

**From Caste-Politics to the Abolition of
Untouchability: Reflections on the Writings of
Upendranath Barman (1898-1988)**

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*Abstract: Of late, the Dalit Discourse has been accepted as an academic
discipline in social science. Naturally, the literary works of the Dalit scholars*

century Bengal have received wide attention in historical studies, particularly under the banner of Dalit Discourse. In such a context, in this article, we'll examine the writings of Upendranath Barman (1898-1988) who left a valuable treasure for understanding caste politics, *dalitism*, and the abolition of untouchability from India.

Upendranath Barman (1898-1988)

Upendranath Barman was born in 1898 in a wealthy Rajbanshi family of Gopalpur village located in Mathabhanga Subdivision of the Cooch Behar State (a princely state of colonial India bounded by Bengal Province). He got his preliminary education from Mathabhanga. Later, he studied in Cooch Behar and Calcutta and obtained an LLB Degree from Calcutta University. Though he started his career as a lawyer soon Upendranath became an essential part of the provincial politics of Bengal. His entry into the political domain of Bengal and later into national politics was initiated through 'caste politics'. The background of this political trend was generated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century due to the growth of the colonial mode of education, administrative and political compulsion of the colonial government as well as through the social reforms movement carried out by the lower castes of Bengal (who later came to be known as 'Scheduled Castes'). The 'self-respect' movement, assertion of caste identity, and 'side effects of colonial rule' have contributed to the growth of several caste-based social organizations (or *Jati Shabhas*) in Bengal. These organizations gave utmost emphasis on social reforms, educational attainment, securing government jobs, and economic upgradation of their caste fellows. The western-educated and affluent section of the lower castes engaged in caste assertion; got the taste of political flavour after the enactment of the '*Government of India Act (1919)*'. It is because of the beginning of electoral politics for the Bengal Legislative Council, the leaders of such movements had started mobilising their caste fellows for political interest.

Just like the caste associations of the Namasudras, Poundras, Malos, Sunris, Bagdis, Bhuinmalis, and many other sub-castes, the Rajbanshis of North Bengal had founded several caste organisations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Among such caste organisations, the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samity was a significant one. It was founded in Rangpur in 1910. Under the leadership of Panchanan Barma (1872-1935), the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samity emphasised the construction of the 'Kshatriya identity' of the Rajbanshis of North Bengal. This association also put importance on the socio-economic development of the Rajbanshis through educational achievement, acquiring government jobs, and receiving advanced knowledge. By utilising the social influence of the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samity, Panchanan Barma won the election in 1920 and entered the Bengal Legislative Council (as per the *Government of India Act, 1919*). In the subsequent elections held under this act (1922, 1926, 1929) the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samity continued its winning streak. It is through this electoral politics, Upendranath Barman, a

privileged disciple of Panchanan Barma, entered the arena of provincial politics of Bengal. After the death of Panchanan Barma (in 1935) and the adoption of the *Government of India Act (1935)*, Upendranath Barman emerged as the main leader of the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samity.

Upendranath entered the Legislative Assembly of Bengal in 1937, after being elected from the Jalpaiguri-Siliguri constituency. He became instrumental in the formation of the Independent Scheduled Caste Party (ISCP, 1938) with fifteen Scheduled Caste (SC) Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA). From 1941 to 1943, Upendranath Barman performed many important duties as a member of Fazlul Haque's cabinet (1941-43). After the fall of the Haque-led Coalition Government of Bengal, a new government was formed under the leadership of Sir Nazimuddin (1943-45). However, Upendranath did not join it. During the tumultuous period of the Second World War (1939-45), Upendranath became sceptical about the future of 'caste politics'. After the fall of the Nazimuddin-led Government (1945), a large section of the Scheduled Castes of Bengal started joining the Indian National Congress (INC). On the other hand, a section of the Scheduled Castes (under the leadership of Jogendranath Mandal: 1904-1968) joined the All India Scheduled Caste Federation (AISCF). Naturally, the caste-based organizations of Bengal were reduced to smaller identities in comparison to the larger political parties like INC, AISCF, CPI (Communist Party of India), etc. Consequently, internal strife became a reality within the Kshatriya Samity, particularly on the question of joining INC, AISCF, and CPI. In 1946, several members of this Samity contested the election as INC candidates. And only one (Nagendranath Roy) was successful as a candidate for the Kshatriya Samity. The ultimate failure of AISCF and caste-based organizations in the election of 1946 and the success of INC in the seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes had exposed the ambiguities of caste politics. After the election of 1946, Upendranath Barman developed a close relationship with INC. Finally, in early 1947, he was elected as a member of the Constituent Assembly as a candidate for INC. As a result, Upendranath crossed the 'narrow circle of caste politics and established himself in the 'wider range of national politics'.

After the independence of India (in 1947), he became a member of the Provisional Parliament from 1950 to 1952, an elected member of the Lok Sabha

the next part of the present article focuses on the writings of Upendranath

The second historical work of Upendranath Barman, which drew much attention from a contemporary Dalit scholar is the biography Panchanan Barma, 'the father of the Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement'. '*Thakur Panachanan Barman Jiban Charita*' (*Biography of Thakur Panchanan Barma*) was published in 1972.³ It shows Upendranath's feelings for his caste and its social movement. The main purpose of this book was to celebrate the birth centenary (1972) of Panchanan Barma. In the preface to the second edition of this book, Upendranath wrote:

"The birth centenary of Panchanan Barma was celebrated in 1372 CE. He passed away in the year 1935. Only a few of his colleagues are still alive. This is the proper time of writing his biography. As the biography I wrote in 1972 was exhausted and some new information came to my hand, I brought out this second edition."⁴

Upendranath begins this book by describing the social circumstances into which Panchanan Barma (Sarkar) was born. A review of Panchanan Barma's educational career is also available here. The second part of this book is very significant. Upendranath has given a detailed account of the location of the Rajbanshis in the caste-ridden society of colonial Bengal. He described how was Panchanan Barma motivated to carry out social reforms among the Rajbanshis for establishing a respectable caste identity. This work of Upendranath shows that the curse of the caste society of Bengal and the quest for social justice had sparked the feeling of the western-educated Rajbanshis of Rangpur, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, and Goalpara districts. Under the leadership of Panchanan Barma, the social movement of the Rajbanshis not only established their Kshatriya identity but also structurally integrated this community into a resistance force. On the other hand, the Kshatriya Samity had encouraged the Rajbanshi youths to join the British Indian Army.

After the adoption of *the Government of Indian Act (1919)*, the Rajbanshis transformed their caste organisation into a political platform to contest the election for the Bengal Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly. The electoral participation of Panchanan Barma as well as other Rajbanshis has also been critically examined by Upendranath Barman. With this biography of Panchanan Barma, Upendranath gave a message to the Rajbanshi youths of the 1970s that they (Rajbanshis) can achieve their political goal if they work unitedly. According to Upendranath:

"it is desirable to have some ideas about the works of Panchanan Barma who by collecting various sources and prescriptions proved that the Rajbanshis are Kshatriyas. Panchanan Barma had dedicated his whole life to the overall progress of the Rajbanshi community. Lord Lothian mentioned in his report in 1932 that 'Kshatriya Samity has united the Rajbanshis of entire North Bengal, Goalpara district of Assam and Purnia district of Bihar for which they have been transformed into a well-organized community.' This report is sufficient to prove the success of this organization. As the leader of this organisation,

Panchanan's political achievement had initiated the success of the Rajbanshis in educational, political and economic domain. Therefore, the social service of Panchanan Barma has been fruitful in terms of theory and devotion."⁵

So we can safely argue that by publishing the biography of Panchanan Barma, Upendranath Barman had materialised two objectives. Firstly, the life and achievements of Panchanan Barma have been presented to the Rajbanshi youths to motivate them for unified assertions. Secondly, the Rajbanshis who were motivated by regional aspirations in the 1970s were given a message for maintaining national and community unity.⁶

The third literary piece of Upendranath regarding the Rajbanshi society was his "*Rajbanshi Bhashay Prabad, Prabachan O Heyali (Proverbs, Discourse and Riddle of the Rajbanshi Language)*".⁷ It was published in 1978 as his inherent love for the Rajbanshi language and culture. Upendranath's main purpose in writing this book was to prove the uniqueness of the Rajbanshi language. In the preface to this book, he referred to the research of Sir George Abraham Grierson and various classical sources written in Sanskrit. With a critical view of the linguistic sources, Upendranath aspired to prove the language prevalent in the Rajbanshi society of North Bengal as a specific dialect.⁸

"*Rajbanshi Bhashay Prabad, Prabachan O Heyali*" contains a total of 175 proverbs or *Silkas* in the Rajbanshi language. These proverbs mainly consist of social advice, daily life miseries, hopes, aspirations, and daily experiences. Whatever may be the literary or linguistic value of this book, it is clear that Upendranath was able to express his commitment to the Rajbanshi society of North Bengal by writing this legendary work without giving importance to the idea of regionalism in the realm of national politics.

Autobiography and History of India

The most significant contribution that Upendranath Barman made as a Dalit thinker is his autobiography titled "*Uttabanglar Sekal O Amar Jibansmriti*" (*That Time of North Bengal and Memory of My Life*). It was published in 1985 by Jalpaiguri. As a notable thinker of 20th-century caste politics and the provincial politics of colonial Bengal, Upendranath's autobiography reveals many features that historians engaged with academic research have often ignored (or failed to explain). Apart from describing the social, economic, and political history of North Bengal, in his autobiography, Upendranath sheds light on the main trends of history of the twentieth-century India.

This autobiography shows that Upendranath Barman entered Indian parliamentary politics in 1947. His journey toward national politics began with the drafting of the '*Constitution of India*' (1946-1949) along with other members of the Constituent Assembly. He was also an eye-witness to the historic moment of the '*Transfer of Power*' on the 14th and 15th of August 1947. He narrates this experience in his autobiography with the following words:

"The midnight of August 14/15, 1947 is the most vivid memory

of my life. Members of the Constituent Assembly have gathered at the Constitution Hall to declare India's independence. I am the only member from the region north of the Ganga from the province of Bengal (North Bengal). With the declaration of independence, the National Flag of independent India shall be adopted by the Constituent Assembly."

On 14th August the entire country was in a mood for the festival. All the buildings, streets, and markets of Delhi were lit up from the evening. The Constituent Assembly convened at 11 pm. Dr. Rajendra Prasad took the chair as President... Jawaharlal Nehru, Chowdhury Khalikuzzaman, and Dr. Radhakrishnan delivered some brief speeches and as soon as the clock struck 12 o'clock, the president and members took the oath standing next to their respective seats.

After taking the oath, the President said in the proposal "The Constituent Assembly of India has assumed power for the Governance of India".⁹ So it is observed that Upendranath Barman could associate the Scheduled Castes of North Bengal with the transition of India from colonial rule to self-rule. *The Constitution of India* has come into force on 26th January 1950. India has started its journey to materialise certain objectives like equality, freedom, justice, and fraternity (as enshrined in the Constitution). After the independence, Upendranath served as a member of the Provisional Parliament from 1950 to 1952 as a Congress candidate. Later he was elected to the Lok Sabha (House of the People) from 1952 to 1961 by which he could become an essential part of the parliamentary politics of India. As a notable member of the Indian Parliament, Upendranath was instrumental to perform certain important tasks for the country. Most notable of these was his role as the Chairman of the Select Committee for drafting the 'Untouchability (Offences) Bill (1954 No 22 of 1955). Along with 26 members from the Lok Sabha and a total of 10 members from the Rajya Sabha, this Select Committee took a bold step for the adoption of the much-desired act for the abolition of untouchability from India. From his own experience of untouchability and from the untouchability cases that persisted in various parts of India after independence, Upendranath felt the need to enact a tougher act to deal with the practices of untouchability and casteism. In his autobiography, Upendranath describes the experience of untouchability that prevailed in South India. He wrote:

"In June 1948, the India Parliament had constituted a committee to inquire about the financial condition of the oil industries of the village. I was nominated as the 'chairman' of the said committee. The main objective of this committee was to find out the probable way to protect the *ghanis* (village oil industries) from their competition with the modern oil industries..... After visiting various places, we went to the Salem district of Rajagopalachari to investigate the condition of *ghanis*.... While coming out from the headman of a village (after gathering information), I saw that

all the roads were blocked. About twenty-five people lay down on the road, and their two hands are extended in front.

We were surprised and asked the headman (*Mukhiya*) to explain its background. The Mukhiya said that they drink water from mud wells. The wells have dried up in the hot summer, so they lack drinking water. In front of Mukhiya's house, 3/4 people are simultaneously fetching water from a big well (made of stone). I looked at it and said – 'Why? Many people fetching water from your well.' Mukhiya replied that "they are Harijans—if they touch this well, the villagers will beat them to death. They will not have to drink water in their lives."¹⁰

The members of the Select Committee formed in 1954 met to discuss among themselves and to enact laws to prevent the untouchability of certain lower caste communities of India. The pressure from different organisations as well as the prevalent anti-untouchability acts of different provinces had prepared the background for the drafting of the '*Untouchability (Offences) Bill (1954)*'.¹¹ Representatives of the Bharatiya Depressed Classes League (New Delhi) and the Harijan Sevak Sangh (Delhi) had also demonstrated during the enactment of this act. Finally, in 1955 this bill has been accepted as the '*Untouchability (Offences) Act (1955)*'. This Act declares that:

"any display of untouchability and upholding the tradition of untouchability in religious places, social fields, medical and educational institutions, buying and selling of goods in commercial establishments shall be considered a punishable offense. The punishment for the crime of untouchability is six months imprisonment and a fine of five hundred rupees."¹²

With the adoption of this act, a new trend began in India particularly to eradicate untouchability and casteism from this country. Later, casteism took a new shape since this act prepared a solid legal base for abolishing untouchability in India. In this context, Upendranath wrote:

"I was nominated as the Chairman of the Select Committee which was formed before the law was enacted. After much discussion, this act decrees that offender would be punished with the rigorous imprisonment for six month or the fine of 500 rupees or both. It is because of this act the incidents of untouchability have decreased considerably though in many provinces of India the practice of casteism has not yet been eradicated."¹³

Apart from the anti-untouchability act, Upendranath Barman played an important role in the enactment of two other acts. The first is '*The Code of Civil Procedure (Amendment) Bill 1955*'. The second is '*The Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill, of 1958*'. In the history of parliamentary politics of India, Upendranath's role in legislation (as a member of the Lok Sabha) proves that he was able to develop his skills and talents.

Upendranath Barman played several other important roles in parliamentary politics and national politics in the first fifteen years after India's independence. Notable among them was his joining the

Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference held in London (in 1948) as India's representative and leading the Indian delegation to the Annual Session of the International Rice Commission in Rangoon (Burma in 1950). In addition, Upendranath Barman was instrumental to merge the former Cooch Behar State to India (in 1949) and the merger of certain parts of Kishanganj of Bihar to West Bengal (1956).¹⁴ However, in the national field, Upendranath got the most important place by being elected as the chairman of the Public Accounts Committee in 1959.¹⁵ All these developments of postcolonial India have been vividly described by Upendranath in his autobiography. Naturally, "*Uttabanglar Sekal O Amar Jibansmriti*" appears as a notable literary piece for understanding the transition of caste politics into nationalist politics.

Of late, the Dalit Discourse has been accepted as an academic discipline both in social science and literary criticism. Naturally, the literary works of the Dalit scholars, laureates, and activists of Bengal have drawn much attention from historians engaged in Dalit Studies. In this context, the writings of Upendranath Barman are quite different from others. Firstly, he was the pioneer in writing an authentic history of a lower Caste community of Bengal (like the Rajbanshis). His '*Rajbanshi Kshatriya Jatir Itihas*' is unique once since it crosses the limitations of the composition of self-history by the lower caste thinkers of colonial Bengal. Secondly, despite being a notable Dalit thinker of colonial and postcolonial India, Upendranath composed a biography (*Thakur Panchanan Barman Jiban Charita*) of another great social reformer of colonial Bengal Panchanan Barman. Both these works of Upendranath Barman are being used as an authentic source for the construction of the history of the caste movement of colonial Bengal. Thirdly, records of his own experience of casteism in colonial society and later his direct involvement in the adoption of the anti-untouchability act (1955) prove Upendranath's commitment toward the utilisation of political power for the betterment of the Dalits of India.¹⁶ His autobiography is thus not only an authentic account of Dalit lives of colonial Bengal but also portrays their assertion for 'social justice' and enactment of laws for the abolition of untouchability from India. Besides, keeping in mind his responsibility towards the Rajbanshi caste community, he recorded the Rajbanshi language, the history of the Rajbanshi community, and its struggle for survival in his language. That is why we can describe him as a notable essayist of the lower castes 'who achieved relevance in national politics despite the social stigma of the lower caste'.

Notes and References

1. Upendranath Barman, *Rajbanshi Kshatriya Jatir Itihas (History of the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Community)*, fourth edition, (Jalpaiguri, Bijay Kumar Barman, 1994).
2. As an authentic source, '*Rajbanshi Kshatriya Jatir Itihas*' has received the wide attention of trained academic historians. In this context, we can refer to the following works: Swaraj Basu, *Dynamics of Caste Movement, The Rajbanshis of North Bengal 1910-47*, (New Delhi, Manohar, 2003); Rup Kumar Barman,

- Contested Regionalism*, (New Delhi, Abhijeet Publications, 2007); Ranjit Kumar Mandal, *Life and Times of Rai Saheb Panchanan Barma*, (New Delhi, All India Forum for Development of the Rajbanshis, 2003); Sukhbilas Barma (ed), *Socio-Political Movement in North Bengal (A Sub-Himalayan Tract)*; 2.Vols., (New Delhi, Global Vision Publishing House, 2007); Rup Kumar Barman, '**Partition of Bengal and Struggle for Existence of The Scheduled Castes: Impact of The Partition (1947) on the Rajbanshis of North Bengal**', *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, vol. 2, no. 2 (July-Dec 2009), pp. 141-163; Rup Kumar Barman, 'Yes! The Scheduled Castes Can Write Reflections on the creative and assertive writings of the Scheduled Castes of Colonial Bengal', *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, vol. 8, no.1 (2016), 1-15; Rup Kumar Barman, 'Dalit Versus Sub-Caste: A Study the Problems of Identity of the Scheduled Castes of West Bengal', *Journal of People's History and Culture*, vol.2, no. 1 (June 2016), pp.7-18; Rup Kumar Barman, *Caste Politics, Casteism, and Dalit Discourse*, (New Delhi, Abhijeet Publications, 2020); Juthika Barma, *Jati Rajniti theke Jatiya Rajniti: Upendranath Barman O Tar Samakalin Uttarbanga*, (Kolkata, Sopan, 2021), etc. Each of them used Upendranath Barman's '*Rajbanshi Kshatriya Jatir Itihas (History of the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Community)*' as the primary material.
3. Upendranath Barman: *Thakur Panchanan Barman Jiban Charita*, fourth edition, (Jalpaiguri, Shibendranath Roy, 2001), p. *kha*.
 4. *Ibid.*
 5. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
 6. Since the merger of the Cooch Behar State to India (1949), the Rajbanshis of Cooch Behar and a few other districts of North Bengal have been clamouring for regional autonomy in the form of a separate province. It became a vibrant issue in 1969, particularly after the formation of Uttarakhanda Dal (1969). For detail see: Rup Kumar Barman, *Contested Regionalism*, (New Delhi, Abhijeet Publications, 2007).
 7. Upendranath Barman, *Rajbanshi Bhashay Prabod, Prabachan O Heyali (Proverbs, Discourse and Riddle in the Rajbanshi language)*, (Jalpaiguri, Nirmal Chandra Chowdhury, 1978).
 8. *Ibid.*, p. *Jha*.
 9. Upendranath Barman, *Uttabanglar Sekal O Amar Jibansmriti (That Time of North Bengal and Memory of My Life)*, (Jalpaiguri, Upendranath Barman, 1985) pp. 100-102.
 10. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.
 11. *The Untouchability (Offences) Bill, (1954), Bill No. 14B of 1954.*
 12. Juthika Barma, *Jati Rajniti theke Jatiya Rajniti: Upendranath Barman O Tar Samakalin*, (Kolkata, Sopan, 2021), p.94.
 13. Upendranath Barman, *Uttabanglar Sekal O Amar Jibansmriti*, p. 222
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 233.
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
 16. Gaining political power (or promoting the Scheduled Castes to the governing position) for a positive development of the marginalized community was one of the key targets of the Scheduled Castes of India. The idea of political power as propagated by Harichand Thakur (1972-78), Panchanan Barma (1872-1935), Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), and many other prominent thinkers got a practical shape through Upendranath Barman. Being 'the Father of the Indian Constitution' and Law Minister of the Government of India (1947-1950), Dr. Ambedkar could have fought for the adoption of the anti-untouchability act. However, it was completed by Upendranath Barman.