

Bhar/Rajbhar and Identity Politics in Uttar Pradesh: A Study of Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party

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Abstract: *Identity, consciousness, and ideological construction are very important fields of inquiry and investigation for every society. The experiences from the past, historical imaginations and identity construction lead society to become more politically assertive and inclusive. This paper deals with ethnic politics and identity construction among the Bhar/Rajbhar community in Uttar Pradesh, India. It departs from the brief history of Bhar/Rajbhar genealogy, society, culture, and folk on one hand and Bhar/Rajbhar political inclusion, identity construction, consciousness, and assertion on the other. It focuses on the contemporary claim of the Bhar and Passi community on King Suheldev. It examines the Bhar/Rajbhar representation and alliance in different political parties like Bhartiya Janta Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, Samajwadi Party Indian National Congress etc. It engages in the political mobilisation and assertion of the Bhar/Rajbhar community with special reference to the Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party in contemporary politics in UP.*

Keywords: Identity, Society, Assertion, Bahujan, Politics.

Identity, consciousness, and ideological construction are very new churning in the Rajbhar¹ Community of Uttar Pradesh, India. Following the traditional lines of identity construction, this community associated themselves with Bharshiva a Shaivite cult and further connected with Nagvanshi's claim of western India which is more alienated towards Buddhism.² Among the Rajbbhar Community, two folds are visible, first in majority following Shaivism within Hinduism, performs the Hindu rituals and customs. Only a few in the community share the Buddhist legacy. Rajbhar community found its identity broadly related to the Shaivite form of Hinduism in Uttar Pradesh. In the colonial period, during the freedom struggle these were the people who fought with the British, and many Rajbhar peoples are associated with it. Coming to the Democratic representation and electoral politics the claim for the decedents of medieval King Suheldev Rajbhar is more dominant and visible among the community. There is a debate in the academia and claim in the society on

Maharaja Suhedev. Kshatriya groups of Uttar Pradesh claim that he was a Kshatriya. Bhar/ Rajbhar Community states that he was Rajbhar and the Passi community of middle Uttar Pradesh considers him as Passi king. In many colonial ethnographic records, gazetteers King Suheldev is mentioned as Rajbhar and Passi which evolved the controversy on it. The majority of the historians suggest he was a Rajbhar King. The journey of searching the Rajbhar King Suheldev history from Maharashtra State Archive Mumbai is very long. During the 1980s, a group of young Rajbhar people formed a discussion cum research group which later developed as *Bhar Shodh Sansthan* in Mumbai and M B Rajbhar was one of them. Being a young and eager mind M B Rajbhar³ searched about King Suheldev in the colonial records of Mumbai Archive and disseminated information on him. But the great challenge was ahead that there was not any image of King Suheldev at all in the Archive or at any other place in India. They came to know that one image of King Suheldev is in the British Library London, through Director of State Archive Mumbai they communicated to the British counterpart and received the image. After that, this image of King Suheldev, riding a horse and wearing a spear and shield gained popularity among the Rajbhar community and social milieu of Uttar Pradesh. This group of young Rajbhar researchers established King Suheldev in the socio-political sphere of North India, and this led to the more assertive presentation, consciousness, and identity construction of the Rajbhar Community through icons and statues of his king in state politics. Following a popular song by Chinta Rajbhar expresses the same.

Gunj Raha Hai Jai Suheldev Naara Bharat Mein
Chamkega Phir Se Rajbhar of Sitara Bharat Mein⁴

The slogan of Jai Suheldev is rising in India and once again the life of Rajbhar will shine.

History of Bhar Community:

On the history of the Rajbhar Community, there are three major historical explanations. First, claims Rigvedic origin and connection of this community. The second talks about the original inhabitants of India as Nagbharshiva and finally associates the Bharg descendants of Buddha's period.⁵ During the early Vedic period Bhar Community was founded and it resembled with name Bharat.⁶ The association of Rajbhar with Bharshiva a Shaivite cult further connects with Nagvanshi's⁷ claim of western India. Of Buddha's period, Sumasumagiri is a place in eastern Uttar Pradesh at Mirzapur where a Bharg Caste was ruling. According to Ain-i-Akbari, "The Bhars were a powerful tribe during the period of Buddhist ascendancy."⁸ This race, variously known by the term Rajbhar, Bharat, Bharpatwa, and Bhar, inhabited a wide tract of country extending from Gorakhpur, in Northern India, to Saugor, in Central India.⁹ Other Tribes, such as the Cherus, the Majhwars and the Kols were in places associated with them; but there is good reason to believe that the Bhars greatly outnumbered them all.

They were very powerful in Oudh, and the country lying between Varanasi (previously Benares) and Allahabad, or either side of the Ganges, a tract of about seventy miles in length, was almost exclusively in their possession. The entire district of Allahabad also was originally in their hand, and traces of them are still to be seen in every Parganas.¹⁰ It is right to add, however, that few of the sculptures, yet only a few, represent the Bhars as the superior race, and attached to the Buddhist and or Jain religion.¹¹ According to the traditional stories, in the Gorakhpur region Rajbhar clan were associated with the Bhardwaj Kashtriya family and his son became low status using flesh and liquor. His offspring was named Surha and settled in Surauli Village. One of the Surha made an illegitimate relationship with Kshatriya Girl and thought to marry her lawfully but he was killed. After this incident, society was considered low and degraded.¹² G. Oppert has mentioned that the Bhar tribe is also known as Rajbhar, Bharat and Bharpatwa.¹³ B.H. Baden-Powell has mentioned that the Rajbhar tribe has been an original pre-Aryan population and was dominating from Nepal Tarai to the hills of Sagar in Central Province.¹⁴ The Bhar consider themselves superior to Rajpoot.¹⁵ The Bhar king did what aborigines in his position always do and got himself admitted as a Kayasth into the Hindu caste system a kind of intermediary caste. From the second to the twelfth century, there was a series of 33 Rajbhar kings in Uttar Pradesh.¹⁶ In the colonial ethnographic and census records Rajbhar are well represented and after independence, they are developing in the new time and space.

Geographical Demography:

The geographical location of the Rajbhar Community is from western to northern India following the central Indian region. In the case of Uttar Pradesh, they are the caste of Dravidian origin found in the eastern part of the state.¹⁷ As B Subbarao states "History without Geography is like a picture without a frame."¹⁸ Here, the Rajbhar community is widespread in India through different names and identities. In the census of 1891, they were placed with classed Bhars under the main subcastes of Bharadwaj, Kanaujiya and Rajbahr.¹⁹ The census of 1891 of United Province (present-day Uttar Pradesh) mentions, 1,77,858 Rajbhar and the highest were 47,608 in Ballia, 28,141 in Varanasi, 25,094 in Azamgarh, and 19,094 at Gorakhpur. In the census of 1931 Rajbhar population is mentioned as 5,27,174 in India. According to the Government of India Act 1935 Schedule, they have their presence in Bihar, Orisha, Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, and Berar. They were mentioned in the schedule of 429 castes in the Government of India Act 1935 in the non-untouchable category. After independence, this schedule changed in 1955 and they were put as other backward classes. In 1981 Rajbhar was placed as a De-notified caste in Uttar Pradesh and later in 1993 under the recommendation of the Mondal Commission, the Ministry of Social Welfare, Central government issued a list of other backward classes mentioning Bhar as beneficiary of backward reservation. The government of Uttar Pradesh issued an amendment stating Bhar and Rajbhar synonyms in

the year 1997. Very recently, the Government of Uttar Pradesh issued an order to include 17 other backward castes in scheduled caste dated 30 June 2019.²⁰

Identity and Consciousness among the Rajbhar community:

The colonial ethnographic knowledge production frame has given the historical base for writing the history of marginal and backward communities in Indian society. Identity politics started in India from the later period of independence where caste identity dominated liberal democratic development. In this reference history of identity construction and consciousness among marginalised communities like marginal and other backward classes got prominence and visibility in India as well as in Uttar Pradesh. Here collective consciousness of communities was forged with individual identity and recognised by both individuals and communities as exercising their rights. Caste, religion, and language play important role in the identity politics. Caste-based discrimination and experiences of marginality have dominated the Indian Society and later after independence it connected with politics made more political freedom and raised consciousness among caste groups. For backwards communities, Mondal Commission was the landmark event which gave them 27 percent reservation in the Government sector and made their larger presence in political and economic gains. The Rajbhar community was not away from these changes and got the benefit of the implementation of other backward class reservations, a community that showed occupational mobility and political strength. After the emergency to a later period, there was a shift in the politics of northern India, where leaders of backward communities were at the centre stage of the Janta Party Government. In the 1980's another political churning happened and gave rise to regional parties in Uttar Pradesh. This process led to the political representation of Rajbhar in the state from its inception. Unlike different politically conscious Dalit and Backward communities, Rajbhar leader realised their numerical strength to influence the electoral process. This initiated the rise of first-generation leaders from the Rajbhar community. They started to connect their historical roots to get political legitimacy and by doing so, they discovered medieval King Suheldev as an iconic and heroic figure of his community. They have shown that they are the decadent warrior race. Primarily Rajbhar succeeded in electoral politics of Uttar Pradesh through different parties like the Indian National Congress (INC), Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and Samajwadi Party (SP).

Political Inclusion/representation of the Rajbhar Community:

With the rise of regional parties and representative politics of caste, Rajbhar started more political movements and associated themselves with state politics. It was the first time when they tasted electoral victory. Sukhadev Rajbhar was the first Member of the Legislative Assembly MLA Rajbhar community from 1991-1993 in the 11th Legislative Assembly of Uttar

Pradesh he was elected from Azamgarh district and served as a member of schedule caste, schedule tribe and De-notified tribe-related joint committee. He was the well-known face of the Rajbhar community in state politics. He was further elected 12th, 14th, 15th and 17th Legislative Assembly Uttar Pradesh and served as speaker of the Legislative Assembly in Ms Mayawati's cabinet.

Ramachal Rajbhar is one of the prominent Rajbhar leaders and he was the initial member of Bahujan Samaj Party from 1991 and won the MLA candidature in 1996, 2002, 2007 and 2012. He was the minister of state transport and held the post of BSP state president in Uttarakhand. He is very famous among the masses of eastern Uttar Pradesh and recently he left the BSP and joined the SP for better space and opportunity.

Kalicharan Rajbhar is a prominent Rajbhar leader from the Ghazipur district of eastern U.P. He was elected in the State Legislative Assembly from BSP in 2002 and 2007. He was the very influential leader of the region. He remained in second position in 2012 and 2017 and later he joined Samajwadi Party. Through his active politics, he made his mark in the region's political equations. Very recently he is the face of Bhartiya Janta Party against Omprakash Rajbhar.

Om Prakash Rajbhar was the basic worker and carder of BSP. He stated that I was the disciple of Manyawar Kanshi Ram and worked for the party at the ground level. He joined the agitation in Ghazipur to implement the Mandal Commission in 1992 under BSP. He was best recognised among the Rajbhars in the Ballia District of eastern U.P. Later he alleged that BSP was not taking up the issues of the Backward community and left the party and became an independent leader of his Rajbhar community Later formed Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party (SBSP) in 2002 and allied Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) in 2017 elections.

Sakadeep Rajbhar is an emerging name in the politics of eastern U.P. and became a member of the Rajya Sabha in 2018.²¹ He started his political journey being the village headman and through the Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party (SBSP) and Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) alliance, he got elected in the Rajya Sabha and worked for the social welfare of the masses.

Anil Rajbhar is a very vibrant leader among the Rajbhar Community. He actively worked with BJP and in the 2017 State Assembly Election made his electoral victory from Shivpur seat of Varanasi district under BJP.²² He is appointed as the minister (independent) of Army Welfare, Food Processing and State Security Force. He is the bigger face in the Rajbhar Community politics of eastern Uttar Pradesh because 20% of its population is of Rajbhars. He is highly active in the Rajbhar community and mobilising the masses.

Vijay Rajbhar is a well-known name in the Azamgarh division, and he has been a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from Ghosi, Mau District under the BJP since 2017.²³ He is a very active politician and attends Maharaja Suheldev Jayanti's and other community programmes at a very large level. Vijay is connecting with the Rajbhar community at all Indian

levels and raising political consciousness among the Rajbhar community.

Bhim Rajbhar is a recognised name of a backward community and works in the organizational structure of Bahujan Samaj Party as Zonal Coordinator of Azamgarh in eastern Uttar Pradesh. He mobilised the Rajbhar voters in the fold of BSP and helped the party to win. He is an active member of the Bahujan Samaj Party and the party has shown faith in his work efficiency.

Formation of Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party:

The Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party (SBSP) is a very strong political party of Uttar Pradesh and dominates the political equation of eastern U.P, popularly known as Purvanchal. SBSP was established by Om Prakash Rajbhar on 27 October 2002 in Maharaja Suheldev Park Varanasi, U.P. with his 27 followers.²⁴ He gave the slogan *Gulami Chhodo Samaj Jodo* (Leave the subordination! United the community) and adopted the yellow *Safa* (turban) and yellow flag as symbols of his gods and goddesses. They adopted the greeting '*Jai Suheldev*' to greet each other and call the Rajbhar people to take the party and its movement to the centre stage of state politics.²⁵

Earlier, in his political journey, he was influenced by the Manyawar Kanshi Ram and joined the BSP in 1981 as a diligent worker of it. Later in 1996, he became the Zila Adhyaksha (District President) for BSP. He was following the ideas of Manyawar Kanshi Ram that "we should know our history and respect our ancestors and the communities who are doing may not develop themselves." He was much influenced by the popular slogan of Manyawar Kanshi Ram '*Jasaki Jitani Sankhya Bhari Usaki Utani Hissedari*' (The greater the number, the greater the share.). It was painful to him when Ms Mayawati (then Chief Minister of U.P.) changed the name of the Bhadohi district and added the name Sant Kabir Nagar to it. This district got its name from the Bhar Raj of the region which had Bhadohi²⁶ as its capital. There are several mounds and old tanks that have been named after Bhar rulers, a tributary of Kannauj kingdom.²⁷ Om Prakash was against that name change raised his voice within BSP left the party in 2001 and further joined the Apana Dal (Party) of Sonelal Patel. Where he again faced discrimination and exclusion. Finally, he formed the Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party (SBSP) in 2002.²⁸

Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party: Identity Construction and Political Assertion

From its inception, Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party became the key organization for the Rajbhar in Uttar Pradesh. In the last 20 years, Rajbhar identity construction and consciousness were in making at a higher level. There is a strong wave of identity construction, in which Rajbhar masses started celebrating Maharaja Suheldev Jayanti and the installation of his statues at different urban as well as rural centres of Uttar Pradesh. Here, one thing is peculiar the Rajbhar community is having large-scale migration to Mumbai (Maharashtra) for jobs and wage labor. Hence, the Rajbhar

communities' movement of identity and consciousness gained momentum in Mumbai, Maharashtra where *Bhar Sodh Sansthan* (Bhar Research Institute) played a very important role. They started the trend to celebrate the Maharaja Suheldev Jayanti on an initial level and developed it on a large scale. The same practice Rajbhar community started in Uttar Pradesh with special reference to the Purvanchal Region. They hosted the Yellow flag of SBSP at their religious places and homes. In this whole process of identity construction and political assertion, the installation of Maharaja Suheldev Rajbhar statues is a very important phenomenon. Parallel to this Rashtraveer Maharaja Suheldev Trust formed by Archarya Shivprasad Singh Rajbhar, Gopilal Chaudhary, Shivparsan Rai, Dr Dhaneswar Rai, Subhash Kumar Prasad, and Birbal Ram played a significant role to spread consciousness and awakening among the Rajbhar community in central and northern India. Rajbhar masses call Archarya Shivprasad Singh Rajbhar Rajguru. He wrote more than half a dozen books on Rajbhar history, and he is very famous in the community. M B Rajbhar and his team met with then Chief Minister Mayawati for the installation of Maharaja Suheldev Statue, but her government collapsed in between. Further, this initiative was taken by BJP and Chief Minister Rajnath Singh and Member of Parliament Lalji Tandon's efforts led to the establishment of Maharaja Suheldev Statue in Lalbagh Lucknow on 23 May 1999. Very recently, the Bhartiya Janta Party took the great step of celebrating Maharaja Suheldev as a 'National Hero' and led the foundation stone of his statue at Shravasti district.²⁹ Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi virtually laid the foundation stone for Maharaja Suheldev Memorial and the development of Chittaura Lake in the Bahraich district of Uttar Pradesh on 16 Feb 2021.³⁰

Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party played a key role in the politics of eastern U.P. from its establishment. In the state assembly elections of 2017, SBSP emerged as a game changer in the U.P. politics. SBSP president, Om Prakash Rajbhar decided to ally with the BJP. Through this pre-pol alliance SBSP won 4 seats in the election and supported BJP candidates to win a large number of seats in eastern U.P. Om Prakash Rajbhar won Member of State Assembly (MLA) elections from Zahoorabad seat of Ghazipur district and became the minister of Backward Community welfare and Disable welfare in Chief Minister Aditya Nath Yogi's cabinet in 2017.³¹ Mr Kailash Nath Sonker won the MLA elections from the Ajagara seat of Varanasi district under the SBSP ticket.³² Mr Triveni Ram got the winning candidature from the Jakhania constituency of Ghazipur under SBSP and made the party base strong in the region.³³ Mr Ramanand Baudh secured a winning seat in the 2017 State Assembly Elections under SBSP from the Ramkola constituency of Kushinagar district of eastern U.P.³⁴ Under SBSP, Rajbhar leaders and masses started raising their voices, demanded good education, jobs and economic stability and finally asked for political representation. SBSP made its mark in the State Assembly Elections 2017 and became the cabinet minister. He supported the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) to win parliamentary (Lok Sabha) elections of 2019.

Later he broke the alliance with the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) and joined hands with the Samajwadi Party. In the pre-pol alliance, in the 2022 Uttar Pradesh State Assembly elections Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party under the leadership of Om Prakash Rajbhar won six MLA seats.³⁵ In the previous one-year party saw the divide and breakage where many leaders alleged Om Prakash Rajbhar for politics of self and family interest. In the present times, before the 2024 Parliamentary elections, the Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party under the leadership of Om Prakash Rajbhar joined the Bhartiya Janta Party once again and tried to share and win a good number of seats.

In the last 41 years, Historians, Rajbhar peoples, groups and researchers tried to make the historical identity of the Rajbhar community in India. They succeeded in this project and initiative. With the rise of the Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh, the socio-political assertion of Rajbhar identity and consciousness got prominence in the present time and space.

Finally, it can be concluded from this research paper that the identity construction and political consciousness among the Rajbhar community is historic and greatly associated with Maharaja Suheldevin Uttar Pradesh. Because of identity politics, the Rajbhar community shows representation, mobility and inclusive development. From the previous generation leaders to the new one, the Rajbhar Community asserts itself. Through this work, it was found that Rajbhar scholars, historians, and organizations like Bhar Sodh Sansthan Mumbai and Rashtraveer Maharaja Suheldev Trust played a very important role in uniting the Rajbhar community and made them a political public. In the last 41 years, Historians, Rajbhar peoples, groups and researchers tried to make the historical identity of the Rajbhar community in India. They succeeded in this project and initiative. With the rise of the Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh, the socio-political assertion of Rajbhar identity and consciousness got prominence in the present time and space. Rajbhars are the largest caste group in eastern Uttar Pradesh and have socio-political identity, assertion and consciousness in the state. In the contemporary political settings, the Rajbhar Community under SBSP shows more identity and consciousness politics and electoral power. This is reflecting the rise of Rajbhar politics in Uttar Pradesh. This writing will initiate new research on the Rajbhar community in North India.

Notes and References (Endnotes)

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