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## REVIEW ARTICLE

### DISARRAY IN KOCH-RAJBANSI IDENTITY AND GOVERNMENT APPROACH: A CASE STUDY TO THE KOCH-RAJBANSI PEOPLE

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#### ABSTRACT

Identity crisis has become one of the most important topics in the politics of north-east India. Every ethnic group is in active mood to preserve their ethno-based identity. Like the other communities, the Koch-Rajbanshis also facing identical problem for centuries. Initially, their efforts to protect own ethnic identity was democratic and peaceful in nature. But now such identical problems become too adverse that some of them indulge in political assertions and violence. Even some of them have gone for underground fighting. Now they started approaching Central government for self dominion and S.T. status. Biswajit Roy, the President of Chilarai Sena, viewed that if the issue of S.T. status is not settled within short time, they will approach Supreme Court for justice.

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## INTRODUCTION

Ethno-based identity has become one of the most important topics in the politics of North-east India. Every ethnic group is in active sense to protect and preserve their ethno-based identity. The feelings of distinct identity lead to the identity politics by forming ethno-based political party. Sometimes, such identity politics becomes too adverse and people indulge in political assertions and violence. Even some section of people has gone for underground fighting for reviving their own identity. It is found that the affect of such ethno-based political violence is so intense in those areas where multi-ethnic and multi-lingual diverse ethnic group lives within same political boundary. The North-East India, particularly Assam; where various ethnic groups lives with distinct cultures, traditions, languages, religions, origins, territories, psychological traits, folklores, customs etc since ancient times. It is because of Assam being a pilgrimage place of Austrich, Dravidian, Mongoloid and Aryan stocks that had made their entry at different period of history. Thus, Assam is being considered as a homeland of various ethnic groups such as Ahoms, Bodos, Chutiyas, Deuris, Garos, Halungs, Kacharis, Koch-Rajbanshis, Mikirs, Miris, Morans, Muttaks and the Rabhas. All these ethnic groups contributed their respective shares towards the growth and development of greater Assamese society. But due to the continuous deprivation since the colonial periods the tribe communities remained socially, politically and economically backward and even in the post

independent period they could not occupied any appreciable position in the socio-economic and political entity. Further, the egoistic attitude towards the different ethnic groups of upper caste elites very often leads to identity formation among different ethnic groups of Assam.

## OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this paper is to analyze the identical position of the Koch-Rajbansi people by referring their historical background.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Historical as well as explanatory method has been adopted to the procedure of this paper. The paper has been accomplished through secondary source materials collected from various books, journals, magazines, local newspapers, articles, internet etc.

## RACIAL AFFINITIES

The Koches are one of the ancient plain tribe originally from the ancient Kamrupa-Kamata Kingdom. The Koches are one of the many tribes of the Tibeto-Burman Linguistic Group and racially the Tibeto-Burman (Bodo-Kachari) people, and have been living in Assam and West Bengal as an indigenous or ethnic group, since time is immemorial (Rajkhowa;2011:p-33). The Koches are the branch of the Tibeto-Burman people or of a greater family called Indo-Mongoloid; thus, they are akin to

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the Kacharies, Tipperas, Garos, Rabhas etc. (Barman 2008). Basically, the people belonging to this community possess all the characteristics of four human streams i.e. Austrich, Dravidian, Mongoloid and Aryan; whereas majority of scholars views that the Koches are belonging to Dravidian origin (Roy 2007). Prominent Historian Sir E.A. Gait observes that the word 'Koch' is a term of some ambiguity. In Assam it has become the name of a Hindu caste, into which are received the converts to Hinduism from the ranks of the Kacharis, Lalungs, Mikirs and other tribes; and as the process of conversion is still continuing, the number of persons described as Koch is increasing rapidly. In North Bengal and undivided Goalpara, on the other hand, the term 'Koch' has been abandoned for appellation 'Rajbansi', which denotes a tribe not a caste, but the ethnic character of Koches has been a matter of some controversy. Colonel Dalton considered them to be Dravidian and Risley, while admitting an intermixture with Mongoloid stock, held that Dravidian features is predominate (Gait 2001). K.L. Baruah observes this divergence of views seems to have arisen from the confusion caused by the term 'Rajvamsi', which originally referred to an entirely distinct community of Dravidian affinities (Baruah 2007). Gait also views that 'true Koches were a Mongoloid race, very closely allied to Meches and Garos; and find in Jalpaiguri, Koch Bihar and Goalpara, the person known as Rajbansi'(Gait 2001). Although they have connected with all cultures such as Austrich, Dravidian, Mongoloid and Aryan; finally they accepted the Aryan culture, when they have converted to Hinduism. Still there is controversy regarding the origin of this community (Choudhary 2011).

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The progenitor of Koch kings was Hariya Mandal, a resident of the village Chikangram in Khuntaghat of Goalpara district. He was the chief of twelve leading families of Maches or Koches of that area. He married two sisters Hira and Jira, daughter of one Haju and had two sons, Bisu, the son of Hira, and Sisu, the son of Jira. After the death of Hariya Mandal, his elder son Bisu took over the reign as a new chief. He was a great warrior. He organized the strength of his tribes and defeated the Bhuyans of Fulguri, who had earlier defeated his father. Accordingly, he attacked the Bhuyans and defeated them and became the chief of Phulguri, Bijni and other places. Gradually, he extended his rule up to the Karatoya River in the west and Barnadi in the east. He rose to power in 1515 A.D. It is said that he took 12 years to subjugate the neighbouring Bhuyans, after which he declared himself as king in 1527 A.D. and named himself as Bishwa Singh (Baruah 2007). Thus, he became the first king of Koch dynasty, while many of his followers described their old tribal designation and called themselves as 'Rajbanshis'. From the time of Bishwa Singh, the Koch dynasty was ruled by different Koch kings and lastly ruled by Jagaddipendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur till 12 September, 1949 (Genealogy of Koch Kings, Cooch Behar Palace).

## CAUSES TO SHED OFF ORIGINAL IDENTITY

The Koches is known as 'Rajbansi' in undivided Goalpara; Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, and Dinajpur district of West Bengal. The word 'Rajbansi' derived from the Sanskrit word

'Rajvamsi', means people belong to royal race or descendants of the king. However, they were also known as 'Koch'. Mythologically, it is belief that the word 'Koch' origin from the fact that during the Parashuram's 'Campaign of Khsatriya Destruction' (*Khsatriya Nidhan Yatra*), the Khsatriyas took shelter in the Lap (koch) of Goddess Kamakhya Devi. From that time the Khsatriyas identifies themselves as 'Koch-Rajbansi' instead of 'Khsatriya' (Choudhary 2011). According to Darrang Rajvamsavali, the Koches were originally Khsatriya princes who had saved themselves as refugees from Parashuram's anti-khsatriya genocidal campaign their secret threads and marrying Koch ladies. Haria Mandal married two sisters Hira and Jira, daughter of Koch chief known as Haju. The Brahmanas encouraged to patronage Hindu deities like Siva, Durga, Vishnu and of Sanskrit learning. Finally they welcome Sanskritization; shed off their tribal name and assumed a more vaunted appellation Rajbanshis (Barpujari 2007). Historians are also of the opinion that the ancestor of Hariya Mandal are called 'Koch' because they have come from the valley of 'Kochi' river and with the increase of population some of them migrated to the valley of Mechi river. Therefore, the inhabitants of Mechi valley are known as 'Mech' (Devburman 2006).

In between 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, Thakur Panchanan (1865-1935), who was a Koch-Rajbansi leader and reformer from Koch Bihar, established Khsatriya Sabha in order to inculcate Brahmanical values and practices among the Koch Rajbansi people. Actually he was a lawyer by profession, thus he started practicing law at Rangpur Court, where one high caste people throw off his Toga (lawyer gown) as he is from lower caste, while he went out leaving his Toga at office. He was shocked by the refusal of a high caste lawyer to wear a Toga. In the following year of the incident he led a Khsatriyaization movement among Koch-Rajbansi community. In order to be respected and accepted by the upper castes Panchanan felt that the Rajbansi must get organized and educated, which he tried to achieve through the Khsatriya Samiti. The Samiti proved that Koch Rajbanshis were originally Khsatriyas with a royal lineage, suggesting the link with Sahasrarjuna, a Khsatriya King of lunar lineage. Based on Sanskrit literature, specially the Puranas, they claimed that Koch Rajbanshis are hiding their original identity for centuries or may since the time of Parasuram's Khsatriya Nidhan Yatra (Khsatriya genocide campaign). In support of this claim the movement involved a ceremonial Khsatriyaization process. Panchanan gathered thousand of Koch Rajbansi people and went to Kashi to approach high resource Brahmin, where Brahmanical rituals were performed to convert thousand of Koch-Rajbansi people to Khsatriya Koch-Rajbansi (encyclopedia). This incident denotes that the Koch people again altered their identity in the modern age in order to be respected and accepted by the upper castes.

It can be said that the Koches are suffering with identity crisis since the beginning of their history and till now the process is alive. Some elite Koch-Rajbanshis are felt ashamed to identify own self as Rajbansi, somewhere now become a matter of secret of their original identity. As we know that the people of this community settled in the entire North East region of India. In Bengal, some conservative Rajbanshis considered

themselves as Bengali and Assamese in Assam. Sometimes they feel proud to identify themselves as Bengali in West Bengal; it is because during the time of independence Bengali language became the sweetest language of the world. The political leaders of West Bengal considered Rajbanshi people as an integral part of mainstream Bengali community for getting political support from them. Apart from these they get more privileges from the state government who feel themselves as Bengali instead of feeling Koch-Rajbanshi. The same event happens to Koch-Rajbanshi people of Assam. Consequently, some of them shattered from the mainland of their paradise and assimilated with the majority of Assamese people. It is said that often a long assimilation with other community proves to be shed off ones original identity. Therefore, some of them feel more comfortable to be Assamese rather than Koch-Rajbanshi. I myself have approached lots of such type of peoples while reading in university, while travelling in bus, train etc. and importantly, most of them are basically from Nalbari, Tinisukia, Golaghat, and Jorhat district. At present, apart from India the Koch-Rajbanshis are found in Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan, who are being regarded as the indigenous people and known as Rajbanshi, Koch-Rajbanshi, Khsatriya, Deshi, Rangpuria, Kochila etc. in different places.

## GOVERNMENT APPROACH

Whether Koch-Rajbanshis are tribe or caste is remaining a matter of controversy. If we see the origin of this community it is clear that they are a distinct tribe since they are the Tibeto-Burman Linguistic Group and racially the Tibeto-Burman (Bodo-Kachari) people. When they have begun to live in the plain of Brahmaputra valley they got assimilate with the composite Assamese society and become the integral part of this greater society. They have gotten respectful position in the mainstream Assamese society and thus they have received even to the position in the Asom Sahitya Sabha, All Assam Students' Union (AASU) etc. This position of Koch-Rajbanshi people in the Assamese society might them forgotten of being a distinct caste or tribe. Another inflammable issue of Koch-Rajbanshi community is that they are provided different status at different states. For example S.C. (Scheduled Caste) status in West Bengal, S.T. (Scheduled Tribe Hill) status in Meghalaya, O.B.C. (Other Backward Class) status in Assam. The leaders of this community argue that they have all the criteria to be recognized as a tribe. Therefore, they are demanding the Schedule Tribe (P). As per the Constitution of India, any community to be recognized as Scheduled Tribe, they must have possessed some specific features. Some of them are; initially, the community should have some primitive traits; such as racial habit, blood continuation, ancestral traits; secondly, the community should have distinct culture; such as own script, language, religion, food habit dress habit etc; thirdly, their location should be geographical concentrated, fourthly, the community should feel hesitation to communicate with other communities and fifthly, the region must be economically backward and underdevelopment. In 1950 the Commissioner of National Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe, Mr. N.M Srikant has defined that a Tribe community which remains outside the Hindu fold, suffers from economical, social and educational backwardness and are

isolated in the hilly forested tracts are considered as scheduled as Tribes. Again, in 1966 the Register General of India said that to be Scheduled Tribe a community must possess the following five specific characteristics: - (1) Primitive Trait (2) Geographically isolation (3) Distinct Culture (4) Shyness of Contact and (5) Backwardness (Roy 2012). According to Biswajit Roy, the Adviser of AKRSU and President of Chilarai Sena that Koch-Rajbanshi community has all the criteria to be recognized as Schedule Tribe. Since, Koch-Rajbanshis have some primitive traits such as they have their own dress habit, customs, rituals, culture etc.

They are mainly concentrated in the North Bengal and lower Assam. The Koch-Rajbanshis are economically, politically, and educationally weak and backward. Despite of the fact, the Registrar General of India has viewed that Koch-Rajbanshis has no such features to be recognized as Schedule Tribe. In a press release, Biswajit Roy argues that in 1996 the Koch-Rajbanshi has been given the Schedule Tribe status through an Ordinance issued by the then President of India, P.V Narasingha Rao and also approved by the Registrar General of India in 1995. But the same Registrar General of India has rejected the Schedule Tribe (P) status. It is said that in the proceeding period bulk portion of S.T. reserves seats in various educational institutions and government service sectors had been secured by the Koch-Rajbanshi community. This might create jealous, unhappy and sense of insecure feelings among the other communities of Assam belongs to S.T. On the other hand, the elite Rajbanshi people feel ashamed to identify them as S.T. Further they did not make any efforts to save their status of S.T.

Biswajit Roy rightly opined that there is a deep political conspiracy behind such negligence (A press released 2012). They are very much serious in regards to the demand of ST status. He also viewed that if the issue of S.T. status is not settled within the next six months, they will be forced to approach the Supreme Court of India for justice (Tribune 2012).

The following song, in their vernacular language rightly expresses the feelings of their patriotism and unity, their wants, sorrows, grievances etc. Now let observed a few lines of the song:

*SUNO SUNO JONOGAN, SOGAI MILI EK HON,  
KOCH RAJA NARA NARAYANER BANSHA JODI  
RAJBANSI BULI KON,  
SUNO KOCH RAJBANSI VAI, AMAR VISWA MAHAVIR  
CHILARAI,  
JAI BACHEYA RAKHSE MATRIVUMI KAMATAPUR,  
TAK AMRA PRANAM JANAI,  
BIRER BANSHA BULI RAKHMU MATRIVUMI, JODI KON  
AMRA KAMATAPURI,  
AISO JOYOGAN GAI, AMRA KAMATAPUR CHAI,  
AMAR RAJYO JATE AMRAI PAI.....  
RAKHSE JATIR MAN THAKUR PANCHANAN, DIA GEIL  
RAJBANSIK PRAN,  
RAJBANSI BULI HOILUNG KAMATAPURI, AMAK NADEI  
KENE DAM,  
BORO BORO MANI GULA DEKHO ALA VABIA,*

*VAL KORI ITIHAS GHATIA.....  
 AMRA JOTO ASI KAMATAPURBASI, AMRA SOGAI VAI VAI,  
 ACHAR-NITIT VAG HOILEO BOL AMRA KAJOT EKE THAI,  
 AI MATRIVUMI SEI SONAR KAMATAPUR, AMAR SOGARE  
 PRAN,  
 ASIL KOTO SUKH, KOTO SHANTI AMAR,  
 AJI KOTE GEIL OI SEI NAM.....  
 JOY KAMATAPURER JOY, JOY KOCH RAJBANSIR JOY,  
 JOY NARA NARAYANER JOY, JOY BIR CHILARAYER JOY.*

*Artist:Ramkrishna,  
 Halakura, Dhubri, Assam.*

The song invited all Koch-Rajbansi people to keep unity among them. If one thinks own self as a Koch then he must take him for descendant of Koch king Nara Narayan and Chilarai, to feel them as one. They should sing the song of victory that they may gain Kamatapur, which their progenitor possessed. The song refers that Thakur Panchanan have saved their ethnicity giving a new heart to them replacing the older one. The song lamented that they have been being contributed their respective shares towards the growth and development of nation, but still they are neglected, why they are not being given proper values and respects..?. This song also suggested that the big guns should carefully review their history for their legacy of wants. This song also suggested maintaining unity among different sections like Koch-Rajbansi, Bengali, Bodo, Toto, Muslim, Kalita, Santhal etc., whether there may be difference in cultures, traditions or language. In earlier period there existed peace and happiness, but now where are these lost? At last, victory Kamatapur's victory, victory Koch-Rajbashi's victory, victory Nara Narayan's victory, victory warrior Chilarai's victory.

It seems that this song is mainly been coined to invite all Koch-Rajbansi people to live under one umbrella, because their identity is now in the wave of crisis. There may not be entering any further elements of division among them.

## CONCLUSION

In the conclusion it can be said that the glorified Koch-Rajbanshis are now in the way of losing their last asset that is their own identity. They are known by different names such as Rajbansi, Koch-Rajbansi, Deshi, Khsatriya, Rangpuria, Kochila etc. at different places.

In fact the difference in the identity of Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam, Bengal, Bihar, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan is artificial and does not have any logical basis. Of course, there are some differences in case of dress and food habits but this difference is not enough to make them different. One should remember the physiognomy and racial stock that should be taken as the measure to examine one identity. There are some reasons for their identity crisis. Some of them are; most of them do not have sufficient knowledge about their history, multi-identity and multi-division of Rajbansi people, marginalization of Kamatapuri or Rajbansi language and culture, deteriorated social, economic and political condition. All these factors directly or indirectly contributed for losing their identity. So, it is the right time to raise their hiding identity once again to preserve the next generation as the ancestor of Koch-Rajbansi.

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