

CHAPTER-II

Environments and Character of the North-Eastern
Rajbanshis along with Nepal and Bangladesh

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ENVIRONMENTS AND CHARACTER OF THE NORTH EASTERN RAJBANSHIS ALONG WITH NEPAL AND BANGLADESH

2.1 Environments of North Eastern part of India:

As we today glance at the map of India on the northeastern extremity, we find a number of spanned-out states namely, Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, Sikkim, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh. These states are linked with the rest of India by a narrow corridor in Eastern Bihar and West Bengal, winding its way between Nepal and Bhutan on the North, and Bangladesh on the south. Located between 24° North to 28° North latitudes and between $89^{\circ} 46'$ East to $97^{\circ} 4'$ East longitudes. This present study will be confined to the north eastern region comprising the northern districts of West Bengal (Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Malda, South Dinajpur and North Dinajpur); some districts of Bangladesh (Rangpur, East Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Bogra) ; Assam (Goalpara, Northern part of Kamrup, western part of Naogaon districts); Meghalaya; Bihar (Eastern part of Purnea district, Katihar, Kishanganj); Tripura and Nepal. This area is formerly known as province of Eastern Bengal excluding Nepal in 1901 covering an area of nearly 190000-square mile, and contained a population of 78 $\frac{1}{2}$ million persons. ¹ According to the Census Report of India 1991, the total area of North Bengal particularly is covered with 22316 sq Km. and population about 12036292 and the density of the population was 560/sq. Km.. By virtue of its location in the transitional zone between East and South Asia, the region characteristically exhibits amalgamation of

phenomena. It has with a great variety of environmental features in different tracts. It stretches from the foothills of the Himalayas to the Padma on the South, forms part of the great Gangetic plains and is wholly alluvial, with the exception of a strip of Sub-montane country in Jalpaiguri and of an elevated tract of quassi-laterite soil, known as the Barind, on the confine of the districts of Dinajpur, Malda, Rajshahi and Bogra. The general level of the country is very low especially in Rangpur, and the central part of Rajshahi, where the rivers have silted up and there is a network of moribund streams and watercourses.

The natural environment of this area is traversed by innumerable streams most of them originated in the hills of Bhutan, Sikim and Tibet to the north of this area. The main rivers are, Mahanada, Karotoya, Tista, Jaldhaka, Toorsa, Raidak, Sankosh, Kaljani, and Brahmaputra along with their tributaries. These rivers swell up enormously in the rains and dry up against completely in the winter leaving sandy beds strewn with stones and sand. The flood does not stay long. It subsides without a few hours and the enormous speed of the water sweeps away large trees to long distances, which are found, deposited on the dry beds in the winter. It is dangerous to navigate these rivers in the rains due to a large number of driftwood. The over flow leaves a deposit of sand and stone converting many fertile lands into wilderness where only long thatch grass grows rendering the cultivation of other crops impossible for many years. This process is going on for a long time and extensive patches of sandy tracts are always visible in this area. The rivers are erratic in the nature and frequently changing their course. ² This frequent changing of the course of the rivers caused heavy damages to the inhabitants on its banks. Some time it caused damages to a whole

villages and engulfing it. Therefore, the river very often influenced the habitation of North Bengal of West Bengal.

The average soil condition is sandy loam. Heavy rainfall causes soil erosion and washes away the surface every year. Hence, the production of paddy and jute fails for blows that of South Bengal. Tobacco is grown in this soil especially in the district of Cooch Behar. The cultivators raise earth embankments (Ali) found small plots of land called '*Khotu*' to preserve the water and to prevent soil erosion.³ These embankments from the boundary demarcation of cultivations land, they serve as path way and the grass grown on them serves as a pasture for the cattle when the low lands are waterlogged. The big and broad embankments serve as highways for bullock carts to go.⁴

The country being situated in the sub-montane area of the Himalayas with dense forest on the north is generally damp. Formerly malaria and black water fevers used to take a toll many lives every year but these have now been considerably checked in recent time. These environmental conditions of this Sub-Himalayan tract greatly influenced the habitation its socio-economic position.

It is to be mentioned here that the word 'Environment' is not used fair technically or lexicographical meaning rather it is used as 'Social and cultural environment'. The climate and ecology have greatly shaped the social and natural environment of the people in this region. 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. As result, we find that when the outsiders came to the place, they did never face any difficulties regarding shelter, refreshment, hospitality from the local people viz., the Rajbanshi people of this area. The Rajbanshis were dominant in position in this region. They were the largest number of the Hindu society. The Rajbanshis were very much sympathetic to the uprooted people who had come to this region from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) at the initial stage. They gave shelter and food to the immigrants. It would not to be exaggerated that at the initial stage the immigrants were brought up in the lap of the Rajbanshi *jotedars*. There was no confrontation between the local people and the immigrants though their cultural practices were different in nature. Gradually the number of the immigrants were being increased day by day. After independence this tendencies became very worse. The huge influx of people not only created the social problem viz. habitation, growth of population but growing of land demand of land prices. Local people, tempted by the spiraling prices soon began to sell their lands leading to the transformation of the local small and middle *jotedars* into under tenants, subservient to a new class of immigrant landed gentry. Indeed all over

the region, the phenomenon of transfer of land from the hands of the Rajbanshis to those of the non-Rajbanshis became a standard pattern and in course of time, it generated a sense of grievance among the disposed Rajbanshi gentry. Needless to say, once the immigrants who were brought up in the lap of the Rajbanshi *jotedars*, became the administrative mechanism of this region. On the other hand, the Rajbanshi who dominated this region became landless and powerless in due course of time. The Rajbanshis felt that the immigrants are intellectually slashing their lands and they are lagging behind in all fields rather than the immigrants. Thus, a section of the Rajbanshi people raised the immigrants and underdevelopment issues. They subsequently launched socio-political movements to resume their position in the name of autonomy and separatism. This issue has been discussed in detail in the Chapter No. VII.

2.2. Social composition of North Eastern Part of India:

Social format of this region is very complex due to the admixtures of different biological and cultural communities. Vernacular and Sanskrit texts, Persian literatures and certain anthropological societal format of this region comprising the multilingual tribal and non-tribal communities. The *Kalika Purana* categorically illustrated that the Kiratas or as *Mlechchhas* were the original inhabitants of *Prgjyotish-Kamarupa*, who in our present knowledge system are considered to be the tribal people. ⁵ The *Yogini Tantra*, on the other hand, has described them as *Kuvachaka* (evil speakers) or non-Aryan people. ⁶ Tribal culture and Non-Aryan physical stature highlighted in these texts indicate that the tribal communities of the Mongoloid race have been existed in the reign

since the pre-historic period. It has also been corroborated by the account of Yuan Chawang (Hiuen Tsang), the Chinese traveller. Yuan Chawang illustrated that the people of region 'were of honest way, small of stature and black-looking. Their speech different a little from that of mid India, they were of violent disposition and were preserving students; they worshipped the *Devas*, and did not believe in Buddhism".⁷ The *Tabakat – i- Nasiri*, a thirteenth century Persian works of Minhaj-ud-din Siraj, has given a similar description. It is clearly mentioned in this work that the settlement of three districts of tribal communities in the region situated 'between the country of Bengal (Lakhnawati) and Tibet viz. Koch, Mech and Tharu.⁸ So the descriptions of the Sanskrit texts and historical literatures about the tribal people of North Eastern region are undoubted by indicated to the present tribal communities like *Koch ,Mech, Tharu, Garo, Kachari, Bhutia ,Chutia ,Rabha Rajbanshis* etc. Formerly, the constant war with Bhutan, Nepal and other neighbouring tribes devastated the area long age. The terribly malarial country with forests containing wild animals had no attraction for the fortune seekers. Later on, the *Rajas* of Cooch Behar and Baikunthapur invited many people from the south of Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and encouraged them to settle in this country by giving them free lands. With the advent of British being peace followed, a large number of men from all parts of India came to this country at first as fortune seekers and then settled down as permanent residents. The Tea Estate that came into being after the British conquest of the Duars from Bhutan attracted nearly three lacs of people from Behar and parts of India and many of them have now settle down in this country as cultivators. They were mostly *Oraons* and *Santals*. The earliest inhabitants that could be traced were Bhutia, Toto, Mech, Koch, Tharu and Rajbanshi.⁹ However, social stratification of the people of this region, available in colonial and post colonial official sources may be

discussed into three division viz. i) social- traditional classification, ii) religious classification and ,iii)ethno-linguistic classification. Rupkumar Barman ¹⁰ in his *Contested Regionalism* has also supported this social formation.

Based on official parameter of social –traditional classification, people of this North- Eastern region under review can be classified as Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Castes (OBC) and General (GEN). The *Rabhas*, *Meches* (*Bodos*), *Totos*, *Limbus*, *Tamangs*, and *Dhimals* who have been classified is Scheduled Tribes, have their special concentration and the districts of Lower Assam. These tribal castes have been settled in this region since the earlier period. Similarities in the racial origin, early history and cultural traditions of the Koch Rajbanshis, *Meches* and *Rabhas* and their multiple references in the diverse historical literatures have created confusion about their identity. ¹¹ The *Totos* is a small tribal community of a village of Jalpaiguri. The Toto dominated area is called *Totopara*. Like the *Totos*, the *Garos* and *Hajons* are small tribal communities of Jalpaiguri although they are largely distributed in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya.

Table 2.1: Distribution of SC and ST population in North Bengal.

District	Total	SC	ST	% of SC to total population	% of ST to total population	% of SC/ST to total population
Darjeeling						
1971	781777	98277	108586	12.58	13.88	26.46
1981	1024269	145942	151073	14.25	14.75	29
1991	1299919	209876	179163	16.14	13.78	29.92
Jalpaiguri						
1971	1750159	595424	428595	34.02	24.48	58.50
1981	2214871	766498	491791	34.61	22.20	56.81
1991	2800543	1035971	589225	36.99	21.02	58.02
Cooch Behar						
1971	1414183	665020	10611	47.02	0.75	47.79
1981	1771643	883084	101105	49.58	0.57	50.42
1991	2171145	1123719	132275	51.76	0.61	52.32
W.Dinajpur						
1971	1859887	429578	221317	23.09	11.89	34.98
1981	2404947	687094	261600	28.57	10.82	39.39
1991	3127653	907553	208487	29.01	6.66	35.67
Maldah						
1971	1612657	265697	130715	16.47	8.10	24.57
1981	2031871	343089	153300	16.89	7.54	24.43
1991	2637032	477896	171326	18.12	6.49	24.61
North Bengal						
1971	7418665	2053996	899824	27.68	12.12	39.80
1981	9447601	2825707	10558860	29.90	11.20	41.10
1991	12036292	3755087	1161566	31.19	9.65	40.84

Source: Census of 1921

There are few more tribal communities in this North-Eastern India who migrated to North Bengal in colonial period such as *Santals*, *Oraons*, *Mudas*, *Malpaharies*, *Mahalis*, *Ho*, *Sabar*, *Birhors*, *Bhumiz*, *Lohar* etc. They actually migrated to this region from Jharkhand mainly as tea plantation labourers'. After a long transition, these people have been completely merged with the land and culturally enriched the region.

It may be noted that the Rajbanshis are the largest Scheduled Caste people in North Bengal while the same group of people is recognized as Scheduled Tribes in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and other North Eastern states in India. ¹² In Bihar, the Rajbanshis are recognized as Other Backward Castes (OBC) and in Nepal and Bangladesh; they are recognized as General Castes. The *Namasudras*, *Malos*, *Jalia Kaibartas*, *Patnis*, *Bagdis*, *Poundras*, *Dhobas*, *Mallas*, *Dom*, *Hadi*, *Sunri*, *Ghashi*, *Chamar* etc. were also included in the list of Scheduled Caste community. There were few Nepali speaking Scheduled Caste communities in North Bengal such as *Dami*, *Kamai*, *Sarki*. The OBCs although have been categorized recently numbers of such communities are being increased gradually. Rest of the people whether Caste-Hindu, Muslims (except few OBCs), Buddhist, Christians or any other communities have been categorized here as general castes and the second parameter of the social stratification were included them.

The third parameter of social stratification is the ethno-linguistic features of the communities. Apart from Bengali, Assamese, Nepali, Hindi, few ethno-linguistic regional communities generally are called tribe. They have their own dialect/languages like *Rabha*, *Mech (bodo)*, *Garo*, *Koch*, and *Mikir* etc. Linguistically they belong to *Tibeto-Burma* group. It is to be mentioned here that the Bodo language is directly related to the post-colonial Bodo land movement of Lower Assam. But the most debatable linguistic issue of the North Eastern region under review is the status of *Rajbanshi/ Kamatapuri* language. Whether it is a dialect or language, it is true that it is practiced by a large number of people including Nasya Shaikh, Rabhas and some other tribal of North Bengal and Northeast India. And it must be mentioned here that the *Rajbanshi /Kamatapuri* is the main issue of the separate statehood

movement of West Bengal on the basis of linguistic issue which will be discussed in the Chapter No.V.

Table.2:2 :Koch –Rajbanshi population in North Bengal in 1971,1981,1991

District	1971		1981		1991	
	Koch	Rajbanshi	Koch	Rajbanshi	Koch	Rajbanshi
Darjeeling	551	31505	192	62770	94	96745
Jalpaiguri	9572	329191	356	514274	538	656073
Cooch Behar	919	481304	1438	714221	2497	865622
W. Dinajpur	1527	134976	3267	369015	5005	489642
Maldah	3561	50693	3793	83462	5139	114697
North Bengal	16130	1027669	9046	1743642	13212	2222779

Sources: Census of West Bengal :1971,1981 and 1991.

The Rajbanshi population in Nepal can be found predominantly within the Jhapa and Morang districts in the southeastern corner of the country. The 1991 census of Nepal gives the total number of Rajbanshi in the country as 85,558. In the district of Jhapa, there was reported to be 66,224 Rajbanshi, whereas in Morang district, the Census records the Rajbanshi population as 18,243. This leaves only, 1,091 Rajbanshi spread throughout other districts of Nepal, not restricted to Jhapa and Morang's neighbouring district. There are a number of Rajbanshi people in Bangladesh. In Purnea district of Bihar the Rajbanshi people comprises 1,03,002.¹³ There are also a number of Rajbanshi people in Katihar and Kishanganj district in Behar.

It is now cleared that societal framework of the North Eastern region under review is very complex in term of language and culture. In Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts of West Bengal the Scheduled Caste / Scheduled Tribe population is the majority accordance to the table 2.1. They are also majority in the districts of lower Assam.

Among the Scheduled Caste, the Koch –Rajbanshis on the other hand, is the largest community in North Bengal of West Bengal. And the separate statehood movement in North Bengal including the lower Assam is basically linked with the Koch- Rajbanshis on the questions of their cultural –linguistic identities. The separate statehood issue will be discussed in the Chapter Nos. V and VII in this paper. There are some distinctive characteristics in the life style of the Rajbanshi people of North Eastern part of India. Let us expose the distinctiveness of the Rajbanshi people of North Eastern part of India and Nepal and Bangladesh.

2.3. Characteristics of the Rajbanshis of the Northeastern part of India:

The Rajbanshis constituted the most predominant section of the local Hindu population in the Northern districts of West Bengal. Numerically they were the third largest Hindu caste in Bengal as whole.¹⁴ The origin of the caste is shrouded in mystery and the basic debate is around the question of their association with the Koches. Whatever might have been their actual origin, there is no dispute about the fact that the Rajbanshis were the early settlers in North Bengal. They were socially homogenous community, in the sense that there was no sub caste among them. Their religious- cultural practices were simple and free from Caste-Hindu rigidities and social organizations were different from the Caste-Hindu culture, which provided the Rajbanshis a distinct character.

2.3.1. Physical appearance of the Rajbanshis:

Generally, the Rajbanshis have darker skin and some are black. But in the case of the *Zamindar* of Baikunthapur, the children and most of their nearest kin (Raj-gan) have fair skin tinged yellow.¹⁵ The common thing is nose which is flat and at least the tip of the nose is broad, high cheek bones and thick lips, the eyes are generally small and slightly oblique. Recent observations marked that the Rajbanshi allow inter-caste marriage and their physical appearance has been changed than the former one. Even one can hardly be recognized the Rajbanshi and the caste Hindus.

2.3.2. Marriage System:

There was free intermarriage between Rajbanshi, Koch and Dhimal. But at present the Rajbanshi prefers to marry within them. In spite of this, the Rajbanshi allow free intermarriage among the other caste Hindu people. The *Panichita*, *chotradani*, *Ghorsodhani* forms of marriage are peculiar to those people.¹⁶

The marriage woman with husband living always uses vermilion on their forehead but not do they always wear iron bangles round the wrist. The women with husband living could be identified by the conch-shell a bangle (Sankha-kharu) at parting of hair is gradually growing but using of iron bangles becomes rare even in village. The widow remarriage is allowed but they do never use conch shell bangles or any vermilion. The women used silver ornaments of which 'Sujjahaar'

(Surjya har), 'Chandra har', and 'chora kathi' are specialties that are not seen anywhere else in Bengal.

2.3.3. Dress style of the Rajbanshis:

The Rajbanshis of North Eastern part of India had regional specialty in their dress. The original residents of the region had to become self-sufficient in spinning and making clothes. Spinning was the part time profession of the women in their leisure period. In the Terai, many poor women had their livelihood by spinning cotton yarn. Cotton used to extensively in Goalpara and Kamrup districts. It has been mentioned in the 'Gurucharit' of Assamese literature that Hariya Mandal, the father of Biswa Singha used to cultivate cotton by digging lands with the help of spade. The regional name of cotton is 'banga'. Because the Meches mainly used to do the cultivation of this cotton, this was given the name 'Mech-banga', being carried on the bullock back. The weaving instruments on which the women had to weave very crude and they had to tie the yarn on the woven cloth was very short.

Formerly, the Rajbanshi adult women of the villages were a piece of cloth called *phata* tied round the chest just above the breast, which hangs up to the knees. The *Phota*, that women were used to wear were all hand woven and mostly dyed in red and blue. The weavers were dying out due to impact of mill made cloth. Later it was having replaced. The dress of Rajbanshi women was gradually being replaced by 'shari' made of handloom and power loom. Sometimes the women wear blouse. But in present time dress has been changed so far as modern culture. Men also had to wear short clothes for the similar reasons. Poor farmers and labourers used to wear loin clothes covering the buttock and the upper

portion of the thigh, while they were engaged in cultivation work but when they go out they used full-length cloth. The rich class put on the knee-length *dhotis* and other valuable garments in their life style. Besides the cotton wrappers, relatively well-off people used *Bhutia rags*, *Mekhala* sheets and heavy *kantha* in winter. Dishes ordinarily made of aluminum and water jars were made of gourd; earthen vessels jars, pots, etc. were the main household utensils of the common people. Zinc bangles, coral beads, silver jewelers were in use. There was hardly any use of gold ornaments. But in recent, the Rajbanshi women are using gold ornaments and civilized garments have been using both the men and women of this community.

According to L.A Waddel ¹⁷ the dress of the Rajbanshi is generally like Bengali peasant. The women go usually with their heads uncovered. Their dress like that of the Kachari woman is merely a narrow stripped cloth wrapped round the body. In younger women, this cloth reaches as high as the breasts and descends to little more than loincloths. The married women usually wear a bracelet of huge conch-shell like the *Bhutiya* women of Eastern Nepal. On the other hand, the Rajbanshis of Assam claim to be the *Kshatriya* in *Varna* system. The married women put vermilion and wear shell Bangles as marriage symbols ¹⁸. In the villages, the males wear only a loincloth while engaged in cultivation work. While going out of the village they wear full-length cloth and a shirt to cover the body and in the winter wear 'Chuddar'. The little kiddies are carried by tying them at the back of the mother with a piece of cloth the legs hanging on the two sides of the mother and the head protruding out of the upper opening of the cloth sling. ¹⁹ In this position, the child does not appear feeling uncomfortable. But in recent the tendency of carrying child on back is found rear.

2.3.4. Intoxicating Practices:

The Rajbanshis specially the women are voracious chewers of 'Pan' (*Betal* leaves). They gradually chew *betal* leaves from the creepers and climb up the areca trees. The *Zaminder* of Baikunthapur-P.D. Raikat once prevailed upon to Charu Chandra Sanyal to chew a 'Pan' prepared in his own way with green areca nut and lime. No sooner had he chewed a little his ears turned red, he began to perspire, so dangerously intoxicating and irritating the preparation was to the unaccustomed.²⁰

The women smoke tobacco in their own home but rarely in public. The male are veteran smokers of tobacco. They set fire to the prepared tobacco²¹ in a '*chilim*', hold its narrower end inside the palm of the two hands and smoke through a used '*Hookka*'.²² Recent the using of '*Hookka*' is to be found very rare. It cannot be seen even in the Rajbanshi dominated areas.

2.3.5. Superstitious Belief:

The Rajbanshi women in North Bengal carry a small knife when going out . They move about freely without *pardah*. It is said that the knife or the iron of the knife is a guard against the attack of the evil spirits. It is not unusual to see a Rajbanshi women on a village road with a knife or a '*dao*' in her hand on market days when she has to travel away to make purchase. The Rajbanshi believe in the evil spirit. The writer has much experienced about calling *baidya* to drive away the evil spirit if some one was attacked. Jharu *Baidya* was one of the popular *Ojha* who was used to drive away the evil spirit at the author's village area.

2.3.6. Food Habits:

Peoples' food habits of a particular region are developed depending on the natural and geographical situation. Environment also influences the food habit of a particular region. For this specific reason, food habits of the Northeastern part of India have some specialties among the caste and tribes. The principal food items are rice, fish, meat, and bird's meat. In the off-seasons and famine period, a large number of populations had to live on *cheena*, *Kaun* and *poyra sattu* (grinds) i.e. inferior staple food. Milk, because of its abundant availability found a significant place in the list of food articles. Butter and curd (*doi*) were natural corollaries. One of the popular milk products was curd made in the earthen pot (*ghatiya doi*). There was also a system of making curds in the Bamboo spout (hollow), *chira* (Flattened rice), *Muri* (Puffed rice), *Moya* (sweetened ball of puffed rice) with *ghatia doi* (curd) were very popular kind of food. *Doi-chira* (flattened rice with curd) is still a specialty of Rajbanshi culture. It is used as *prasada* for deity worship. *Atiya kala* (Banana with lots of seeds) sometimes-called *Bichi Kala* (seedy banana) is added to *doi-chira* when used as *prasada*. Otherwise also *doi-chira* is necessary as part of any ceremonial feast-particularly marriage related feasts.

At the time of marriage, *doi -chira* was used to be sent on yoke used for carrying the gift articles to the new relative as a token of respect. Fish-small or big which was available in plenty in the innumerable ponds, *beels*, rivers, paddy fields. The main instrument for catching fishers from such natural sources of water were *jhako*, *Palo*, *Jakai*, *Kocha*, *Jalanga*, *Dhorka*, *Deru*, *Hook*, *Burung*, *Khalai* etc. After the rains in the month of September and October, lots of fishes

particularly small fishes used to be caught in the ponds, *nala*, *beels*, most of which, except the deeper ones, got dried after the winter because of the nature of soil with low water retention capacity. Both the factors led to the idea of dry fish and eating dry fish became a food habit among the Rajbanshi. Not only the Rajbanshi, the other people of this region also eat dry fish. *Sidal*, a food variety made out of dry fish is still a special item. ²³

Among the vegetables and pulses, the locality cultivated and available brinjal, bitter gourd, bottle gourd, potato, *kakrol*, *shim* and *thakuri*, *masari*, *khesari*, *mug*, *kulti kalai*, etc. pulses were the main varieties. *Khuria*, *battua*, *kalmi*, *dheki*, *kachusak*, *patasak*, (jute leaves) *nafasak* were main leafy vegetables. *Sukati* made of dried leaves of jute and *bathua* is one of the delicious. It may be mentioned that the necessity of salt is used to be met by alkaline liquid. This alkaline salt was the alkaline water prepared out of ash obtained by burning the fibrous roots of plantain trees put through the distillation process. This kind of alkaline fermentation was used for cleansing the hair (especially by women) as substitute of soap and for washing clothes as substitute of soda. But this practice is gradually being given up even in the locality. The process of boiling clothes in earthen vessel with the help of alkaline water was given a specific name "*Chhyakapara deoa*". Alkaline water, slightly purified, was used for preparing human food called '*Chhyaka*' also. Alkaline water put in the preparation of gourd and *Kachu* (arum) makes delicious '*chhyaka*'. ²⁴

2.3.7. Household making Materials:

Houses were constructed mainly with the help of natural resources like bamboo, straw, kushgrass, shrubs and wood available in

plenty in the naturally grown forest and jungles. In the northern portion of the region, which was infested with wild animal, houses were mainly made of forest wood. Comparatively well-off people had the roofs constructed of tin. There was hardly any use of bricks, cement and iron rods, poles, hedges, truss, etc. because of availability of bamboo. But there were some *Zaminders* houses among the Rajbanshis who used bricks, iron rods, poles to make their house. Sometimes the Rajbanshi *Zamindars* used to make brick field themselves to build their house because there was scarcity of brickfield in locality.²⁵

2.3.8. Education facilities:

There was hardly any facility for education and medical treatment. People were mostly illiterate. According to the Census Report 1921, the total number of literate and illiterate Rajbanshi and Koch population of Bengal Province were 96140; 4293 and 1567808; 126979 respectively. The table: 2.3 shows the total number of literate and illiterate of the Rajbanshi and the Koch population in the Bengal Province.²⁶

Table: 2.3 Total numbers of literate and illiterate Rajbanshi and the Koch people

Caste	Locality	Population											
		Total			literate			illiterate			learning in Eng.		
		Persons	Male	Female	Persons	Male	Female	Persons	Male	Female	P	M	F
Koch	Whole	131272	67627	63645	4293	4242	51	126979	63385	63594	83	82	01
	Province												
Rajbanshi	Do	1663948	864042	799906	96140	93889	2251	1567808	770153	797655	5151	5074	77

Source: *Census Report of India 1921*

Due to this illiterate problem, any kinds of sickness used to be considered as a result of being possessed by an evil spirit or deity and treated by *ojha* (exorcist). People had much more confidence in *mantra* than in medicine.²⁷ Even today, a section of Rajbanshi people believes this *mantra* practice. They had profound belief in spirit, witches etc. Amongst the wild animals tiger, bear, deer, bison, zebra, rhinoceros; snakes, wild boar, elephants were the main species. Hiuen Tsang, the Chinese pilgrim, has specially mentioned elephant of Bhagadutta. The system of catching elephant was a custom in Kamrup, as mentioned by the pilgrim.

2.3.9. Rituals and Religious Belief:

The Rajbanshis are Hindus with special features in their rituals and beliefs. All Rajbanshis worship the snake goddess *Bishohari* or *Monosha*. During *Bishohari puja* songs in honour of the snake goddess are sung for several days with dancing. The male dress themselves as women and dance. Rajkumar Gidal is the pioneer of the '*Bishohara*' in North Bengal. The Rajbanshi sacrificed the animal to the goddess in different ways. Dr. Charu Chandra Sanyal described the horror of sacrifice of a goat before a village deity in Jalpaiguri, by twisting and breaking the neck. Four persons held the body tightly fixed and two men twisted the head round and killed it by suffocation. It is reported that recently goats were killed by hanging or by stoning before the God *Siva* at Jalpeswar (Jalpaiguri) and the goddess Siddheswari at Baneswar (CoochBehar).²⁸ The author witnessed the method of existing goat sacrifice among the Rajbanshi in the different part of Cooch Behar like *Gosanimari Goyerkata Masan* deity in Dinhata subdivision where the head is severed from the body by one stroke. Dr. Sanyal described that

there was a system of human scarifies to the deity among the Rajbanshi in ancient time. ²⁹ It is also reported that about 200 years ago human sacrifices was performed before the goddess *Durga* in Baikunthapur and Cooch Behar. The tribes *Chutia*, *Khen*, *Koch*, *Aham* and *Kachari* who previously inhabited in Kamrup were in the habit of performing human sacrifices before their goddess *Kali* or *Durga* ³⁰ In this respect; it is to be mentioned here that in Cooch Behar , *Bara Debibari*, the goddess *Durga* is worshipped even now by human scarifies. However, in recent on the day of *Mahaastami*, at midnight *Durga* is worshipped secretly by human blood in the presence of the present *duarbaxi* of Koch Rayal Family(Amiya Deb Baxi) along with the blood donor . This year (2008), Kamsantait Shiben Ray has scarified blood. It is to be mentioned here that the Ray family used to scarifies blood by cutting their limbs (finger) by hereditary. ³¹

During *Shibratri* in the month of February, March, *Mahadeva* is worshipped with great pomp in *Jalpeswar* temple in the caves of Jayati, Phaskawa and Chamurchi in Jalpaiguri and Baneswar Temple in Cooch Behar and thousands pilgrims attended the ceremony, most of women are Rajbanshi . *Mahadeva* is usually called *Mahakal* in North Bengal. The Rajbanshi also worship the river goddess *Tista Buri*. They also worship the forest God (*Saleswari*) before entering a forest for collection of wood.

All Rajbanshi celebrates 'Bisoba' or 'Bisna' on the last day of 'Chaitra' (March-April). On that day all Rajbanshi male adult go out with weapons in their jungles for hunting .They must kill some edible animal and eat its meat either roasted or cooked otherwise, it is believed, the coming year would not be prosperous. This 'Bisoba' or 'Spring hunt'

is celebrated by the Rajbanshis of Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and Assam. Such spring hunt is also celebrated in some other parts of India and Burma. However, this practice of Spring Hunting is not existed in the present generation of the Rajbanshi community.

The Rajbanshis burn their dead body. In some cases, the dead body buried e.g. the child before teething, un-natural deaths and during epidemic when burning becomes impossible. After cremation, a piece of the frontal bone is taken out of the pyre and consigned to the Ganga or the *Karotoya*. If the first child is born dead it is buried near the house. It is believed that the soul of the child will move about the house and take the earliest chance to re-enter its mother's womb and another pregnancy might be expected soon. If several death children are born in succession, a portion of one of them is cut and it is buried far away from the house with the expectation that the devil soul will never dare to enter the womb of the mother. Now this kind of belief is not existed in Rajbanshi society since memory of the author.

At present the dress, old manners and customs, the religious rites and even their features have undergone revolutionary changes so much so that amongst the educated class there is hardly any difference between a Caste Hindu and a Rajbanshi. They are in a process of being completely absorbed. Recently the Rajbanshis allows intermarriage to other castes and adopted many customs from the Caste Hindus that have been reduced the difference between the former and the latter. However, the social organizations and religious customs will be discussed in the Chapter No. IV in details.

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2. C.C. Sanjyal; *The Rajbansis of North Bengal*, ASB Monograph series, Vol. XI, 1965, Calcutta, p. 2.
3. *Ibid*; p. 2; Being as an inhabitant of this area the author has personal experience in the field of agriculture .
4. *Ibid*; p. 2.
5. *Kalika Purana*, Chapter 38, Vs 95-101, p, 318 and Chapter 77 Vs. 30-32, p.787.
6. *Yogini Tantra*, pt.-I ,Chapter 13, Vs.47-67, pp, 128-130. .
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8. Minhas-ud-din Siraj, *Tabakat-i- Nasiri*, Tr. into English by H.G. Roveryt rept. (ed), N.Delhi, Orient Books, 1970, p. 560.
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12. P.S. Dutta; *Movement for Scheduled Caste Status in a Poly-Ethnic Society: The Case of the Koch- Rajbanshi of Assam*, J.N.E.I.S.S.R, II, 1978, p. 31.
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15. C.C.Sanyal; *The Rajbansis of North Bengal*, *op.,cit.*, p.3.
16. *Ibid*; p.3.
17. *The Tribes of Brahmaputra Valley*, L.A.Waddel, Logos Press, New Delhi, Reprint 2000, pp. 48-49.
18. Sipra Sen; *Tribes and Caste of Assam*; Gyan Publishing House , New Delhi, 1999, pp.156-157.
19. This mode of tying the child is called 'bukuni bandha' There is a common saying 'choatak bukuni bandhi kam korek' (tie the child on the back and then work). It other thing such as puffed rice, cloth etc. Are so tied it is called 'bokuni bandha'.
20. *The Rajbansis of North Bengal*; *op. cit.*, p. 3; The writer has much experience regarding the 'Pan' in childhood.
21. Tobacco leaf cut up to into small bites and thoroughly mixed up with treacle forming a lump.
22. '**Hukka**' is a full coconut shell water-container into which a wooden pipe is fixed vertically and an earthen ware bowl (*Chilim*) containing the tobacco is placed on it .A small hole on one side of the shell serves the purpose of smoking. The writer also had seen practiced such smoking in his family.
23. *Sidal* is made by grinding dry mixed with '*mankochu*' (arum) in the pestle thus making a pulp and getting that pulp of fish grind, oil and turmeric scoured and then dried .This preserved properly so that it can be used any time of the year as substitute for fish.
24. Sukhbilash Barma; *Bhwaiya; Ethno-Musicological Study*; Global Vision Publishing House, New Delhi(India), First edition 2004, p.89.

25. The author saw the remaining construction of the brick field at his village, near a Rajbanshi Zamindar's house and a tomb is still remaining which was constructed by the Zamindar in the first decade of twentieth century.

26. *Census of India 1921*, Table-IX, Education by selected Castes, Tribes, or Races-concluded ; Vol. 5, Part-II, p. 96.

27. C.C.Sanyal; *The Rajbansis of North Bengal, op.cit.*, p.147.

Montros(incantations):-

Hare k(r)ishno nam, paroar nam

Andhar ghar, phirache tok

Dzor dzari charia, paroar nam

Soggo hate namo kali montse dia paa

Ugir Ostang deha charia

Paroar siggir ko nam

Free translation:-Oh! The pigeon hear the name of Hari and Krishna. You are grouping in the darkness. Kali has come down from the heaven to the earth. Please at once take away the disease from the sick person and fly off. Note: Paro-Pigeon ,Ugi- Patient, Ostang dha- whole body.

28. *Ibid*; p. 4.33.

29. *Ibid*; p. 4.

30. E.A.Gait; *A History of Assam*(1906); Hutton; *Census Report of India 1921* , Vol.V , part - I.

31. The *Pratidin*, 9th October, 2008. This is described by Jayanta Maiti, the Sub-Divisional Officer, Cooch Behar(sadar) and the member of the Cooch Behar Debatra Trust Board. Personal met, the hereditary *duarboxi* of the Koch Royal family, Amiya Deb Baxi on 10th October, 2008.

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