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Koch Rajbanshi identity question: An analysis from historical perspective

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Abstract

The Koch Rajbanshis are one of the largest plain tribe of India originally from the ancient Kamrupa-Kamata kingdom. The Koch dynasty came into existence in the first half of sixteenth century. Under Naranarayan it reached to a position of glory but in course of time the hay days of them did not last long. Although they had a glorious past, but like many other tribes of India Koch Rajbanshis also have been facing identical problem for a long time due to lack of proper knowledge of their history, external threats, partitions, multi-divisions; colonial interference, elitism, conservative demeanor, geographical alienation, negligence of the governments, multi-names etc. At present they have been striving for protecting their identity through different associations and organisations. Their efforts now have turned into the form of Kshatriya Movement and the Kamatapur Movement. This paper attempts to analyse the deteriorated identical condition of the Koch Rajbanshi people and their measures to protect it.

Keywords: The Koch-Rajbanshi, migration, external threats, caste

1. Introduction

In India, ethno-based identity has become an important subject of concern in all social sciences. Although a number of study have been done on the Koch Rajbanshi but still not any study on their identity question has done from historical perspectives. Thus, this paper attempts to study identity question the Koch Rajbanshi primarily from historical perspectives. Assam and its neighbouring states is considered as melting place of numerous tribes and ethnic groups who had made their entry in different phases of past. They are living with their distinct origins, territories, psychological traits, cultures, traditions and folklores since the early times (Gait: 2008:3) ^[7] and contributed their shares towards the growth and development of society, economy and culture of different states. In course of time several elements of divisions have entered to their identity, which led some of them towards identity crisis. Among the many tribes of India the Koch Rajbanshi is no exceptional of this procedure. The genealogy of Koches begins from the time of Haria Mandal, the chief of twelve leading families of Maches or Koches of the village Chikangram in Khuntaghat of Goalpara. Soon after his death elder son Bisu (Biswa Singha) took over all the responsibilities of father and declared himself a king in the first half of 16th century (Baruah: 2007: 203) ^[2]. During the reign of Naranarayan the kingdom attained to a position of glory. But the glorious days of Koch kingdom did not last long as soon after the death of Chilarai the kingdom was divided into two parts- Koch Bihar and Koch Hajo in 1582 CE (Nath: 1989: 103-104) ^[9]. The empire founded by Biswa Singha last long up to 12th September, 1949 CE since it become a category 'C' state of Indian dominion (Roy: 2007: 103) ^[14]. It is noticed that their identical problem started since the beginning of their reign and in the later phases it has become more adverse due to external threats, partitions, multi-divisions, colonial interference, independence, elitism and conservative demeanor, geographical alienation, negligence of government, different caste status, lack of proper knowledge of their history, multi-names and marginalization of dialect, tradition and culture (Kalita et.al Ed: 2015: 72-73) ^[8].

2. Method and Materials

The source materials which are available in the form of books, edited books, magazine and articles are used as per historical methodologies.

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Interviews and own observations have been used as empirical data. Thus, attempt is made to make the paper rational as far as possible on the basis of both literary sources and empirical observations.

3. Results and Discussion

The Koch and The Rajbanshi both the terms refer to some groups of people but the basic difference between the two terms- the former is aborigine; while the latter is Aryan or Dravidian origin. The term Koch or Mech used in order to identify one of the plain ethnic groups from Kamrupa-Kamata kingdom (Barua: 2008: 189) ^[1]. On the other hand the term 'Rajbanshi' presumed to be derived from the Sanskrit or Dravidian word 'Rajvamsi' means Khsatriya or people belong to royal race or descendants of the king (Choudhary: 2011: 09) ^[4], whereas the term 'Rajvamsi' also refers to a distinct community of Dravidian affinities (Baruah: 2007: 203) ^[2]. It is believed that the appellation 'Koch' origin from the fact of Parashuram's 'campaign of entire Khsatriya destruction'. According to legend it is said that once Parashuram campaigned Kshatriya genocide in order to take revenge of his father's death by the sons of a Kshatriya king named Sahasrarjuna (Barua: 2008: 191) ^[1]. The Khsatriyas in order to save them from Parashuram's Kshatriya genocide took shelter in to the '*kuch*' (lap) of goddess Kamakhya. Since that time they started to identify themselves as 'Koch Rajbanshi' instead of 'Khsatriya' (Choudhary: 2011: 9) ^[4]. In this regard the Darrang Rajvamsavali states that the Koches were originally Khsatriya princes who had renounce their native land in order to save from Parashuram's anti-Khsatriya genocidal campaign. They took shelter into the regions of the Koches in order to save from the hand of Parashuram. Then they started to reside permanently in the Koch regions, married their ladies and become Koch. Consequently, the Brahmanas encouraged them to patronage Hindu deities i.e. Siva, Durga, Vishnu and the Sanskrit learning. Finally, they adopted Aryan culture; changed their tribal identity and assumed the appellation 'Rajbanshi' (Barpujari Ed: 2007: 70) ^[3] and since that time they are known as Rajbanshi. Historians are also of the opinion that they are called 'Koch' because they have come from the valley of 'Kochi' river and with the growth of population some of them migrated to the valley of Mechi river and came to known as 'Mech' (Devbarman :2006: 9) ^[6].

Partition of Koch Kingdom and purposive interventions of outsiders can be regarded as a serious factor for their identity question. The kingdom established by Biswa Singha reached to its zenith during the reign of Naranayan. But the hay days of Koches did not last long soon after the death of Chilarai. After his death Raghudev raised the question succession, which ultimately leads to the partition of Koch kingdom. Along with some officers and councilors, he proceeded towards east, reached Barnagar on the bank of Manah where he made his capital and declared himself as a sovereign king in 1581 CE. Being a peace loving monarch Naranayan did not adopt offensive measures against his own nephew and decided to divide the Kingdom among them. Accordingly he handed over Raghudev the territories east of Sonkosh and retained the parent Kingdom for himself (Baruah: 2007: 214-15) ^[2]. After his death Lakshminarayan and Raghudev indulge in to race for political supremacy. On account of mutual suspicion both of the kings sought help of outsiders to save their respective

territories. The outsiders also came up to help them openly with the objectives of political hegemony. Lakshminarayan of Koch Bihar sought Mughal help against his rival cousin Raghudev by offering submission to the Mughals. On the other hand Raghudev sought the help of the Afghans and on failure sought help of the Ahoms. But in 1603 CE Raghudev died. After his death, Parikshitnarayan ascended to the throne of Kamrupa. He also refused to acknowledge the supremacy of Lakshminarayan (Barpujari Ed: 2007: 97-98) ^[3]. In a war with the Mughals at Pandu, Parikshinarayan was defeated and surrendered to the Mughals. Then his kingdom Koch Hajo annexed to the territory of Mughals. After annexation of Koch Hajo his brother Balinarayan along with his followers sought protection to the Ahom king. The Ahom monarch reinstated him at Darrang on assurance of obedience (Nath: 1989: 103-104) ^[9]. After the Battle of Itakhuli in CE 1682, the Mughals left the Ahom territory for ever and retreated as far as west of the Manas river and territories of earlier Koch Hajo naturally came under the possession of the Ahom king (Barpujari Ed: 2007: 254) ^[3]. The seventeenth century was very embarrassing for Koches as all the territories went to the possession of outsiders and the outsiders allowed them to rule on the conditions vassalage kings and even the kingdom of Koch Hajo became extinct. In that century there were as many as seven branches of Koch families such as Raikat family of Jalpaiguri, Panga family of Rangpur, Kachar family of Kachar, Darrang Raj family of Darrang, Bijni family of Goalpara, Beltola Raj family of Kamrupa including the families of Koch Bihar, who ruled as feudal kings under the vassalage of the Mughals and the Ahoms. All these circumstances not only weakened or separated the kingdom politically (Nag Ed: 2005: 52-55) ^[10], but also lead them to form slight different identities than the Koches of Koch Bihar. Gradually, long term assimilation with the majority of local habitants of different areas encouraged them to form mixed cultures, traditions, customs, languages, dresses, food habits, psychological traits, life style, religious and other practices.

It is often says that the questions of identity of different tribes of India lies from the colonial age as the British followed the policy of divide and rule everywhere they ruled. They brought many tribes into their favour as per their interest and discarded numerous tribes who were not in the range of their interests. But the case Koch Rajbanshi was slight different as the identity question of them did not lies from colonial period. After careful study of history of the Koch Rajbanshi's it can be assumed that identical problem of them was an ongoing process which lies its roots from the beginning their history. Still the colonial interference in some extent is also accounted for their identical problem. The word Koch Rajbanshi as it precisely evident from the word itself consists of two terms Koch and Rajbanshi. According to regulating act in 5th April, 1773 CE Koch king Dharendra Narayan signed a treaty with East India Company acknowledging the vassalage of the British authority and it remained as a princely state of British government till the independence (Roy: 2007: 97) ^[14]. Soon after the Koch kingdom became princely state the British became the 'de facto ruler' of Koch dynasty. Thus, psychologically it was believed by upper caste Hindus that the Koch does not borne glory like that of their past days, they are just ruler in name and further the British in Bengal were more depended on upper caste Hindu Bengali people rather than any other

communities for political and economic gains. Thus, they considered themselves politically superior and in some places of Bengal the Koches were oppressed and neglected. Another reason behind this oppression and negligence was the tribal norms and lifestyle of the Koch people. It also happened to them as the royal authority might quiet unknown of this fact, thus they could not adopt any stern measures to save their own people from such oppression and negligence. Another reason might be being passing a happy luxurious life under British they overlooked the pains and grievances of common people. In such situation Panchanan Burma (1865-1935 CE), a Koch-Rajbanshi leader and reformer from Koch Bihar, came up to encourage Koch Rajbanshi people to get together and established *Khsatriya Sabha* in 1910 CE to inculcate brahmanical values and practices among the Koch Rajbanshi people. In the following year he led a *Khsatriyanisation* Movement among Koch Rajbanshi community. The aim of this movement was to remove racial discrimination and to establish social respect and dignity of Koch Rajbanshi people. In order to be respected and accepted by the upper castes Panchanan felt that the Rajbanshi must get organized and educated, which he tried to achieve through the *Khsatriya Samiti*. Thus, the immediate objective of the *Samiti* was to recover the social status of the Koch Rajbanshi community. Unfortunately, they could not elevate their social status as the upper caste Hindus were against such reformation (Das: 2009: 72-74) ^[5]. After a few years later of independence in 28th August, 1949 CE Koch Bihar included to Indian dominion. Thus, the empire founded by Biswa Singha last long up to 12th September, 1949 CE since it become a category 'C' state of Indian dominion (Roy: 2007: 103) ^[14]. After independence they had to face so many oppressions in their social life in Bengal and Assam as the administrative power of these states respectively went to the hands of Bengali and Assamese people. They became socially deteriorated in such a position even they were forbidden enter into the temples in some places of Bengal. The similar case also happened with them in Assam. So in such a situation, the Koch Rajbanshis had two options in front. First one was to live with their Koch Rajbanshi identity without caring about rest of the world. Secondly, they could once again try hard to enter the fold of caste Hindu society. But the Rajbanshi leaders have chosen the second option. In the later period the Kshatriya Movement lost its significance as the Rajbanshis were offered scheduled caste status in Bengal (Das: 2009: 74-75) ^[5]. Some of the Koch Ranbanshi people themselves responsible for their identity issue. It is because some elite and conservative Koch Rajbanshis feel ashamed to identify themselves as Rajbanshi, somewhere now it has become a matter of secret of their original identity. Some conservative Rajbanshis feel proud to identify themselves as Bengali in West Bengal. It is because during the time of independence Bengali became the significant race and language and acquired national and international value and concern. Further, the political leaders of West Bengal considered Rajbanshi people as an integral part of mainstream Bengali community for getting political support from them and in response they also show fidelity to such politicians. Apart from these they get more privileges from the state government who feel themselves as Bengali rather than feeling Koch Rajbanshi. The same event happens to Koch Rajbanshi people of Assam as some of them shattered from the mainland of their original paradise and assimilated with

the majority of Assamese people for various purposes. Gradually, some of them feel more comfortable to be Assamese rather than being Koch Rajbanshi. After the partition and formation of new states naturally they are geographically and politically separated. At present the main concentration of them in North Bengal and lower Assam that is accounted as their original paradise. A few of them can be found in south Assam, Bihar and Meghalaya. Apart from some Indian states the Koch Rajbanshis in small numbers are found in Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. Another complicate issue in front of them that they are known as different names at different places, although these terms are used by others people and even themselves to refer to the same Koch Rajbanshi community. For instance the terms such as *banshi* (people belong to same race), *rajbanshi* (people belong to royal race), *khsatriya* (descendants of the kings or warrior class), *deshi* (people belong to native land), *rangpuria* (people belong to Rangpur area of modern Bangladesh or who migrated from Rangpur), *jharua* or *dakori* (people who have formed a mixed cultures, mood of livings, traditions, customs, languages, food habits, religious and other practices) and *ujani* (people belong to upstream of North Bengal or who lives far north to international border area) are used mostly in lower Assam and North Bengal. Another complicate issue close to them is the absence of a common script and recognised language. Though they have their own oral language but do not have a common script. Therefore, they use Bengali script in Bengal and Assamese in Assam for their convenience in writings. They have more than four dialects, which differs place to place. These divergences of dialects seem to have derived to them through an evolutionary process of intermixing with Assamese, Bengali, Rabha and Garo languages (Source: interviews, Jan, 2016). Apart from these another inflammable issue of them is different caste status in different states. For instance Scheduled Caste status in West Bengal, Scheduled Tribe Hill in Meghalaya and Other Backward Classes status in Assam (Roy: 2012: 10-11) ^[12]. Biswajit Roy, the president of Chilarai *Sena*, states that in 1996 CE the Koch Rajbanshi had been given the Schedule Tribe Plain 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 CE. But the same Registrar General of India has rejected the Schedule Tribe Plain status. He also views that there is a deep political conspiracy behind such negligence (Roy, a press released, 2012) ^[13]. Another leviathan issue to them is their racial affinities. There is divergence of views among the authors and scholars regarding their racial origin. Gait viewed that the racial affinities of Koches is a matter of controversy, although he attempted to prove that Koches are a Mongoloid race. Colonel Dalton considered them to be Dravidian. Risley considered them as an intermixture of Dravidian and Mongoloid stocks, but held that the Dravidian features is predominate (Gait: 2008: 47) ^[7]. S.L. Baruah observes that divergence of views among the scholars regarding racial affinities of Koches might have arisen from the confusion caused by the term 'Rajvamsi', which originally referred to an entirely distinct community of Dravidian affinities (Baruah: 2007: 203) ^[2]. In this regard Rajkhowa said that the Koches are one of the many tribes of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group and racially the Tibeto-Burman people, which indirectly refers to their Mongoloid origin (Rajkhowa

Ed: 2011: 33) ^[11]. N.R. Roy views that the people belonging to Koch-Rajbanshi community possess all the characteristics of four human streams i.e. Austrich, Dravidian, Mongoloid and Aryan (Roy: 2007: 6) ^[14]. A.C. Choudhary viewed that they connected with all cultures of human races i.e. Austrich, Dravidian, Mongoloid and Aryan, finally they accepted the Aryan culture and they have converted to Hinduism (Choudhary: 2011: 9) ^[4]. Still the scholars and authors are not intimate in their opinion regarding the racial origin of Koch Rajbanshi people. Therefore, the racial origin of them still remains a matter of controversy.

4. Measures to Protect Identity

In the first quarter of twentieth century the first attempt of social upliftment of Koch Rajbanshis was made by Panchanan Barma. He came up to encourage Koch Rajbanshi people to get together and established Khsatriya Sabha to inculcate brahmanical values and practices among the Koch Rajbanshi people. In the following year he led a Khsatriyanisation Movement among Koch Rajbanshi community with the aim to remove racial discrimination and to establish social respect and dignity of Koch Rajbanshi people. In order to be respected and accepted by the upper castes Panchanan felt that the Rajbanshi must get organized and educated, which he tried to achieve through the Khsatriya Samiti. Unfortunately, they could not elevate their social status as the upper caste Hindus were against such reformation (Das: 2009: 72-74) ^[5]. Soon after the independence they have become more sensitive regarding their identity and social dignity. At present the intensity of preservation of identity become more organized and united to them. They have been striving for protecting their identity through different associations and organizations, which have turned into the form of the Kshatriya Movement and the Kamatapuri Movement. The Koch Rajbanshi people of Assam have been demanding Scheduled Tribe status for a long time, even identity politics now become too adverse that some of them indulge in movement for Scheduled Tribe status and separate Kamatapuri state. Further, their identical problems now become too complicate that some of them also involved in 'Koch Rajbanshi Bachao' movement through their voluntary organizations; even some of them indulge in violence to make it reality. Apart from different associations and organizations they also are trying to safeguard their ethnic identity through other measures such as poems, songs, stage shows, rational writings etc. For instance the poem '*mora chahina artha, chaina maan, chahina bidya, chaina jnyan, mora chahi shudhu jatir pratistha, mora chai shudhu jatir pran*' indicates that they neither want money nor prestige, they neither want education nor knowledge, they only want recognition of their nationality to remain alive (Das: 2009: 15) ^[5]. Even the song '*suno suno janagan, sogai mili ek hon, Koch raja Naranarayanar bansha jodi rajbanshi buli kon..., amar vishwa mahavir Chilarai..., Rajbanshi buli hoilung kamatapuri, amak nadei kene dam..., aji kote geil sei nam...*' attempts to urge all the people to be united to feel them one. It is stated that they have been contributing their respective shares towards the growth and development of nation, but still they are neglected and are not being given proper value and respect. It is urged to maintain integration, peace and happiness among different sections of people (Source: interviews, Jan, 2016). Numerous rational writings on their identity question are available in the forms of

books, edited books and articles in different reputed journals. All these things precisely express their wants, hatred, pain and grievances. It also signifies that they leaving no effort untried to preserve their ethno-based identity.

5. Findings

The Koch Rajbanshis are originally Kshatriya princes, who migrated to the land of Koch or Mech. They became Koch marrying their ladies and carried life of aborigine. Consequently, the Brahmanas encouraged them to patronage Hindu deities i.e. Siva, Durga, Vishnu and the Sanskrit learning. At last they adopted Aryan culture; changed their tribal identity and assumed the appellation 'Rajbanshi'.

The partition of Koch Kingdom and purposive interventions of foreign powers lead them to become vassalage and the very foundation of their dynasty threatened although they had a glorious reign sometime. The colonial interference had an impact on their sovereignty. Soon after the Koch kingdom became princely state the British became the 'de facto ruler' of Koch dynasty. Thus, psychologically it was believed by upper caste Hindus that the Koch does not borne glory like that of their past days, they are just ruler in name and further the British in Bengal were more depended on upper caste Hindu Bengali people rather than any other communities for political and economic gains. Thus, they considered themselves politically superior and in some places of Bengal the Koches were oppressed and neglected. Another reason behind this oppression and negligence was the tribal norms and lifestyle of the Koch people. It also happened to them as the royal authority might quiet unknown of this fact, thus they could not adopt any stern measures to save their own people from such oppression and negligence. Another reason might be being passing a happy luxurious life under British they overlooked the pains and grievances of common people.

Some of the elite and conservative Koch Rajbanshis feel ashamed to identify themselves as Rajbanshi in some places of West Bengal and Assam. After the partition and with the formation of new states naturally they are geographically and politically separated and known as different names mostly in lower Assam and North Bengal.

Though they have their own oral language but do not have a common script. Therefore, they use Bengali script in Bengal and Assamese in Assam for their convenience in writings. They have more than four dialects, which differs place to place.

They are provided different caste status in different states such as Scheduled Caste status in West Bengal, Scheduled Tribe Hill in Meghalaya and Other Backward Classes status in Assam.

There is divergence of views among the authors and scholars regarding their racial origin. Still the scholars and authors are not intimate in their opinion regarding the racial origin of Koch Rajbanshi people. Therefore, the racial origin of them still remains a matter of controversy.

6. Conclusion

The Koch Rajbanshis are one of the ancient plain tribe of India originally from the ancient Kamrupa-Kamata Kingdom. In the past they possessed glorious rule which came to an end with acquiring of independence of the nation. Since the inception of their rule and onwards due to many reasons the Koch Rajbanshi's identity has been

affected. The intensity is still continuing and even now they are in the way of losing their ethnic identity. Now, Apart from Indian states the Koch Rajbanshis are found in Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan, who are being regarded as the indigenous people and known as *banshi*, *rajbanshi*, *khsatriya*, *deshi*, *rangpuria*, *jharua* or *dakoriya*, *ujani* at different places. Moreover, they are given different status of caste at different states. They do not have a recognised language or dialect and a common script. It happened to them because of the negligence of government and in some extent some of the Koch Rajbanshi peoples themselves also responsible. So, it is the right time to adopt high measures to preserve their ethnicity. The governments should very careful in this regard and should adopt high measures to draw out an everlasting solution in order to encourage this community to live peacefully and united.

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