stakeholders to formulate strategies that enhance the living standards of diverse population groups. Assam is home to various indigenous communities, each contributing to its distinct socio-economic and demographic landscape. The Kaibarta community, one of the major Scheduled Caste groups in Assam, plays a significant role in the state's socio-economic life. A substantial proportion of this community resides in the Hajo area of Kamrup District of Assam, especially in a locality known as Kaibartatola. This study undertakes a comprehensive socio-economic analysis of the Kaibarta community in Hajo, treating income as the dependent variable. The analysis is based primarily on field-level primary data and examines the influence of key socio-economic parameters on income levels, thereby highlighting the structural factors underlying income distribution within the community. The study is based on primary survey data from 490 households that highlights the structural factors such as land scarcity, poverty, occupational concentration and low human capital, that collectively sustain low income and constrain economic mobility within the community.

Keywords: Socio-Economic Structure, Kaibarta Community, Income Distribution, Poverty, Occupational Concentration

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Kaibartas* are recognized as one of the Scheduled Caste communities in Assam. Traditionally, they have lived in the riverine areas of the Brahmaputra River. Historically, their presence has been recorded in Assam, Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha in India, as well as in Nepal, Bangladesh, and Bhutan. They are primarily known for their traditional occupation of fishing. Based on occupation, the community is divided into two sub-castes: *Jaliya Kaibarta* (engaged in fishing and boating) and *Haliya Kaibarta* (engaged in agriculture). According to the 2011 Census, the total *Kaibarta* population in Assam is 7,16,893.

The word *Kaibarta* is derived from the Sanskrit words *ke* (water) and *varta* (depending upon), thus translating loosely to "those who earn their livelihood from water." Members of this Scheduled Caste community are widely dispersed across Assam, especially in rural and wetland regions, with notable concentrations in *Kaibarta tolas* (colonies) in districts such as Kamrup. Hajo, the study area, consists of multiple castes and communities, each with its distinct cultural heritage. Kaibartatola is one such locality where the present study was conducted. Understanding the socio-economic condition and demographic structure of this community is essential for the design of effective developmental policies and programmes.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The major objectives of the study are-

1) To understand the socio-economic status of the *Kaibarta* community residing in the Hajo area of Assam in order to identify the characteristics and factors that have contributed to the overall socio-economic development of the community.
2) To study the multiple structural factors that influences the income level of the community in the study area.
3) To suggest remedial measures for improving the socio-economic status of the community.

3. METHODOLOGY AND DATABASE

The study uses a quantitative, descriptive-analytical design. Household income is treated as the central variable of interest and its association with four structural factors- landholding size, poverty status, occupational pattern and educational attainment is examined through disaggregated tabular analysis. Primary data were collected from 490 households in Kaibartatola, Hajo, during 2024-25, using structured interview schedules. Households were selected through systematic sampling. Secondary data were sourced from the Census of India (2011), government publications and peer-reviewed journals. Three quantitative indicators were computed for the statistical analysis. Income Share Analysis was used to assess intra-community income inequality. The Economic Dependency Ratio indicates the average number of dependents supported per working individual. And, the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) was computed as the sum of squared occupational shares across six categories to measure the degree of occupational concentration (Rhoades, 1993).

4. STUDY AREA

The study was conducted in Hajo, located in the central part of the Hajo Revenue Circle under Kamrup district, Assam. Hajo is situated 32 km northwest of Guwahati on the north bank of the Brahmaputra River. The area covers approximately 15.41 sq. km and has a population of 17,625 as per the 2011 Census. Geographically, it lies at 26°14′35″N latitude and 91°32′24″E longitude. It is bounded by the Lakhaitora (Puthimari) River on the north, Abhaypur and Gerua villages on the east, Nadia, Ujankuri and Hahdia villages on the west, and No. 2 Kulhati village and the Hajo-Sota River on the south.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

The report *The Socio-economic Conditions of the Kaibartas of Assam* by G. C. Sarma Thakur (1987) is a significant contribution that documents the historical background and socio-economic conditions of the *Kaibarta* community. Based on a survey of 77 villages, including Hajo, Kaibartatola, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of their living conditions, occupation and social structure. Prabin Chandra Das (1999), in *The Blessed Land*, offers a concise account of the origin and historical background of the *Kaibartas* in Assam, with special reference to Hajo. His work draws upon classical sources such as the *Manusamhita*, *Brahmavaivarta Purana* and inscriptions from the rulers of ancient Kamrupa, thereby linking the community to a broader historical and cultural framework. The research article *The Kaibartas: A Fishing Community of Assam, Their Society and Economy* by Chandana Sarma and A. N. M. Irshad Ali (2005) focuses on the socio-economic life of the *Kaibartas* in Boripara village of Kamrup district. The study highlights changes in occupational patterns, particularly the shift away from traditional fishing due to the impact of urbanization. Poli Konwar (2020), in her paper *A Social Background of Kaibarta Community in Assam*, discusses the social, economic and cultural

life of the *Kaibartas*, highlighting their role in Assam's social development. A study conducted in Majuli district of Assam entitled *Education and Socio-Economic Development of Kaivartta Community* by Dilip Das and Nobin Chandra Das (2020) emphasizes the critical role of education in shaping occupational choices, income levels, social status and overall lifestyle of the community. Debashree Chakraborty (2022) in *The Kaibarta Question in Barak Valley, Assam: A Curious Case of Settlements in Flux* traces the origins of *Kaibarta* migration in Barak valley of Southern Assam by focusing on how the community came and settled in the region. The paper entitled *Fishing and the Kaibartas of Assam*, Chandana Sarma (2015) mentions that though fishing is their primary occupation, the *Kaibartas* still depend on traditional technologies and reflect a peasant culture. The paper attempts to elucidate the duality of the *Kaibartas* expressed in the peasant economy. They are linked on the one hand to subsistence needs and on the other as consumers/producers with urban centres or the market.

6. ORIGIN AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE KAIBARTA COMMUNITY IN ASSAM

The *Kaibartas* are considered among the aboriginal inhabitants of Assam and are listed as one of the sixteen Scheduled Caste communities of the state under the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950. They are predominantly found in the plains districts of Assam, where the term *Kaibarta* is mainly associated with those engaged in the fish trade. The *Doms* and *Nadiyals* are also considered part of the *Kaibarta* fold, and some scholars include the *Keots* as well (Thakur, 1987, p. 3). Historical evidence suggests that the *Kaibartas* may have migrated to Assam from Bengal and Bihar (Dutta, 1985, p. 35).

Different *Samhitas* and *Puranas* trace the origin of the *Kaibartas* differently. The *Brahmavaivarta Purana* describes the *Kaibarta* as born to a *Kshatriya* father and a *Vaishya* mother. According to the *Manusamhita*, the son of an *Ayogava* woman and a *Nishada* man is called *Margava* or *Dasa*, who earns his living by boat-sailing; such individuals are referred to as *Kaibarta* in Aryavarta (Chapter X, Sloka 34). The Buddhist *Jatakas* also mention a class of fishermen called *Kevattas*, who worked with nets and baskets (Dutta, 1985, p. 35).

The *Kaibartas* of Hajo form a functional caste located northwest of the Hayagriba-Madhava temple. Historically, they were responsible for collecting tolls and ferrying people on rivers owned by the temple estate. They also supplied firewood for preparing *bhoga* (cooked food offerings) and played drums and cymbals before the deities during festive processions (Das, 1999, p. 15).

7. SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF THE KAIBARTA COMMUNITY: AN ANALYSIS BASED ON THE PRIMARY SURVEY DATA

In analysing the various indicators of socio-economic status, household income is considered as the dependent variable. The socio-economic profile of the 490 surveyed households reveals multiple structural factors that influence income. Since monthly income is treated as the dependent variable, the analysis interprets how landholding size, poverty status, occupation patterns and educational attainment collectively shape income levels. The income distribution of the surveyed households is presented below.

Table 1

Table 1 Income Distribution of Households

Income Category (Rs. Per Month)	No. of Families	Percentage (%)	Estimated Economic Status	Socio-Economic Features
Below 10,000	270	55.10	Very Low Income	Majority dependent on fishing and casual work
10,000 – 20,000	97	19.80	Low Income	Limited diversification of income sources
20,000 – 30,000	82	16.73	Lower-Middle Income	Some access to business/private jobs
Above 30,000	41	8.37	Relatively Better-off	Likely linked to salaried employment
Total	**490**	**100.00**	—	—

Source: Primary Survey, Kaibartatola, Hajo (2024-25), n = 490 households.

The table shows that 55% of households earn below Rs. 10,000, indicating a high concentration of income at the lower end. These households fall under the "very low income" category, and are largely dependent on traditional

occupations such as fishing and casual labour, as reflected in the table. About 19.80% of households fall within the Rs. 10,000-20,000 range, representing a low-income group with limited diversification of income sources.

Further, 16.73% of households belong to the lower-middle income category (Rs. 20,000-30,000), where some access to private jobs and small business activities is observed. Only 8.37% of households earn above Rs. 30,000 and are relatively better-off, often associated with more stable and salaried employment. Thus, the income distribution clearly indicates economic stratification and occupational linkage, highlighting limited and uneven access to income-generating opportunities.

8. LANDHOLDING SIZE AND INCOME

Landholding size refers to the total area of land owned, inherited, leased or otherwise managed by a household, typically for agricultural purposes. Land size plays a crucial role in determining agricultural output, food security and credit access and asset formation. The landholding size in the study area is very small. About 72% of the families possess less than 1 katha of land, representing extremely small and economically non-viable holdings. Only four families own land measuring 3 katha or more. The distribution is presented below.

Table 2

Table 2 Landholding Size and Income Implication

Landholding Size	No. of Households	Percentage (%)	Average Income Category	Economic Viability	Landholding Implications
Below 1 katha	352	71.84	Below Rs. 10,000	Non-viable	Severe land constraint, subsistence level
1-2 katha	109	22.24	Rs. 10,000-20,000	Marginal	Limited surplus generation
2-3 katha	25	5.10	Rs. 20,000-30,000	Moderately viable	Some asset formation possible
Above 3 katha	4	0.82	Above Rs. 30,000	Economically viable	Better access to credit & productivity
Total	**490**	**100.00**	—	—	—

Source Primary Survey, Kaibartatola, Hajo (2024-25), n = 490 Households.

As indicated in the table, the households are primarily associated with the lowest income category (below Rs. 10,000) and face severe constraints in terms of subsistence and asset formation. Households with 1-2 katha of land (22.24%) fall under a marginal category, with estimated income levels between Rs. 10,000 and Rs. 20,000, reflecting limited surplus generation. A very small proportion of households (5.10%) with 2-3 katha land exhibit moderate viability and are associated with middle income categories, suggesting some capacity for asset formation. Only 0.82% of households own more than 3 katha of land, and these are economically viable, with higher income levels (above Rs. 30,000) and better access to credit and productivity-enhancing resources. Thus, the table clearly demonstrates that landholding size is positively associated with income, influencing not only agricultural output but also economic stability and access to opportunities.

9. POVERTY LEVEL AND INCOME

The survey reveals that more than 82% of households belong to the Below Poverty Line (BPL) category, while only 9.59% are Above Poverty Line (APL). As reflected in the table below, BPL households are predominantly associated with income levels below Rs. 10,000, and are largely engaged in informal occupations such as fishing and casual labour, resulting in low living standards and high economic vulnerability. These households typically possess limited land, low literacy and informal occupations, which reinforce the low-income cycle.

Table 3

Table 3 Poverty Status and Income Linkage

Poverty Status	No. of Families	Percentage (%)	Estimated Income Range	Employment Type (Dominant)	Living Standard	Socio-Economic Insights
APL	47	9.59	Above Rs. 20,000	Salaried/Business	Moderate	Better access to resources

BPL	402	82.04	Below Rs. 10,000	Fishing, casual labour	Low	High economic vulnerability
Others	41	8.37	Mixed	Mixed	Transitional	Between BPL and APL
Total	**490**	**100.00**	—	—	—	—

Source: Primary Survey, Kaibartatola, Hajo (2024-25), n = 490 households.

Note: *'Others' refers to households not classified under APL or BPL by the local administration.*

In contrast, APL households are linked with higher income ranges (above ₹20,000) and are typically engaged in salaried employment or business activities, ensuring relatively better living standards and access to resources. The "Others" category represents a transitional group with mixed characteristics. Thus, poverty status not only reflects income levels but also corresponds closely with employment type, living standards and overall economic security, reinforcing the structural nature of low income in the study area.

10. OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE AND INCOME

The occupational structure of a population indicates the distribution of the workforce across primary, secondary and tertiary sectors and serves as an indicator of economic development. The occupational structure reveals a strong linkage amongst type of employment, income level and job stability.

Table 4

Table 4 Occupational Structure with Income Implications

Occupation Type	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)	Estimated Income Level	Nature of Employment	Stability	Employment Conditions
Fishing	54.20	51.89	53.82	Low	Traditional	Unstable	Seasonal & uncertain earnings
Agriculture	8.41	23.58	10.92	Low-Moderate	Subsistence	Moderate	Limited by land size
Government Service	2.99	3.77	3.12	High	Formal	Stable	Very limited access
Private Job	8.60	8.49	8.58	Moderate	Semi-formal	Moderate	Income varies
Small Business	24.9	10.38	22.15	Moderate	Self -employment	Variable	Risk-prone but flexible
Artisans	1.31	1.89	1.41	Low	Traditional	Low	Declining occupation
Total	100	100	100	—	—	—	—

Source: Primary Survey, Kaibartatola, Hajo (2024-25), n = 641 workers (out of total population of 1,836; work-participation rate = 34.91%).

The table demonstrates that nature of employment and stability are crucial determinants of income and the dominance of traditional occupations like fishing explains the prevalence of low-income households. Out of a total population of 1,836, there are 641 workers (34.91%), while 1,195 individuals (65.08%) are non-workers, implying a high dependency ratio. Fishing remains the dominant occupation (53.82%) and as indicated in the table, it is associated with low and unstable income, primarily due to its seasonal and uncertain nature. Agriculture, though present, is largely subsistence-based and yields low to moderate income, constrained by small landholdings. Government service, although employing only 3.12% of the population, provides high and stable income, highlighting the importance of formal sector employment. Private jobs and small businesses contribute to moderate income levels, though with varying degrees of stability. Artisans represent a very small share and are associated with low income and declining occupational relevance. A total of 22.15% run small businesses, contributing to moderate or variable income levels.

11. EDUCATIONAL LEVEL AND INCOME

When excluding 145 children in the 0-6 age group, the literacy rate of the *Kaibarta* population stands at 87.40%, which is higher than the state average of 72.19% (2011 Census). Male and female literacy rates are of 90.49% and 84.35% respectively. These figures are also significantly higher than the state averages of 77.85% and 66.27%. The distribution of educational attainment is shown below.

Table 5

Table 5 Educational Attainment and Income Potential

Education Level	No. of Persons	Percentage (%)	Skill Level	Employment Opportunities	Income Potential	Employment Implications
LP	983	66.51	Basic	Unskilled work	Low	Limits occupational mobility
HSLC	250	16.91	Secondary	Semi-skilled jobs	Low-Moderate	Some diversification possible
HS	170	11.50	Intermediate	Clerical/private jobs	Moderate	Gateway to higher education
UG	27	1.83	Graduate	Skilled jobs	High	Very small proportion
PG	3	0.21	Advanced	Professional jobs	High	Negligible presence
Technical	45	3.04	Vocational	Skilled trades	Moderate-High	Important for income mobility
Total	**1478**	**100.00**	—	—	—	—

Source: Primary Survey, Kaibartatola, Hajo (2024-25), n = 1,478 persons.

Note: *Excludes 145 children aged 0–6 years.*

The table shows that 66.51% of individuals have education only up to LP level, which corresponds to low skill levels and limited access to unskilled employment opportunities, resulting in low income potential. Higher education (UG and PG), though very limited in proportion, is associated with high income potential and access to skilled and professional employment. Thus, the table clearly indicates that educational attainment influences not only employment opportunities but also income levels.

12. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC INDICATORS

Income Share Analysis: Since household income was recorded in categorical ranges rather than as continuous values, the midpoint of each interval was used as the representative income value for estimating total household income, following standard practice in grouped data analysis. The assumed midpoints are as follows:

Table 6

Table 6 Estimation of Household Monthly Income Using Income Class Midpoints of Kaibarta Community, Hajo (2024-25)

Income Category	Midpoint Assumed	No. of Households	Estimated Monthly Income (Rs.)
Below Rs.10,000	Rs.5,000	270	13,50,000
Rs.10,000 – Rs.20,000	Rs.15,000	97	14,55,000
Rs.20,000 – Rs.30,000	Rs.25,000	82	20,50,000
Above Rs.30,000	Rs.35,000*	41	14,35,000
Total		**490**	**62,90,000**

Source: Computed by the Authors from Primary Survey Data, Kaibartatola, Hajo (2024-25). n = 490 households (1,836 persons).

Note: **The top category is open-ended; ₹35,000 is adopted as a conservative lower-bound estimate.*

The estimated total monthly income of the community is thus Rs. 62,90,000. Each group's income share is expressed as a percentage of this total:

- Bottom 55.1% of households (below Rs. 10,000): Rs.13,50,000 ÷ Rs. 62,90,000 = 21.46%
- Top 8.37% of households (above Rs. 30,000): Rs. 14,35,000 ÷ Rs. 62,90,000 = 22.81%

This means the top 8.37% earns almost as much as the bottom 55.10%, a stark illustration of intra-community income polarisation.

Economic Dependency Ratio: The economic dependency ratio is defined as the ratio of non-working to working population and is a standard indicator of the economic burden borne by the labour force (World Bank, 2023). Out of a total population of 1,836, only 641 individuals are workers, yielding a dependency ratio of 1.86. This means that on average, each worker must support approximately 1.86 non-workers (including children, elderly, homemakers and the unemployed). The high dependency ratio constrains household savings capacity and limits investment in human capital, thereby perpetuating the low-income cycle documented in this study.

Occupational Concentration: Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI): The Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) is a standard measure of market or sectoral concentration used in industrial economics and labour economics (Rhoades, 1993). It is computed as the sum of squared shares of each occupational category. Using the occupational shares from Table 4 (Fishing: 53.82%, Agriculture: 10.92%, Government Service: 3.12%, Private Job: 8.58%, Small Business: 22.15%, Artisans: 1.41%), the HHI is calculated as:

$$\mathbf{HHI = 0.5382^2 + 0.1092^2 + 0.0312^2 + 0.0858^2 + 0.2215^2 + 0.0141^2 = 0.289 + 0.012 + 0.001 + 0.007 + 0.049 + 0.000 \approx 0.359}$$

The index ranges from 0 (perfect diversification) to 1 (complete monopoly). An HHI of 0.359 indicates moderately high occupational concentration, dominated by fishing. This is economically significant: a highly concentrated occupational structure exposes the community to covariate income shocks such as floods, depletion of fish stocks or seasonal downturns which can simultaneously affect the earnings of the majority of households.

Table 7

Table 7 Summary of Key Economic Indicators for Kaibarta Community, Hajo (2024-25)

Economic Indicator	Value	Benchmark	Interpretation
Income Share: Bottom 55.1%	21.5%	Line of equality = 55.1%	Bottom majority earns less than proportional share
Income Share: Top 8.37%	22.8%	Line of equality = 8.37%	Top group earns disproportionately high share
Economic Dependency Ratio	1.86	Workers per non-worker	High burden; ~1.86 dependants per worker
Occupational HHI	0.359	0 = diversified; 1 = monopoly	High concentration in fishing

Source: Computed by the Authors from Primary Survey Data, Kaibartatola, Hajo (2024-25). n = 490 households (1,836 persons).

13. MAJOR FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study reveals that the socio-economic condition of the Kaibarta community in Kaibartatola, Hajo is characterised by low income, limited asset ownership and occupational vulnerability. More than half of the surveyed households (55.10%) earn below ₹10,000 per month, indicating widespread economic insecurity and dependence on low-paying occupations such as fishing and casual labour. Only a small proportion of households enjoy relatively stable income levels.

Landholding pattern emerges as a major structural constraint, as nearly 72% of households possess less than one katha of land. This limits agricultural viability, asset formation and access to credit. The findings also show a positive relationship between landholding size and household income.

The poverty structure reflects severe economic deprivation, with over 82% of households belonging to the BPL category. Occupational analysis indicates a high dependence on fishing (53.82%), which is seasonal and uncertain, exposing households to livelihood insecurity and unstable income.

Although literacy levels are relatively high, educational attainment remains concentrated at the primary level, restricting access to skilled and formal employment opportunities. Limited access to higher and technical education further constrains occupational and income mobility.

The statistical indicators also highlight structural inequality within the community. The bottom 55.10% of households account for only 21.5% of total income, whereas the top 8.37% command 22.8%, indicating significant income disparity. The dependency ratio of 1.86 and Occupational HHI value of 0.359 further reflect economic pressure and occupational concentration.

Overall, the socio-economic condition of the Kaibarta community is shaped by low landholding, poverty, occupational concentration and limited educational advancement, resulting in restricted economic mobility and persistent structural vulnerability.

14. REMEDIAL MEASURES FOR IMPROVING THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF THE KAIBARTA COMMUNITY IN THE STUDY AREA

The analysis of the socio-economic conditions of the Kaibarta community indicates the need for targeted and integrated policy interventions to address structural constraints and improve overall living standards. The following remedial measures are suggested:

1) Educational support through scholarships and hostel facilities should be strengthened to reduce dropout rates and promote higher educational attainment.
2) Skill development and vocational training programmes should be expanded to enhance employment opportunities and occupational diversification.
3) Traditional fishing livelihoods should be supported through modern equipment, storage facilities and improved market access to ensure stable income generation.
4) Access to institutional credit and welfare schemes should be improved to enhance economic security and support income-generating activities.
5) Healthcare services and basic infrastructure, including sanitation, drinking water, roads and electricity, should be developed to improve living conditions.
6) Women empowerment and social inclusion initiatives should be promoted through self-employment programmes and greater participation in local governance.

15. CONCLUSION

The socio-economic condition of the Kaibarta community reflects a structurally constrained economy shaped by land scarcity, poverty, occupation and education. The dominance of low-income households indicates a subsistence-based system with limited upward mobility. Small and fragmented landholdings restrict productivity, asset formation and access to credit, reinforcing low income levels. Poverty remains structural, with limited access to stable employment and resources, creating a cycle of deprivation. The occupational structure, dominated by fishing and subsistence agriculture, leads to low and unstable earnings, while limited formal employment restricts income security. Although literacy is relatively high, low educational attainment limits access to skilled jobs and occupational mobility. The high dependency ratio further intensifies economic pressure. Overall, income inequality in the community reflects a cumulative effect of limited assets, low human capital and restricted economic opportunities.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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