

CHAPTER -IX

Conclusion

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CONCLUSION

The present study attempts to explore socio- economic status and ethnological identity of the Rajbanshi people of Northeastern part of India, Nepal and Bangladesh. India may be called a land merely infinite ethnic diversity. Ethnicity as a sociological concept is based on the notion that certain ethnic groups are "rooted in space".¹ Mitchell,² Epstein,³ Gluckman⁴ and Nair⁵ stated that culture is the basis of ethnicity on which ethnic groups are formed by assimilating their cultures of origin within a new social context. Francis⁶ and Gordon⁷ stated that ethnicity provides a sense of peoplehood or we-feeling shared by members of a group. Nair⁸ also stated that the four major premises on which ethnicity operate in Indian castes, languages, region of origin and religion. On the other hand, Desai⁹ says, "Ethnicity appears to have tremendous scope for perseverance for group mobilization without necessarily passing through historical phases." Paul R. Brass in his work *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* says, "There are three ways of defining ethnic groups in terms of objective attributes, with reference to subjective feelings and in relation to behaviour."¹⁰ An objective definition assumes that though no specific attribute is invariably associated with all ethnic categories, there must be some distinguishing cultural feature that clearly separates one group of people from another, whether that feature or features be language, territory, religion, colour, diet, dress or any of them. The problem with objective definitions is that it is usually extremely difficult to determine the boundaries of ethnic categories in this way. The

difficulty with subjective definition is that they make it impossible to answer the basic question of how a group of people arrives at subjective self-consciousness in the first place. Behavioural definitions are really a form of objective definition since they assume that there are specific concrete ways in which ethnic groups behave or do not behave, particularly in relation to an interaction with other groups.¹¹

Ethnicity is the sense of ethnic identity, which has been defined by De Vos as consisting of the “subjective symbolic or emblematic use by a group of people ...of any aspect of culture in order to differentiate themselves from other groups.”¹² This definition can be used for the analytic purposes required here by altering the last phrase to use in order to create internal cohesion and differentiate themselves from other groups. An ethnic group that uses cultural symbols in this way is a subjectively self-conscious community that establishes criteria for inclusion into and exclusion from the group. At this point, matters of descent, birth and a sense of kinship may become important to ethnic group members, for the methods of inclusion and exclusion into the group often involve the explicit or tacit adaptation of rules of endogamy and exogamy.¹³ Ethnic identity is the root from where ethnicity arises, which manifests in both intra and inter ethnic interactions. This identity aspirations and sense of identity have offered a new dimension to the assertiveness of the ethnic groups.¹⁴ Ethnic identity plays a crucial role bringing about social mobility of a community on which interaction takes place. It also provides common norms on which interaction takes place. It provides a sense of solidarity. These in turn, lead to upward mobility in stratified society.¹⁵

In this regard, it may be stress that social mobility is the movement of an individual or groups, from one social position to another. It is a change in social object or value, by human activity. It is a change in conditions, in ones education, occupation, incomes, and economic change in conditions, prestige, status, power and wealth. It changes persons over all social position. Rao¹⁶ in his Foreward to Chandrashekhar Bhat's Study "*Ethnicity and Mobility*" says, "Ethnic identity is a significant unit of operation in educational, economic, and political field" which leads to social mobility of the community. Ethnic communities, which are locally segregated, develop their own ethnic associations and ethnic organizations, which provides for upward mobility. Ethnic associations play a pivotal role in the preservation of ethnic identity by simulating their culture and social mobility by promoting educational and occupational facilities and financial help to members of the community. They look after overall development and progress of the community. Yogendra Singh has observed, "Earlier aspiration for vertical mobility or '*sanskritization*' among lower castes, has now been replaced by new feeling of self-identity within ones own caste or increased horizontal solidarity. Caste associations are an indirect reflection of these new trends".¹⁷ While, Kumaran observed that ethnic associations have given a new life to the depressed classes by strengthening their group solidarity and identity. They stir for social upliftment and development of their community through educational progress, eradication of superstitions and blind faith, and inculcating and developing spiritualism among the community members. These ethnic associations fight for the democratic rights and demands, through collective members.¹⁸ Thus, the ethnic identity plays an important role in acquiring political power for upward mobility. Ethnicity, therefore, is an alternative form of social organization and identification to class ,but

it is a contingent and chargeable status that like class, may or may not be articulated in particular contexts or at particular times. The socio-political movement of the Rajbanshi people reflects on their separate “ethnic-cum- caste identity” drive which was started in the last phase of nineteenth century formed a distinctive features in the historical perspective.

Historical sources adequately bring out the fact of social mobility among the autochthones in different forms including the emergence of new castes in the social claim of North-Eastern Bengal and parts of Assam. The Rajbanshis appellation and the claim of *kshatriya* status goes back to the early historical period.¹⁹ The colonial administration-ethnographers like Gait, Hutton, Dalton, Risley and Thompson were unanimously support that a section of Koch of Northern Bengal began to call themselves as ‘Rajbanshi’ from the early 19th century. But there was also a belief among others that all the Rajbanshis were not Koch. Some of them were Dravidian and not Mongoloid like the Koches.

Regarding ethnic affinities, Buchanan Hamilton was in opinion that all the Koches are sprung from the same stock, and that most of the Rajbanshis are Koches; but may of the Rajbanshis belong to the different tribes, who have abandoned their impure practices and admitted to communion.²⁰ Hunter viewed the people commonly known as Koch, Rajbanshi and Pali are very mixed race.²¹ A.K. Ray in his article *Some Notes on the Kshatriya Movement in North Bengal* noted that when the Mongoloid Koches rose to power in the West of Assam, and the north of Bengal they gradually fell under the influence of Hinduism and began to assume the name Rajbanshi which was already

the appellation of the great bulk of the admittedly Hindu population in their neighbourhood. Hodgson takes down the physiognomy of the Koches as verily similar to the physical traits of the Mongoloid and thus regard them as Mongoloid.²² He also says, "Hajo's grandson Viswa Singh became Hindu, renounced the name Koch and adopted 'Rajbanshi'". Bravery calls it as a Rajbanshi and Polia are the same ethnic group of people. This ethnic group is not Aryan but it origins from kin of Dravidian- Bhutanese family, says Dalton. However, O' Donnel says, "another interesting tribe is the Rajbanshi or Koch of North-Eastern Bengal, the localization of whose racial position has long been a subject of dispute. They are however, only the third wave of Mongoloid who have advanced through the eastern passes in the first being the Chandal, the second the Koch and the last the Ahom."²³ It assumes that this ethnic group of people's blood is a mixture of Dravidian-Austro- Mongolian impacts to be black or copperier. This group of people, have, small eyes, straight hair- broad jaw. There are yellow and white colour people among the Rajbanshis. Dr. Charu Chandra Sanyal has dealt this issue in his work *The Rajbanshis of North Bengal* in detail. Thus most of the colonial administrator and ethnographer and some of Indian scholars tried to establish that the Koches and the Rajbanshis are the same racial group.

On the other hand, the Indian scholars like Maniram Kavyabhusan, Harikishore Adhikary, Manbholā Ray, Upendra Nath Barman, S.K.Chatterjee and others tried to refer that the Rajbanshis were different from the Koches and the formers were superior than the later. The Rajbanshis were the indigenus Hindu inhabitant than before the reign of Viswa Singh adopted Hinduism. This view is also supported in the religious and cannon literatures like Puranas, *Tantras*,

the Ramayan, the Mahabharata etc. In Chapter No. III it has been discussed in details. On the basis of selected anthropometric observations, Atul Sur comes to the conclusion that in the Jalpaiguri, there was considerable admixture of the Rajbanshi with the Mongoloid blood; where as in West Dinajpur, the *Desi* Rajbanshi had intermingling with the Dravidian race.²⁴ However, the ethnic affinity of the Rajbanshi with the Koch is still a matter of mystery. In addition, on the identity question, several controversial statements have been noted²⁵ that ultimately instead of simplifying the problem, have made the issue more complicated and sensitive. This issue became more complicated when the Rajbanshi claimed ethnic-cum-caste identity and differentiate themselves from the Koches.

Since the late nineteenth century, the institution of Decennial Census had been introduced in colonial India, came as an opportunity to the Rajbanshis for pressing and perhaps obtaining some recognition of the social claim to be enumerated in the census as *kshatriya* otherwise denied by persons of castes higher than their own. They looked at the census as a new government sponsored channel of social mobility. Not only the Rajbanshi, had the existing fragmented society become much more consolidated as most of the caste groups were trying to rally their members around the cultural symbol of caste identity.²⁶ In Bengal, Shekhar Bandopadhyaya has shown that how caste was politicized and used by the Government for the sake of imperial rule in the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries.²⁷ Similarly for Madras Presidency, David Washbrook has argues that by the second decade of the twentieth century the British government had ensured that "the administration continued to run along caste channel".²⁸ This had become a general phenomenon all over India around this

time.²⁹ It is to be remembered that caste formed a very important item in the census operation in British India. A substantial portion of the census reports from 1872 to 1931 was devoted to work out the details of caste ranking and examining the claims of the different castes for higher ranks or caste respectable positions. So census was used by caste groups as an instrument to improve their position in the social hierarchy by assuming new names or titles and advancing claims to a position than that usually assigned to them in the social scale.

The endeavour of the Rajbanshi to be placed higher up in order of precedence and be recognized as *kshatriya* continued from 1872 A.D. to 1931 A.D. census assuming new names viz., from *Koch* to *Rajbanshi* (1872), from *Rajbanshi* to *Bratya / Bhangra Kshatriya* (1891), from *Bratya Kshatriya* to *Rajbanshi Kshatriya* (1911 and 1921) and from *Rajbanshi Kshatriya* to only *Kshatriya* (1931). The Rajbanshi presumed that if they could succeed in getting themselves recorded as *Kshatriya* in the census, an official document of the Government no one would indeed be able to dispute their rank in the caste hierarchy. Further to confirm their *Kshatriya* identity, there were serious efforts on the part of the Rajbanshi leaders to secure the opinion of Brahmin *Pandits* of Nabadwip and Benares and other *shastric* sanctions from them to validate that claim.³⁰ They also wanted to get it legitimized by the priests and genealogists. Mythology and traditions were also frequently cited in support of their claim to be recognized as descendents of *kshatriya varna*. Attempts were being made to recognize *kshatriyahood* as by the Rajbanshi taking the materials from folk tales, folk songs, legends, proverbs etc. For some kind of institutional support to their endeavour to get recognized as *Kshatriya* and also for mass mobilization, they also founded *Kshatriya Samiti* in 1910 at Rangpur. It

was Panchanan Barma under whose leadership the *Kshatriya Samiti* not only put forward claim to higher social status but also urged their members to abandon many of the practices considered degrading by the upper castes have been discussed in the Chapter No. VI.

Historical accounts show that in the context of changing social, economic and political conditions under colonial rule, the Rajbanshis of North –Eastern Bengal strove for '*kshatriyahood*'.³¹ Or, to put it in another way, behind the claim of the Rajbanshi for *kshatriya* status there were many intricate underlying reasons. It was not a sudden demand, but obviously a manifestation of reaction to changing social situation in Northern Bengal. It was in this context, we have to see growth of Rajbanshi caste movement, which grew out of a protest against upper caste domination and represented an urge to change their existing degraded social position. The social system with which Rajbanshis were associated faced a challenge with advent of consistent immigration of caste Hindu from other parts of the country. According to A.K.Ray, with the influx of large number of caste Hindu immigrants who started during the Muslim rule of Bengal reached the peak during the British advent and with modern education, *Zamindari* and new economic system introduced by the British, the pattern of the Hindu society in North Bengal completely changed.³² Following such transformation in social milieu caste distinctions in a nebulous form began even in the autochthonous society. The Rajbanshis entered into a phase of social humiliation and tension when the Hindu migrants with strong caste identity started to interact with them with a sense of caste superiority. Many of them began to lookdown upon the Rajbanshi as an inferior caste and declined to establish any commensally and other social relations with them. There were also instances when the members

of Rajbanshi community suffered from humiliating ill treatment and hatred from upper castes and others. (See the Chapter No. VI in detail). It was under this social degradation, the Rajbanshi leader Panchanan Barma sacrificed his life for the social recognition of *kshatriya* status in social hierarchy system. In the adoption of ritual symbols of a higher *varna* status, this group saw their alleviation in the caste hierarchy. On the other hand, the problems of the backward and illiterate sections of the community were not linked to such issues. Mere claim for higher *varna* status or change in cultural practices without a change in their economic status seemed meaningless to the majority of the community. Realizing this fact, Panchanan Barma, the leader of the Rajbanshi *kshatriya* movement confined caste movement to the articulation of the demand for being enlisted as a Scheduled Caste so that they could enjoy special protection in education, employment and in the matters of representation in the Legislative Council and their local bodies. Throughout different process and controversial arguments, the Rajbanshis entered in the list of Scheduled Caste in 1933.³³ The framer of Indian Constitution also adopted the term Scheduled Castes coined by the British. After Independence, as per Article 341 of Indian constitution and orders of 1950 and 1956 the Rajbanshis remain as Scheduled Caste in West Bengal. This inclusion no doubt helped the community in getting special concessions in education, employment and in the matters representation in the legislative council and the other local bodies. But the inconsistency between their claim of social rank and the special privileges achieved as a member of the Scheduled Caste category had to put an identity crisis to the community. Some controversies were there within and without the Rajbanshi society in accepting the new Scheduled Caste status. However, the Rajbanshi leaders could managed to overcome this controversies arguing that the

category of 'Scheduled' was not related with ritual and social-hierarchical status of a caste and that the category Scheduled Caste just referred to certain caste included in a scheduled for economic and electoral purpose, hence there was no ground for having any misgiving.³⁴ Thus acquiring *kshatriya* status in one hand, enter in the list of Scheduled Caste on the other put the community to an identity question. In this respect, the social movement of the Rajbanshi community differs from the others viz. *Paundra Kshatriya, Malla Kshatriya, and Ugra Kshatriya*. In the nineteenth century the *Paundra Kshatriya, Malla Kshatriya* and *Ugra Kshatriya* claimed higher status through *kshatriya* movement but they did never claim separate ethnic issue and reservation.

On social identity question, the situation of the Rajbanshis in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Bihar, Nepal and Bangladesh, however, somewhat different. The Rajbanshis of West Bengal secured some special protection become of their recognition as Scheduled Caste but the Koch Rajbanshis in undivided Assam could not find any place in the said list. The Koch-Rajbanshis were recognized as MOBC and OBC. Thus, the same ethnic group achieved there difficult status for official purpose viz. Scheduled Caste in West Bengal and MOBC and OBC in Assam. The Rajbanshis of Meghalaya and Tripura are regarded as Scheduled Tribe while in Bihar they are treated as OBC³⁵ under the same constitutional protection for political, social, educational, and economic upliftment. On the other hand, in Nepal and Bangladesh the Rajbanshis are treated as General Caste.³⁶ This kind of variety of social status caused one of the suffering from identity crisis of the Rajbanshis remained unresolved.

The language issue of the Rajbanshis is taken for the mother tongue, or demanded for the development of separate language namely Rajbanshi / Kamatapuri language. It is the general view among the scholars that the people of Eastern Purnea of Bihar; Morang and Jhapa districts of Nepal; Northern districts of West Bengal; undivided Goalpara district of Assam and some part of Bangladesh speak this language.³⁷ The spoken language of the Rajbanshi has been identified by different names such as dialect of Bengali, Goalparia dialect of Assamese, *Kamata*, *Kamrupi*, *Deshi*, *Kamatai* language, *Kamata Behari*, Rajbanshi etc. There is different views among the scholars whether it is dialect or language was discussed in the Chapter No. V. But this spoken language is considered “a heart, a medium of self expression, a way of displaying their ethnic distinction and cultural richness, the existence as people who deserve to be treated as equals in a modern democratic society”³⁸ to the Rajbanshi people. But some section of people terminate this spoken language of Rajbanshi as ‘*Bahe*’. This termination of ‘*Bahe*’ raised question to this ethnic group of people and makes agitation against it. Perhaps the concerned section of people was not aware about the colloquial meaning used by the Rajbanshis including the Hindus and Muslims who have been living in this region for generation. They use the term ‘*Bahe*’ as the shorter form of the vocation ‘*Babahe*’ to address the persons of paternal /maternal and son/ daughter relation of affectionate and love. But this kind of ignorant of knowledge provides wrong message to the general public which is very harmful to the community concerned.

In order to create literary consciousness, the Rajbanshi intellectuals establish a good numbers of cultural centers in the dominated areas. They publish magazine, periodicals, weekly news, and

monthly journals in Kamatapuri / Rajbanshi language, and even set up *Yatra Dal*. This is a good effort of the Rajbanshis to propagate their history, cultural activity, language, anthropology, ecology and political environments. Based on linguistic issue namely *Kamatapuri* language, a section of the Rajbanshi people put forward a political goal viz. to organize movement for separate statehood namely Kamatapuri state. This effort had been done by the Rajbanshis of North Bengal with the collaboration of the Koch –Rajbanshis of lower Assam. Needless to say, this endeavour of separate statehood issue created another crisis of the Rajbanshis. The Kshatriya identity apparently lost its relevance once the Rajbanshis got them enlisted as Scheduled Caste and became entitled for protection in education, job and electoral politics. Rup Kumar Barman has rightly says, “Cultivation of language and literature is not an evil practice but driving the linguistic sentiments of the marginal people with illusionary sights for a separate state is a seductive approach”.³⁹ Professor Ananda Gopal Ghosh has remarked, “By taking ‘*Kamatapuri identity*’ the Rajbanshis are playing an arbitrary construction role which will create more obscurity about their glorious past history, nation and language”.⁴⁰ Needless to say that by the ‘*Kamatapuri identity*’ the future generation of the Rajbanshi community will forget their glorious past, and the contribution of their social leaders who had tried their level best to acquire the ‘Kshatriya identity’. Therefore, the process of demanding separate statehood may be sought out in such a way so that the majority of people of the region might support the overall process.

The psychological distinctiveness of the people of North-Eastern part of India is perhaps the most crucial factor in the development of regional sentiment. Their growing sense of relative

deprivation and feeling of hatred against the immigrants Bengali gentry in Northeastern part of the region created a strong sense of resentment among the Rajbanshis. Indeed, lopsided economic development and exploitation of the national resources of the region by the politically dominant groups or a policy of internal colonial policy are prominent ground which encourage the sense of regional movement like separate statehood and autonomy. In his work *Regional Movements*, Sajal Basu says, domination in service and industry, local of employment opportunities for the educated natives etc. were responsible for the 'Sons of the soil' sentiment in North Bengal. Issuing these factors, the Rajbanshi leadership using their shared ethnic identity, capitalized the grievances to mobilize their community members, and projected this as discrimination against their community. Really, in respect of economic development, employment, transport, and communication, this region is comparatively behind rather than the rest of the state. Therefore, the issue of under development and exploitation of natural resources of this region raised by the UKD, UTJAS, KPP and GCPA is not irrelevant. Analyzing the Uttarkhanda Movement, R.S. Mukhapadhyaya has commented that it was an offshoot of the conflict over sharing of power between the gentry in which the Rajbanshi leaders tactfully used the mythical tradition of the Kamatapuri kingdom to mobilize the local indigenous people.⁴¹ Writing on the present Kamatapuri Movement, H.C. Narjinary, a Mech intellectual, has noted that the Mech community would support the Kamatapuri Movement in North Bengal for a separate state and language. In his opinion, local indigenous people like Rajbanshi, Koch, Mech, and Rabha have not only economically suffered but have also faced social humiliation. After a long and silent suffering, they see this movement as a chance to express their resentment against exploitation.⁴² Very recently the GCDP of Cooch

Behar and GJMM of Darjeeling hill supported the Kamatapuri movement and they declared their joint venture to move against the Government to snatch their demand of separate state namely Kamatapur and Gorkhaland respectively. Jayantanuja Bandopadhaya says, "Kamatapur movement is not fundamentally a problem of law and order, but one of collective existential alienation. Hence, it would also be a grave error to try to suppress the movement with the help of the armed forces, or to marginalize them through the bestowal of minimal local autonomy and Pseudo-philanthropic economic packages".⁴³ Needless to say, it is a power struggle between the indigenous and the immigrants gentry as the former once had dominated the land and gradually became wage labourer, rickshaw puller, house hold servants and have to be migrated to other states for job. It is perhaps the second effort of the indigenous people to acquire economic position through political movement.

The Rajbanshi ethnic assertion had been started in colonial period as a social movement. For identity formation in the changing context, it has been turned into a caste-politics in Bengal under the leadership of elite section of the community. This caste-identity formation and the caste-politics had easily capitalized the caste feelings of the Rajbanshi people and achieved its destination to establish fellow feelings in the community. However, in the last phase a crisis has been created to the Rajbanshi community. This identity crisis became acute when they claimed *kshatriyahood* in one hand, while on the other to enter Scheduled Caste list to take special protection in economic development, education, employment, etc. Finally, it turns into an assertion for nationality with cultural linguistic ethnicity. Since the crisis of the Rajbanshi culture originated from the economic decline of

their people, cultural resistance may not materialized without economic support. Therefore, disseminated linguistic ethnicity and multiple locations of ethnic identity in spite of valid ground of economic deprivation is merely an illusion to both the Rajbanshis and the immigrants' peoples. We may come to conclude that ethnicity can be used to overcome social discrimination but would not be always compatible with the broad ideological objective of a community that has been occurred to the Rajbanshi Kshatriya community.

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Gour Gramin Bank, Chakulia, Uttar Dinajpur. His relatives are still staying at Rangpur in Bangladesh who are treated as General Caste on 10.11.2006.

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