

## **Ethnic Identity Movement of Rajbanshis in Colonial State: Role of Panchanan Barma(1910-1935)**

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The Rajbanshis are the indigenous people of the greater part of North Bengal and lower Assam in the pre- colonial and colonial period. The Rajbanshis are the majority people of North Bengal, particularly in the districts of Jalpaiguri, 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 Rajbanshis 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 case 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 dispute 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."<sup>1</sup> 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 Rajbanshis. These Rajbanshis later on claimed to be Kshatriya."<sup>2</sup> According to Swaraj Basu, "The local situation also provided a sufficient ground for the Rajbanshis' assertion of a Kshatriya identity and their endeavor to build up caste solidarity."<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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"<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> 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.'<sup>7</sup>

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 Kind. The Koch or the Rajbanshis form by far the majority of the Hindu population of Jalpaiguri district.<sup>8</sup> 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 Brahminical cultural values, the Rajbanshis, with a tradition and culture of their own, failed to get a respectable position in the status estimation of these immigrant upper caste gentry.'<sup>9</sup> 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 Rajbanshi people called the Bengali people coming from East Bengal or South Bengal as 'Bhatia'.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand H.H. Risley says that "there was no historical foundation for the claim of the Rajbanshis to a provincial variety of the kshatriyas"<sup>11</sup>.

Dalton has pointed out that since the Koch king Viswa Singha having been Hinduised took the title ‘Rajbanshi’, therefore, it could be a clue afterwards for all the Koches to take for themselves the name Rajbanshi. But it has to be stated here that the Koch kings of Koch Behar till the end of their dynastic rule consistently introduced themselves as Koch and not Rajbanshi.<sup>12</sup>

In the social hierarchy of Bengal, the Rajbanshis were placed at the bottom of the structure along with the Namasudras.<sup>13</sup> It was mainly from the early twentieth century onwards that colonial policy was given a new direction in order to safeguard the interests of certain underprivileged groups. Without getting into the debate whether this policy was desirable or not, it may be submitted that this policy definitely reinforced the caste identities and indirectly encouraged mobilization along caste lines. If all started with education as the government had made it clear that it was going to assist those who belonged to the very lowest classes of the Hindu social system, or ---- (were) outside the pale of caste altogether the government took special care to motivate the boys of these classes to go to schools. Special schools were opened in the backward areas and education for them was made highly subsidized<sup>14</sup>.

The sense of alienation among the Rajbanshis was further strengthened by the insults and humiliation they faced due to the domination of Brahminical culture. In the Rajbanshi caste literature, as also in some other Contemporary accounts, there are number of references to the humiliation of the Rajbanshis by the upper caste Hindus. The latter regarded the Rajbanshi as antyaja who had no right to enter the places of worship on the occasion of any public celebration of pujas or to enter the Kitchen in the upper caste household. Even water was not accepted from their hands by the upper caste Hindus.<sup>15</sup> Charu Chandra Sanyal, writing on history of Jalpaiguri district, mentioned that casteism was strictly maintained in this district and the people of higher and lower castes used to sit in different rows on the occasion of any public lunch or dinner. Initially although the Rajbanshis were also regarded as ajalchal and they were not allowed to touch the wells of the upper castes, with beginning Kshatriyaization movement these prejudices gradually disappeared<sup>16</sup>.

The assertion of the Kshatriya identity by a section of the Rajbanshis was not something unheard of before the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the various other castes throughout India started their movements for higher ritual status. We have references to the Rajbanshi speaking of their royal lineage and claiming Kshatriya status was reiterated with a new vigour toward the close of the nineteenth century and around this claim an organized movement gradually developed among them from the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there is no account tell us about what happened to the earlier to the earlier Rajbanshi claims to Kshatriyahood, though from the bulk of the Rajbanshi caste literature produced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and from the government of the period, we can reconstruct a history of this growing caste movement in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>17</sup>

The leadership of the Rajbanshis as discussed came from the relatively more advanced section within the community, i.e. the Zaminders, Jotders, rich plebeians, and educated men. The most prominent among these leaders during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were Panchanan Barma, Nagendra Narayan Roy, Premhari Barma, Upendra Nath Barman, Kshetra Nath Singha and others. Panchanan Barma was the ideologue of the movement and remained the secretary of the movement and remained the secretary of the Kshatriya Samiti from the day of its foundation till his death in 1935. Born in a substantial peasant family of a village called Khalisamari, in Mathabhanga subdivision of Cooch Behar and then moved to Calcutta for post graduation in Calcutta he completed his M.A in Sanskrit also obtain a degree in law. After this, he came back to Cooch Behar to look for suitable job, having failed to do so he went to Rangpur and started his legal practice in the local bar. He was the first lawyer from Rajbanshi community and therefore got maximum support from his community.

This was in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when a social movement was already started by Haramohan Khajanchi a Rangpur zamindar, to re-establish to Kshatriya status of the Rajbanshis.<sup>18</sup>

This brief sketch of the early phase of Panchanan Barma's life is important to understand his mind-set. This in effects shaped his leadership which ultimately was to determine the future course of the Rajbanshi cast movement itself. Panchanan belonged to a rural society dominated by traditional outlook and values which had an important bearing on the formative phase of his life. Later when he came to Calcutta for higher education he became aware of t he 19<sup>th</sup> century spirit of reform, regeneration, and nationalism. But all these liberal ideas and influences were overshadowed by the humiliations. That he had to face because of his caste identity. The woes of his community arising out of its backwardness and perpetuated by the denomination of the upper castes made his very worried. His personal experience of frustration for not getting suitable job in Cooch Behar further strengthened his ideas about the magnitude of domination by the upper caste.<sup>19</sup> But as his mind had been conditioned in a traditional social milieu, he looked for a solution to this problem in the socio-religious reform of his own community. Instead of challenging the caste hierarchy itself, he looked for a higher status for the Rajbanshis within that same structure, hoping that owned remove the social stigma of degraded ritual rank. For the same reason he felt the need to secure the support of the British government and could not think of making a common front with the nationalists against colonial rule. Thus Panchanan Barma's view of struggle for the upliftment of his community was confined to solid-ritualistic reforms and lobbying for some limited concessions from the Raj. What he failed to realize is without some basic economic reforms, his movement was unlikely to succeed. It was his lack of any long-term perspective on mass mobilization programme that circumscribed the scope of success of the Kshatriya Samitis. There was no much difference in attitudes among Panchanan Barma's successors in this regard. So beyond Kshatriyaization the politics of the Rajbanshi caste movement was mainly confined to the articulation of the demand for being enlisted as a scheduled caste so that they could enjoy special protection in education, employment, and in matters of reprsculation in the legislative council and the other local bodies.<sup>20</sup>

Under the leadership of Panchanan Barma the kshatriya Samity began to publish a monthly journal name 'Kshatriya'. It included articles of socio – economic and political conditions of the time in order to educate the Rajbanshi in the realness of different branches of knowledge. Moreover it used to give information of abductions and steps taken against the criminals. In this regard mention should be made of the 'Uttaranga Sahitya Parishad' established by Panchanan Barma in collaboration with Surendra nath Roy Chowdhury. Under the auspices of the 'Parishad' was published another monthly, Sahitya Parishad edited by Panchanan Barma.<sup>21</sup>

The first important step that the Kshatriya samiti took was the organization of Milankshetra or ritual congregation at different places for Upanayan Sanskar, prescribed in the Shastras for male members of the Kshatriya varna. In second annual conference of the Kshatriya Samiti in 1911, a suggestion was made for wearing the sacred thread by the Rajbanshis but no definite resolution was passed. The Secretary of the Samiti thereupon given the responsibility of deciding the time and place for the organization of a mass thread wearing ceremony. Following this , in the month of Magh 1319 BS (1912) at a place called Debiganj in Jalpaiguri district, on the bank of the river Karotoa, the pundits of Nabadwip, Mithila and Kamrup initiated thousands of Rajbansis with the sacred thread according to the prescriptions of the Hindu Shastras and the ceremony continued for three consecutive days. This was followed by similar Milankshetras in different districts where many more Rajbansis were given the sacred threads which would signify their Kshatriya status.<sup>22</sup>

Another very important dimension of Kshatriya movement was to make the presence of the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samiti felt in all India conferences of the Kshatriyas. In 1922 Panchanan Barma was elected the Vice- President of the Bengal branch of Bhartiya Kshatriya Mahasabha, known as the Bengal Prantik Sabha. Around this time he had come into close contact with Janaki Pal Singh, a Punjab Kshatriya who had taken an active interest to bring the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samiti into an intimate relationship with the Mahasabha. In 1920 under his initiative Panchanan Barma and some other members of the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samiti went to Puri to attend the conference of the Kshatriya Upkarini Mahasabha, which was presided over by the Maharaja of Sailana.<sup>23</sup> In view of this intention, Panchanan Barma in the Company of a few other members of the Samiti including Upendra nath Barman of Jalpaiguri attended the all India 'Kshatriya sammelan' held at Alwar and Indore respectively in 1924 and 1928. This country wide awareness of the leaders ultimately brought them to a newer and better field of understanding, and that was Indian politics. Though the Rajbanshis organized movement for Kshatriyahood but did not fail to grasp earnestly all facilities given to the depressed classes in British India, and afterwards to the scheduled castes in free India. In view of attaining the prospective facilities given to the depressed classes and afterwards to the scheduled castes, the 'Rajbanshi' Kshatriya Samity under the leadership of Panchanan Barma maintained solidarity in the right earnest with other depressed classes in Bengal. The Rajbanshis thus, purposively joined the 'Bangiya jana Sangha' an organization representing the backward classes in Bengal. On behalf of the 'Bangiya Jana Sangha' Panchanan submitted a memorandum to the Indian Franchise commission in 1932 and supported the "provisions for reserved seats and separate electorate for the depressed classes and later on its modified seats and separate electorate for the depressed classes and later on its modified version<sup>24</sup> reserved seats but joint electorate- under the Poona pact. Their (Rajbanshi) hearts were aroused after the Poona Pact in 1932 and maintained correspondence and contact with the depressed classes of India. It was this continuity of contact that brought dividend in the long run. Thus the Rajbanshis led a movement, first to become Kshatriya and then Scheduled Caste in order to safeguard their social position and dignity in one hand and economic interest and prosperity on the other.<sup>25</sup>

After his death there was a sharp decline in process of the work begun by him. In the formative years of the movement, main attention was to the claim of Kshatriyahood, but over the years, along with changes in the political arena of the country, the central drive of the 'Kshatriya Samiti' got focused upon the benefit of becoming Scheduled Caste. It was, of course, a long process of evolution of their maturity in socio-political works and efforts that opened the gate of opportunity to the Rajbanshis.<sup>26</sup>

## Notes and References

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