

## PREFACE

*The Rajbanshis, a huge community, have been living for ages in North- Eastern part of India particularly in North Bengal of West Bengal, present Bangladesh (Rangpur, East Dinajpur, North Western part of Mymensingh district, Northern part of Rajshahi and Bogra district), Lower Bhutan, Lower Assam, Meghalaya, Nepal (Bhadrapur, Jhapa, Morang district), Bihar ( Purnea, Katihar and Kishanganj districts). They are also found in some part of Tripura. It is to be mentioned here that the Rajbanshi community of these areas is getting increasing disposed of their distinct ethnic, socio-economics, linguistic and political entities, but also suffering from rudimental identity crisis in all fields. In the present study, it would like to be highlighted the problems of Rajbanshis.*

*The proposed study of the "Ethno-Cultural Identity Crisis of the Rajbanshis in North Eastern part of India and Nepal and Bangladesh" is an attempt to concentrate a serious inquest on micro-history hitherto unexplored and devoid of levity. This maiden effort is undoubtedly the first of its kind to synthesize an untold chapter of Indian history during the period of 1891-1979. It is felt that case studies of regional, local or micro-level will be helpful in bringing to light many untold or unnoticed corners of the history of our recent past. The case studies at regional, local, or micro-level of our recent past have been*

neglected still now. From this point of view, this proposed study has been selected regarding the identity crisis of the Rajbanshis from 1891 to 1979. The problem of the Rajbanshi community gets an impetus movement in 1891 when the Census authority of India (1891) issues an instruction to the effect that Rajbanshis is same as 'Kochi' and such Rajbanshi Kshatriyas be returned with the Koch communities as had done in the previous Census of 1872. The circular of census authority barred the people of the community to register their caste as Kshatriya. This issue created resentment to the Rajbanshi people and in many places of Rangpur, Dinajpur and other parts of Bengal, they refused to disclose their name to the census officials and field workers. Keeping this point in mind, the year 1891 has been introduced in the proposed study. In 1979, the UTJAS movement (UTTARBANGA TAPASILI JATI O ADIVASI SANGATHAN) in North Bengal demanded autonomy. They also demanded economic development of the backward classes. It is interesting to mention here that before coming in power in 1977 the Left Front parties were sympathized to the various tribes in North- Eastern part of India. However, it is ironically observed that after establishment of the Left Front Government in West Bengal, a section of those people have been opposing against this Government and claiming separation in different regions. In this perspective, the Uttarkhand movement (1969), UTJAS movement and the Kamatapuri movement have been emerged with their distinct linguistic entities and separation. On the other hand, the ethnographers, British administrators, and scholars opine that the Rajbanshis and the Koches are the same and they are known as Koch Rajbanshi in Assam. A section of Koch Rajbanshi of Assam also launched

*a separation movement with the collaboration of Rajbanshi people of West Bengal. They submitted memorandums to the Prime Minister and the President of India from time to time. Under these circumstances, it turns into a challenge to the present Government of India as well as the Government of West Bengal and Assam to tackle the situation for the integration of our tradition.*

*The planning of this proposed study is as follows.*

*The chapter –I begins with the geographical landscape of North-Eastern part of India comprising the areas where the Rajbanshis are majority in number. It also deals with the river system of this area. An attempt has been made to explore the historical names of North- Bengal of present West Bengal since ancient period viz. Pragjyotishpur, Kamrup, Pundrabhumi, Louhitya, Goudabhumi or Barendra Bhumi, Kamatapur and Kamata Coochi- Behar etc.*

*In the second chapter, a brief profile of the environments and character of the North-Eastern Rajbanshis along with Nepal and Bangladesh has been given in order to distinguish them from the other castes and Tribes of North- Eastern part of India and abroad. The discussion shows the distribution of the Rajbanshis in different districts, and climate and ecology of the area of our study. Here the word 'Environment' is not used fair technically or lexicographical meaning rather it is used as 'Social and cultural environment'. The foothills, hills, and hillocks of western Assam and the Duars (mountain Passes) to*

*Bhutan of the Sub-Himalayan Bengal were closely associated with the cultural format and mode of production of the people of the region. Plenty of Jungles and forests with wild animals of large varieties are closely linked with the total animism, hunting and gathering, cattle rearing and their way of life. Therefore, the people of this region, tribal and non – tribal used to collect their tools for hunting, fishing and agricultural operation from the forests. The forests of this region were also full with reeds, bamboos, caves, timbers, natural fruits, medicinal herbs etc. There were huge areas of land for agricultural production. The inhabitants were self-sufficient. They never feel deprivation from natural resources rather than the others. With these enormous natural resources, the local people were happy and they were simple and sympathetic in nature. This chapter deals in the simple and sympathetic character of the Rajbanshis along with their habits and customs, food grains and dress style etc.*

*The third chapter shows the historical and ethnological data of the Rajbanshis. It shows the discussion of different scholars, ethnographers, viz Indian writers and foreign scholars regarding both origin and ethnological aspects of the Rajbanshis.*

*The chapter IV shows the population of the Rajbanshis in North eastern part of India, Nepal and Bangladesh. It also deals with the social formation of the Rajbanshis. A brief profile of the socio-economic life of the Rajbanshis has been depicted in order to situate them within the social as well as economic structure. It also deals with the demographic changes in North Bengal after independence. The discussion*

*shows how the social, economic, and cultural differentiation had been taking place between the Rajbanshis and the immigrant people. It has been shown that how this difference corresponded social consciousness to the Rajbanshis.*

*The fifth chapter deals with linguistic question and cultural resurgence. The discussion shows debate on linguistic question-whether the language of the Rajbanshis is Bengali or dialect or separate language. This question gradually leads to constitute the Rajbanshis in the cultural resurgence from time to time. The Rajbanshi intellectuals have set up a good number of cultural centers to propagate their cultural activities and published a number of periodicals, pamphlets news bulletins, magazine etc. They contacted with All Koch Rajbanshi Students Union of Assam. Thus, cultural resurgence corresponds to political consciousness among a section of the Rajbanshis in North Bengal and Assam is the subject matter of this chapter.*

*The sixth chapter deals with the aspect of the social movement, focusing on the major issues taken up by the Rajbanshi caste movement and its attitude toward the British, the ongoing anti-imperialist struggle, and the Muslims, who constituted around 50% of the local population of North Bengal also responds to the Rajbanshi movement. How the different sections among the Rajbanshis responded to the socio-cultural and the political agenda of the Rajbanshi social movement, called the Kshatriya movement was led by the Kshatriya Samiti and other organizations have been discussed. The Kshatriya Samiti*

had launched a vigorous movement through different census operations for their legitimized higher social status i.e., 'Kshatriya status' in Hindu society. Finally, the Rajbanshis had secured their 'Kshatriya status' in 1931 Census Report. After securing 'Kshatriya status', the chief architect of the Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement, Rai Saheb Panchanan Barma very tactically placed the economic backwardness of the Rajbanshis. When the Government of India prepared a list of the socio-economic backward class called 'depressed classes' for their special protection, Rai Saheb Panchanan also launched movement to enlist in the depressed class category. The Government, however, prepared the list as Scheduled Caste instead of 'Depressed Class'. The Rajbanshis had enlisted into the list of Scheduled Caste and waited to take the reservation facilities. It was an anti-thesis for the Rajbanshis who secured the 'Kshatriya status' and took the reservation facilities of the lower caste simultaneously. The chapter also shows the success of the Kshatriya movement in North Bengal, it had no influence in Assam. Why the Koch Rajbanshi people of Assam did not support the Kshatriya movement of Rai Saheb Panchanan Barma is also a subject matter of this chapter.. The Chapter also deals with the reservation politics of the Rajbanshis. At the later phase of Kshatriya movement, the Rajbanshi Kshatriya leaders merely concentrated in reservation politics. Consequently, the Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement lost its vigorous character of its initial stage. Very few well established Rajbanshis could secure their fate taking part in election, the condition of the masses remained the same and it had lost its potentiality to the common Rajbanshis.

*In the seventh chapter, it would be stressed on the genesis of socio-economic and cultural crisis of the Rajbanshi people, the predominant group of the North Eastern part of India, which led them regionalism in the form of separatist and autonomy particularly for recognition of a distinct cultural linguistic identity including regional development during post- colonial period. They founded a good number of socio-political organizations during the period under review like Uttar Khanda Dal (UKD-1969), Uttarbanga Tapasili Jati-upjati Adivasi Sangathan (UTJAS-1979) Koch-Rajbnashi International (KRI-1984), Bharatiya Kamta Rajya Parisad (BKRP-1986), Kamatapuri Peoples Party (KPP-1987), Uttarbanga Rajya Samgram Parisad (UBRSP-1996) Greater Cooch Behar Peopl Association (GCPA-1998) to fulfill their ultimate goal of separate state and autonomy.*

*In the eighth chapter, the caste identity of the different castes and ethnic- cum -caste identity of the Rajbanshis have been discussed. The demand of ethnic/racial based identity of the Rajbanshis is one of the arbitrary constructions, which led the Rajbanshis to the origin of identity crisis later on. It is to be mentioned here that the endeavour of the Rajbanshis to be placed higher up in the order of precedence and be recognized as Kshatriya continued until 1931 by assuming in different census. In their desire to be recorded as a member of high caste, they passed through at least four distinct social identities from one census to another i.e. from Koch to Rajbanshi (1872 A.D.) , from Rajbanshi to Bratya/ Bhangra Kshatriya (1891), from Bratya/ Bhangra Kshatriya to Rajbanshi Kshatriya (1901, 1911, 1921 A.D.) and from Rajbanshi*

*Kshatriya to only Kshatriya. These occasional distinctions of the Rajbanshis had been raised their identity question to the present generation of the community. Such type of identity question corresponds to the identity crisis when they searched reservation about being as 'depressed classes'. Apart from this, the Rajbanshis are treated in different categories within the same Indian constitution viz., in West Bengal they are treated as SC, in Assam they are going to move to be ST while in Bihar the Rajbanshis are treated as OBC. These different identities lead the Rajbanshis to another identity crisis is the subject matter of this chapter.*

*In the final chapter, the Rajbanshi ethnic assertion has been discussed with the views of the Indian and foreign scholars. 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. Therefore, it has been shown 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.*

### *The Objective of this present Study:*

*The proposed study attempts to analyze the reasons behind the Social and political movement on the issues of identity crisis of the Rajbanshis and relates them to the historical and developmental context of India specially, it attempts to investigate:-*

- i) Historical as well as ethno-linguistic and Caste factors;*
- ii) The socio-economic background of the Rajbanshis agitation.*
- iii) The ethno- linguistic and identity factors have given rise to the emergence of the political and social agitation among the Rajbanshis.*
- iv) The linguistic question:- Whether the language of the Rajbanshis contents to prove itself as separate language from Bengali namely Kamatapuri or simply it is a northern dialect of Bengali.*
- v) The role of the Government policies and the response and reaction of the political leaders or organization.*
- vi) Growth of regional movements coincides with uneven development that generates a feeling of deprivation.*

vii) *The identity crisis among Rajbanshis in the context of Nepal, Bangladesh and India distinguish themselves from each other's.*

*For source materials, the present study has depended on archival materials as well as on published government reports, such as district Gazetteers and Census reports. But there is a major problem in getting information from official records on caste and social movement, which was not so important from the Government's perspectives. In view of this problem, field trips were undertaken in areas where the Rajbanshis were mainly concentrated or the leaders and veteran persons essentially those who have observed the problem and some other directly involved in the problem from a close quarter. Information and data for the proposed study have, therefore, been collected from published and unpublished documents, party resolutions and other related documents. Through cross-verification of archival documents, caste literature, and field experience, this study has sought to reconstruct a faithful history of the Ethnic Problem, Social, and Political Movement of the Rajbanshis during the period under review.*

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