

IDENTITY CRISIS OF THE RAJBANSHIS

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ABSTRACT

The Rajbanshis Community has been trying to preserve their identity for some time. it's evolved a great deal over time. Their effort has taken the shape of the Kshatriya Movement and Kamatapur Movement. At this time they're trying to voice their demand through the Greater Cooch Behar Movement which is search by different associations and organizations.

Keyword: *Rajbanshis, Identity, The Greater Cooch Behar Movement.*

INTRODUCTION

Social entities have repeatedly tried to try to identify themselves by relating to their glorious past or by showing their present condition which is not recognized by others. People are aware of their identity and they are also sensitive about it. People fight, fight, or even discuss and re-discuss their identities.¹

Each ethnic group is very keen to protect its own identity. Present the Rajbanshis are Assam and North Bengal (W.B.) jointly working to protect their ethnic identity. It has evolved a lot over time and space so they are continuing to put in a lot of effort. The Rajbanshis is found in West Bengal, Tripura, Assam, Meghalaya, and Bihar in India. Out of India, they are also found in Nepal, Bangladesh, and Bhutan. The purpose of the present paper is to explore the identity crisis of Rajbangshis and to explain the issue historically.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE RAJBANSHIS

The racial origin of Rajbanshi is a matter of debate. These are similar to Garos, Ravas, Mech, and Dhimal etc. while some scholars, such as Risley, Colonel Dalton, Dr. Latham, Oldham, have suggested that the Rajbanshis belonged to the Dravidian race. Waddell, W.W. Hunter, and Buchanan said they included Mongoloid stock. Although there are differences of opinion, it can be said very well that the Rajbanshis belongs to the Mongol race according to their religious beliefs, customs, social systems and customs, speeches, and physical characteristics. However, as it gradually intertwined with the Dravidians, it paved the way for a mixed type of evolution - the Mongoloid-Dravidian type, where the characteristics of both races were found.²

In the fifteenth century, Husain Shah's invasion of the Kamata kingdom of Gaur (Bengal) put an end to the Nilambar rule of the Khen dynasty. At least there was no strong ruler for a long time, ending his rule. Instead, several small chiefs arose. The strongest of them was Bishwa Singh, son of Hariya Mandal, a resident of Chikangram in the present Goalpara district of Assam. Hariya was the recognized head of the twelve-headed coach family living in the area.³ After his father, Bishwa Singh was able to subdue the surrounding Bhuiyans and gradually built an empire that was later expanded by his son and successor Naranarayana. It was the reign of Naranarayana, where the power of the Rajbanshis reached its genitalia. It is his reign that serves as a glorious past for the people of the present Rajbanshis.

THE ORIGIN OF THE IDENTITY CRISIS

With time the glorious period of Rajbanshis gradually diminished. In the politics that is going on in the country along with the incompetent rulers, at one time a huge empire collapsed. Many eternal rulers also demanded their independence. The situation reached such a stage that the Koch dynasty ruler Dharendranarayan had to seek help from the British and became a British state for the annual tribute. With the involvement of the British in the administration of the country, a separate episode of Rajbanshi began. The region was characterized by the East India

Company's entry and their interest in trade and commerce and further access to the northeastern border of India and Nepal.⁴

The British brought English educated Hindu upper-caste Bengalis from South Bengal to run their administration and for their political purposes. The unrest of the Rajbanshis began with the settlement of this group of people in the region. This group grew in time and began to dominate the people of the tribal Koch dynasty. They began to hold all the key positions in the administration and the local citizens were left behind educationally, economically, politically, and socially. Not only this, in the whole process Rajbanshi was classified as the lowest class of the society and was equated with the Shudras. This naturally annoyed the elite part of the Koch dynasty and they tried to tone their anger through the Kshatriya movement. Beginning with Panchanan Burma, the movement aimed at proving the position of the Koch dynasty as an upper caste group, i.e. the Kshatriya origin of the Kshatriyas. Also, the use of "Rajbanshi" was emphasized to prove the royal or Kshatriya status.⁵ The Kshatriya movement was primarily responsible for the culturing of Rajbanshis. But Panchanan Burma soon withdrew its movement to demand Scheduled Castes for the community, and finally, Rajbanshis was listed as a Scheduled Caste in 1933. The inconsistency between the opportunities remains unresolved. Once Rajbanshis is given the status of a Scheduled Caste, the Kshatriya identity begins to lose its relevance and the Kshatriya movement gradually fades away.⁶

Rajbanshis was also given different status in different states. In West Bengal they were given the status of Scheduled Castes; In Meghalaya, they were given the status of Scheduled Tribes, and in Assam and Bihar other backward classes. The fact that they are given different status in different states also adds to the existing identity crisis. At present in Assam, they are demanding the status of Scheduled Tribes and the delay in granting this sanction by the Indian government is causing a lot of anger among Rajbanshis. In North Bengal, too, the Rajbanshis is known to have given at least three distinct identities in different censuses - from Rajbangshi to Bratya Kshatriya (1891), from Bratya Kshatriya to Kshatriya Rajbanshi (1911, 1911) and Kshatriya Rajbanshi only Kshatriya (1911).⁷

There are other causes of the existing identity crisis. They live in politically defined areas where Bengalis and Assamese are the majority. Thus, due to their long association with this community, they mostly draw Bengali and Assamese in orbit. Moreover, most of them do not have enough knowledge about the past, Kampturi or Rajbanshi language and culture and the favorable social, economic and political conditions.⁸ Some of them lack interest in using their language and culture.

Currently, Rajbangshi is trying to save their lost identity through the Greater Cooch Behar movement. Many organizations and associations are leading this movement in collaboration or individually. The primary aim of the Greater Cooch Behar movement was to form a separate state under Indian domination with the territory inhabited by the Rajbanshis of North Bengal and Assam. Initially, the number of districts in North Bengal included in the proposed state was 6 but with the addition of Alipurduar, it has now increased to include Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Malda, and Alipurduar. The number of districts in the proposed state of Assam also continues to increase over time. The districts are Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Goalpara, Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Darang, Morigaon, Laximpur, Nalbari, Sonitpur, Kamrup (rural), Dhemaji, Kamrup (metro), Chirang, Baksa, and Udalguri. The proposed state of Greater Cooch Behar is also reported to include three districts of Bihar.

CONCLUSION

Rajbangshi's demand for a separate state is old. The idea has been strong since Independence Day. Since then, the demand for a separate state has been developed by Rajbanshis organizations and associations. Sometimes it has become too active to become a cause of concern for the government and sometimes it has remained at its lowest end as if it were no longer there. Now the movement is back on track. The main reasons responsible for the demands of individual states are that they have an identity of their own, protect their socio-economic interests, preserve their cultural heritage and language development and have something to say in the socio-economic field.⁹

However, there are some inherent problems with the Greater Cooch Behar movement. A large part of the area claimed by the Rajbanshis for their state also includes Bodos in Assam and Bodos' claim for Gurkhaland in North Bengal. Moreover, divisions and factions can be observed among the associations and organizations leading the movement. With the formation of GCPA (Greater Cooch Behar People's Association), AKPP (All Kamatapur People's Party), KPP (Kamatapur People's Party), etc. has been divided into many parties. AKRSU (All Koaches Rajbangshi Students Union) and is divided into two sub-groups. One led by Biswajit Roy and the other by Hiteswar

Barman. This department is engaging in unwanted conflicts within themselves that are consequently hampering their struggle. So the question of their identity is still hanging and embarrassing.

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