

Book Review

Swaraj Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement, the Rajbansis of North Bengal, 1910-1947*, Manohar Publications, New Delhi, 2003

Caste studies, now a day, have occupied a central position in the field of historical research. To have an integrated view of historical change became impossible without the knowledge of a Lower caste's thinking, their ideology, aspirations, and their efforts to respond to the changing socio-political and economic scenario. Caste continued to be an indicator of an individual's position in the social hierarchy of Bengal. But it gathered a new dimension with the growing importance as an administrative category in the post mutiny period. And from the early 20th century caste became the official criterion for providing special protection to the needy and backward sections of the society and this brought about a significant change in the social outlook towards caste as an institution. The existing fragmented society became much more consolidated as most of the caste groups were trying to rally their members around the cultural symbol of caste identity. In the case of Bengal, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's work has shown 'caste' both as an analytical category and politics, as it stresses the centrality of caste in Bengali Hindu social formation and reconstructs the ways in which caste has shaped the operation of power in Bengal. Similarly for Madras Presidency, David Washbrook has argued that by the second decade of the 20th century the British government had ensured that the administration continued to run along caste channels. This had become a general phenomenon all over India around this time. The onward sympathy of the British towards the lower castes created a notion among the unprivileged groups that future was more secure in the hands of the British government rather than that of the upper caste leaders. The indifference of the upper caste was no less responsible for the schism in Indian Society. It is in this context that we have to see the growth of the Rajbansi Caste Movement, which grew out of a protest against upper caste domination and represented an urge to change their existing degraded social position.

The present study **"Dynamics of a Caste movement The Rajbansis of North Bengal, 1910-1947"** by Swaraj Basu makes an attempt to explore the causes for the search for a new identity in the 19th and early 20th centuries by the Rajbansis of North Bengal and the attempts of the Rajbansi community to establish themselves as Kshatriyas in the first half of the 20th century in Bengal. Situating the Rajbansi caste movement in the context of contemporary socio-political events this book addresses the complexities inherent in this movement. The caste system, despite many changes over the years, remains significant in contemporary times. The colonization of the country and the response of indigenous society to the manoeuvres of colonial rulers provided a new impetus to mobilisation along caste lines in the 19th and 20th century Bengal as in the rest of the India. The Rajbansis constituted the most prominent section of the local Hindu population in the districts of North Bengal and were placed quite a low in the caste hierarchy. Using Rajbansi caste literature and govt records, this study explores the formation of the Rajbansi identity, the socio-cultural and economic profile of the community, their efforts towards Kshatriyaization and the legitimization of their social and political rights. The author argues that there can be many identities within a caste group which play crucial roles on different occasion and at different times. As class identity often cuts across caste lines, so also territorial identities can lead to a fragmentation of a caste.

Broadly speaking, the lower caste mobilization against upper caste hegemony demonstrates two major trends, either the adoption of upper caste culture i.e. 'Sanskritization' or the rejection of

caste system. All these suggest complexities inherent in lower caste movement. The Rajbansi caste movement adopted the Sanskritization model to get an honourable social status within the caste hierarchy.

But at the same time author tells us the exclusiveness of their movement as the poorer Rajbansi had the courage to defy their authority of their caste leaders and they mobilized to push forth their class demands.

The chapters of this book were made as follows. The first chapter deals with the question of the origin of the Rajbansi community. Discussing the conflicting interpretations given by the colonial text and the indigenous literature on this issue, the question that has been raised is, why at a particular point of a time the Rajbansis felt the urge to look for a new social identity in terms of a *varna* status which is Kshatriyas. An attempt has been made to find an answer to this in the genesis of a caste movement. In the second chapter a brief profile of the socio-economic life of the Rajbansis has been given in order to situate them within the local social as well as economic structure. The discussion shows how economic and socio-cultural differentiation had been taking place among these people and how gradually this was influencing their consciousness. How the migration of the upper caste gentry in the traditional Rajbansi area changed the economy of Northern Bengal and turned many of the Rajbansis into the sharecroppers in the lands which they owned is also the subject of discussion of this chapter. The third chapter tries to explain the reasons for the Rajbansis' search for "Kshatriya" identity and the process of Kshatriyaization, contextualizing it within the contemporary process of change. Apart from Kshatriyaization, the other important dimension of the Rajbansi caste movement was its gradual politicization. The fourth chapter deals further with the aspect of the movement, focussing on the major issues taken up by the Rajbansi caste movement and its attitude towards the British, the ongoing anti-imperialist struggle, and the Muslims, who constituted around 50 percent of the local population of North Bengal. Basically the focus of this chapter is on how the Rajbansi movement from a struggle for social regeneration gradually turned into a political movement. How the different sections among the Rajbansis responded to the socio-cultural and the political agenda of the Rajbansi caste association, called the Kshatriya Samiti, and how effective was this strategy of mobilizing the community merely in the name of caste solidarity, keeping aside the economic and other grievances of the majority of the community, become the subject of discussion of the fifth and final chapter. It demonstrates that the support of the masses cannot always be taken for granted because of the primordial loyalties. The major thrust of this study is to explore the nature and extent of this differentiation among the Rajbansis. The author argues that the interaction with the higher castes and the transformation of the local economy introduced the difference within the community in terms of ideas, interests and outlook. The author also gives the explanation of periodizing the social movement from 1910- 1947, as the Kshatriya Samiti was set up in 1910 to begin an organised caste movement and 1947 the Rajbansi movement lost its vigour with the partition of Bengal.

Based on exhaustive archival materials and other primary sources in English and a large number of vernacular texts, pamphlets and newspapers, this study on the Rajbansis shows the complex character of a caste movement. While social humiliation experienced in different ways acted as a major influence to look for a new social identity and its legitimation through various means, at the same time the Rajbansi leaders did not demand for abolition of the caste system. The study of the Kshatriya movement points to the existence of different levels of consciousness within the same caste and how different aspirations of the Rajbansi community came out in open due to the changing political scenario. Although mobilised in the name of

caste, different sets of goals and different ideologies co-existed within the “Khyastriya” movement. Beyond caste identity it is important to take note of the other concerns and interests which co-exist within a caste. He also suggests that how ethnic identity is primarily used as vehicle by emergent leadership of local indigenous people to assert their voices against immigrant Bengali gentry. This movement can be seen as a protest movement of the local indigenous people against the dominant socio-cultural groups. One may not agree with Swaraj Basu’s hypothesis about the dynamics of caste movement but this book would definitely provide new insights to look into caste movement. But one thing I should mention here that author remains silent about the role played by the Rajbansi women in their respective caste movement though he accepts the view that Rajbansi women had to do more work than their men folk(p.42). Still in the context of recent political mobilization by the Rajbansis in North Bengal for a “separate Kamtapur state” this book is essential reading for those wishing to understand the Rajbansis in their historical context.

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