

Creating Ethnic Identity: A Movement of *Koch Rajbonshis* of Assam

***Dr Juri Gogoi Konwar and Kaushik Das**

**Assistant Professor, Dept. of Cultural Studies
Tezpur (Central) University, Assam-784028
E mail: jgkon@tezu.ernet.in*

Abstract

In the formation of the greater Assamese nationality, Koch-Rajbongshis had a pioneer role. Koch-Rajbongshis are one of the indigenous communities of Assam who basically belongs to the western parts of Assam and the Northern part of Bengal. The Koch-Rajbongshi community of west Assam is demanding the S.T. status and a separate state named Kamatapur. Koch-Rajbongshis are one of the struggling communities, who are fighting for their nationality and for their dignity. This paper tries to focus the causes of identity crisis which give this community the motive and courage to lead a movement for creating identity with an autonomous state of their own.

Key words: Koch-Rajbongshi, ethnicity, identity, Kamatapur.

North East India is the homeland of many indigenous ethnic groups of people. It is the melting pot of many multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic groups. Assam is one of the North Eastern states where many ethnic communities settled together. The British had initially used expressions such as 'primitive' and 'savage' with reference to the people of North East, which was later replaced by term tribe. The term *Janajati*, *Adivasi* etc. are used as an equivalent to English word 'aborigine' which opens the class conscious ideology of backward and forward. But interestingly the concept of *tribe* is very controversial in present day as many people have refused to accept this term. Soumen Sen (2004 -05), in this regard argued that "*the hill people of North-East India – at least the political and academic leadership who are very sensitive to the question of cultural identity – refused to accept the term tribe. They consider the term derogatory. Neither do they approve of other terms like ethnic group or indigenous people that are currently used as replacements for the word tribe. They prefer to designate themselves only by their endoethnonym to emphasise their distinct cultural identity.*"

The concept of cultural identity of a community or a group is very much related with the concept of ethnicity. Present day it becomes quite important to understand the term *ethnicity* as the related terms like 'ethnic group', 'ethnic conflict', 'ethnic assertion', 'ethnic cleansing' etc. are cropping the daily text of our life. The usage of *ethnic* derives its strength in social/cultural anthropology as method of analysis of social behaviour and events (Eriksen, T. H. 2010).

It is said that the word *ethnic* is derived from the original Greek word *ethnos* which means *nation*. Many scholars say that the word *ethnicity* was first used by Nathan Glazer and Moynihan in their book *Beyond the Melting Pot*. Writing in the 1970s, Glazer and Moynihan argued that 'ethnicity seems to be a new term' (1975: 1), pointing to the fact that the world's earliest dictionary appearance is in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1972. Its first usage is attributed to the US sociologist David Reisman (*ibid*). An ethnic group a segment of a larger society whose members are thought, by themselves or others, to have a common origin and to share important segments of a common culture and who, in addition, participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients (*ibid*). 'Encyclopedia America International' defines an ethnic group as, "*Any group of people distinguished by common cultural and frequently racial characteristics. The members of most ethnic groups have a sense of group identity and the larger cultural within which they live and recognised them as a distinct aggregation.... And a number of internal and external forces that keep them as group united and reinforce their cultural distinctiveness.*" (Chauhan, D. 2012). The sense of belonging to an ethnic group by its members is an important characteristic.

Within two decades of India's Independence, the process dismantlement of Assam began with the separation of Naga Hills district as a political unit and now the hill tribes of North East India have their ethnic based states – Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh are states which were hill districts of Assam before reaching their present political status (Hazarika, N. 2005). Present day Assam is still facing many questions regarding the establishment of ethnic identity of many communities like Bodo, Mishing, Karbi, Dimasa, Rabha, Lalung, Koch-Rajbongshi etc. Many indigenous communities raise the question of ethnic recognition which creates a kind of social up-down; a social movement. This kind of social movement includes the urge for a scheduled status or an autonomous state for their own.

Objectives of the study

The paper attempts to throw some light on identity questions of Koch Rajbongshis of Assam which is a burning issue of contemporary Assam. The present study deals with the different objectives and goals of Koch-Rajbongshi's movement to create an identity separating them from the greater 'Axomiya' society and for the autonomy. Though, in the formation of the separate state includes most of the parts of North Bengal and half of Assam, but the present study does not have the enough space to include and discuss the position of Bengal in it. This study will focused the ethnic movement of Koch-Rajbongshi people only in the context of Assam. Regarding the scheduled status, there is a big gap between the Koch-Rajbongshis of Assam, Bengal

and Meghalaya. They already have the Scheduled Caste status in Bengal and Scheduled Tribe status in Meghalaya; but regarding the autonomous state they are united.

The objective of the study is to understand their identity consciousness which shakes the present day socio-political scenario of Assam through different protests both with peaceful demonstration and violence.

Methodology

The present work is an outcome of both primary and secondary sources. For the primary sources, data are mostly collected from the field experiences. For the field study, few villages and town areas from Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Dhubri, Chirang and Barpeta district of Assam are selected which lies in the north western corner of Assam. The selected field areas are *Futkibari* of Dhubri; *Chandrapara* of Kokrajhar; *Mulagaon*, *Panchapur*, *Borgola*, *Borpara* of Bongaigaon; *Bijni* of Chirang and *Bakharapara* of Barpeta district; all of which are Koch-Rajbongshi dominated area.

In the field study, observation and interview methods are applied to collect data. In the observation method, data on different cultural aspects of Koch-Rajbongshi community such as dressing pattern, food habit, various rituals, festivals etc. are collected. In certain point of time this observation are done with the help of participant method also. Festivals like *Bishua*, *Bishohori* etc., protests, seminars organized by various organizations are experienced through participation. In the interview method, generally people are selected who have a better and fair idea and knowledge about the community and its ongoing movement. People like writers, students and teachers, people who are related with various political or non-political organizations are selected as the key informant.

Books, articles, journals, magazines and newspapers that are written in English, Assamese, Bengali and Rajbongshi language are taken as the secondary sources.

Koch -Rajbongshis

Koch-Rajbongshis are one of the indigenous communities of North-East India who basically inhabited to the Western part of Assam and the Northern part of Bengal. This Mongoloid group has also their inhabitants in Meghalaya, Nepal and in some parts of Bangladesh.

The Koches had played one of the important roles in the history of Assam since the 16th century. It is one of the aboriginal Mongoloid groups of North-East India. There is a debate among the scholars regarding its racial origin. Scholars like Oldham and Dalton regarded the Koches as the Dravidians in origin; where as scholars like Risley accepted the Koches as the admixture of Dravidian and Mongoloid blood (Nath, D 1989). But scholars like Hodgson had classified them as Mongoloid. Endle, had classified the Koches within the fold of the great Bodo race along with the Rabhas, Meches, Dhimals, Hojias, Hajongs, Lalungs, Garos (*ibid*). But regarding this debate historian Gait's view is the most important and which is accepted by most scholars like S. K. Chatterji and D. C. Sarkar.

According to Gait (2005) “There seems, however, to be no doubt that the true Koches were a Mongoloid race very closely allied to the Meches and Garos; and we find that in Jalpaiguri, Koch Bihar and Goalpara, the persons now known as Rajbanshi are either pure Koches who, though dark have a distinctly Mongoloid physiognomy, or else a mixed breed, in which the Mongoloid element usually preponderates.”

The Koches are designated as *Rajbongshi* which means “descendents of the Royal blood.” They are also designated as the *Bhanga Kshatriya*. Gait observed that “in North Bengal and in Goalpara”, the term ‘Koch’ had been falling into disrepute; and it has, to a great extent, been abandoned in favour of appellation Rajvansi” (*ibid*).

The language that is spoken by the Koch-Rajbongshi people today is known as *Rajbongshi* language. It is also known as *Goalpariya*, *Kamata*, *Deshi Bhasha* etc (Bhakat, D.N 2008). There is no original script for the language. Instead, Assamese, Bengali and Devanagiri script is used to write this language. For example - Assamese is used in Assam, Bengali is used in Bengal and Devanagiri is used in Nepal.

Although the present *Rajbongshi* language is a form of the Indo-Aryan language group, there is no doubt to believe that many Tibeto-Burmese words are also available in this language. Though *Rajbongshi* language belongs to Indo-Aryan group, the influence and contribution of other Tibeto-Burmese languages such as *Bodo*, *Rabha* etc is also notable which give the language a different taste.

The Koch–Rajbongshi people of Assam are generally practice the Hindu religion and rituals. But many non-Aryan practices also available among them simultaneously. These rituals are accompanied with songs and dances. Many gods are based on the natural beliefs like water, rain, forest etc. Hindi gods and goddesses like Manasa, Shiva, Kali etc. are also worshiped. The influence of Tantrik-Shaivism is also present. The Rajbongshi people mainly worship the Snake Goddess *Manasa*, and there is a special place for her in the main house. *Manasa* is also known as *Marai* and also as *Bishohori*.

Although the impact of Aryan culture can also be seen in a Koch-Rajbongshi’s ritual, but many non-Aryan practices are also available which are accompanied by the songs and dances. Some of the festivals which reflects the tribal features are *Bishohori*, *Baash puja*, *Sonaray puja*, *Hudum Deo*, *Sauni puja*, *Haokali*, *Bura-Buri puja*, *Dhankata puja*, *Noyakhaowa*, *Kati puja*, *Charak puja* etc. The Koch-Rajbongshi people believe on the evil spirit like *Mashan*, *Pattani*, *Deo* etc. also. *Mashan* is believed to be the most powerful evil spirit in the society.

The festivals of the Koch-Rajbongshi community are *Katigasa*, *Bishua*, *Hudum Deo*, *Sonaray puja*, *Baash puja*, *Bishohori puja*, *Ori* or *Aiuri Maga*, *Aai puja*, *Bormani puja* etc. The social behaviour and beliefs are reflected through the festivals and songs which are sung in Rajbongshi language.

Patriarchal system of descent and inheritance is purely available in a Koch Rajbongshi society. The traditional dress of Koch-Rajbongshi’s is very simple. Male wear simply a towel called *Angsa* which is wrapped around the waist. In some places these *angsas* are also known as *Aosa*, where *Ao* means ‘lower’ and *Sa* means ‘to cover’.

Patani is the traditional dress for a Koch-Rajbongshi woman. It is a piece of cloth

worn round the chest from armpit and a chadar on top which is known as *Aagoron*. The wearing style of the *Patani* is more similar with the *Dkhona* of Bodo women. The *Patani* reaches up to the ankle and not up to the knee. In some places it is also known as *Phota*. The colour of a *Patani* is generally yellow, orange or green.

Rice constitutes the staple food of any Koch-Rajbongshi family. Rice is also used for the preparation of food as *Chira* (flattened rice), *Muri* (puffed rice), *Gura* (powdered rice), and *Khoi* or *Akhoi* (popped rice). *Sidal*, *Pelka*, *Patao*, *Sukta* or *Sukati*, *Seka* are some of the indigenous food items of this community.

Ethnic Identity Movement

In Assam, since 1933, various demands were raised for all the plain tribal communities which are still going on. Now-a-days an ethnic movement becomes quiet a common phenomenon for the people of Assam. Starting from the demand of a 'Sovereign' *Axom* to today's demand for separate *Bodoland* is just a continuation of the political turmoil in Assam. The struggle for the recognition of a 'scheduled' status by the 6 groups i.e. the Ahoms, the Koch-Rajbongshis, the Chutias, the Morans, the Muttocks and the Tea-Tribes are add as an ingredient for the ethnic movements.

Today, Koch-Rajbongshis are one of the struggling communities, who are fighting for their nationality and their dignity. Although, the Koch-Rajbongshis are demanding a separate state, which is '*Kamatapur*' or '*Kamataland*'; but in Assam, the movement in which the Koch-Rajbongshis are involved is of altogether a different nature, which is assertion of their identity through attaining a '*scheduled*' status.

Though a Mongoloid tribe, the community is denied of their position as most of the Mongoloid communities of North Eastern India are in the Indian Scheduled Tribe list. Today, they are in such a complex situation all over India that it becomes quite difficult to state actually where they are. In West Bengal, they are enjoying a Scheduled Caste status, Scheduled Tribe in Meghalaya, MOBC in Goalpara district of Assam and OBC in the rest of Assam.

It was only in 1968, for the first time, *Koch-Rajbongshi Sanmilani* (KRS), which was established in 1959-60 for the socio-economic upliftment of the community, demanding for the scheduled status. But at that time there was no clear cut demand whether they are demanding Scheduled Tribe or Caste status. They overcome this ambiguity by 1969 and sought for the scheduled caste status as in North Bengal which they reiterated in 1970 and urged to include even the Koch-Rajbongshis of Meghalaya into the same list.

The Koch Rajbongshis has been suffering from identity crisis. The first step to uplift its social status and to make a definite identity, Panchanan Burma's contribution is most important. His *Kshatriya Movement* of the early 20th century was to elevate the status of the Rajbongshis by claiming *Kshatriya* status. Victimized by social discrimination from his childhood, Panchanan Burma tried to bring this community to the fold of caste Hindu society. Interestingly this movement tried to disassociate the Rajbongshis from the Koch identity, as the leaders felt that by doing so they could establish the superior social rank for the Rajbongshis. But the *Kshatriya Movement* lost its significant in the later phase while with the initiative of Panchanan Burma; the Rajbongshis were offered scheduled caste status (Das, A. J. 2011).

The sufferings from the identity crisis give this community the motive and courage to speak for something. To safeguard their identity the demand for the Scheduled Status is not the ultimate goal for this community. Taking the dynamic history of the Koch Kingdom as the base, they are demanding their independent state *Kamatapur* to protect their old dignity and identity. Though *Kamatapur* is a recent phenomenon for the people of Assam, but according to Das, “*Kamatapur* was very much there in the history from 13th century onwards.” He also says that “even when Hiuen Tsang, the famous traveler and scholar from China visited the ancient Kamrupa kingdom of Kumara Bhaskar Barma between 600 to 648 A.D. the capital of Kamrupa was believed to be *Kamatapur*. What we find in “*A History of Assam*” is that, ‘there were at this point (during the reign of Bhaskara Barma) no larger towns, and the capital of the country does not appear to have been place of much importance. The only indication that is given as to its locality is that it lay 150 miles east of Paundra Vardhana. Cunningham, after identifying the later place with Pabna, concluded that it was *Kamatapur*.(ibid)

The present *Kamatapur* movement has emerged from the historical *Kamata* or *Koch Bihar* of North East India. The proposed area of territory they are demanding for the proposed *Kamatapur* state is more or less as that of the old *Kamata* kingdom, which was under the Koch dynasty. The proposed map issued by AKRSU also shows the same boundary including Assam and Bengal. According to T. Ray, the General Secretary of *All Koch-Rajbongshi Students Union* (AKRSU), gaining *Scheduled Tribe* status is just a step towards the goal of *Kamatapur* (Field note, April, 2012).

In the present *Kamatapur* movement, the issue which plays a very important role is the merger of Cooch Bihar state with West Bengal and its transformation from a native state to a mere district of West Bengal. In the time of interview H. Barman, the present President of AKRSU informed that it is a conspiracy to disturb the unity of the greater Koch-Rajbongshi community (May, 2012). The *Greater Cooch Behar People's Association* (GCBPA) also argues that the merger of Koch Bihar with West Bengal was fully illegal, unconstitutional and initially void.

It is said that Koch Bihar was an Indian State ruled by the Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan who was a feudatory king by the British Government until the 28th August, 1949. Koch Bihar was transferred to the Government of India by a document ceded on 28th August, 1949 and in 12th September of 1949; Koch Bihar was ruled as a Chief Commissioner's Province by a Chief Commissioner appointed by the Indian Government. By an order under section 290A of Government of Indian Act 1935, Koch Bihar was transferred and merged with the Province of West Bengal on 1st January 1950. since then Koch Bihar is being administered as a district of West Bengal (Das, A. J. 2011).

After the independence of India from the British rule, the decision was given to the ruler of the states whether they would join India or go with Pakistan. According to the Indian Independence Act, Section 7(1) all the treaties and agreements signed between Koch Bihar and British Government from 1773 to 1902 became invalid, and the territories i.e. Jalpaiguri, Darjiling, Dinajpur, Goalpara and West Assam were returned to Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan of Cooch Behar¹³. On 28th August, 1949, an agreement was signed between the Maharaja and Government of India for

the integration of Cooch Behar with India. Koch Bihar was placed in the Constitution of India as a 'C' category state after the request of the Maharaja to the then Governor of India to administer for the present territories of Koch Bihar as a centrally administered area under a Chief Commissioner.

But, the state government of West Bengal headed by the Chief Minister Dr. B. C. Ray wanted to merge Koch Bihar with West Bengal which was not locally supported. Newly born organization like 'Prajahit Sadhini Sabha' intended that Koch Bihar should not be merged with either Bengal, or Assam, rather it should be a union territory under Delhi. During the time, there was a wave in favour of the merger of Koch Bihar with Assam as historically and culturally Koch Bihar allies Koch-Kamata Kingdom was more close to Assam than West Bengal (*ibid*). The then Chief Minister of Assam Shri Gopinath Bordoloi tried to move the wave in favour of Assam. But Bidhan Chandra Ray succeeded to convince the then Prime Minister, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in his favour by his continuous labour.

So, according to AKRSU leaders, they are not demanding a new thing from the Indian Government; they just want their Kamatapur back which was already there. Besides statehood and ST (Plains) status, they are also demanding the inclusion of the *Rajbongshi* language in the Eight Schedule and the introduction of this language in the primary level education as a medium of instruction. To achieve the intimate goal, various protests and agitations are going on. On 27th March, 2012; AKRSU and *Sodou Koch Rajbongshi Mahila Samity* (SKRMS) activists demonstrated at Dispur Last Gate in support of their long-pending demand for a Kamatapur state to be carved out from Assam and West Bengal.

In that protest, they submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister through Chief Minister of Assam. AKRSU General Secretary said that they have been neglected and oppressed since long by the Central and Assam Government. He also said that they are losing their identity under the influence of Assamese and Bengali culture and it becomes quite important to recognize them as ST.

To come in the list of 'Scheduled Tribe' of Indian Constitution, a particular group needs some criteria to fulfill, which are:

1. Traditional occupation of a definite geographical area.
2. Distinctive culture that includes a whole spectrum of tribal ways of life, i.e., language, customs, traditions, religious beliefs, arts and crafts etc.
3. Primitive traits depicting occupational pattern, economy etc.
4. Lack of educational and techno-economic development.

Among all criteria, the second one is most important because it has a chance to loose or assimilate with other cultures, which happened with Koch-Rajbongshi community. Although, many rituals and practices are still exist but many of them were more or less lost or forgotten. For example, in many places this community used an Assamese *Mekhela-Chador* or *Sari* instead of its traditional dress *Patani*. So, they tried to revive, popularize and make aware the people about their culture. In this regard, the role of AKRSU is very important. They focused mainly on their folkloric items and culture. As a step, in 2007-08, *AKRSU* announced that all Koch-Rajbongshi women should wear their dress *Patani*. They demanded that *Patani* should be used as

a uniform in the High Schools instead of *Mekhela-Chador*. In 2007-08, Dotoma High School of Kokrajhar district made *Patani* as the school uniform for girls for the first time. After that the other high schools like Kalipukhuri, Serphanguri, Chandrapara, Salekati (all in Kokrajhar district) etc followed the uniform code. Now, students are wearing their traditional dress to project their identity.

One of their festivals named *Bishua*, which is celebrated instead of Assamese National festival *Bihu* very recently. According to them, *Bihu* belongs to the main stream Assamese people. It is observed on 13th and 14th April, 2012 in *Panchapur* of Bongaigaon district. *Bishua* festival is celebrated with their cultural items like ethnic food, indigenous musical instruments etc. A competition of folk dance and songs was organized in the first day of the festival to show the rich heritage of the community. In the second day, leaders of AKRSU requested people to feel proud of their culture, dress and history.

It can be mentioned here that the Koch Rajbongshi people are now demanding that the folk songs and dance forms of the then undivided Goalpara, popularly known as *Goalporiya lokogeet* and *Goalporiya lokonritya* be renamed as *Koch-Rajbongshi lokogeet* and *lokonritya*, as the language used in the songs are of Rajbongshi language and the dances related with the festivals Koch Rajbongshis. It is a strategy to include them among the fold of greater *Axomiya* society.

As a part of their assertion, many national, international as well as regional seminars were organized where papers were presented and discussed on language, folklore and other cultural aspects. In such seminars the material folkloric items are exhibited. Many stalls on folk items such as dress items, traditional household materials, agricultural items etc are exhibited. Usually, 'welcome gates' erected in front of the venue are decorated with their traditional items so that people can easily imagine a picture of their unique society. The welcome gate of Chandrapara seminar (2011) is a good example of the use of folkloric item in their ethnic assertion. Consciously wearing of traditional dress is seen among the volunteers as well as participants. Arrangements of cultural traits like plough (1), leveler (2), traditional hat (3), winnowing fan (4) in the gate, project their consciousness.



At Chandrapara, Kokrajhar district three day's international seminar on the language, culture, and society of Koch-Rajbongshi was held from September 23, 2011. In the midst of surging demand for the creation of a separate state of Kamtapur curving out of five districts from West Bengal and eight districts of Assam as well as granting ST status to the community, the core organ of the Koch-Rajbongshi community the *Koch-Rajbongshi Sahitya Sabha* (KRSS) at the seminar demanded community language to be included in the Eight Schedule of the Indian constitution. In Futkibari, Dhubri district of Assam, another seminar was organized by a young organization named *Kamatapur Association*, on the Folk-Culture of Koch-Rajbongshi community on 4th February, 2012.

Although, the identity question is carried through peaceful protests and agitations, but the violent phase has also been in the news. The Kamatapur movement came into media for the first time after the Royal Bhutan Army attacked the camps of *Kamatapur Liberation Organisation* (KLO) situated in Bhutan in December, 2003 along with other two organisations namely *National Democratic Front of Bodoland* (NDFB) and *United Liberation Front of Asom* (ULFA) (Das, A.J 2011). KLO, who are fighting for the Koch-Rajbongshis of North East India, has been making news headlines time to time due to their insurgency activities since its formation in 1995.

In the present days, the role of the youth can be said as an emerging aspect in the ethnic identity movement. In retrospect to the older and middle aged people, youths are more conscious about their identity. Although the aged people have that consciousness but most of them are happy with their Assamese identity side by side. But, the young generations are willing to give their identity only as Koch-Rajbongshi. AKRSU is trying for the dignity of Koch-Rajbongshis. Recently, a group of graduate students of the community has started publishing a monthly magazine named *Haus* in Rajbongshi language, which deals with the Rajbongshi culture and problems.

In the formation of an ethnic awareness and to garner support, the modern digital media has been effectively used by the Koch-Rajbongshis. Internet as well as social networking sites is gaining popularity day by day. Face book, orkut are just a few examples which are popular among the young Koch-Rajbongshis like that of others. Conversational topics incorporated in the face books are mainly related to their culture, language, demand and issues related with the development of the community. The *Koch-Rajbongshi*, *Koch-Rajbongshi (Education)*, *Kamatapur Association*, *We want Kamatapur*, *Mashan Association*, *Koch-Rajbongshi Literature Group* etc are some of these.

Conclusion

In the present days, the ethnicity related questions become a burning problem in the state of Assam, in fact in all over India. In Assam, the demand of the Koch Rajbongshi to attain a common tribal status is not a new phenomenon which is not difficult to solve. Since 1998, the Koch Rajbongshis of Assam was included in the official list of Scheduled Tribe. But, the weak political representation made it difficult to carry that status for a long. The present Koch Rajbongshi problem is the outcome of their feeling of deprivation in every sphere of life, be it economic, educational,

social or political. Time and again, they are promised to give the Scheduled Tribe status, but till now the problem has remained to be unsolved. So, the gap between their expectation and achievement, made the situation even more critical and the present agitation is just the result of their oppression. Consciousness towards the self identity leads people towards a movement; which is the movement of Koch Rajbongshis of Assam.

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