

Evolution of Rajbanshi Society: A Historical Assessment

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Abstract: *Rajbanshis, an indigenous community of northern portion West Bengal, in the past they were the majority people of North Bengal, particularly in the districts of Jhalpaiguri, 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. There are many debates on the origin and ethnic identity of the Rajbanshis, in spite of that it is agreed by most of the scholars and historians that the Rajbanshis originated from Koch, a tribal community belonged to Indo- Mongoloid race. Since the colonial period huge number of people of different castes, classes and religions immigrated in this region, particularly in the post colonial period more uncountable people migrated from East Bengal, as a result they became minority in North Bengal and became helpless losing their lands and property. Now-a-days they have faced different types of crises and problems.*

Keywords: Koch, Indigenous People, panichhita, Non-Aryan, Kshatriya Identity etc.

At the outset, it can be said that many writings, articles and books have been published on the different issues and aspects of the Rajbanshi people both in the educational and non- educational institutions. Beside these, many articles, write-ups and books are being published by the initiative of different authors individually or jointly out of any institution. In the University level some research works including Ph. D and M. Phil are also being done. In spite of that there are many undiscussed and unknown aspects of the Rajbanshis which has not been explored by the researchers and authors till now, in this context it can be said that more research works are expected on the various issues and aspects of the Rajbanshis; it is also true that there are many issues on the Rajbanshis which is debateable and no unanimous decision can be taken.

The Rajbanshis were the indigenous people of the greater part of North Bengal and lower Assam in the pre- colonial and colonial period. The Rajbanshis were the majority people of North Bengal, particularly in the districts of Jhalpaiguri, 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 Rajbansis 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 caste 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 disput 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."¹ 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 Rajbansis. These Rajbansis later on claimed to be Kshatriya."² According to Swaraj Basu, "The local situation also provided a sufficient ground for the Rajbansis' assertion of a Kshatriya identity and their endeavour to build up caste solidarity."³

There are many debates among the origin or ethnological identity of the Rajbanshis. The main debate was whether Rajbanshis were originated from Mongoloid race or Aryan race. This debate was initiated from the starting of the census work from 1870 onwards by the British- India Government. In the census report Government has shown the Rajbanshis and the Koches in the same group. Here, one point should be mentioned that the Koches were originated from the Indo- Mongoloid race and they were treated as tribal community. In accordance with the Aryan culture, the non- Aryan people treated as 'Dasa', 'Dasyu', 'Kirata', and 'Nisada' which means the lower graded people in the society. The non- Aryan people had no prestigious or honourable position in the eyes of upper strata of the society of so called traditional Hindus or Aryan people.

So, when Rajbanshis were shown as a non-Aryan people that were Koches, they protested against the census report. This protest turned into a social movement called "Kshatriya Movement". They demanded that Koches and Rajbanshis were not originated in the same human race. Koches were the tribal people and the Rajbanshi originated from Aryan race. In accordance with the social status of the Aryans, Rajbanshis held the 2nd position that was "Kshatriyas" after the Brahmanas. They gave the description from different sources of the Hindu Shastras or mythologies that after defeating in the battle to the Porshurama they came in the Ratnapith that was the place beside the Trishrota or Jalpes, settled there and they were called "Bratyo Kshatriyas". This Kshatra movement got a new motion under the leadership of Thakur Panchanan Barma who led the movement throughout the North Bengal and Assam. Ultimately their demand became success and in the census report of 1911 Rajbanshis and Koches were shown separately. In spite of that debate it is not proved

anthropologically that the Rajbanshis were originated from the Aryan race because their physical structure or biological features of their bodies are assimilated with the Mongolian stock of people. Naturally, almost all the historians and scholars and the British officials showed that the Rajbanshis originated from the Mongoloid race.

Swaraj Basu pointed out “.... In case of the Rajbanshi caste movement, we find that one of the main thrusts of their movement was to distance themselves from the Koches and to establish their superior social rank.⁴ He also added that when the Rabhas in north Bengal tried to move upward in social hierarchy the Rajbanshi leaders did not support their movement”⁵. Sunder showed in his report, “The Rajbanshis or Koches predominate in the Duars. The last census returns shows their number as 123,439. They are now recognized as a distinct caste of Hindus, but generally the Rajbanshis of the Duars is a Hindu when suits him to be one and a Mech when he obtains pork and wishes to eat it.”⁶ Hunter also showed in his reports that the Koches and the Rajbanshis were the same communities. He wrote, ‘The Koches, or the Rajbanshis as they are now called, may be briefly mentioned among the semi-aboriginal tribes, although they are now recognized as a distinct caste of Hindus. The Koch race first came prominently into notice about the close of the fifteenth or the beginning of the sixteenth century, when Hajo established the Koch Kingdom upon the downfall of the more ancient Hindu Kingdom of Kamrup.’⁷

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 Kindred. The Koch or the Rajbanshis form by far the majority of the Hindu population of Jalpaiguri district.⁸ 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 Rajbansis, with a tradition and culture of their own, failed to get a respectable position in the status estimation of these immigrant upper caste gentry.”⁹ 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’.¹⁰ They were mainly habituated with agrarian cultivation.

Almost all the people of Rajbanshis were uneducated in the colonial period. They would live in the villages. Their house was made mainly with the Bamboos and thrash and the economically solvent jottars made their house with tin and wood. Generally in the house of the Rajbanshis four huts were seen. Sunder stated in his report “Among the Rajbanshis as well as Mahamedan there four huts in every homestead. These face North, South, East and West. Sometimes an extra hut called Darighar is also built and is used by friends who may be staying for a night so. In building a homestead care is taken to have it bounded as follows whenever possible.”¹¹

North----- Betel nut trees

South ----- compound

East ----- Water

West ----- Bamboos

In making the homestead of the Rajbanshis a proverb is prevailing in the Rajbanshi society which is followed by the Rajbanshis people at the time of making their house like this –

Uttare gua,

Dakshine Dhua,

Purbe Hans,

Pashime Bansh.

‘Uttare gua’ means in the north of the homestead there would be a betel nut garden, ‘Dakshine ‘dhua’ means in the south of the homestead there would be blank field or farm house that means no trees would remain in the south. ‘Purbe Hans’ means in the east portion of the house there would be a pond and in the pond ducks would swim, ‘Pashime Bansh’ means in the western portion of the house a garden of Bamboos would remain.¹²

I. Food habit

As the Rajbanshis people became Hindus, so they eat everything in accordance with the Hindu religion, but some special food or items are eaten by the Rajbanshis of which ‘Chheka Shak’ is one of the delicious food of the Rajbanshis which is cooked by different types of vegetables specially mixing with one kind of soda.

Another delicious vegetable of the Rajbanshis is ‘Lapha Shak’. Another delicious food is eaten by the Rajbanshis people locally known as Sutka and Sidal. Sutka means dry fishes and sidal is made by crashing of small dry fishes, spices, turmeric and chilly, all these are crushed in a husk locally called chham and Gain.¹³ ‘Pelka’, one kind of delicious vegetable item to the Rajbanshis is one kind of traditional food which is mainly cooked by vegetables specially ‘Lapha shak’. Dai and Chira is favourite to the Rajabanshi people. Rajbanshis like to eat very much pan and supari locally known ‘Gua pan’, ‘gua’ means raw betel nut. They honoured their

guest by offering *gua pan* at the initial stage of receiving. Many of them always keep this *gua pan* in their pocket or small container, and gradually they eat this after some duration.

Later on, after huge number of people migrated in North Bengal, many indigenous foods were taken as the food of the migrated people; on the other hand the indigenous people were habituated with the food habit of the migrated people. Not only that, the indigenous people accepted the process of cooking and spices from the migrated people. Beside these, after independence and partition, the spread of education accelerated, many school, colleges, institution were established, as a result of which many indigenous people came under the education. They became educated and many of them got services, the number of employee increased day after day. These educated people went out of the house, settled into different places, started to live different places of the country, as a result of which they gradually became habituated with the food habit of multi- characterized dishes. The food habit of the educated people automatically influenced the other people of the villages. For example many people of Rajbangsi Community used burning fishes as their food, but the new generation people including educated people do not use various types of spices, simply they used turmeric, cumin, coriander etc. dusting in the traditional husking machine, now a days they use various types of spices purchasing from market. In this regard Sitangshu Prosad chakraborty stated, "Relating food habit they also habituated with modern food habit at present, particularly, the educated Rajbanshis and the Rajbanshis of urban areas use modern food instead of taking their traditional food habit such as pelka, chheka, sidal- sutki.¹⁴

It is found in the field survey that all most all of the indigenous people use modern type's food accordingly the global culture of food habit. Jagat Singh Barman stated that they eat everything in accordance with the Hindu food habit. Both of the veg and non- veg they take as their food which are available in the market and they purchased accordingly their financial capacity. They sometimes eat their traditional food like pelka, sutka sidal, chheka etc. But usually they use all the food which is eaten by other Bengali people. There are no vast differences between our food habit and the food habit of other Bengali people.¹⁵ Kaitalu Barman of the same village told that they rarely use traditional food, generally they are habituated with the food habit like the other Bengali people. He also added that their children preferred the modern food than the traditional food.¹⁶ I have also collect informations from many educated Rajbanshis who serve in various departments and dowelled in the town and my colleagues of Rajbanshi community talking with them directly where no differences have been found in their food habit between the Rajbanshis and other Bengali people.

II. Dress

Upendra Nath Barman stated, "It is known that the women of Rajbanshi community weared a dress called *Buki* (*Bukali*) and it was prevailing since ancient time. Apart from this the two parts of dress named *Riya* and *Mekhla* were used by the women. It should be mentioned here that the men of poor family weared small *dhoti* from the upper side of knee and the very poor men weared a piece of cloth called '*Nengti*'. At the time of continuing social reforms movement Thakur Panchanan Barma propagated to wear *dhoti* in stead of '*Nengti*' and *sari* of women in stead of '*Buki*'.¹⁷ Advance group among the Rajbansis whom we may refer to in the absence of a better term as the Rajbansi 'elites', followed the upper caste Hindus of the region in dress, lifestyle, marriage customs, and religious practices."¹⁸ According to C.C. Sanyal, "Discarding the ir traditional clothes, both men and women dressed in the fashion of the upper castes in society."¹⁹

All the indigenous people started slowly to wear modern dress like other people of main stream. The young generation both male and female is habituated with the modern dresses they started to wear pant, shirt, shoe, etc. The girls and female wear *churidar* or *salwar kamij*, frok, sarees etc, not only that, presently, the female also wear the dresses of the male such as pant, shirt etc. The old men wear *Dhoti*, *Punjabi* also pant, shirts etc. Now a day's almost all the indigenous people have been wearing modern dress, no differences are followed in terms of dresses between the indigenous people and the immigrated people. For the emergence of global culture no man can deny to accept the global culture. So, now a day's no man can be identified of which community they belong with their dresses because of the abolition of traditional dresses except few instances and increasing the modern dress-habit.

III. Marriage

As the Rajbanshis belonged to Hindu community, so the marriage ceremony is performed according to the Hindu religion or Brahmanical references. Despite of that many traditional customs or rituals were to be followed at the time of marriage. A middle man locally known as 'ghatak' or 'ghatki' communicated between the guardians of bride and bride- grooms and information is sent time to time to both of the parties. If both sides are satisfied and chosen each other the wedding is confirmed and fixed up the date of marriage.

The marriage ceremony of the Rajbanshis of the district is completed by three stages, namely *pan tola*, *adhibas* and *marriage*. The guests of bride are gone to the house of bride groom and the new clothes and ornaments are weared to the bride groom and blessed her. This occasion is called *Pan Tola*. In the second stage the following occasion are performed --- turmeric was touched to the body of the bride groom called *adhibas*.

and in the occasion called Naua kamani was performed. Then the Hargouri puja, Nandi mukhi shradhya and the last stage the main marriage ceremony is performed. Among the local customs or rituals of the marriage ceremony among the Rajbanshis a ‘Mittar’ or friend is to be selected at the time of marriage who remain as a friend or a relative of the bride in the whole life. Another custom is seen, a person who dropped water in the head of the bride and bride- groom at the time of marriage and related with them as their parents called ‘Pani chhita Baap’ and ‘Pani chhita Mao’. They are also related with the bride And bride- groom in the whole life as their parents. Another custom in the marriage of the Rajbanshis which is not seen in the marriage of Aryan culture a Bairati played a vital role in the whole marriage ceremony. Polygamy was seen in the society of the Rajbanshis meaning of which that a Rajbansh man could marry more than one. Widow Remarriage was also a common practice in the society of the Rajbanshis in the pre-colonial and colonial period where in the society of higher caste widow remarriage was a hard task. In this point of view Rajbanshis were more liberal than the higher caste people.

IV. Worships, Customs and Festivals

At present the Rajbanshis are Hindus. But originally they were Koches, an Indo- Mongoloid tribes believing in tribal culture, though it is debateable. It is assumed by most of the historians and social scientist that the Rajbanshis were converted to Hinduism from Koches. There were many God, Goddess and Deities who were worshiped by the Rajbanshis. It should be mentioned here that there were many non- Aryan God and Goddess worshiped by the Rajbanshis as they were basically non- Aryan. After converted into Hinduism they worshiped Hindu God and Goddess. Among the non- Aryan deities there were Bisto Thakur, he was worshiped by the name of Jalthakur also. This worship was held in the month of Bhadra. He is a deity of water. The Brohma thakur is a deity of Agni or fire. Besides, there were Paban thakur or deity of air, Basumati thakur, Bisha hari thakurani, Mahakal thakur, the oldest Deity, Gramthakur, Shib thakur, or Maheswar, Lakshi thakurani, Dharmathakur etc.²⁰ The worship of Banadurga is held in every year at the time of ekadashi of Durga worship at Bhandani in the village of Barnish near Maynaguri. This worship is performed in accordance with the Rajbanshi Mythology. The Devi is immersioned at the midnight of ekadashi according to the Vedic literature. There was a custom to sacrifice of goat and dove to the Goddess.²¹ The worship of Ban Durgar is held at the time of Ekadashi in every year at the Barnish village of Maynaguri in accordance with the Rajbanshi customs.²²

Harihar Adhikary informed me, ‘Late Hariprosad Basuniya was a zamindar. He introduced Kalipujar at first. The worship of Kali of the house of Hariprosad Basuniya was known as ‘Hariprosad Basuniya Barir Puja’ and later on it was known as ‘Kal Singh Basuniya Barir Kalipuja’.²³ According to him, ”The Basuniyas then had a total land of (80) eighty” Hals’(an unit of fifteen bighas), Comprising of the jotes of Betgara, Khagrabari, Naktabari(near Baksirdanga) and “Dhanda Simla” (near Nathula). It is also learnt that the former title of the Basuniyas was “Das”. They came from the Gaibandha thana of Rangpur District (Now in Bangladesh). The title Basuniya” was probably given by the British.²⁴ The marriage of Rajbangsi society was like a social festival. Different types of customs and usages were performed at the time of marriage which were enjoyed by the relatives, invitees and the villagers.²⁵

Kainagata—This worship Kainagata is started from the previous Purnima. In this worship their forefathers are respected by sacrificing water oblation to their forefather by the Brahmana or Adhikary. Nabanna—This worship is observed at the time of collecting new crops. There is a custom prevailing among many of the Bengali Hindu families that they worship ‘Nabanna’ before eating new crops. Binapani Adhikari pointed out, ”Baishakhi puza or worship is performed in the month of Baishakha (April-May) Bananas, Kandali etc. different types of fruits and flowers are given in this worship. Out of these, dahi (curd) and chira are also given. Nor Brahmana or priest is necessary to perform this worship; rather the priest of Rajbanshi community called Adhikary performed this worship.²⁶ Kali/Bishahari worship is performed by local priest known as Mareya or Ojha. It is significant that no Sanskrit mantra is uttered in this worship, rather the mantras are pronounced in local dialect or Rajbanshi language. This puza is sacrificed by the left hand.²⁷ Before performing the marriage ceremony the worship of Kulaguru, placed the east corner of the house is given and thereafter the worship of Bishahari is given. Gochubona—This worship is observed before growing plants of paddy in the land. At first land is prepared for growing plants of paddy, thereafter a worship called guchubona is performed in the lands. Few plants of paddy is poured these worshipis performed to their deity with rice, banana and other fruits. Masdal (one kind of beans), black arum and raw milk is given to the worship. Jatrapuja—this worship is performed in the day of Nabami of the month of Aswin(October) by giving sugarcane, lemon and other fruits and the next day, in the day of Vijoya Dasami the Jatrapuja is observed in the house . In this worship the essential instruments of the house including books have been worshiped”. Laxmi puja—Laxmi puja is popular festivals of the Hindu Bengali. In every houses of the Hindu Bengali the Goddess mother Laxmi is observed. Like other Hindu Bengali people in the house of Rajbanshi community mother Laxmi is observed. The

Rajbanshis worship with dai, chira, banana and other fruits. The trees of paddy is cut at the bottom, covered with banana leaves and kept in the kitchen”.²⁸

Different kinds of religious occasions are seen to be performed in the Rajbanshi society through the ancient period when rain is not seen in the rainy season as a result of which agricultural cultivation is affected. One of these festivals is ‘Benger Biyo’ (marriage of frog). This occasion is performed by women. A proverb is prevailing in the society of North Bengal that when frogs croak rain is falling. So for falling of rain Rajbanshi women perform the occasion of frog’s marriage. Another occasion was held in the Rajbanshi society though it is not seen in the present day society that was ‘Hudum Khela’. In this occasion women would go house to house in the dark of night being naked unfolding hair warning the male members of the house either they would leave the house or they would remain in the room shutting the door. The naked women in such a way entered the house and dance together in the court yard and sang songs for falling rain.²⁹ According to W.W.Hunter, “A singular relic of old superstition is the worship of the God Hudum Deo. The women of a village assemble together in some distant and solitary place, no male being allowed to be present at the rites which is always performed at night, a plantain or young bamboo is stuck in the ground, and the women throwing off their garments, dance round the mystic tree, singing old songs and charms. The rite is more especially performed when there is no rain and the crops are suffering from drought.”³⁰

As the Rajbanshis were converted into Hindus which is referred earlier, they perform all the worship, festivals, occasions in accordance with the Hindu customs and mythology. But many of the customs, festivals and worships and rituals are found which is out of the Aryan culture. These cultures have been going on through the ancient period to the present day.

V. Language

George Abraham Greearson published his research report in “Linguistic Survey of India” in 1927 where he mentioned, “when we cross the river (Brahmaputra) coming from Dacca, we meet a well marked form of speech in Rangpur and the districts to its north and east. It is called Rajbansi and while undoubtedly belonging to the eastern branch has still points of difference which lead us to class it as a separate dialect.”³¹ He also wrote “The dialect is usually known as Rajbansi, from the tribe of that name already alluded to. It is also frequently called Rangpuri from one of the districts in which it is spoken. In the Darjeeling Terai the dialect is influenced by the neighbouring Northern Bengali and has a special name, as a sub-dialect viz Bahe.”³²

The Rajbanshi language is a dialect of main Bengali language.³³ Provat Ranjan sarkar stated the language of Rajbansis of North Bengal as ‘Rangpuri Bangla’.³⁴ Upendranath Barman stated that the Rajbanshi language is a pure Aryan language which was supported by different scholars like Hodson etc.³⁵ Dr. Charu Ch. Sanyal wrote, ”The Rajbansis speak Bengali but it is a local dialect sometimes widely away from standard Bengali.”³⁶

VI. Amusements

There are many dramas, songs, palatiya songs which were written and performed by the Rajbanshi language. The famous song of the Rajbanshi as well as of the indigenous Muslims of North Bengal and lower Assam is ‘Bhwaoaiya’ which is written and sung in Rajbanshi language. The ‘Bhwaoaiya’ songs are the themes of every aspect of the lives and hearts of Rajbanshi people. This song is divided into two categories namely ‘Chatka’ and ‘Dariya’. These songs are composed on the basis of every aspect of the society, economy, culture, custom, religion, love, joy and pain taking place in everyday life of the Rajbanshis. Other famous songs of the Rajbanshis are ‘Dotaradanga Gaan’ and ‘Kushan Gaan’. These songs are performed in different villages of North Bengal and lower Assam; these are performed particularly in the season of different occasions and festivals. These songs are composed on the basis of different Hindu Sastras such as Ramayana, Mahabharata and Purana. In the song, different ‘Pala’ or Play is performed on the basis of various aspects of the society, economy, religion and politics etc. In these songs the ‘Gidal’ plays the significant role. Beside the ‘Gidal’, the ‘Dohari’ and ‘Chhokris’ sing and dance jointly. The Gidal sings first, Dohari and Chhokris follow the song; after singing the Gidal explain the meaning of the song, The Dohari also explain it. Now-a-days, these songs and play are not seen sufficiently to perform. The people present generation are interested to modern songs, Jatras, theaters and cinemas. In Dinajpur district one of the ancient dramas “Monai Yatra”. The original writer of Monai yatra was Telenga Fakir, inhabitant of another writer was Najir Mahmud Sarkar. In Malda, Dinajpur, Bagura, Murshidabad district one kind of drama named Alkap was performed where evolved the various incidents of society and the story of the poor and distressed people. Another type of drama of Malda and Dinajpur district was Gambhira remaining the story of various people and comedy.³⁷ Rangpur Bartaboho Patrika introduced a valuable literature and culture. Many informations and writings were published in this Patrika. It was patronized by the zamindar of Kundir of Rangpur district.³⁸

In the post colonial period for entering the modern culture indigenous people gradually accepted it. They accepted Baul, Bhatiali, Rabindra Sangit, Nazrul giti, adhunik songs etc. Not only that now a days the

young generation people like Hindi songs, Adhunik songs, Hindi cinema instead of their traditional culture. It should be mentioned here that in spite of all these changes many indigenous people still now do not forget their traditional culture. They observed and preserved their traditional culture as their wealth and heritage.

VII. Conclusion

Many changes have been taken place in the Rajbanshi society balancing with the multi-dimensional culture of the world. It is true that a large number of people of Rajbanshi community have taken education and become educated and serving in different places of the country positively. But, it is also true that many of the Rajbanshi people having no way for their livelihood or source of income they have been working as agricultural labourer, industrial labourer, house servant in the town. Practically, it is the present scenario of the town of North Bengal, particularly of the northern portion of North Bengal that most of the labourers including men and women working on the road, house servants, helper of mason are Rajbanshis. As a result of these incidents, many discontents and grievances have been accumulated in the mind of Rajbanshi people.

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