

Formation of the Caste Identity and the Elites Leadership: The Rajbanshi Kshatriya Movement in Colonial Bengal

Abstract

The British administrators and researchers, who investigate the various caste-tribe-race-society of India, circuitously established the colonial imperialism. Through the various census and settlement reports, these researchers were highlighted the fragmented Indian portraits based on caste, race and religion. The fragmented community on the question of 'identity' is the Rajbanshis of the northern part of Bengal. The question of caste identity came to Rajbanshis due to the census report of 1891. As a result, the 'pride of caste' had entered into the movement of 'formation of caste identity'. Through this social movement, one elite group emerged from the Rajbanshis that talked about the question of 'caste upliftment'. Within a span of two decades of Kshatriaization movement, by the Kshatriya Samity in 1913, this organization became meaningless from the broad perspective to the large Rajbanshi society. The elite class of the Kshatriya Samiti did not think that economic development was necessary in addition to caste upliftment to the agrarian Rajbanshi society, only exception was the Panchanan Barma. This elite class were used the 'pride' of the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Movement for need dignity and power. Therefore, the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Movement could not be expected to contribute to the overall development of the large Rajbanshi society. It is necessary to explain the caste mobility movement of the Rajbanshis from the different perspectives of the caste mobility discourse.

Keywords: Kshatriya Movement, Rajbanshis, Panchanan Barman, Identity, Caste, Elite Class, Social Movement.

Introduction

In the colonial India, especially from the late nineteenth century to the first half of the 20th century, the Social movement of the caste mobilization has been used as a key component in the research of social sciences. Through its own 'distinctiveness of caste', the leaders of the caste upliftment movement followed various methods in order to improved their caste's development. This adopted method or way of the leaders actually instead of annihilation the caste system indirectly made it stronger. Social Scientists have been discussing until now about the caste-uplifted movement that was organized by the various features like appeal to higher authorities,¹ protests against atrocities by the upper castes/races² and the development of socio-economic conditions³ etc. Nevertheless, they did not give importance in their work to the social uplifted movement for the caste identity formation. In the society, instead of turbidity, equivocal and ambiguous castes, entered into the caste upliftment movement on purpose of creating the individual caste identity. Such a social movement is the Kshatriya movement organized by the Rajbanshis of the northern part of Bengal; the main purpose of this article is to analyze it. The movement was organized by the educated people of this community to create a specific identity of the Rajbanshis, with the help of improving the social customs, applying to the census authority for the better caste status in the census list and acceptance of sacred thread through the Vedic ceremonies. Most of these educated people were Zamindars, Lawyers, Teachers and others who were originally the pioneer to Rajbanshi society at that time. As a Kshatriya caste, the main objective of this essay is to discuss the 'Kshatraization' movement of Rajbanshis in the second decade of the 20th century from a new perspective. In addition, the context of the extinction of the question of dual identity will also be mentioned.



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The identity is a self-image that makes a person or group to the others. In fact, the identity depends on the quality, beliefs, personality, expressions and so on. Social identity usually refers to two or more individuals who share a common social identification of themselves or, which is nearly the same thing, perceive themselves to be members of the same social category.⁴ The question of social identity depends on a broader social context, when others identify a group or person that means social contact may change in the changed circumstances. In the larger society, sometimes a small social group is trying to achieve identity, and as a result, a person or organization believes pleased to identify as a member of a particular group. However, the social indefinite positions of a group lead them to the movement of identity formation and develop of self-esteem. Social identity formation becomes feasible by structural integration and economic development. Standardization of caste relies solely on these two features. Those individuals or groups who have the ability to firm established these two issues with the ability to lead the development of caste, which can be able to lead the caste with the help of these features. In this case, the knowledgeable person or group took guidance in the caste society. In one, word the influential classes of society. In the above article, in the Rajbanshi caste identity formation, it has been highlighted for the leadership of the educated intellectual and working influential class.

Objective of the Study

In order to establish social identity, the movement for the caste identity formation was driven by the educated class of Rajbanshi society. Through this educated elite class in the view of the large Rajbanshi society, the Rajbanshi society will acquire prosperity from all directions. However, this elite class has limited the question of social mobility into the caste upliftment. As a result, other aspects of the social identity were neglected by these elite, which are contrary to complete social development.

The question of caste identity was initially raised in the Rajbanshi society in 1891, for the determination of the then District Magistrate of Rangpur and the Superintendent-in-charge of the census, Mr. F. A. Skyne, he ordered the Rajbanshis to be referred as the 'Koch' in the British census list.⁵ That means 'Rajbanshis' and 'Koches' both of these castes became officially synonymous. This announcement of British officials became questionable about the status of social status to the Rajbanshi community and they protested strongly against the government order. These leaders of Rajbanshi society firmly assert that 'Koch' and 'Rajbanshi' are different in the two castes and social dignitaries Rajbanshis have higher elevation than Koches. The social upliftment movement began to demand the separation of Koch and Rajbanshi community into government documents. In fact, the direct result of observations and opinions of various British officials about origin and ethnological identities of Koches and Rajbanshis.

There was no specific social status as a caste of Rajbanshis. According to British officials, the ethnological question of coaches and Rajbanshis, particularly the question of tribal identity with caste, is one of the reasons. The British officials, anthropologists, and many others scholars did not even agree with the origin and ethnological identities of Rajbanshis. Buchanan Hamilton gave his first opinion about the Koches and Rajbanshis, who visited various areas of Rangpur and North Bengal from 1807 to 1814 A.D. His observation experience reached the conclusion that, "All Rajbanshis are not Koch". He also writes that, "All the Koches are sprung from the same stock and most of the Rajbanshis are Koches; but many of the Rajbanshis belong to different tribes; who have abandoned their practices and have been admitted to communion".⁶ Buchanan Hamilton made this dual opinion more complicated by B. H. Hodgson. He said that, the Koches were became apostatized in Hinduism and adopted Rajbanshi identity during the Biswasingh.⁷ The census report in 1872, Beverly commented about the 'Koch' and 'Rajbanshi' that, "the Koch, Rajbansi and Paliya are for the most part one and the same tribe."⁸ One thing that is clear from these discussions and comments is that according to the observation of the observers, the ethnological identity of the Rajbanshis has remained between the caste and the tribe. The 1901 census report for the controversial identity of this opaque identity could not create separate caste identity between 'Rajbanshi' and 'Koch'. H. H. Risley commented on the 1901 census report that "The great Majority of Koch, inhabitants of Jalpaiguri, Rangpore and Part of Dinajpur now invariably describe themselves as an outlying branch of the Kshatriya of Hindu tradition although there has been no mixture of blood and they remain thoroughly Koch under the name of Rajbanshi."⁹ Risley again commented that, "...The assertion of the Rajbanshis of Rangpur that they have no connection with the Koches and that the two community spring from entirely different sources."¹⁰ According to Charuchandra Sanyal, Rajbanshi is a caste, where the Koches were adopted Hinduism and became known as Rajbanshi.¹¹ Modern western education and logic were developed; the newly educated society or 'elite group' could not be satisfied with the suspicious dual and fragile caste identity or accepted the government order. Rajbanshi Jotedar / Zamindars, especially the residents of Rangpur, Zamindar of Shyampur, Harimohan Roy established '*Rangpur Bratya Kshatriya Jatir Unnati Bidhayani Sabha*' with respect to the cause of this problem. The magistrate of Rangpur district was under heavy pressure on this meeting. Mr. Skyne was under obligation to discuss the caste status of the Rajbanshis with the Vedic scholars. Due to this lack of solution for the caste identity, in the 1891 and 1901 census report, there was no 'Kshatraya' status as claimed by the Rajbanshi society. However, the district magistrate of Rangpur, Mr. Skyne was allowed to the Rajbanshis as a '*Bratya-Kshatriya*' on the caste list of the Census report.¹² Despite the permission, the failure to get recognition in the census report, the leaders of the Rajbanshi community were again led to

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new movement. They demanded the standard Kshatriya status instead of 'Bratya-Kshatriya'. However, there was a lack of strong leadership to drive the movement by making this demand as an institutional issue. To say better, a leader like Panchanan Barma did not appear at the time.

In order to popularize and legitimize the claim of Kshatriya status through Caste's upliftment as a Non-Kshatriya in the caste system, it was necessary to have direct connections with Hindu myths or royal events. Besides, in the Vedic ceremony, the Brahmins were essential. Since the origin of caste-system, the Brahmins are only interpreters of the Vedic ceremonies or social restrictions. Naturally, in order to prove itself better than the 'Koch'; the elites of Rajbanshi society had to try the connecting with the royal families. The first tread of this type was '*Rajbanshi Kulapradeep*' of Harikishor Adhikari in Goalpara district of Assam that was published in 1314 A.D. with the financial help of the Estate of Sidli, Abhayananarayan. Mr. Adhikari's book has been recognized as caste as the most authentic book in determining the social status of Rajbanshis. Even the next researchers used this book as the most authentic texts in the case of caste identification of the Rajbanshis. In this book, the author proved that in the case of caste identity, the Rajbanshis were '*Poundra Kshatriya*'. Besides, '*Rajbanshi Kshatriya Deepak*' and '*Poundra-Kshatriya Kuladeep*' of Maniram Kabyabhusan of Dinajpur district created so-called Kshatriya sentiments among the Rajbanshis.

For the formation of caste identity, the close association between the leadership of this Caste group is very important. In order to realize the Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement, the educated elite of the community needed an undisputed mass leader. The performance and skill of Rangpur lawyer Panchanan Burma fulfills the lack of leadership within the community. In 1910, Panchanan Barma formed the '*Kshatriya Samiti*' of Rangpur with nearly 400 members of Assam, Bengal, Bihar and the native state of Cooch Behar.¹³ Even with being a lawyer in Rangpur, Panchanan Barma was one of the members of the '*Rangpur Sahitya Parishad*' and the Editor of the first eight years of the '*Rangpur Sahitya Parishad Patrika*' of that Parishad. It can be said without doubt that, on one side, the intellectuals, on the one hand, developed Panchanan Barma as the guide to the Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement. This Kshatriya Samiti was formed based on two characteristics, the Rajbanshi and Koch Castes are completely separate from the place of cast and the Rajbanshis are superior to the cast status based on culture, increasing social status among the Rajbanshi community. The use of disrespectful indictment of the upper caste and upper caste Bengali Rajbanshi Castes and the oppression made these claims of the Kshatriya Samiti even stronger. Despite all the qualities of upper caste Hindus, Panchanan Barma colleagues have to be completely humiliated at different times for caste identity only. The colleagues have heard of humiliating words like "I hate to use a toga used by a Rajbanshi".¹⁴ In his earnest efforts, Rajbanshis and

Koches recognized the status of separate nationalities in the census report of 1911; which was one of the key demands of the Kshatriya Samiti. According to the consultation with the Brahmins of Cooch Behar, Mithila, Kamrup and Nadia on the bank of Karotoya in Peralbari of Deviganj thana of Rangpur district, on February 10, 1912, Rajbansis took the sacred thread under the leadership of Panchanan Barma and became known as Kshatriya.¹⁵ The Rajbanshi caste upliftment movement that lasted for two decades has fulfilled its goal through standard 'Kshatriya'.

The Formation of caste identity movement enriched the Rajbanshi society and by the concept of 'Kshatriya', widened the path of unity in the community. Mr. Panchanan Barma realized that it is necessary to take some other initiative in order further strengthen of the unity that was organized by social caste mobilization. Observance in mind the 'Kshatriya', he was encouraged Rajbanshi youth to join the military under the Colonial Government. This step received lot of co-operation by the colonial government. In the British Indian army, the policy of recruitment of from the low-caste and lower class has been given, allowing the Rajbanshi community to become 'Kshatriya' or fighters. Because the colonial government had a firm belief that conspiracies by the upper class and castes were at the root of the rebellion in the army.¹⁶ In 1914, Rajbanshi youth joined the British Army for the First World War.

Under the Indian Administrative Law of 1919, the Bengal Legislative Assembly got the right to represent the backward castes themselves. In the elections of the Bengal Provincial Government of 1920, Rajbanshi leader Shri Panchanan Barma was elected as the candidate of the Kshatriya Samiti from Rangpur. Besides, Mr. Jogesh Chandra Sarkar also won the Kshatriya Samiti's supported candidate. He was elected a member of the most important draft committee for amending Bengal Tenancy Act-1920. He played an important role in the question of returning land rights to the farmers. In the elections of 1929, two Kshatriya Samiti candidates were elected. In the initial stage, the Kshatriya Samity was established to manage the Kshatriya movement and no political purpose was formed in this organization.¹⁷ However, since of the social caste mobilization, the Kshatriya Samity leaders leaned towards the political side. Because of the Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement in the social field, the elite leadership was forced to look at other areas. Due to the Kshatriya movement, huge public support has attracted them especially to 'power politics' / 'caste politics'. It can be said without doubt that the formation of caste identity movement for the social upliftment has soon become the means of occupied and enjoyment of the political power of elite leaders of the Kshatriya Samity. Even though the Kshatriya movement's leaders were busier with the social upliftment of the Rajbanshis, they were far from thinking about economic development, the only exception being Panchanan Barma. In this way, a part of the social category becomes more 'dignity' and 'power', and if the other part makes the question of 'power' 'rights' and dignity of this part, then the general contradiction of social inequality is in

common. In the world war, about 600 Rajbanshi youth Singha,¹⁸ were martyred in battle for just being proud of social casteism, when the social elite-class had done that heroism for the occupation of political power. In the North Bengal, the Rajbanshis were agricultural-dependent communities, with about 90% of the people engaged in agriculture. Jotedars and Zamindars associated with the so-called Kshatriya movement did not have any role in the development of Rajbanshi peasants. From 1901 to 1931, from evacuation of the land from Cooch Behar, Rangpur and southern part of Jalpaiguri, the peasants migrated to tea garden areas.

Caste mobility provided more power than the abolition of a social organization like caste. Rationalism established by Western education has become a supporter of the caste-system's irrational discrimination in place of caste identity movements instead of progress. The colonial rulers had provided extra support to their interests in some areas rather than evicting this integral part of Indian society. Through the election and participation of the Bengal Legislative Assembly, the elite-class of Rajbanshis was interested to protect by class benefits. Naturally, the Rajbanshi elite-class has been away from the main objective of the social caste movement in the changed circumstances from the 30's. To get entry to the Bengal Legislative Assembly, the elite-class was joined the political parties, instead of Kshatriya Samiti. However, the caste upliftment movement, driven by the Kshatriya movement, was in the center of the 'social status' and 'power' of these rajbanshi elites. However, the main foundation of these elite 'dignity' and 'power' was that the Rajbanshi society deeply believes in the caste upliftment movement driven by the Kshatriya Samity.

Conclusion

Even though the 'Elites' started caste identity movement by utilizing positional contemporary opportunities, it was only a part of the social identity formation's constructive unification. Regarding economic development Rajbangshi Kshatriya movement may have been either removed or not feasible. In the field of education and the British Indian army, the slightest effort to enroll Rajbansi's young people can never be regarded as the method of overall development. The 'thread ceremony' of the Kshatriya movement is not only a 'Sanskritaization', but also Demonstration effect; Because the movement started from undefined social status and the leadership of the Kshatriya movement in the profession was scattered and isolated. Like the Namasudras' movement, the Kshatriya movement of the Rajbanshis was not a result of caste conflict against the Brahmanism; to establish themselves from the Koches to the higher of Caste's status. The census did not allow social status development in this case, which was made for other castes, but forced indirectly to educated Rajbanshis to engage in the movement for caste identity, who engaged in search of 'glorious history' or 'royal' Kshatriya life of Rajbanshi. Thus, it can be acknowledged that the census conducted by the colonial government

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triggered obstacles in the progress of many castes including of Rajbanshis.

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