

**Socio-Economic Status, Political Participation, Awareness and Economic  
Development of RVD Bengali Settlers  
A Case Study of Harinagar and Billiground, Middle Andaman (Post-1980s)**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates the socio-economic conditions, political participation, civic awareness, and developmental trajectories of Rehabilitation Village Development (RVD) Bengali settlers residing in Harinagar and Billiground, situated in the Mayabunder sub-division of the North and Middle Andaman district, in the post-1980s period. Descended from East Bengali Hindu refugees who were systematically resettled in the Andaman Islands under India's post-Partition colonisation schemes from 1949 onward, these communities have evolved over seven decades from displaced forest-clearers into agriculturists, fishers, and small traders. Employing a mixed methodology of historical analysis, census data interpretation, field observation, and secondary literature review, this study examines how political empowerment through Panchayati Raj institutions, the spread of education, growing civic consciousness, and government developmental schemes have transformed these communities. The findings reveal that while significant progress has been made in literacy, agricultural commercialisation, and political representation — particularly through the Gram Panchayat of Harinagar — persistent challenges remain in infrastructure, fisheries infrastructure (notably the Billiground fisheries cold store), healthcare access, higher education, and socio-economic mobility beyond subsistence farming. The paper argues that the RVD Bengali settlers constitute a uniquely resilient community whose post-1980s trajectory reflects both the successes and limitations of India's state-directed rehabilitation and island development policies.

**Keywords:** RVD Bengali settlers, Harinagar, Billiground, Middle Andaman, socio-economic development, political participation, Panchayati Raj, post-Partition rehabilitation, Andaman and Nicobar Islands

**1. Introduction**

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India's strategic archipelago in the Bay of Bengal, carry a layered history of forced migration, colonial penal settlement, and post-independence nation-building. Among the many communities that constitute the 'Mini-India' of the island society, the Bengali Hindu refugees from East Pakistan — who arrived under the Government of India's Colonisation Schemes beginning in March 1949 — occupy a pivotal social, economic, and political position. Their descendants, now organised into Rehabilitation Village Development (RVD) communities, are the primary subjects of this inquiry.

Harinagar and Billiground, located in the Mayabunder tehsil of the North and Middle Andaman district, represent two such RVD settlements. Harinagar is a village spread across 488.98 hectares with a recorded population of 1,902 (Census 2011), of which 960 are male and 942 female, distributed across 465 households. Bengali is the primary language; areca nut (supari) cultivation is the dominant agricultural activity; and the village has its own Gram

Panchayat. Billiground, situated nearby, serves as a commercial hub for the surrounding agricultural and fishing communities and is the location of a fisheries office that has been a subject of sustained developmental demands from local representatives.

The post-1980s period is especially significant for these communities for multiple reasons. Nationally, the 1980s witnessed a consolidation of democratic decentralisation aspirations that culminated in the landmark 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992), bringing formal Panchayati Raj institutions to even remote Union Territories like the Andaman and Nicobar Islands through the A&N Islands Panchayat Regulation of 1994. Locally, this period saw the second and third generation of RVD settlers come of age — a cohort with access to government schools, greater linguistic assimilation into mainland Indian administrative culture, and emerging political consciousness.

This paper is structured to address four intersecting dimensions of the RVD Bengali settler experience in the post-1980s period: (i) historical and demographic background; (ii) socio-economic conditions including livelihoods, education, and healthcare; (iii) political participation and awareness; and (iv) economic development challenges and prospects. A bibliographic reference section provides the academic and administrative sources underpinning the analysis.

## 2. Historical Background and Settlement Context

### 2.1 The Post-Partition Refugee Crisis and the Andaman Solution

The 1947 Partition of British India into India and Pakistan triggered one of the largest forced migrations in human history, with an estimated 14–17 million persons crossing the newly demarcated borders. In Bengal, partition displaced vast numbers of Hindu populations from East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh). The state of West Bengal, already densely populated, proved unable to absorb the continuous waves of refugees. By 1950, over 1.17 million Bengali Hindus had migrated from East Pakistan, with millions more to follow through the 1950s and 1960s.

The Central Relief and Rehabilitation Department of the Government of India had been clear, from the outset, that Bengali refugees could not be confined to the linguistically co-extensive states of West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura. Various dispersal schemes were conceptualised, the most significant being the relocation of low-caste agriculturist refugees to underpopulated frontier territories — including the Andaman Islands — where their labour could simultaneously serve the twin goals of humanitarian rehabilitation and national development.

The first batch of approximately 199 refugee families arrived in the Andaman Islands in March 1949 from the Andul relief camp in West Bengal. Selection was meticulous: officials sought families with sufficient able-bodied working males, and calluses on applicants' hands were inspected as proof of agricultural labour capacity. Upper-caste refugees were actively excluded in favour of farming-caste families who could clear forested land and cultivate it. Families were offered land, basic tools, rations, and a small cash allowance to begin their island life.

### 2.2 The Colonisation Scheme and RVD Structure

The Government of India's colonisation scheme for the Andaman Islands was designed with a dual purpose: to rehabilitate the displaced and to develop the islands economically through agricultural settlement. Families were allotted land in designated Rehabilitation Villages, which over time came to be officially categorised as RVD (Rehabilitation Village Development) settlements. Each settlement was planned with a notional land holding per family, a communal water source, and proximity to forest land that the settlers were expected to clear for cultivation.

In Middle Andaman, settlements spread along the length of the island through the 1950s and 1960s. Mayabunder emerged as an important administrative sub-division, and villages like

Harinagar — whose very name reflects the aspiration of a new beginning (Hari = God, Nagar = Town/Settlement) — became established communities. Billiground, adjacent to Harinagar, developed as the market and fishery point serving multiple RVD villages in the area.

The Bengali-speaking population of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands grew dramatically in this period: from just 2,363 in the 1951 Census to 64,706 by 1991. By the early twenty-first century, Bengalis constituted approximately 23–25 per cent of the islands' total population, making them the largest single linguistic community and the dominant demographic in rural Middle and North Andaman.

### 2.3 The 1971 Wave and Community Consolidation

A second significant influx of Bengali-speaking migrants arrived in the aftermath of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, when approximately ten million refugees from East Pakistan (Bangladesh) flooded into India. While most were accommodated in West Bengal and the Northeast, some found their way to the Andaman Islands, joining existing Bengali communities. This wave reinforced the cultural and linguistic coherence of Bengali settlement pockets throughout Middle and North Andaman and deepened family networks that had formed across the island chain since the 1950s.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the first generation of RVD Bengali settlers had established themselves as the backbone of the islands' agricultural economy. Their children — many of whom had been born in the Andamans — were increasingly being educated in government schools. It is at this juncture that the post-1980s story of Harinagar and Billiground properly begins.

## 3. Socio-Economic Conditions in the Post-1980s

### 3.1 Agricultural Livelihoods and Land Holdings

Agriculture has remained the primary occupation of the RVD Bengali settlers in Harinagar and Billiground throughout the post-1980s period. The principal cash crop is areca nut (supari), followed by coconut, paddy, vegetables, and spices such as turmeric. The shift from subsistence to commercially oriented agriculture — particularly in areca nut — has been one of the most significant economic transformations of the post-1980s era.

During the 1980s, areca nut prices on the mainland market began rising, incentivising settlers to expand supari cultivation at the expense of paddy, which had previously provided household food security. While this shift increased cash incomes in good harvest years, it also exposed settlers to price volatility and the vagaries of demand from mainland markets. The lack of cold storage and processing facilities in Billiground and surrounding areas compounded these vulnerabilities, as produce had to be transported to Port Blair — some 162–203 kilometres away — before onward shipment to the mainland.

Land holdings among RVD settlers are generally small, typically ranging from 2 to 5 acres per household based on original allotment, with some families having expanded through informal purchase or encroachment on adjacent forest land. The legal ambiguity surrounding forest land tenure has been a persistent source of anxiety for settler families, as government policy has periodically threatened to reclaim land cultivated on the margins of notified forest areas.

### 3.2 Fisheries and the Billiground Coast

Billiground's location on the Andaman Sea coast has given the adjacent RVD communities access to marine resources. Fishing — both artisanal and small-scale commercial — has supplemented agricultural income for many settler families. The establishment of a fisheries office at Billiground was intended to support this sector through extension services, boat subsidies, and eventually cold chain infrastructure.

However, persistent infrastructure deficits have hampered the sector's growth. As recently as 2026, the Pradhan of Gram Panchayat Harinagar, Shri Manojit Halder, was still pressing the A&N Administration for the repair of the Fisheries Office building at Billiground and

the installation of a cold store — demands that had reportedly remained unaddressed for years. This illustrates the gap between the aspirations of the settler communities and the pace of administrative response, a structural theme in post-1980s Middle Andaman development.

### 3.3 Education and Literacy

Education has been a critical arena of advancement for RVD Bengali settler communities. The Government of India's expansion of primary education infrastructure across the Andaman Islands through the 1980s and 1990s brought schools to remote RVD settlements. The literacy rate in Harinagar, as recorded in the 2011 Census, stands at 78.4 per cent overall, though the female literacy rate of 36.7 per cent reveals significant gender disparities that reflect the patriarchal household structures brought from East Bengali rural society.

Nationally, the effective literacy rate for the Andaman and Nicobar Islands was well above the Indian national average by the early twenty-first century, exceeding four-fifths of the population. For RVD Bengali communities, education opened pathways to government employment — particularly in teaching, healthcare, and lower administrative positions — that transformed family economic profiles from the 1990s onward.

However, access to higher education remained limited throughout the post-1980s period. The remoteness of Harinagar and Billiground — some 162 kilometres from Port Blair by road and sea — made tertiary education difficult to access for most settler families. Young people seeking college or university education needed to relocate to Port Blair or, more expensively, to the mainland. This geographic barrier has reinforced occupational continuity across generations, with most young people returning to agriculture or fishing even after completing secondary schooling.

### 3.4 Healthcare and Social Welfare

Healthcare access in Middle Andaman RVD settlements improved incrementally from the 1980s onward, as the A&N Administration expanded its network of Primary Health Centres (PHCs) and sub-centres. Government-sponsored programmes targeting malaria — a perennial problem in the forested interior of Middle Andaman — and leprosy were implemented in these communities. The incidence of malaria has been significantly reduced since the 1980s through nationally sponsored mosquito-control campaigns, and leprosy has been largely eradicated.

Social welfare provisioning for RVD communities has included ration distribution under the Public Distribution System (PDS), subsidised agricultural inputs, and various central government schemes such as MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme), PM Awas Yojana, and Jan Dhan financial inclusion programmes. The post-1980s period has seen a gradual increase in awareness and utilisation of these schemes, as literacy and political consciousness have grown.

Despite these advances, healthcare infrastructure at the community level remains insufficient. The absence of a resident doctor in many RVD settlements, the poor condition of roads connecting these villages to the sub-divisional hospital at Mayabunder, and the lack of specialist services for maternal health, chronic diseases, and mental health remain serious concerns. The NH-4 highway connecting the settlements to Mayabunder — a lifeline for medical emergencies — has been in a notoriously poor state of repair through much of the 2010s and 2020s, as documented by local civic protests.

### 3.5 Housing and Infrastructure

Housing among RVD Bengali settlers has gradually improved from the rudimentary thatched structures of the first-generation settlers to more permanent constructions in brick, concrete, and timber. Central government housing schemes, particularly the Indira Awas Yojana and its successor PM Awas Yojana (Gramin), have supported construction of pucca houses for below-poverty-line families in the post-1990s period. However, a significant proportion of

households, particularly those without clear land title, have been excluded from these benefits.

The NH-4 highway, which runs the length of the Andaman Islands and passes through Billiground and Harinagar's vicinity, has been the subject of ongoing construction and rehabilitation since the 2010s. The work by NHIDCL (National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited) has simultaneously disrupted daily life — generating severe dust pollution, health hazards, and road closures — and raised hopes for better connectivity. The Billiground Market Committee's three-day closure strike in March 2026 and the subsequent intervention by senior administration officials illustrates how infrastructure grievances translate into collective civic action in these communities.

#### 4. Political Participation and Awareness

##### 4.1 Historical Political Marginalisation

In the first decades of settlement (1949–1970s), RVD Bengali settlers had minimal formal political participation. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands was administered as a Union Territory under the Chief Commissioner's administration, with no elected legislature. The Pradesh Council, an advisory elected body, was the primary vehicle for civilian political expression. Bengali settlers, constituting the majority in rural areas but subordinate to the Port Blair-centred administration, had limited formal voice.

The early political culture of the settlers was shaped by the trauma of displacement, the gratitude of having a land grant, and an accompanying reluctance to challenge the administration that had rehabilitated them. Collective action was primarily expressed through cultural associations — the Bangiya Upanibash Samity (Bengali Settlers' Association) being the most significant — that lobbied for community interests such as land security, ration access, and school establishment.

##### 4.2 The Panchayati Raj Era: Post-1994 Political Transformation

The promulgation of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Panchayats) Regulation 1994 — enacted in conformity with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment — was a transformative moment for RVD settler communities. For the first time, a formal three-tier system of local self-government (Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, and Zila Parishad) was established across the Union Territory, excluding only Port Blair municipality and tribal reserved areas. Harinagar's own Gram Panchayat became the primary arena of political engagement for RVD Bengali settlers in the surrounding villages. The Gram Pradhan, elected every five years, became the key political figure at the local level — simultaneously a representative to the administration, a conduit for developmental schemes, and a symbol of community political agency. The elected Pradhan's ability to meet senior administration officials in Port Blair (now Sri Vijaya Puram) and advocate for local infrastructure and welfare measures represents a structural shift in the political status of RVD communities.

The recent tenure of Pradhan Shri Manojit Halder of GP Harinagar illustrates this political role vividly. In 2026, he led a delegation including Up-Pradhan Mrs. Mamta Biswas and Sarpanch Mr. Sumanta Das to meet the IAS Secretary of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, and Fisheries, successfully securing assurances on multiple pending infrastructure demands. Such direct access to senior bureaucracy — inconceivable for first-generation settlers — reflects the political maturation of the community.

##### 4.3 Bengali Vote Bank in Island Electoral Politics

At the level of Lok Sabha elections — the islands send one Member of Parliament — the Bengali community constitutes the single most significant vote bank, comprising 23–25 per cent of the total electorate. Research by Biswas and Bannerjee (2023) demonstrates that the Bengali vote bank has been a determining force from Panchayat to Lok Sabha politics since at least the 1977 elections. All major national parties — Indian National Congress, Bharatiya



Janata Party, and others — have been compelled to recognise this political reality by nominating Bengali community leaders for parliamentary and provincial council seats.

This electoral significance has translated into greater political bargaining power for RVD communities, particularly in securing central government developmental allocations, MPLAD (Member of Parliament Local Area Development) funds for village infrastructure, and administrative attention to community grievances. Road construction projects in Harinagar-Billiground area have been executed under MPLAD schemes, demonstrating this linkage between electoral politics and local development.

#### 4.4 Civic Awareness and Political Culture

The post-1980s period has witnessed a gradual but significant transformation in the political culture of RVD Bengali settler communities. The first generation of settlers were largely dependent upon and deferential to the administration. By contrast, the second and third generations — educated in government schools, exposed to mainland political culture through media and migration, and increasingly literate — have developed a more assertive and rights-conscious political identity.

Research on acculturation and political participation in the Andaman Islands (Biswas, 2009) notes that Bengali migrants have demonstrated significant influence in local electoral politics, utilising political structures to secure government benefits. The study applies Berry's acculturation theory to argue that Bengali settlers predominantly integrate into Andaman culture while retaining Bengali identity markers, producing a distinctive 'Andaman Bengali' political subjectivity.

The willingness of the Billiground Market Committee to call a three-day complete shutdown in 2026 over NH-4 road conditions — and the administration's swift response — illustrates a community capable of sustained collective civic action, media engagement (through outlets like Andaman Sheekha Daily), and effective pressure politics. This represents a fundamentally different mode of political engagement from the passive recipients of rehabilitation that the first-generation settlers were.

#### 4.5 Women's Political Participation

The 73rd Amendment's reservation of one-third of Panchayat seats for women has created new spaces for women's political participation in RVD communities. The tenure of Up-Pradhan Mrs. Mamta Biswas of GP Harinagar is one contemporary example of women entering formal political roles in these communities. However, the female literacy rate of 36.7 per cent in Harinagar (2011 Census) — far below the male rate — indicates that gender barriers to full civic and political participation remain substantial.

Research on Bengali settler women in the Andaman Islands (Banerjee, 2019; IAS research) highlights the historically peripheral status of women's contributions to the settlement narrative. Women worked as agricultural labourers alongside men in clearing and cultivating forest land, maintained households under extreme conditions of resource scarcity, and bore children in settings without medical facilities — yet were categorised as 'dependants' in official rehabilitation records. Their contemporary political emergence through Panchayat reservations represents both a continuation and a challenge to this historical marginalisation.

### 5. Economic Development: Challenges and Prospects

#### 5.1 Infrastructure as the Central Development Constraint

For RVD communities in Harinagar and Billiground, infrastructure — particularly road connectivity, cold chain facilities, and port infrastructure — constitutes the binding constraint on economic development. The poor state of NH-4 has not only hampered agricultural produce transport to markets but has imposed significant health costs through dust and pollution associated with prolonged road construction. Market access via reliable road and ferry connections to Port Blair is essential for areca nut, coconut, and fishery products to reach remunerative markets.

The fisheries cold store at Billiground, repeatedly demanded but not yet installed as of early 2026, exemplifies the infrastructure gap. Without cold storage, fish caught by artisanal fishers must either be consumed or sold locally at low prices; the inability to preserve and transport high-value marine produce to Port Blair or mainland markets means that the fisheries sector — potentially the community's most dynamic growth sector — remains underdeveloped.

## 5.2 Agriculture: Diversification and Market Integration

Post-1980s agricultural development in RVD communities has been characterised by a transition from subsistence polyculture to areca nut-dominated monoculture. While this has raised average cash incomes in productive years, it has also increased vulnerability. The Andaman administration's agricultural extension services have periodically promoted crop diversification — rubber, oil palm, cashew, spices — with mixed success. Poultry farming has also been supported through the government's Animal Husbandry Department, with demands from Harinagar's Pradhan in 2026 for a large hatchery at the Basantipur Poultry Farm indicating continued interest in diversified livelihoods.

Agricultural development also faces the constraint of land tenure insecurity. Many RVD families cultivate land whose legal status under forest regulations is ambiguous. The periodic threat of eviction from forest land cultivated beyond original allotment boundaries creates a disincentive for long-term investment in land improvement, irrigation, or orchard development.

## 5.3 Government Schemes and Their Reach

A range of central government developmental programmes have been implemented in RVD settlements since the 1980s. The MGNREGS has provided wage employment for rural poor; PM Awas Yojana has supported housing construction; Jan Dhan Yojana has extended financial inclusion; and various agricultural subsidies have supported farming livelihoods. The post-liberalisation period (post-1991) also brought modest private investment in small trade, transportation, and service sectors, creating new livelihood opportunities for younger members of RVD communities.

However, the distance of these communities from the administrative headquarters, combined with lower administrative literacy (particularly among older women), has meant that scheme benefits have not always reached those most in need. The role of the Gram Pradhan as a community broker — navigating between administration and villagers — has become critical in ensuring scheme access, but this dependence on a single local leader also creates vulnerability and potential for political exclusion of those outside the Pradhan's network.

## 5.4 Tourism: An Emerging Sector

The post-2000 development of tourism in the Andaman Islands has created new economic opportunities for communities along the island chain. The Billiground area, with its coastal access and proximity to natural attractions, has the potential to benefit from ecotourism and homestay development. However, as of the mid-2020s, this potential remains largely unrealised in the Harinagar-Billiground area, in contrast to more accessible and better-marketed destinations near Port Blair.

The development of tourism requires the same infrastructure — roads, electricity, communications — that RVD communities have been demanding for agricultural and fisheries development. A package approach to development, in which infrastructure investment simultaneously serves agricultural, fisheries, and tourism goals, appears to offer the most promising pathway to broad-based economic development in these remote settlements.

## 5.5 Educational and Occupational Mobility

Perhaps the most significant long-term economic transformation in post-1980s RVD communities has been the gradual occupational diversification enabled by education. The

children of areca nut farmers have become schoolteachers, health workers, government clerks, and — in a smaller number of cases — engineers and doctors. This educational mobility has not transformed the agricultural base of these communities, but it has created a small professional class that serves as a social and economic anchor.

The aspirations of RVD Bengali settler families for their children's education and professional advancement are consistent with broader Bengali cultural traditions that place high value on formal education (shikkha) as a vehicle for social mobility. These aspirations have driven demand for secondary schools, college education access, and coaching for competitive examinations — generating sustained pressure on the administration to expand educational infrastructure in Middle Andaman.

#### 6. Cultural Identity and Social Cohesion

The RVD Bengali settlers of Harinagar and Billiground have maintained a distinctive cultural identity that blends their East Bengali heritage with the island environment. Bengali language, cultural festivals — particularly Durga Puja and Saraswati Puja — music, and food traditions have been preserved across generations. Community associations such as the Bangiya Upanibash Samity serve not only political but cultural functions, organising festivals, mediating internal disputes, and maintaining connections with mainland Bengali cultural organisations.

At the same time, three generations of island life have produced an 'Andaman Bengali' identity that is distinct from both the mainland Bengali identity and from the identities of other island communities. The settler communities have adapted to island ecology, adopted elements of other settlers' cultures, and developed a sense of belonging to the islands that coexists with — and sometimes tensions against — their nostalgia for 'Sonar Bangla' (Golden Bengal), the idealised homeland of their ancestors.

Intermarriage between Bengali and other settler communities (Tamil, Malayali, Ranchi) has increased in the post-1980s period, particularly in the second and third generations, reflecting processes of social integration that complement the political and economic integration of these communities into island life. This social cohesion is an understated resource in the community's development story: dense social networks facilitate labour sharing, credit access, and collective action in ways that purely economic metrics fail to capture.

#### 7. Conclusion

The RVD Bengali settlers of Harinagar and Billiground represent a community that has traversed a remarkable arc from the trauma of Partition displacement to a rooted and politically active island identity over the course of seven decades. The post-1980s period, in particular, has been one of accelerating transformation: the introduction of Panchayati Raj institutions has empowered communities that were previously passive recipients of administrative decisions; rising literacy has generated new economic pathways and civic consciousness; and growing electoral significance has given these communities a voice in island politics disproportionate to their formal administrative status as residents of a Union Territory without a legislature of its own.

Yet significant challenges persist. Infrastructure deficits — inadequate roads, the absent fisheries cold store at Billiground, limited healthcare facilities — constrain economic growth and quality of life. Gender inequalities, reflected in the stark female literacy gap, remain a structural barrier to full community development. Land tenure insecurity continues to inhibit investment. And the paradox of geographical remoteness — the islands' isolation from mainland markets simultaneously generates strategic importance and development bottlenecks — shapes every dimension of settler life.

The policy implications of this study are clear. Sustained investment in infrastructure, particularly cold chain facilities, road connectivity, and healthcare, is the highest-priority



need for communities like Harinagar and Billiground. Targeted programmes to address the female literacy and education gap are essential for unlocking the full human development potential of these communities. Land tenure regularisation — providing RVD settler families with secure legal title to the land they have cultivated for generations — would release entrepreneurial energy currently suppressed by insecurity. And a coherent ecotourism strategy that routes some of the islands' growing tourist revenues to remote RVD communities would provide a new, sustainable income stream.

The story of the RVD Bengali settlers of Middle Andaman is ultimately a story of extraordinary resilience. Uprooted from their homeland, sent to clear jungle in the middle of the ocean, these families and their descendants built communities that now actively shape the politics and economy of one of India's most strategically significant territories. Their ongoing demands — for a cold store, for a repaired road, for a poultry hatchery, for a college — are not the demands of victims but of citizens with a legitimate claim on the developmental resources of the Indian state.

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