

CHAPTER – 2

SOCIAL AWAKENING OF CONTEMPORARY BENGAL AND NORTH BENGAL

I

Although the nineteenth century social reform movement did not shake the entire rural society of Bengal at a time, yet, the wave of such change left their effect upon the land far away from Calcutta, the centre of social awakening and social reform movement i.e. northern part of Bengal. Though there is controversy regarding the nature and characteristics of Bengal Renaissance it is true that western education must have changed the traditional beliefs of the educated Indians, who became the pioneer of social awakening of nineteenth century Bengal. Like the social and caste geography of the region, there was also a sharp distinction in the process of social awakening between North Bengal and the rest of contemporary Bengal.

The social awaking and social reform movement of the nineteenth century Bengal resulted in the demand for Kshatriya status by a number of low caste and non-caste group of people in Bengal as well as India. It has to be remembered in this respect that the demand for Kshatriya status was one of the most significant features of the nineteenth century caste movement in India. In the western and southern portion of Bengal there were movements which desired the status for Malla Kshatriya, Barga Kshatriya, Poundra Kshatriya, Ugra Kshatriya etc¹. In North Bengal the Rajbansis started movement for getting the Kshatriya status. In this respect North Bengal

made no difference from the rest of Bengal though there was difference in characteristics as well as consequences of the movement.

Here we will study about the background of the response of North Bengal to the social awakening of Bengal. The western liberal education and the development of newspapers periodicals, journals and establishment of educational institutions which are considered the vehicles of social awakening made their footholds in this part of Bengal in a much later phase. Similarly the wave of the nineteenth century Renaissance reached in this part in a later phase². Therefore we must study the reasons behind this delayed-response to the western education and the nineteenth century Renaissance of this region which lagged behind the spread of newspapers, periodicals, journals, liberal educational institutions, cultural associations, and organizations etc. which were the apparatuses of the social awakening in society of all kinds.

Although Bengal first came in contact with the British colonial administration and received the western liberal education first, this part of Bengal got attention by the colonial masters in a much later phase, more than after a hundred years of the establishment of the colonial hegemony in Bengal (1765). The northern portion of present day North Bengal was under Bhutanese kingdom for a long period. It is only after the war with Bhutan in 1864 that the hilly portion was taken under the colonial administration³. Similarly after war with Bhutan a large portion of western Duars was annexed from Bhutan by the British Govt. in 1865 and made the districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri respectively⁴. It has to be kept in consideration that Dinajpur came under British administrative jurisdiction at the time of the

establishment of the East India Company's hegemony in the sub-continent i.e. through the Grant of Dewani in 1765⁵. Rangpur also came under British administration with the Grant of Dewani. It was the last frontier district of British Bengal before the annexation of duars. Malda was made a district in 1813 though it was a part of Company's administration long before it was made a district⁶. But we see that the eastern portion of Dinajpur was comparatively advanced which went to East Pakistan in 1947. The eastern part of Dinajpur was as backward as the northern part of north Bengal. On the other hand the social life of Malda was equally less advanced⁷. So it can be said that the northern portion of present day North Bengal came under the administrative periphery of British rule comparatively later than that of the southern portion of present day North Bengal. But the area as a whole was similarly backward in terms of western education and response to the nineteenth century Renaissance. Naturally the fruits of western education reached into this region far later in comparison with that of the rest of Bengal. Therefore spread of knowledge through educational institutions, newspapers, periodicals etc. could develop in this region in a very slow manner.

As we have studied in the previous chapter that the region is basically a non-caste and low-caste majority area. As mentioned earlier (chapter-I) the non-caste people were predominant in comparison to the so called caste Hindu people. The number of non-Hindu people too was significant. Therefore most of the issues relating to the social reform movements of the nineteenth century viz. the practice of sati polygamy, child marriage, taboo against widow remarriage & sea voyage, Age of Consent Bill etc. were almost

absent in this part of Bengal as they were related to the caste-Hindu society only.

It has already mentioned that socio-culturally this area was backward compared to Calcutta and some advanced parts of East Bengal (Modern Bangladesh). The literacy rate of this area was very poor even in the beginning of the twentieth century. Throughout this region there was only one institution for higher education that was in Cooch Behar (then Princely State) and the name of the institution was Cooch Behar Victoria College. From the contemporary administrative reports it is found that the number of recognized high schools in the region was only fourteen. Even in the first half of the twentieth century the picture remained as it was. For instance, according to census report of 1931 it is found that the literacy rate in Jalpaiguri district was 4.8%⁸. The very social and ethnic composition of the district was responsible for such low literacy level. So it becomes clear from the report that the number of people interested in spreading education as well as number of educated people was very negligible.

In undivided Bengal, probably this region had no important cultural and intellectual background. Because the cultural centers of the nineteenth century undivided North Bengal was Rangpur and Rajshahi (presently in Bangladesh). A large part of Goalpara (Assam), Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar was culturally attached to the Rangpur. Perhaps, for this Rangpur centric orientation of educations, publications, associations etc; the intelligentsia of northern North Bengal did not take much interest in establishing such institutions in this part⁹.

Similarly, Rajshahi, then an administrative Division of North Bengal, was the other centre of cultural association and activities of Malda and Dinajpur. Like Rangpur, Rajshahi too was culturally and intellectually developed. So many cultural and research institutions were established there to cultivate socio-cultural and intellectual activities. “VARENDRA ANUSANDHAN SAMITI (1900) was one of them. As it has mentioned earlier that Malda and Dinajpur culturally and ethnically was associated with the Barind region, therefore, no attempt was made to establish educational institutions to spread knowledge into this southern portion of present day North Bengal. Moreover the rate of education in this area was similarly low and number of educated people was also insignificant¹⁰.

The media of Calcutta and of enlightened areas reached to the districts of North Bengal and the people of this region had become aware of social awakening and social reform movement of Calcutta and surrounding areas. EDUCATION GAZETTE, SAMBAD PRAVAKAR, BHARAT MIHIR, HINDU RANGIKA—all the papers had their agents in North Bengal. For example – EDUCATION GAZETTE, edited by Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay had its agent in Jalpaiguri. These papers from outside North Bengal met the needs of the enlightened people of the region¹¹. But due to the lack of education amongst the masses the intellectual changes left no significant effect upon the society of the region.

The socio-cultural and political scenario had been changing since the last quarter of the nineteenth century onwards. Rate of literacy and number of educated person were also increasing since then. In this connection railway communication played an important role. The introduction of North Bengal

State Railway in the year 1878 and the Darjeeling Himalayan Railways in 1881 had a great role to play for the cause of higher education as well as publication of news papers, periodicals, journals etc. from North Bengal. Due to the introduction of railway communication in this region the distance with other parts of the country had been shortened and it made contact easier and smooth from one place to another which not only helped people, though mostly of upper & middle class, to send their boys for higher education. As a result the people of this region became culturally and educationally influenced¹². The Rajshahi College was established in 1878. It should be noted that there was no college in plain districts of present day North Bengal before 1942 barring the Princely State of Cooch Behar. Next to the Rajshahi College, Cooch Behar Victoria College came into existence in 1888, this was also followed by other institutions, the number of students interesting to take higher education increased¹³.

Thus we find that due to various reasons this part of Bengal received the fruits of western education in a much later phase. Therefore the process of social awakening delayed in this region. Though the process was slow, this region, however, responded to the socio-cultural developments started in Calcutta and surrounding areas throughout the nineteenth century. If we meticulously study the pattern of response of the region to the social awakening and social mobility movement of the nineteenth century Bengal we will see that there were two distinct types of response – a) response of North Bengal to the social reform movements of Bengal. The educated and enlightened section of caste Hindu people of North Bengal, though their number was small, responded to the cause of social reform movement, particularly to those issues which were associated to the caste Hindu society.

In addition to that, non-caste people along with the caste Hindus of the region responded to the spread of modern education and establishment of educational institutions, development of press and publications etc. and b) response of the Rajbansi community to the social mobility movement and Social awakening among the Rajbansis of North Bengal. It has already mentioned that the area is mostly inhabited by the non-caste people viz. Rajbansi, Koch, Mech, Tea- tribes, indigenous tribes etc. Among the non-caste people of the society of North Bengal the Rajbansis initiated social awakening movement which ultimately took the shape of caste solidarity movement with the passage of time.

II

a) Response of North Bengal to the social reform movement of nineteenth century Bengal:

Before entering into the course of response to the social reform movement of nineteenth century Bengal we must study the spread of education and the process of establishment of educational institutions, socio-cultural associations, printing-press, news papers, periodicals etc. which played as vehicles in bringing social reform movements into this region. So, here we further divide the discussion as-(i) the growth of education and the spread of press and publications in the region and (ii) the courses and conditions of social reform movements in North Bengal

(i) With regard to newspapers the main publications from North Bengal was in Bengali, apart from Bengali, English, Hindi, Nepali and Tibetan newspapers also came into being. These newspapers focused on the socio-cultural and political activities of concerned area and enriched the

knowledge of contemporary educated section of society. It has mentioned that socio-culturally this area was backward in comparison to Calcutta and advanced parts of erstwhile East Pakistan (modern Bangladesh); therefore the illiterate mass remained indifferent towards those developments.

From Malda the first monthly periodicals published under the editorship of Radhesh Chandra Seth, the name of the periodical was 'KUSUM'. The exact date of its publication is not known, though a few references suggest its publication in 1890. In addition to this the editor also published a few important news papers, among them 'GOURBARTA', 'GOUR DOOT' – two weekly news papers published from 1896. From Malda a bi-monthly journal 'GAMBHIRA' was published for a short duration (1914-1961). The editor and publisher of the journal was Krishna Charan Sarkar. Its purpose was to encourage different types of social reforms, to enhance social awareness among the people of different classes of society. In 1897 'MALDA SAMACHAR', edited by Kali Prasanna Chakravarty was published from Malda. Various social issues were reflected through these newspapers¹⁴. Apart from these a large number of news papers began to publish from Malda since the time of the Swadeshi movements onwards which were interested to propagate political and national ideas¹⁵.

The first newspaper from Jalpaiguri was published from 1900 namely 'TRISROTA' under the auspicious of Sri Bhujangadhar Roy Choudhury and Sri Sashi Kumar Neogi. The latter became the editor of the news paper. It was a monthly newspaper. But it stopped publication within a short duration due to the sudden death of the editor and again started its publication in 1923 as a Bengali weekly. This time its editor was Suresh Chandra Paul. He was an active member of district Congress Committee. Along with this,

'JANAMAT' (a Bengali weekly) and 'BARENDRA', English weekly started their publications under the editorship of Jyotish Chandra Sanyal, secretary of National Congress, Jalpaiguri branch, from 1924 and 1925 respectively. Another paper 'MUKTIBANI' was published under the guidance of Congress worker Khagendra Nath Das Gupta. In addition to those a number of other papers were also came into existence from the district during this time. Apart from these, a good number of periodicals were also published by some educational institutions of the district. The achievements of the periodicals were basically in the field of cultural and literary activities which helped in building public opinion around the district¹⁶.

The publications from Darjeeling were totally different from the other districts of North Bengal due to its socio-cultural and ethno-linguistic background. Another point is that unlike the plain districts of North Bengal the European Missionaries and British officials played an important role in developing education and public opinion in the hill areas of Darjeeling. Since 1892 a series of non-Bengali publications mostly in English came into being in the district. The official records from 1897-98 mentioned the following newspapers – 'THE DARJEELING TIMES' (English weekly), 'DARJEELING MISSION KA MASIK SAMACHAR PATRIKA' (Hindi monthly), 'DARJEELING-KALIMPONG-SIKKIM News' (monthly in English) etc. the first newspapers in Nepali language published from Darjeeling was 'GORKHA KHOBAR KAGAT' in 1901. Its editor was Ganga Prasad Pradhan, who was an active worker of Scottish Baptist Mission in Darjeeling. Along with the activities of the missionaries, this paper also published news and other information for the enlightenment of

the common people. The main concern of the journals published from 1912-1939 was investigation to different aspects of Nepali society, culture and language, propagation of republican ideas and condemnation of the social evils like child marriage and polygamy etc. in 1918, the first literary journal in Nepali language was published named 'CHANDRAKA'. Its editor was Parashmani Pradhan¹⁷.

As Cooch Behar was a princely state, it had some compulsion in this respect. But it has to be mentioned that the first Bengali news paper of North Bengal 'KOCH BIHAR MASIK PATRIKA' was published from Cooch Behar. The editor was Kumar Rangil Narayan of Cooch Behar Raj family. 'KULASASTRA DIPIKA' was published from CoochBehar in 1879. During the last decade of the nineteenth century a large number of newspapers was published from CoochBehar, 'SUKATHA' the mouthpiece of the Nababidhan Brahma Samaj of CoochBehar was one of them. The editor of the paper was Acharya Ram Chandra Singh. All these were published from the State Press of CoochBehar¹⁸.

From Dinajpur district, DINAJPUR BHATPARA UNNATISADHANI SABHA an association of the district published a paper named 'SUHRID'. This was the second Bengali newspaper of North Bengal, published from 1878. Its editor was Tarak Bandhu Sharma. Another newspaper named 'DINAJPORE PATRIKA' was published from Dinajpur at the very beginning of the publications from the district. Its editor was Brājendra Chandra Singh; he was a legal practitioner in Dinajpur court¹⁹. Like other districts from Dinajpur also a good number of papers and periodicals had

published and played an important role in developing social awakening of the people of the district.

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, the wave of social reform movement arrived in this part and conscious people desired to organize some associations to make discussions about social and cultural reforms. In this context press and publication took an important role to generate public opinion. Until the late nineteenth century, we don't have any information about Association of North Bengal. At the initial stage the associations did not play any significant role in the socio- political and cultural development of the people of this region.

It is well known that the 'Indian Association' was established by S.N. Banerjee on July 26, 1876 (Other reference 1875). In the first year of its existence, the Indian Association affiliated a number of Associations in different parts of the country. These branch associations were set up in Bogra, Rajshahi, Rangpur, Pabna etc. as mentioned earlier that the districts of present day North Bengal were culturally, socially, ethnically were associated with Rangpur and Rajshahi, therefore the Indian association must had its influence over this region²⁰.

Like the Indian Association, 'Brahma Samaj' was another important socio-religious organization which had its branches and activities in different towns of North Bengal. Brahma Samaj was established at Baolia in Rajshahi (1859), in Cooch Behar (1873), in Dinajpur (1870), in Jalpaiguri (1870) and in Rangpur (1862). In this part of North Bengal Brahma Samaj activities became manifest in such places as Jalpaiguri, Saidpur and Siliguri owing to the presence of Chandi Charan Sen, well known for his work to develop

Brahma Samaj movement. It is well known to all that after the marriage of Keshab Chandra Sen's daughter Suniti Devi with the Maharaja of Cooch Behar the Brahma Samaj movement found a strong base in the State. Not only had that, from Cooch Behar the movement also left its effect in the surrounding areas²¹.

Like Brahma Samaj, 'Saktadharmā' of Sri Ramakrishna and 'Sebadharma' of Vivekananda also made their impact in North Bengal. These two institutions gave much importance to the education specially, the women education and social services. But their influence and sphere of activities were limited to the educated middle classes of the urban areas only²².

Arya Samaj was established in Jalpaiguri in 1904. A number of Associations formed during nineteenth century in the region were transferred to erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh after partition in 1947. The Arya Natya Samaj was formed in Jalpaiguri in 1905. Other associations viz. Jalpaiguri Sahitya Samiti (1928), Jalpaiguri Muslim Sahitya Samiti' (1931), etc also came into existence during the first half of the twentieth century.²³

The branch of International Theosophical Society was founded in 1921 at Jalpaiguri to organize and build universal brotherhood of humanity and to serve the suffering people and the poor. The society received affiliation in 1923. The founder members were Makhanlal Roychoudhury (President), Upendra Nath Karmakar (Secretary), Suresh Chandra Chakraborty, Jogesh Chandra Ghosh, Ananda Chandra Rahut and others. The society celebrated its Platinum Jubilee Function in 1997 at Jalpaiguri Theosophical Society Lodge²⁴. Next to Jalpaiguri, another branch of the Theosophical Society was established at Kalimpong of Darjeeling. Although, most of the members of

this branch were Bengali, yet its Secretary was Motichand Pradhan, the first Nepali Sub-divisional Officer. But the contribution of Prof. Hirendra Nath Dutta for the prosperity of the society was unquestionable. He was the President of the eighth annual conference of the Theosophical Federation at Jalpaiguri in 1927²⁵.

In Malda, there are some associations too which exercised some socio-cultural activities. Radhesh Chandra Seth a renowned intellectual cum nationalist and Professor Benoy Kumar Sarkar a renowned scholar and nationalist leader were the main force to establish several organizations in the district. These associations played an outstanding role for socio-cultural awareness in this area. The names of such important organizations were (1) Malda Zela Sahitya Sammelan (1317-B.S.), (2) Rampur Boalia Dharma Sabha (Malda Branch), the exact date of its foundation is not known. (3) Malda National Council for education (1907) (4) Malda Mohammedan Association (1890), (5) The Malda Association (1887) etc²⁶.

In Darjeeling district also a good number of associations were formed, though they were different in character. These associations along with socio-cultural awareness advocated the cause of Hill people. The associations were (1) Hillmen's Association (1917), (2) Nepali Sahitya Sammelan (1924), (3) Gorkha Dukkha Nibarak Sammelan (1932), (4) Nebula, the Association of Nepali – Bhutia and Lepcha (1935), (5) Gorkha Samiti, later on Gorkha Association (1926). It has to be mentioned that in the hill area the effect of the nineteenth century social awakening movement was different compared to that of the plain districts of North Bengal, there we found the emergence

of a strong Nepali culture through the development of newspapers, periodicals, association etc²⁷.

During the early twentieth century the Muslim society of North Bengal was still fragmented. The socio-cultural and political integration and intermingling between the migrant Muslims and the Muslims of autochthonous origin remained weak²⁸. It is worth mentioning that the migrant Muslims were socio-culturally and economically more advanced compared to the local Muslims and these migrant Muslims took the leading role in the socio-cultural development of the Muslim community in the region, though the establishment of their associations took place comparatively in a later phase²⁹.

It has to be noted here that the newspapers as well as the associations and organizations that developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were very much related to nationalism, socio-economic reforms, and spread of education etc. though some efforts were made to propagate Christianity and Brahma religion. Interestingly we do not find the voice of the people who lived in the rural areas of North Bengal, as the question of reforms were related to the removal of malpractices and superstitions prevalent in the caste Hindu society only. Therefore they had no significant role in North Bengal. The Rajbansi Kshatriya Samiti which was the representative organization of the Rajbansis of North Bengal published its own mouthpiece named 'Kshatriya'. It was very much concern to upgrade the socio-economic condition of the Rajbansi community. It is also fact that a number of lower castes and non-caste groups launched their social mobility movements simultaneously with the Rajbansi Kshatriya movement but most of the movements were originated beyond the periphery of present

day North Bengal and they also had their mouthpieces which will be discussed in chapter 6 of the present study.

So far as education is concern in North Bengal the first Government school was established in Malda in 1858³⁰. It is also a fact that Malda and Dinajpur came under Company's jurisdiction comparatively earlier in North Bengal. Darjeeling was sparsely populated so educational institutions were established later there. Though later, the missionaries as well as the British Government took active initiatives to spread English education in Darjeeling, because the European officials opted to reside in the hills with their families and propagation of Christianity was the objectives of the Christian missionaries. In the princely State of Cooch Behar one vernacular school was established under the auspicious of Maharaja Shibendra Narayan and his wife Maharani Brindeswari Devi in 1857³¹. In 1861 the school was named as Jenkins school. The schools for girls came into existence a decade later, in 1870 at Malda and the name of the school was Barlow Girls School³². Next to Malda in Jalpaiguri another school for girls was established in 1871. In 1881 one girls' school was established in CoochBehar, it was a primary school. The numbers of schools affiliated to the Calcutta University in the present day North Bengal were only 14 in the year 1903; they were as follows- in Darjeeling 5, in Dinajpur 1, in Jalpaiguri 1, in Malda 3, in CoochBehar State 4³³. In addition to those there were a good number of Govt. aided and private schools but most of these were of primary level and lower middle schools. With regard to the higher education in 1900 there were only two Degree Colleges in North Bengal, one was the Rajsahi Government College and the other was the Cooch Behar Victoria College. There were 3 I.A. Level Colleges, 2 were at Darjeeling and 1 was at Rangpur. One point should be kept in mind that the nature of population and

socio-cultural features was absolutely different from that of plain districts of North Bengal and Cooch Behar was then a Princely State. Thus we see that there were no institutions for higher education in the plain areas of North Bengal till the first half of the twentieth century. But students of solvent section from the districts of Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur and Malda went for higher education to Cooch Behar and Rajsahi. In addition to the above mentioned institutions the students from these areas also went to take higher education to the Hindu college (Presidency College), Ripon College, Sanskrit College etc. and many of them came back to their birth places after the completion of their studies and joined to prestigious posts in the Govt. offices, many of them became professionals. Those students brought with them the seeds of nationalism and spirit of development and took initiatives for the spread of education in their respective places³⁴. But all these happened since the first and the second decades of the twentieth century.

With regard to the education of the Muhammedans we found that in the Cooch Behar State the Royal authority took initiatives to spread education amongst the subject people irrespective of differences in caste, religion etc. So far as British Bengal was concerned like in other parts of India, in North Bengal also the Muslims did not show any interest to take education at the initial phase of introduction of Govt. education.

Here the education of the tribal people is also worth mentioning. In the northern part of North Bengal i.e. the hilly and terrain portion of Darjeeling and the Duars of Jalpaiguri no Govt. effort was made in the plantation areas only the Christian missionaries opened a few schools but no significant response was found on the part of the tribal people³⁵. It has already mentioned in chapter I that the number of tribal people in Cooch Behar was negligible. In the southern part of North Bengal i.e. Malda and Dinajpur, in

spite of the Govt. effort the Santals and other tribal groups hitherto had not found it necessary to take education as the medium of instruction was Bengali, the language of the schools and they spoke in Santali and Hindi³⁶. Thus we see that due to a number of factors the educational development as well as the social awakening had delayed in this region.

(ii) Here we will study about the course of social reform movements of the region. The spread of western education resulted in questioning against a number of social anomalies, superstitions and malpractices prevalent in the society of Bengal. The most debatable among the issues was the movement for the abolition of Sati. This inhumane practice was almost absent in northern Bengal as there was no evidence of sati practiced in the Barnish Temple, though there is stray references of a few incidences of this in the districts of Malda and Murshidabad in the book 'Sati' written by Swapan Basu. Two specific incidences are evident in Cooch Behar, one occurred in the Royal family and the other was in a Brahman family of Khagrabari in 1840, except those the wife of Aniruddha who was a barber in profession at Pirganj of Dinajpur district preferred to be sati in the year 1224 B.S but ultimately she was saved by the Daroga of Pirganj police station. . The wife of renowned Golaknath Sharma of Malda district too preferred to be sati. This Golaknath was engaged in teaching Bengali among the missionaries of Malda. Therefore it can be said that this practice of sati was not a prevalent social system in this part of Bengal and also in Assam³⁷.

Polygamy was in vogue purely in the upper-caste Hindu society. Among the non-Hindu people of North Bengal, the Sariyati laws already gave permission to the Muslims to have four wives at a time. Although a few non-caste people did more than one marriages, yet it was depended absolutely on

the economic solvency. The Jotedars among the Rajbansis of Rangpur got married more than one or two, but inspiration to such act was economic approbation rather than ritual sanction, because the Jotedars themselves considered their wives as peasant workers and made them work in the field of cultivation. Therefore this could not be considered as polygamy as was prevalent in the upper caste Hindus of Bengal and it was not at all an alarming social issue. Because the Rajbansi Hindus, who were predominant in the region, did not have the kulin system, their society was endogamous society. Similarly the Kulin system was absent in the non-Hindu society also. Nevertheless, the enlightened section of the society of North Bengal participated in the movement against polygamy³⁸.

Another movement that flamed the fire of severe debate and contentions in the caste Hindu society during the last quarter of the nineteenth century was the movement favouring widow remarriage. The widow remarriage act was passed in 1856 by the East India Company's Government as a result of the untiring efforts and vigorous clamourings by Iswarchandra Vidyasagar and his followers. The mafussil North Bengal was also shaken by the movement as it gradually took the shape of an all India movement. The educated people of Rangpur sent a memorandum to the East India Company's Govt. appreciating widow remarriage³⁹. Although the Act was passed in 1856, there was no evidence of widow remarriage till 1884. It is clear from the fact that perhaps the Act did not get mass support both in caste as well as non-caste Hindu society. In the first half of the twentieth century two references of widow remarriage are found in Balurghat, Dinajpur district and in Jalpaiguri district respectively. The eminent freedom fighter and leader of Indian National Congress of Balurghat Saroj Ranjan Chattopadhyay got married to a widow at his own initiative. Another distinguished political

leader of Jalpaiguri Satish Chandra Lahiri took initiatives of widow remarriage⁴⁰. But all these took place during the twentieth century.

The Age of Consent Bill movement started in Maharashtra and Bengal which had unfolded a serious debate and discontent all over India. Sociologists opined that the age of consent Bill movement was truly an all India social reform movement. Because the practice of Sati was a problem of Bengal caste Hindu society only, accordingly the widow remarriage was an issue of upper-caste Hindus (as it was in vogue in the society of the Rajbansis and other non-Hindu community), but the age of consent Bill was an all India issue which catered the whole of the Hindu society of India. The Bill proposed to enhance the marriage age of Hindu girls from ten to twelve. The intelligentsia of Bengal and Maharashtra divided into two groups i.e. protagonist and antagonist in responding to the question⁴¹. The wave of the movement was reached to this part of Bengal, though the effect was minimal. The educated people of Cooch Behar sent a Memorandum against the Bill to the British Govt. more information to this issue is not available.

There was no serious movement against child marriage throughout the period under study, though the practice was prevailed in the region to a maximum extent among the non-caste Hindu community people of this region.

Like other parts of Bengal, in North Bengal also there was a number of superstitions and social taboo against sea voyage. The name of the person who crossed the 'Kalapani' first of this region is not yet known in spite of adequate enquiry. In relation to the crossing of 'Kalapani', the migrant Bengali Hindus, and Muslims in Duars have a considerable record. The family members of Roy, Ghosh, Sanyal and among the Muslims the

members of Nabab Rahim Box since the first quarter of the twentieth century had taken their education in the United Kingdom, we do not find such a number of students went abroad for taking education in other districts of present day North Bengal.

It has to be noted that the grievous issues which were to redress through social reform movements related to the caste Hindu society only (and caused sufferings particularly to the women of the society). Therefore, the low caste, non-caste (viz. the tribes, Muslim community people etc.) who constituted a significant number in the demographic composition of North Bengal were indifferent towards those movements. Not only due to the lack of education and proper enlightenment, ethnically, culturally, linguistically these people were not at all associated with the notion of caste Hindu society of the region, naturally did not respond to the nineteenth century social reform movement. Thus we see that the spread of western education and the succeeding development of press, educational institutions, and socio-cultural associations accentuated the cause of social awakening in contemporary Bengal as well as in North Bengal.

b) Social awakening among the Rajbansis of North Bengal (1881-1911):

Before entering in to the course of the social awakening movement of North Bengal, we have to study first the background of the society. In undivided North Bengal the Rajbansi Kshatriyas constituted the single largest community. They were socially a homogeneous group in the region. The vast area of Rangpur, Dinajpur, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Terai of Darjeeling and Goalpara district of Assam, Purnea of Bihar was inhabited by the Rajbansis. They even lived in the Terai region of Nepal. This habitat suffered a change after partition in 1947(see chapter1). There is much

controversy regarding the origin of the Rajbansis. Whatever may be the debate, it can undoubtedly be said that these people, at once, ruled over the northern region of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Rangpur and took a dominant role in the society and culture of the region.

Situation began to change with the establishment of the Islamic rule over the land. Because from that time onwards the caste Hindus began to settle there in order to take part in their (Islamic rulers) administration. It is also evident that even before the advent of the Muslim rulers there inhabited a few rich Hindu Jotdars⁴² but their number was very few. This trend continued till the second half of the nineteenth century. After the formation of the districts of Darjeeling (1865) and Jalpaiguri (1869) the demographic pattern of this region began to change. Jalpaiguri was made the divisional headquarter of Rajshahi division. So, the subsequent establishment of various govt. offices, law courts, dispensaries etc. necessitated migration of educated upper caste Hindus from other parts of Bengal. These people settled there as govt. officials, office bearers, clerks, as other professionals viz. doctor, lawyer, business person, traders etc. As the early settlers (mostly Rajbansis) were basically cultivators and associated with land, did not show any interest to the modern process of development and the migrant people took the opportunities of English education and other facilities provided by the colonial masters. These people by virtue of their closeness to the administrative authority had become most dominant group in the local society, economy and politics. They began to control the society and economy of the region. They treated the Rajbansis as backward and inferior community. 'This alienation from the caste Hindus did indirectly promote caste solidarity among the Rajbansis'⁴³. Thus in this way the Rajbansis, once

a dominant community not only began to disintegrate but also had been disgraced by the migrant upper caste Hindus of eastern Bengal.

It is argued by a few scholars that after the mutiny of 1857, to face the question of social reforms the British Govt. started intensive study about the caste society of India. The result was the first census of 1872 which brought about an unprecedented response on the part of the Indians to place their respective castes, according to the traditional order in a recognized and prestigious stratum of the society⁴⁴.

After the publication of the first census report in 1872 the people belonged to various lower caste category of south and western India launched a vehement agitation against Brahmanical domination in the society and demanded the Colonial Government's intervention to change this social anomaly. The census of 1872 actually flamed the fire of anti-caste movement in south and western India as it (census) had disclosed the picture of social status of various lower-castes existed in Indian society. So, these people burst against the age long privileged caste-group and demanded their own respective caste protection and opportunities of all kinds. The anti-caste movement of south and western India had marked its influence upon the society of south Bengal in the first phase. The intermediary and lower castes people of south Bengal initiated a similar movement against the Brahmanical oppression, the anti-caste movement immediately took the shape of a caste – solidarity movement with the demand of higher social status, which desired recognition from the colonial Govt⁴⁵. It is interesting to note that most of the lower and intermediary caste groups of Bengal demanded recognition of their Kshatriya status. Therefore the demand for Kshatriya status became the most significant feature of the nineteenth

century caste movement. The anti-caste movement of South Bengal then influenced to start a similar movement in Northern Bengal. In this region as mentioned earlier the most predominant caste group was Rajbansis though other minor caste group people were also in existent. The Rajbansis had received inspiration from the movement of southern Bengal provoked by census report in 1891. Another reason for their resentment was that they were described as Koch in the report that they considered as inferior to them. 'The census operations had created a notion among the members of various lower and intermediary castes that if they could have their names listed in the census reports in the category of twice born, their social rank would automatically be raised and recognized by the indigenous society. So this kind of false notion of legitimacy that census created in local society led a sudden growth of caste association and caste movements. This affected the Rajbansis as well'⁴⁶. It was in this background the social awakening movement among the Rajbansis of North Bengal started. This movement, with the passage of time, became a caste consolidated movement in the process of attaining higher social status.

It was under this background the Rajbansis of North Bengal started claiming of their Kshatriya status which was opposed by the caste Hindus of eastern Bengal. Because according to them (caste Hindus) unlike the other parts of India there was no concept of Kshatriya in the social system of Bengal. The reason behind such conception was that there had never been any tradition of consolidated kingdom in Bengal. Interestingly the movements of the people of other low-caste groups in southern and eastern Bengal which also demanded the same Kshatriya status did not face such opposition that faced by the Rajbansis of North Bengal. Perhaps racial difference between the

Rajbansis and the other caste Hindus of Bengal was responsible for such opposition, because the Rajbansis are of Indo-Mongoloid origin where as the rest are of Aryan origin⁴⁷.

Apart from the census factor, other factors viz. socio-cultural domination and the hatred of the upper caste Hindus augmented the process of social awakening among the Rajbansis.

The social awakening movement of North Bengal resulted in the outcome of a consolidated and organized caste movement by the Rajbansis which demanded recognition of their higher social status from the British Govt. as well as indigenous society. The movement started with the claim made by the Rajbansi Hindus of the region that they were Kshatriyas of Aryan origin and separated from the Koch. Because the census of 1891 gave instruction to consider and mention the 'Rajbansis as same as Koch' as had done in the previous census of 1881⁴⁸. This created resentment among them because generation after generation they (Rajbansi Hindus) had been claiming for their status as Kshatriya descent of Aryan origin. When the census officials refused to enumerate them as Kshatriyas the leaders of the community in many places of Rangpur declined to fill up the census returns⁴⁹.

Thus a movement against the census authority had started by the leaders of the society, most of whom were zamindars, Jotedars and rich peasants. Sri Haramohan Roy Khajanchi, a local Zamindar of Shyampur (Rangpur) who belonged to Rajbansi community took initiative for the formation of an organization named 'BRATYA KSHATRIYA JATIR UNNATI BIDHAYANI SABHA' to elevate their status according to the Hindu Social hierarchy. Several leading Rajbansi Zamindars and Jotedars of Rangpur including Haramohan Khajanchi voiced their protest against this move of

census authorities. Thus Rangpur became the centre of agitation and Kshatriya movement⁵⁰.

On February 6, 1891 the Rajbansis of Rangpur openly demonstrated against the order of F.H. Skyne, then District Magistrate of Rangpur who had asked the local superintendent to enroll the Rajbansis under the head of Koch. Haramohan Khajanchi had been working to awaken the Rajbansis to attain higher social status. The Samiti urged the district Magistrate to dissociate them from the Kochs. Not only that, it had realized that to give spontaneity to the movement it was necessary to educate the Rajbansis. The education should make them conscious about their glorious past, history, society and tradition of which they will be proud to mention. As an eminent leader he held meetings in different localities and began collecting history, proverbs, traditions, cultural heritage and saying of the Rajbansis. He also met many Brahmin Pandits, *Naiyayiks* and *Sastrakars* of Rangpur, Kamrupa and other elite sections of Hindu society in Rangpur. As a result of his toilsome efforts he got recognition of his caste from the 'Pandit Samaj' (the learned society) of Rangpur and Kamrupa. He had also published two books – '*Vratya Mochan Paddhati*' and '*Kshatriyaponayan Byavastha*', which included the opinions of the Pandits of Mithila Kamrupa and Bengal stating that Rajbansis were Kshatriyas and had become 'Vratya' due to the non-observance of certain rites but can regain their Kshatriya status⁵¹.

The district Magistrate at his initiation sought the opinion of *Rangpur Dharma Sabha*, it was a mouth piece organization of Hindu religion and an association of Pandits. Pandit Yadaveswar Tarkaratna was authorized to give his opinion on behalf of the *Sabha*. He (Pandit Yadaveswar Tarkaratna) wrote to the district Magistrate a letter that Rajbansis and Koches were

different castes. He also drew references from the 'Sastras' and finally concluded that Rajbansis of North Bengal were Kshatriyas and should be recognized as 'Vratya Kshatriyas' not 'Bhanga Kshatriyas'. This statement was accepted by the District Magistrate. Therefore the movement deferred temporarily in 1891 and the Rajbansis were hopefully waiting for the recognition of their Kshatriya status in the census reports⁵².

It has to be mentioned in this context that the census reports attributed the Rajbansis as same as Koch on the basis of the observations made by the European ethnographers like Riseley, etc. Most of the European Scholars described them as a mixed race of Dravidian and Mongolian origin. According to Buchanan Hamilton the tribal Koches of Kamrupa are the forefathers of the Rajbansis. He further stated that the Hinduised Koches are called the Rajbansis and he mentioned them as lineage of Bodo group⁵³. Similar views had expressed by W.W. Hunter that the Rajbansis are a mixed caste originated from the same stock as the Koches, Meches, Kacharis etc.i.e. of Mongolian origin and the lineage of Bodo group⁵⁴. On the other hand Risley had mentioned that the Koch, Rajbansi, Poliya and the Deshi all are of same Dravidian stock. He further mentioned that Mongolian blood must have fusion into them⁵⁵. It has to be remembered that much later the renowned anthropologist Charu Chandra Sanyal in his famous work has mentioned them as of Mongolian origin⁵⁶. According to the view of the scholars of this region they are Pundra Kshatriyas⁵⁷. So a controversy regarding their origin had begun during this time which continues till the present days. It has viewed by most of the European scholars that since the early part of the sixteenth century the term Rajbansi are found in various

texts as well as other references. So it was concluded by them that since the sixteenth century onwards the Rajbansis began to be Hinduised. Therefore at the time of census debate a trend had started to enquire into their origin. Rajbansi scholars like Upendra Nath Barman, Haripada Adhikari expressed their resentment against the contention of the colonial ethnographers. They also disagree with the contention that the Rajbansis had adopted Hinduism during the regime of Biswa Singha in the early sixteenth century. According to these scholars the Rajbansis were already Hindus prior to it and were recognized as *vratya* or *Bhanga* (fallen) Kshatriya. They had tried to prove their argument through the ancient texts as well as mythological references that they are of Aryan origin and it was due to the fear of Parashuram who launched a fierce attack on the Kshatriyas they fled away from their lands of habitation and began to settle in the forests of this region. Due to the non observance of the ritual practices they had fallen from their actual status⁵⁸.

Although we will study here about the factors as well as the courses and features of the social awakening movement of the Rajbansis, it will not be irrelevant to mention another point in the continuation of this aspect that is the issue whether they are identical with the Koches or not, the Rajbansis are changing their stand regarding their caste identity from time to time both during colonial and post colonial period. It is viewed by a section of educated Rajbansis that the people of this community generally bear the features of all four human streams or culture i.e. Austra-Asiatic, Dravidian, Mongoloid and Aryan where Mongoloid features are predominant. When the Aryanised people made their headway into the eastern part of India they were resisted by the people of Paundra, Vanga and Kamrupa all in a strong

axis and delayed main Aryan thrust for centuries. Finally these aboriginal people accepted Aryan culture⁵⁹.

The movement however, created a great enthusiasm among the people who began to declare themselves openly as Kshatriyas and adopt Kshatriya customs and titles. But although it was getting popular and social awakening was visible, its nature was still sporadic and localized. By this time Haramohan Roy (khajanchi), the pioneer leader of the Kshatriya movement had died and the leadership was taken over by a more competent, dynamic and forceful person Panchanan Sarkar an advocate of Rangpur, originally an inhabitant of Cooch Behar state⁶⁰.

The Kshatriya movement again gained momentum during the census in 1901. The Rajbansis had expected after the 1891 movement that the govt. would accept their demand and enlist them as Kshatriyas and as a caste separate from the Koch. But it revealed to them that in the current census also orders had been issued to field workers to enroll the Rajbansis as mere 'Rajbansi' and not Kshatriya. This led to a general displeasure among the community. The Rajbansi leaders met at Rangpur and sent a protest note to P.C. Mitra, then district Magistrate on 1st February 1901, urging him to recognize their Kshatriya origin. The district Magistrate firmly rejected the notes as because he was instructed by the superintendent of census operation that they (Rajbansis) will be classed as 'Rajbansis' and not 'Bratya Kshatriyas'. He in his order on February refused to response the case. Therefore it became clear to the Rajbansis that the recommendations of F. A. Skyne in 1891 were not accepted. The Rajbansis then appealed to the census superintendent who also turned down their prayers as 'it is too late to issue

any order on the point'. On 19th April 1901 a memorandum was submitted to Sir John Woodburn, then Lieutenant Governor of Bengal but with no result⁶¹. As before 1901 census, the Rajbansis were again placed with the Koch community.

The disappointed Rajbansis launched a vigorous movement with new enthusiasm. They now concentrated mainly on social issues. The movement had spread throughout undivided North Bengal and reached even to the village level. Panchanan Barman with his able leadership encouraged his community fellows to stand on their own feet with dignity and valour. 'He brought out historical past and traditions of the Rajbansi kshatriyas. He said that the anti-Kshatriya king Nanda, popularly known as Parasuram lodged a fierce attack on the Pundra king who was a Kshatriya. Being defeated, the Pundra king with his agnates fled to the swampy forests of northern Bengal and western Assam to escape from the wrath of Parasuram. The descendants of his agnates for many years had concealed their sacred thread which the Rajbansis claimed they had and also their Kshatriya ancestry, they now claim to be 'Bhanga kshatriyas'⁶².

The Rajbansis under the leadership of Panchanan Barma (Sarkar) cited 'Jagasangits' a kind of 'palagan' to rebuild the Kshatriya status for the Rajbansis. The 'palagan' was composed by Ratiram Das, the famous rebellious who with Sibachandra Roy a Zamindar of Itakumari of Rangpur district led an armed peasant rebellion with their Rajbansi followers against the tyrannical Izaradar Devi Singha, appointed by the East India Company.

Ratiram mentioned his caste as ‘*Bhanga Kshatriya*’ in his Palagan⁶³. He further stated that Rajbansis were not non- Aryans.

One thing has to be cleared in this respect that barring the Rajbansis other caste group people of the region, who were minority in comparison to the number of the formers, also initiated social mobility movements with either minimum or no effect, which will be discussed in the succeeding chapter (chapter-6) of the present study.

For the fulfillment of their demands the leaders of the Rajbansi community realized that without a proper organization this movement could not be carried further. It is believed that the growth of associations among various other caste groups particularly in south Bengal might have also influenced the thinking of these leaders who began to move in the same direction of forming a caste association for themselves, though their objectives differed to some extent from those caste associations. Therefore the result of such initiation was the formation of Kshatriya Samiti in 1910⁶⁴.

The organizational structure of the Samiti was as follows- i) an Executive Committee to formulate and implement Samiti’s policies, ii) Finance Committee to look after the financial matters, iii) a Publication Committee and Publicity Committee. The Samiti had members of three categories) *Sadharan*’ or ordinary members, ii) *Pracharaka* or ‘*Ganya*’(distinguished) members, i.e. those who paid Rs. 2 each as annual subscription were regarded as *Ganya Sabhya*’. They will get invitation to attend all the meeting of the Samiti and were able to vote in all its meetings. iii) ‘*Manya*’

or respectable members who paid hundred rupees or more at a time to the Samiti's fund, they were the life-time members and were entitled to get all the Reports, Pamphlets published from time to time. Not only that they also had the right to vote in its meetings as well. The *Sadharan Sabhya* also could cast their voting rights in its meetings⁶⁵.

In the meanwhile enthusiastic attempts were made to collect proverbs, traditions, history, songs, sayings and popular folktales which established their Kshatriya identity. Pandit Hara Kishor Adhikari, well versed in Sanskrit and Hindu Scripturs published a booklet, 'RAJBANSI KULA PRADIP' in which he established that the Rajbansis were Kshatriyas. There were also works of other Rajbansi Kshatrihya scholars of the period like Pandit Jagamohan Sinha, who wrote 'RAJBANSI KULA KAUMUDI. 'KHATRO SANGEET' was written by Gobind Chandra Roy and 'RAJBANSI KULA DIPAKA by Maniram Kabyabhushan. The creation of the myth resulted with an appeal for the reform of socio- religious and cultural practices of the community⁶⁶.

In 1910 at the time of the census operations the Rajbansis once again started their campaign demanding Kshtriya status in the coming census reports. With this idea they convened a large meeting at Rangpur on 1st may 1910 (other reference 2nd may). The meeting was held in Rangpur Natya Mandir which resulted in the foundation of the Kshatriya Samiti, which was attended by the representatives of the community from Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Rangpur, Dinajpur, and other districts of Bengal amounting to almost 400 representatives. The aims and objectives of the Kshatriya Samiti were formulated by Sri Madhusudan Roy, a pleader of Jalpaiguri Bar as its

President and Panchanan Barma (Sarkar) as the Secretary. In the conference it was stated that the Rajbansis were Kshatriyas and were known as *Bhanga* or *Bratya* kshatriyas. It formed a separate Hindu caste different from of the Koch. A delegation of the community then met sir Lancelot Hare, the Lieutenant Governor of East Bengal and Assam at Dacca and the census Commissioner E. A. Gait at Calcutta and conveyed to them their desire and grievances. A memorandum signed by more than 2000 (two thousand) Rajbansis from Rangpur, Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar was also given to the Lieutenvant Governor of East Bengal and Assam in January 1911. In addition to this they (memorialists) submitted the rulings of various Pandits in support of their claim for Kshatriya status. In different districts the Rajbansis appealed to the district Magistrates to recognize them as Kshatriya and to permit them to use the more respectable surnames such as Barman, Roy, Deb Barman etc. instead of Sarkar, Das etc. C. Tindal, The district Magistrate of Rangpur strongly recommended to the census superintendent of Assam and East Bengal in letter dated 16th December 1910 that, Rajbansis should be recognized as Kshatriyas and the word 'Rajbansi' should be also put within the bracket to distinguish the community from the other castes. He also mentioned that there were no reasons to object if the Rajbansis use surnames like Barman, Deb Barman etc. the Deputy Commissioner of the Goalpara district in Assam ordered the field Superintendents on 27 January 1911, to enroll the Rajbansis as Kshatriyas. Similar instructions were issued in other districts including Purnea in Bihar, except in Cooch Behar, where the Royal Officials strongly opposed it. Ultimately the interference of the Cooch Behar state superintendent E.W. Dentith solved the problem. The efforts of the Kshatriya Samiti ultimately brought success as they got

recognition of their claimed Kshatriya status in the final Report of 1911 census, where they were listed as a separate Hindu caste, Rajbansi with 'Kshatriya' in brackets. Ultimately L.S.S.O'Malley, census Superintendent published the census report in 1913 and commented in page no 445 that "the former request was granted without hesitation, as there is no doubt that as the present day, irrespective of any question of origin, the Rajbansi and Koch are separate castes"⁶⁷.

In order to understand the uphill task taken by the leaders of the Rajbansis for achieving higher social status, we must study the response of the upper caste Hindus to their movements. As mentioned earlier that the Rajbansis were organizing themselves with the objective of attaining Kshatriya status in the social hierarchy. Upper caste section of Bengal did not welcome their movement because during the pre-colonial and colonial period the upper caste Hindus dominated the socio-religious life. Therefore the attempts made by the Rajbansis to get recognition of higher social status 'opened the question of readjustment in power relation'. Naturally they voiced their protest against such movement. Not only that the caste Hindus claimed that there had been no concept of Kshatriya in the caste system prevalent in Bengal. It can undoubtedly be said that the 1901 census move rejected their (Rajbansis) demand particularly on the basis of the objection put forward by the upper caste Hindus. Many Brahmins as priests in religion and social ceremonies and officials refused to record the caste of these people as Kshatriya⁶⁸.

But Pandits of Mithila, Kamrupa and some local Brahmins continued to support the cause of the Rajbansis and even participated in the movements.

The Pragyatishpur or Kamrupi Brahmins had cultural relations with the Mithila Brahmins for a long period even before the coming of the Muslims or the British. A group of Mithila Brahmins was invited by the rulers of khyen dynasty. There were cultural exchange with the Rajbansis and they adopted some of the customs of the Kamrupi Brahmins⁶⁹.

III

Although the census operations of 1891 caused the emergence of a movement aiming at the social uplift among the Rajbansis of North Bengal, the movement was not confined to the attainment of recognition of their Kshatriya status only, but also to the all round development of the community. It was realized by the leaders of the movement that the community was 'educationally backward, economically poor and socially degraded'. Therefore the leaders from the very beginning espoused the cause of spreading modern education among the Rajbansis. Moreover the leaders were painfully aware of the existing backwardness of the community. They realized that unless or until the community was educationally advanced they would not be able to contend for securing Government facilities. Although the leaders considered that there was a noble value in the society that education should bring knowledge, therefore the Rajbansi Kshatriyas must not be guided by the objectives of getting jobs only; education must develop to generate the moral values of mankind⁷⁰. The leaders of the movement repeatedly mentioned about the noble values of education, at the same time expressed the inevitability of taking education to get job opportunities under the situation when the Rajbansis are in a deplorable condition for their backwardness in comparison to the other castes of Bengal. The renowned leaders of the Kshatriya Samiti Panchanan Barma at the time when began his

career as legal practitioner in 1901, he found that the Rajbansis Kshatriya society was extremely backward in the field of education. The society was not at all eager to take education which was the sole way of social uplift of all society.

It has mentioned in chapter- 3 that one of the reasons for the lack of education among the Rajbansis was the absence of student's hostel or boarding to accommodate the students of the community who were interested to go outside for education. Panchanan Barma made an appeal to Government for the better accommodation of the Rajbansi students, saying that due to the absence of hostels the students could not go for taking higher education the lack of which is the root cause of their utmost miseries. The Government however promised to spend Rs.10000/- to establish a students hostel if the Samiti take the responsibility to provide Rs.5000/- for the purpose. Panchanan Barma with much trouble ultimately became able to manage the said amount of Rupees. Thus the first hostel for the Rajbansi students was established in Rangpur district in 1320 B.S.(1913) with the capacity to accommodate 32 students. Brahma Narayan Ashikari was given the charge as superintendent after appointing him as the teacher in the district school. The establishment of the hostel and the initiatives of the Kshatriya Samiti must have resulted in the increase of Rajbansi students in higher education⁷¹.

In the eighteenth conference of the Kshatriya Samiti at Bhandardaha, Patgram, Jalpaiguri in 1334B.S.(1927) the Annual Secretary of the meeting Sri Jagat Chandra Singha requested Sri Jagadindra Deb Raikat of Jalpaiguri for his deliberation and share his views regarding the education of the

community. Jagadindra Deb Raikot at his deliberation repeatedly urged for the development of inner spirit through education. He too emphasized the lack of education as one of the reasons for their backwardness. He also argued that the community must be educated to remove the overwhelming control of the 'Bhatias' in all aspects⁷².

In 1913, under the initiatives of the members of the Rajbansi community, two English Schools were established, one was at Naotara, Tapa village and the other was at Sundarpur Chortabari village, both were under Dimla police station in Rangpur district. From the proceedings of the Kshatriya Samiti we get a list of students appeared and qualified in various examinations between 1915 and 1917. The following table shows the number of students appeared and qualified in the three consecutive sessions.

Appeared

	Matriculation	I.A. & I. Sc.	B.A. & B. Sc.
1324 B.S.(1917)	15	9	3
1323 B.S.(1916)	15	9	4
1322B.S.(1915)	16	9	0

Qualified

	Matriculation	I. A. & I. Sc.	B.A. & B. Sc.
1324B.S.(1917)	7	4	3
1323B.S.(1926)	12	3	1
1322 B.S. (1915)	14	3	0

Source: Brittabibarani of Eighth years of the Kshatriya Samiti, 1324 B.S.p. 32.

Along with education, the social reform movement of the Rajbansis did touch various social evils also prevalent in the society. Particularly the

movement launched an attack to the dowry system. The leaders of the movement encouraged to develop physical strength both for male and female members of the society, for which they suggested a regular training that should be arranged by the society itself. In addition to the measures mentioned above a number of steps were taken considering the development of the community. Thus we see that the nineteenth century social reform movement of Bengal left its imprint upon the society of North Bengal to a great extent though there were differences in characteristics of the movement, yet it maintained the same line i.e. the reformation and social mobility by the most numerous caste group people of this region. Another important point has to be mentioned that during a decade from 1911-1921 the Samiti paid considerable attention to the educational, emancipation of women and socio-cultural development of the community. Not only that the people of the community also began to respond to the efforts of the leaders. But after 1921 the Samiti began to participate in the electoral politics and gradually all those social reform programs became secondary to the leaders, naturally the illiterate and poorest of the poor people of the community remained illiterate and backward. The objectives of such initiatives however will be discussed in the succeeding chapter (chapter 4).

IV

Thus we see that the census provided an opportunity to the Rajbansis of this region to develop a community consciousness among them for attaining a respectable position in social hierarchy. The Rajbansis started the movement around census to establish a respectable position in the society which was further strengthened through the process of 'sankritisation' and

‘westernisation’ which will be discussed in the later chapter (chapter 4) elaborately.

If we study the social awakening movement among the Rajbansis of North Bengal we will find that the movement had several distinct characteristics which changed from time to time. The movement was initiated with the demand of recognition to their higher social status from the Colonial Government. By this time their sole demand was to get entry into the census list as a separate caste group dissociated from the Koch. Because the earlier census reports recorded their name under the head Koch, whom the former considered as degraded caste group. The movement rose to its climax in 1910 when it formed a distinct caste based organization i.e. Kshatriya Samiti. Ultimately they got official recognition in 1911 census when they were enlisted separately from the Koch and entitled the Kshatriya status as per their claim.

After achieving the official recognition of their desired Kshatriya status in 1911, the leaders of the movement had shifted their attention and activities towards the direction of social uplift of the Rajbansi community. Initiations were taken to spread education, establishment of educational institutions, acceptance and practice of various social practices prevalent among the upper caste Hindus, such as adoption of sacred thread etc. A number of offshoot organizations of the Kshatriya Samiti were formed in different places of North Bengal⁷³. Thus under the banner of a distinct caste based organization the leaders of the Kshatriya Samiti advocated the cause of social up gradation movement for the community. This trend is described by the renowned sociologist M.N. Srinibas as ‘modernization’ and

‘westernization’. Actually the social structure of Bengal was not well acquainted with that of the other parts of India. In other parts of India there were Brahmans, Kshatriyas and Sudras where as in Bengal there were Brahmans, Baidyas and Sudras, no Kshatriyas. Therefore, the mentioned theory is partially applicable to the society of Bengal. So, considering the shifts in characteristics of the movement the study of the social awakening movement of the Rajbansis has been divided into two specific periods – (i) from the inception of the movement in 1891 till 1911 which has already discussed in the present chapter and (ii) from 1911 to 1947, because from 1911 the movement gradually shifted its dimension towards other aspects. Moreover the Colonial Govt. opened the door to various lower caste groups to get facilities by Participating in the election as separate caste groups from the level of Union Boards to the Legislative Council. Therefore the social awakening movement gradually took a political turn as it realized that without their representation they will not be able to get facilities from the Government which was needed for their development. Therefore the social up gradation movement was converted into caste-based political movement by the Rajbansi community. This trend continued till the independence in 1947, which will be discussed in chapter 4. After the independence and partition in 1947 the movement lost its spirit because the centre of the movement, Rangpur was transferred to erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. Not only that, caste based politics was abolished by the constitution of independent India. The movement took a new turn during the 60s of the twentieth century, which is observed by modern scholars as ‘ethnic identity movement’, this aspect will be discussed in chapter 7, and this trend again got a shift to another as because after 1977 a new horizon in

the spheres of socio-political movement emerged with the formation of leftist Government in west Bengal.

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