

## **In Search of the Ethnic Identity: Koch-Rajbanshis of North Bengal**

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The ethnic identity movement has now occupied an important place in the domain of social science. In the colonial period, we observed the ethnic identity movement of Rajbanshis from the North-East part of India, especially in North Bengal. The colonization of the country and the response of indigenous society to the maneuvers of colonial rulers provided a new impetus to mobilizations along caste lines in the nineteenth and twentieth-century Bengal. The Koch- Rajbanshis constituted the most predominant section of the local Hindu population in the northern district of Bengal and were yet placed quite low in the hierarchy. Social reformer of Rajbanshis like Panchanan Barma of that time realized accurately that the Identity of any community, race or group can never be established devoid of reference to Diaspora-changes from the past to the present, therefore, in search of the identity of Rajbanshis, he too traced the social roots of the community in the past though his claim to kshatriyahood in the name of Rajbanshis. In order to secure only a positional improvement for them, they tacitly endorsed the caste-based system of social differentiation, thus missing an important opportunity to bring about some fundamental structural change in the society. The Kshatriya Movement lost its significance in the later phase while with the initiative of Panchanan Barma, and the Rajbanshis were offered scheduled caste status. The Hindu refugees, who came from East Pakistan and others to Cooch Behar and various part of North Bengal after independence, had the good economic background. They had a strong cultural awareness with a good knowledge of cultivation. In front of their developed culture, modernity of language, education and efficiency, the indigenous Rajbanshis could not stand anywhere and they gradually lost their culture, language and land. About all they became minority due to the flow of this immigrant and ultimately they lost their last asset, which was their identity.

The Rajbanshis are the indigenous people of the greater part of North Bengal and lower Assam in the pre-colonial and colonial period. The Rajbanshis are the majority people of North Bengal, particularly in the districts of Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Dinajpur and the plain areas of Darjeeling district and the Cooch Behar state. Other than North Bengal, Rajbanshis had been living in the other parts of Bengal and Assam. According to Swaraj Basu, "The Rajbanshis constituted the most predominant section of the local Hindu population in the northern districts of Bengal. Numerically they were the third largest Hindu caste in Bengal as a whole. The origin of this case is shrouded in mystery & the basic debate is around the question of their association with the Koches. Whatever might have been their actual origin; there is no dispute about the fact that the Rajbanshis were the early settlers in North Bengal. They were a socially homogenous community, in the sense that there was no sub-caste among them" (Basu ,2003:) Dr. Charu Chandra sanyal stated, "The above observations point to the fact that the Koches are non-Aryan in origin. Some of them adopted Hinduism and became Rajbanshis. These Rajbanshis later on claimed to be Kshatriya."(C.C Sanyal) According to Swaraj Basu, "The local situation also provided a sufficient ground for the Rajbanshis'assertion of a Kshatriya identity and their endeavor to build up caste solidarity. (Swaraj Basu , 2003)

It is stated that among the Koches who were converted into Hindu religion called the Rajbanshis and who were converted into Islam called Muslim or Mahameddan. Hunter here pointed out that the name of Koch was abandoned by the converts who assumed that of Rajbanshis literally of the Royal Kind. The Koch or the Rajbanshis form by far the majority of the Hindu population of Jalpaiguri district (W.W.Hunter ). Whatever the identity of the Rajbanshis they were the people like semi- tribes, simple in habit. Swaraj Basu again writes, 'As they were guided by the traditional Brahmonical cultural values, the Rajbanshis, with a tradition and culture of their own, failed to get a respectable position in the status estimation of these immigrant upper caste gentry ( Swaraj Basu-2003).' It is true that the people of higher caste Hindus coming from East Bengal and South Bengal treated the Rajbanshis as inferior caste, many times called them 'Bahe' or 'Banku'; on the contrary the Rajbansi people called the Bengali people coming from East Bengal or South Bengal as 'Bhatia' (Kartik Chandra Sutradhar- BS 1420) .<sup>6</sup> On the other hand H.H. Risley says that "there was no historical foundation for the claim of the Rajbanshis to a provincial variety of the kshatriyas"(H.H.Risley) Dalton has pointed out that since the Koch king Viswa Singha having been Hinduised took the title 'Rajbanshi', therefore , it could be a clue afterwards for all the Koches to take for themselves the name Rajbanshi. But it has to be stated here that the Koch kings of Koch Behar till the end of their dynastic rule consistently introduced themselves as Koch and not Rajbanshi. (Dulton )

In the early social setting of the North Bengal region, the social status of the Rajbanshi's was not challenged until the influx of a large number of caste- Hindu immigrants into this clime from other parts of the country. These people with a strong awareness of casteism started interacting with the indigenous Rajbanshis in differential terms ( Sujata D. Hazarika -2004). Swaraj Basu observes, "with the gradual settlement of an upper-caste Hindu gentry in what were traditionally the Rajbanshi dominated areas of North Bengal, the existing balance in local power structure had changed. The immigrant's upper-caste gentry in course of time had become the most dominant group in the local society, economy and politics. They manned the local administration and by virtue of their closeness to the administrative power and their shrewdness, emerged as the dominant landholding class. As they were guided by the traditional Brahmanical culture values, that Rajbanshi with a tradition and culture of their own failure to get a respectable position in the status estimation of this immigrant upper-caste gentry. There were sharp dissimilarities between the cultural practice of these two groups and the gentry treated the Rajbanshis as 'backward, uncultured and even antyaj'"(Swaraj Basu.-2003).

The narrow mentality of the upper caste Bengali Hindus was reflected in the work of renowned scholars of that time.

*Mora chahina artha, chahina man,  
Chahina bidya, chahina jnan  
Mora chahi shudhu jatir pratistha,  
Mora chahi shudhu jatir pran.*

*We do not want money, nor do we want prestige,  
We do not want education, nor we do want knowledge,*

*We only want the recognition of our caste,  
We only want our caste to be alive ( G.C.Roy ).*

Though these song the Rajbanshi poet Gobinda Chandra Roy tried to whip up caste sentiments among the members of his caste. The leaders later used this song in most of the mass gatherings to awaken caste consciousness within the community. How far this appeal for caste solidarity was successful in mobilizing the entire community is something that needs to be verified. The existing historical evidence suggests that the Kshatriyaisation movement had evoked varied responses from the Rajbanshi community. A line of distinction was very much in existence between the economically well-off and the culturally advanced sections on the one hand and the rest of the community on the other. The majority of the Rajbanshis who were at the bottom of the local agrarian structure and lived mostly in village had significant differences in the social values with the better-off and section of the community. No doubt they were also conscious of their Rajbanshi identity.

Soumen Nag observes that Nagendranath Basu in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century while writing his Vishwakosh (Encyclopedia) mentioned the Koch Rajbanshis as barbarians or (Mlechha). Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, the renowned Bengali scholar says in 'Bongo Darshan' that the Koch identity cannot be synonymous with Bengali Hindu identity (Soumen Nag-2003). He writes in 'Bongo Darshan', "Lots of Koches lives inside Bengal. Koches are found in the district of Dinajpur, Malda, and some other part of Bengal (now Banladesh). There are almost one lakh Koches, who live in Bengal. Few people say they should be counted as Bengalis. But I express my doubt over this matter" (Soumen Nag-2003).

In the social hierarchy of Bengal, the Rajbanshis were placed at the bottom of the structure along with the Namasudras. (Swaraj Basu-2003) It was mainly from the early twentieth century onwards that colonial policy was given a new direction in order to safeguard the interests of certain underprivileged groups. Without getting into the debate whether this policy was desirable or not, it may be submitted that this policy definitely reinforced the caste identities and indirectly encouraged mobilization along caste lines. If all started with education as the government had made it clear that it was going to assist those who belonged to the very lowest classes of the Hindu social system, or ---- (were) outside the pale of caste altogether the government took special care to motivate the boys of the these classes to go to schools. Special schools were opened in the backward areas and education for them was made highly subsidized (GB, General).

The sense of alienation among the Rajbanshis was further strengthened by the insults and humiliation they faced due to the domination of Brahminical culture. In the Rajbanshi caste literature, as also in some other Contemporary accounts, there are number of references to the humiliation of the Rajbanshis by the upper caste Hindus. The latter regarded the Rajbanshi as antyaja who had no right to enter the places of worship on the occasion of any public celebration of pujas or to enter the Kitchen in the upper caste household. Even water was not accepted from their hands by the upper caste Hindus. (D.N. Sarkar) Charu Chandra Sanyal, writing on history of Jalpaiguri district, mentioned that casteism was strictly maintained in this district and the people of higher

and lower castes used to sit in different rows on the occasion of any public lunch or dinner. Initially although the Rajbanshis were also regarded as ajalchal and they were not allowed to touch the wells of the upper castes, with beginning Kshatriyaization movement these prejudices gradually disappeared (C.C. Sanyal ).

It is not only in the literature where Koch Rajbanshis were humiliated; they also faced social oppression in their social life in Bengal and Assam. According to one scholar, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Koch Rajbanshis were even denied entry into the temple of Jagannath Puri by an Act of the Govt. in the year 1911 (Sujata D. Hazarika.(2004) There were similar practices in Assam. Once Koch Rajbanshis were denied entry in the famous Barpeta Kirtan Ghar, a prayer place for the Vaishnavite sect of Assam, situated in Barpeta town of lower Assam. For their entry in to the Barpeta Kirtan Ghar, they had to fight a legal battle in the then Calcutta High Court.(A.C.Choudhury - 1993) In such a situation of social oppression, the Koch Rajbanshis had two options. Firstly, the Koch Rajbanshis could live with their 'Koch Rajbanshi' identity without caring about rest of the world. Secondly, Koch Rajbanshis could once again try hard to enter the fold of caste Hindu society. Unfortunately, the Rajbanshi leadership went for the second option. Still the dream world of 'Kshatriya' was in their mind.(Arup Jyoti Das - 2009).

Panchanan Barma was the person who tried to elevate the status of the Rajbanshis by claiming 'Kshatriya' status for them through the famous 'Kshatriya Movement' of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He had a reason for this, as he himself was a victim of racial discrimination by upper caste Hindu. About his humiliation Ranjit kumar Mandal writes in his book 'Ray Saheb Panchanan- Life and Time' that Panchanan Barma experienced caste hatred right in his childhood. Once in early childhood, he happened to the Gita of their family Priest while the later was on his visit to their house. He was shocked that even the conduct of the innocent child was grossly condemned through an alarm of hue and cry. He was cautioned that being a non Brahmin he had no privilege to touch a holy book that too written in Sanskrit, the Deva-Bhasha. Mandal continues, "even after the brilliant Panchanan established himself as a highly qualified lawyer, he could not escape the fate of caste hatred. Once in Rangpur court, Panchanan unconsciously, in hurry, put the hat of his colleague Mr. Maitra to attend a court proceeding. Mr. Maitra subsequently refused to use the same hat and retaliated, I hate to use a toga used by a Rajbanshi" (Ranjit Kumar Mandal-2002).

This brief sketch of the early phase of Panchanan Barma's life is important to understand his mind-set. This in effects shaped his leadership which ultimately was to determine the future course of the Rajbanshi cast movement itself. Panchanan belonged to a rural society dominated by traditional outlook and values which had an important bearing on the formative phase of his life. Later when he came to Calcutta for higher education he became aware of t he 19<sup>th</sup> century spirit of reform, regeneration, and nationalism. But all these liberal ideas and influences were overshadowed by the humiliations. That he had to face because of his caste identity. The woes of his community arising out of its backwardness and perpetuated by the denomination of the upper castes made his very worried. His personal experience of frustration for not getting suitable job in Cooch Behar further strengthened his ideas about the magnitude of domination by the upper caste. ( Barman) But as his mind had been conditioned in a

traditional social milieu, he looked for a solution to this problem in the socio-religious reform of his own community. Instead of challenging the caste hierarchy itself, he looked for a higher status for the Rajbanshis within that same structure, hoping that would remove the social stigma of degraded ritual rank. For the same reason he felt the need to secure the support of the British government and could not think of making a common front with the nationalists against colonial rule. Thus Panchanan Barma's view of struggle for the upliftment of his community was confined to solid-ritualistic reforms and lobbying for some limited concessions from the Raj. What he failed to realize is without some basic economic reforms, his movement was unlikely to succeed. It was his lack of any long-term perspective on mass mobilization programme that circumscribed the scope of success of the Kshatriya Samitis. There was no much difference in attitudes among Panchanan Barma's successors in this regard. So beyond Kshatriyaization the politics of the Rajbanshi caste movement was mainly confined to the articulation of the demand for being enlisted as a scheduled caste so that they could enjoy special protection in education, employment, and in matters of representation in the legislative council and the other local bodies (Swaraj Basu -2003).

It is through Kshatriya Movement that we find the Rajbanshis challenging the lower status assigned to them. While in 1891 the Rajbanshis described themselves as Vratya Kshatriya from 1911 they began to claim pure Kshatriya Status legitimized by priest, genealogists and pundits. In order to gratify their ritual rank aspiration they began to imitate the values, practices and cultural styles of 'twice born' castes that formed a part of Hindu Great tradition. Since 1912, a number of mass thread wearing ceremonies (Milan Kshetra) were organized in different districts by the 'Kshatriya Samiti' where lakhs of Rajbanshis donned the sacred thread as a mark of 'Kshatriya' status. The immediate objective of the 'Kshatriya Samiti' was to regain the lost social status of the Rajbanshi community in the Hindu social system (Sujata D. Hazarika-2004).

Interestingly one of the main thrusts of the movement was to disassociate the Rajbanshis from the Koch identity, as the leaders felt by doing so they could establish the superior social rank for the Rajbanshis. The tragedy of the Kshatriya movement was that though this movement they (Rajbanshis) tried to elevate their social rank, they were against similar efforts of the other indigenous communities of North Bengal. The Rajbanshis did not support the Rabhas own attempts at upward social mobility. (Swaraj Basu-2003). Instead of the developing a common platform with other victims of Brahmanical hierarchy, writes Basu, "the Rajbanshi leaders remained preoccupied with their own exclusive community centric interests. In order to secure only a positional improvement for them, they tacitly endorsed the caste based system of social differentiation, thus missing an important opportunity to bring about some fundamental structural change in the society.(Swaraj Basu-2003). The Kshatriya Movement lost its significance in the later phase while with the initiative of Panchanan Barma, and the Rajbanshis were offered scheduled caste status (Swaraj Basu-2003).

With gradual settlement of the Upper caste gentry in North Bengal, the indigenous Koch Rajbanshis faced a great loss regarding economic power and land holding. They also experienced a great deal of social discrimination. But more than social discrimination, loss of land and power, they went through a bigger threat of cultural politics. Soumen Nag offers a good example of cultural politics in Siliguri town of North

Bengal. Nag writes, before independence Siliguri was not a full town. The indigenous Rajbanshis were the major inhabitant of Siliguri. Even these areas known by their names. The educated Bengalis who came from East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh) and settled in these areas after purchasing lands from local Rajbanshis first replaced the indigenous Rajbanshi name from the places with their names. The new names not only pushed back the old names into the past, this also resulted the loss of old Rajbanshi identity (Soumen Nag-2003). Soumen Nag further informs that in a Govt. report of 1930, the old name of the present Desbandhu Para was recorded as Rajrajeswari Jot. Same way Hakim Para was Brajasingh Jot, Bharat Nagar was Jogen Jot, Mahananda Para was Lambodas Mohan Jot and the present Babu Para was recorded as Sabur Jot (Soumen Nag-2003).

When it comes to cultural politics, name plays a very important part, at least in the context of North Bengal and Kamtapur movement. Nabyendu says, "they don't want to see the name Cooch Behar (Koch Bihar) anywhere. Any name that makes us feel about our past history, they will change it. They have changed the name of 'Cooch Behar State Library' to North Bengal State Library', 'Cooch Behar State Transport' to 'North Bengal State Transport' and 'Moti Mahal' to 'Kalyan Bhavan'. We have lost everything, land, language, culture and even the names of places. (Nabyendu Roy Pramanik-2004)

Soumen Nag says "The Hindu refugees, who came from East Pakistan and others to Cooch Behar after independence, had good economic background. They had a strong cultural awareness with a good knowledge of cultivation. In front of their developed culture, modernity of language, education and efficiency, the indigenous Rajbanshis could not stand anywhere and they gradually lost their culture, language and land. About all they became minority due to the flow of this immigrant and ultimately they lost their last asset, which was their identity" (Nag ,2003)

According to Sujata D. Hazarika ('Unrest and Displacement: Rajbanshis in North Bengal'-South Asia Forum for Human Rights) - Jogendra Nath Mondal leading the movement for up-liftment of backward classes mooted idea and pressed for a separate state for Rajbanshis called 'Rajar-Sthan' meaning abode of king. He had apprehension that if Bengal were divided, a section of backward class would be dominated by the upper caste Hindu Bengalis and the other be dominated by majority Muslims. In 1969, an organisation named Uttar Khanda Dal (UKD) demanded a separate state for Rajbanshis in the name of either Kamtapur or Uttar Khanda. In the same year, 'Uttar Banga Sanskritik Parishad' raised the issue for recognition of Kamta language and measures for its development. Main factors that are responsible for demanding a separate state is have an identity of their own, safeguard their socio-economic interests, development of their cultural heritage and language and have some say in economic-political fields. From practical point of view, geographically and demographically South and North Bengal separated by the river Ganga, are already two separate identities, whereas from the same point of view, entire North Bengal barring its hilly areas, Purnia and Kishanganj districts of Northern Bihar, districts of lower Asom and northern districts of Bangladesh are more contiguous. Therefore, off late, the demand for a separate state for Koch-Rajbanshis has picked up that creates problems for the political establishments both at the Centre and respective State capitals. (Roy, Nalini Ranjan-2007)

Still, now the problem of ethnicity is going on, and the Rajbanshi peoples are demanding for a separate land for them. The Rajbanshis are of the local people of north Bengal have not only economically suffered but have also faced social humiliation. After long and silent suffering the Koch-Rajbanshi peoples of these areas started the movement and get a chance to express their resentment against exploitation. Since the early phase to date, the leadership of local indigenous people to assert their voices against the immigrant's Bengali gentry. This movement could be seen as a protest against assimilation or integration of local indigenous people by dominant socio-cultural groups of this region.

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