

CHAPTER -III

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The history of the origin of the Rajbanshis is a mystical fact. It is said that they belong to the Bodo family that entered India in the 10th century B.C. from the East, settled on the banks of the Brahmaputra, and gradually spread over Assam and the whole of the North Eastern Bengal. Now they are living in north eastern part of India, particularly in North Bengal, present Bangladesh (Rangpur, East Dinajpur, North Western part of Mymensingh district) Lower Bhutan, Assam (Goalpara, Northern part of Kamrup and Western part of Naogaon district), Meghalaya, Nepal (Bhadrapur and Jhapa, Morang district), Eastern part of Purnea district of Bihar, some parts of Tripura. The 1921 Census Report shows about 89% of this caste population lived in just districts i.e. Dinajpur, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar. ¹ They were the original inhabitants of North Bengal and the third largest Hindus caste in the whole province. The census commissioners and the Colonial ethnographers, however, faced a major problem regarding the identification of the Rajbanshis. Particularly a problem has been raised regarding the term whether the Rajbanshis and Koches were synonymous or not.

There is more than one viewpoint about the origin of the Rajbanshis. Some scholars say, the Rajbanshis are of *Kshatriya* origin, and they have subsequently become degraded and made themselves known as Rajbanshis, the term denoting their association with the *Raja*

(King), the Koch tribe of Bodo-origin. The basis of this viewpoint is that the Koch Behar dynasty, which ruled in Kamrup, had their origin from the Koch tribe. The King and the subjects being of same stock in this region, the Rajbanshis belong to the Koch. Both the viewpoints deserve some amount of discussions.

The evidences of inhabitation in the farthest northern part of Bengal are found in the account of invasion of Baktiyer Khalji ² while he entered Tibet in 1206 A.D.³ It is reported that at that time between the country Lakhnnavati and Tibet lay the hill or rather the jungle tract which was inhabited by three non- Indian tribes viz. the Koch, the Mech and the Tharu. We came to know from the history of Kamrup and medieval Assam that many tribal groups like the Kiratas, the Ahoms, the Khens, and the Koches etc. ruled over different parts of Kamrup. Among these various groups, the Koches under the leadership of Viswa Singha established their control in the western part of Kamrup by the end of fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century. ⁴ But the term Rajbanshi was not mentioned in any Persian records, in the foreign accounts, in *Assam Burunjis*, or in *Darang Rajvanshavali* (Genealogical accounts of the Koch Royal Family)⁵.

There are different official and non- official works on the origin question of Rajbanshis. Broadly speaking, there are two lines of arguments regarding the origin of the Rajbanshis; one by the colonial official-cum- ethnographers and the other by the Rajbanshi caste publicists and indigenous literatures like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharat*, *Puranas*, *Tantra Scriptures* etc.

Entrusted with the responsibility of collecting information on the various sects of population of the Eastern India, Sir Buchanan Hamilton did a survey in the years between 1807 and 1817. Based on Buchanan's finding a number of surveys were made and several ethnological monographs were produced on racial and ethnic origins of several of Indian social groups. ⁶ Buchanan reports –“Accounts of the district of Rangpur 1810” inserted in that book gives an account of the history of the Rajbanshis. ⁷ According to this report Koch and Rajbanshis, both being part of the larger Bodo stock, belong to the same caste. The report, however, says that not all the Rajbanshis are Koches, although most of them are those who have become degenerated by adopting the profession of palanquin bearer are Koch and amongst them, those who have become further degraded by taking to the habits of eating pork, chicken, etc are *Dahoi* or *Garol*. Most of the scholars in the latter years followed this research work of Buchanan Hamilton. However, all of them have restricted their discussion around the central point whether the Rajbanshis and the Koches are same. Some native *babus* who had very little idea about the Rajbanshi people of this region worked as assistants to British scholars and as such, their findings suffered from various kinds of limitations.

After Buchanan, B.H. Hodgson who in the “ Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal 1849” wrote that when Biswa Singha, the grandson of Hajo, and the founder of the Koch Kingdom, embraced Hinduism, the country was renamed Bihar- the people, became Rajbanshi. ⁸ According to him, the Koch and Kuvaca are synonyms. He has divided Koches of Assam into three groups- Kamkhali, Madai and Kalita. Koches of Rangpur on the other hand, are divided into two groups- Koch and Rajbanshi. In other words, he has described Koch and

Rajbanshi as belonging to the same stock from the viewpoint. He also says the Koches belong to the distinctly marked type of the Mongolian family. ⁹ He is supported by Waddel who also says that they do not belong to the Dravidian stock, "but are distinctly Mongoloid though some what heterogeneous". ¹⁰ In this respect he has given a note as follows-

"This term 'Koch' has become more of a caste title than a tribal appellation so that individuals of the Kacharie, Garo, Rabha, Lalung and allied Indo- Chines tribes are admitted as members; and there seems also in places to be a slight learning with Namasudra blood. Thus any one of these tribes can become a Koch by establishing a Brahmanical rituals and giving up eating beef. In this stage he is called 'Saraniya', and 'Haroniy' (usually pronounced in the Assam fashion), which means 'a refugee', implying that he has taken refuge in Hinduism. The more advanced stage can be gained leaving off beef and swine's flesh and strong drink altogether, when he assumes the full externals and status of a Hindu... only assign by the more orthodox Hindu the position of one of the very lowest caste. The term Koch, therefore, not being a favoured one in Bengal it is usual to find then dropping that title wherever there is a resident *raja* of their own kindred as at 'Koch Bihar'(Koch Behar) , Darang, Bijni, Mech para, Sidli, Beltola, Jalpaiguri and Lakhi. At such places they call themselves by the higher sounding Indian title Rajbanshi or Royal race."¹¹

After Hodgson, E.T. Dalton and other British ethnographers like Thomson, Porter etc. have observed that the Rajbanshis are belongings to non-Aryan stock and large Bodo population based on their physical appearances. ¹² H. Beverley comments that, the Koch, Rajbanshi and *Paliya* are for the most part one the same tribes. Rajbanshi is an indefinite term and some few of the individuals may possibly belong to

other castes. In the lower delta, Rajbanshis is said to be a sub-division of *Tiyars*, but by far the great majority coming from the district of Dinajpur, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and Goalpara are clearly the same as Koch and *Paliyas*".¹³ Captain Lewis, a Deputy Commissioner of Cooch Behar while commenting on the Census of 1872, "The present inhabitants of Cooch Behar State do not belong to any particular race. The Meches who inhabit the Bhutan Duars coming into contact with the immigrants from the south intermarriage have taken place and the descents are the modern Cooch Beharis".¹⁴

W.W.Hunter observes that towards the close of the fifteenth century one Koch king Hajo founded a kingdom at Kamrupa. According to him, the Rajbanshis and the *Paliyas* were the offshoots of the Koch tribes. The Koch tribe first came into prominence by the close of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century when they established the powerful Koch kingdom. During the reign of Viswa Singha, Brahmanism was introduced and the people including the King and his officers embraced the new religion. On their conversion to Hinduism, they abandoned the name "Koch" and adopted the name 'Rajbanshi' that literally means 'Royal Race'. He also opines that the cultivators adopted the name of Rajbanshi and they were semi Hindu aboriginals.¹⁵

Herbert Risley in a similar way noted-

Koch, Koch-mandi, Rajbanshi, Paliya, Deshi, a large Dravidian tribes of North- Eastern and Eastern Bengal among whom there are ground for suspecting some admixture of Mongoloid blood. At present day the name Koch, without doubt the original designation of the tribe, is a carefully tabooed in the districts where they are most numerous, and where there is very reason to believe them to represent the earliest

permanent settlers, that in Kuch Behar itself at the Census Report of 1881 not a single Koch was to be found. The transformation of the Koch into the Rajbanshi, the name by which they are now known in Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and Kuch or Koch Behar is a singular illustration of the influence exercised by fiction in the making of caste. Now the great majority of the 'Koch tribes' inhabitants of Northern Bengal invariably describe themselves as Rajbanshi or Bhanga- Kshatriya- a designation that enables them to pose as an out going branch of the *kshatriyas* who fled to these remote districts in order to escape from the wrath of Parsu Ram. They claim that they are descended from *Raja* Dasarath, father of Rama. They keep Brahmans; initiate the Brahmanical ritual in their marriage ceremony. They have begun to adopt the Brahmanical system of *gotroas* (Kasyapa). The original nucleus of the Rajput group may have been Aryan that of the Rajbanshi was certainly Dravidian.¹⁶ He also told that the *Koch, Rajbanshi, Paliya, Desi* and other varieties by whatever names they are descended from a Dravidian stock. They have occupied the valley of the Ganges at the time of the Aryan advance into Bengal driven forward by this incursion into the swamps and forests of Northern and North-Eastern Bengal. The tribes were here and there brought into contact with the Mongoloid races of the lower Himalayas and of the Assam, border and their type may have been affected to a varying degree by intermixture with these people. Overall, Dravidian characteristics predominate among them over Mongolian.¹⁷

However, in the Census Report of 1901, E.A. Gait remarked that there was basis for the assertion of the Rajbanshis of Rangpur that they did not resemble the Koches and sprang from entirely different sources. He believes that in spite of considerable racial intermixture in some places, the Rajbanshis appeared to be Dravidian tribes. They

probably owned the name long before the Mongoloid kings rose to power. In Jalpaiguri and Kuch Bihar and in Goalpara of Assam, the persons now known as Rajbanshi are either pure Koches who though dark have a distinctly Mongoloid physiognomy or else a mixed breed in which the Koch element usually preponderates.¹⁸ Gait also describes Dhimals of Darjeeling and Nepal Terai as Rajbanshi. They often call themselves Rajbanshis. Their title is Maulik (Mallik). The Koches are cultivators and same as Rajbanshi. The Koch Monde of East Bengal is the Koches who are still non-Hindus. They speak their own language 'Koch Munde'.¹⁹ Though the Koches freely call themselves Rajbanshis, it is believed that the two communities sprang from entirely different sources; the Koch Kings Mongoloid origin, while the Rajbanshis are Dravidian tribes, who probably own the name long before the Koch Kings rose to power.²⁰

H.B. Rowley describes that intermarriage with Koch tribes with Hindus has considerably changed their old habits. They resemble the Bengalese more than any other people do. One class of this tribe, the Rajbanshis worship Hindu deities and have adopted Hindu manners.²¹

H. Boileau, while commenting on the Census Report 1891 of the district of Jalpaiguri that "The Koches or Rajbanshis, are not within the pull of Hinduism, but are Hinduised aboriginal tribes of the district has been authorized fixed by the Privy Council ruling in reference to the succession of the Raikat Phanindra Dev of Jalpaiguri. The Raikots of Jalpaiguri, the Maharaja of Cooch Behar belong to the same family. Both the families trace their descent from the common ancestor Bisu Singha who was the offspring of Siva Madhavi Devi, a *Yogini Tantra*. The Raikot of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar families are *Kochhs* or *Kochhis* and *Mechs* mixed. As both royal families call themselves *Sivabangshi*, so the

mass of the *Koches* call themselves Rajbanshis as commented with royal families. Some of the Rajbanshis are now trying to prove that they are descendants of the *Kshatriyas*, who have taken shelter in North Bengal, being pursued by a Brahman hero Parsu Ram who extirpated the *kshatriyas* from the earth twenty one times. Some of them still call themselves *Bhanga Kshatriyas*.”²²

H.F.J.T. Maguire comments, “Among the Rajbanshis there is a distinction between those who have adopted the Vaishnava faith and the followers of God Siva. The latter appear to be Koches proper being of Mongoloid origin and having come from a small minority of the tribe of Rajbanshis. The former are of Dravidian stock and are more numerous and respectable, forming the main body of the agriculturists. The Rajbanshis have become to all intents and purposes Hindus and their claim to rank as Sudras (*kshatriyas*) was admitted by the *pandits* of Rangpur *Dharma Sabha*”.²³

O’ Donnel writes, “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 Mongols who have advanced through the eastern passes the first being the *Chandal*, the second the Koch and the last *Ahom*”.²⁴

Grierson comments ‘there can be little doubt that the original Koches were the same as the Bodos. The Koch, Mech and the Bara or Bodo all connoted the same or at most different steps of the same tribe. The name Koch in fact connotes a Hindu Bodo who abandoned his ancestral religion for Hinduism and ancestral Bodo language for Bengali or Assamese. Rajbanshis are the Hindu Koches of Rangpur and

Goalpara. 'Those Koch who are Hindus, are principally known under the name Rajbanshi. The Rajbanshi dialect bears any close points of resemblance to the dialect of East Bengal.'²⁵

O' Malley states "The Rajbanshi or Barua Mugs are the offspring of Bengali woman by Burmese men or more generally of Arakanese mother by Bengali father"²⁶. He also says that 'a most persistent agitation was carried on Rajbanshis of North Bengal with the object recognized as *Kshatriyas* by descent. They desire not only to record separately from Koch, but also to be distinguished by the name *kshatriyas*. The former request was granted without hesitation as there is no doubt that at the present day, irrespective of any question of origin, the Rajbanshis and the Koches are separate castes. It was however out of the question to allow them to be returned by the generic and archaic name of *Kshatriyas*.'²⁷

Thompson states, "The Rajbanshis are the indigenous people of Northern Bengal and the third Largest Hindu Caste in the province. Their total number has been exaggerated by the fact that a member of fisherman caste in Mymensingh, Nadia and Murshidabad returned themselves as Rajbanshis. In 1901, many Koches in North Bengal were returned as Rajbanshis. Many of the Rajbanshis have taken sacred thread and were prepared to use force in support of their claim to be returned as *Kshatriya*."²⁸ He also writes "No part of the Census in 1891, 1901, 1911 aroused so much excitement as the return of caste which caused a great deal heart burning and in some were returned as *kshatriya* quarters with threats of disturbance of the peace."²⁹ The Rajbanshis claimed to be included as *Kshatriya*, *Bratya kshatriya*, *Barua kshatriya*

Kayastha and Hari.....	as <i>kshatriya</i>
Kamar	as <i>kamar kshatriya</i>
Pod	as <i>Poundra or Bratya kshatriya</i>
Malo	as <i>Malla or Bratya kshatriya</i>
Koch	as <i>Koch kshatriya</i>
Jalia Kaibartta and Tiyer.....	as <i>Rajbanshi</i>

The feeling ran so high that the census would have broken down completely in Rangpur if this had not been promised.³⁰

Porter comments, "Some more gotras other than *Kashyapa* were introduced amongst the Rajbanshis. They are—i) *Kasyapa*, ii) *Sandilya*, iii) *Bharadwaja*, iv) *Savarna*, v) *Kapila*, vi) *Thandi* vii) *Batsya*, viii) *Mandgala*, ix) *Arti*, x) *Parasara*, xi) *Kausuka*, xii) *Viswamitra*.³¹ He then comments, "The Rajbanshis have now to some extent regularized the anomalous position in which they found themselves until recently owing to the fact that upon assumption of the *Kshatriya* Status they had all adopted themselves into the same *gotras* (*kasyapa*) with result that all marriages amongst Rajbanshi as *Kshatriya* would, upon a strict interpretation of Hindu law have invalid owing to their being within the same *gotras*. But even amongst those families which have been invested with sacred, it is apparently only the literate section who claim to belong to any *gotras* and those, when it is necessary to disclose a *gotras* at all, plump for the *kasyapa gotras* as a matter of course.

Porter also states- Koch, Palia, Rajbanshi, were originally the same. The *Kaivarttas* of Assam and North Bengal have more affinity with Rajbanshis. They all claimed to be recorded as Rajbanshis and all the Rajbanshis claimed to be a recorded as *Kshatriyas* at the beginning of the

19th century. The more backward and illiterate members of the Rajbanshi caste still maintain practices inconsistent with orthodox Hindu belief.³²

In the indigenous literature on the other hand, the Rajbanshis were referred to as different from and superior (in rank) to the Koch. But this assertion was made, it will be interesting to note through the use of the same concepts, either western anthropological (Dravidian, Mongoloid etc) or an ancient Scriptural (i.e. Varna status), borrowed from the official discourse. For example, Monomohan Ray wrote: "Inspective of any question as to identify or difference of origin, the Rajbanshis and Koches from entirely distinct Castes". In social status, the Koches were inferior to that of the Rajbanshis, who had greater ceremonial purity than the Koches did. The physical features of the great majority of the Rajbanshis of Rangpur, except the northern part bordering on Cooch Behar, were distinctly Dravidian'. The physiognomy of the Koches was decidedly 'Mongoloid'. He also says that the distinction between the Rajbanshis and Koches in the Rangpur district is not of recent growth, but points to a real ethnological difference. The theory that the term Rajbanshi is merely a recent title of the Koch who assumed it on the establishment of the Kingdom of Kuch Bihar does not on a close examination of the existing facts; appear to be a tenable one.³³

Hari Kishore Adhikary also argued that the Koches and the Rajbanshis were not the same caste and were different in many ways. The food habits, behaviour, and the upper caste Hindus, including the Rajbanshis, did not maintain social relations with them. In fact, Adhikary stressed that the Rajbanshis, on the other hand should be regarded as an upper caste, which is borne out, by their food habits behaviour, and customs. The Rajbanshis performed all their ceremonies and ritual in the

fashion of the *Kshatriyas* and other upper caste Hindus. He also objected to the contention that the Rajbanshis adopted Hinduism during the reign of Maharaja Viswa Singha of Cooch Behar (in the early 16th century). According to him, the Rajbanshis were Hindus before the reign of Viswa Singha and were recognized as *Bhanga Kshatriyas*. As according to the *Shasta's* the term *Bhanga Kshatriya* had no meaning so they had come recognized as 'Rajbnashi.'³⁴ Upendra Nath Barman also argued in a similar way that the Rajbanshis were *kshatriyas* and lived in the land called 'Pundra Desh', between the river Karotoya and Ganga. He refuted the arguments of colonial ethnographers by citing example from the Hindu *Shastras* and *Puranas* and he wrote that Rajbanshis were claiming the Kshatriya status long before the eighteenth century.³⁵ Maniram Kabya Bhusan and many others of the Rajbnashi literate also asserted the same mythic- historical claim of a *Kshatriya* origin.³⁶

Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterjee writes that the masses of North Bengal area are very largely Bodo origin, or mixed Austric-Dravidian- Mongoloid, where groups of peoples from lower Bengal (*Bati-des*) and Bihar have penetrated among them. They are now mainly as Koch, i.e. Hindu or Semi Hindu Bodo who have abandoned their original Tibeto- Burman speech and have adopted the Northern dialect of Bengali (which has a close affinity with Assamese). When they are a little too conscious of their Hindu religion and culture and retain at the same time some vague memory of the glories of their people particularly during the time of Viswa Singha and Nara Narayana, they are proud to call themselves Rajbanshis and to claim to be called *kshatiryas*. Yet they are quite content at the same time, for the sake of political advantages, to be classed as a Scheduled Caste, among the lowly in Hindu society whose past disabilities are now sought to be atoned for by giving them some

special privileges. He also says nothing much is definitely known about the Koches of North Bengal prior to the 16th century. They may be described as western Bodos, an extension of the great Bodo race of Assam valley from Sadiye right up to North Bengal, the Garo Hills, Mymensingh and Sylhet districts, Kachar district, and Tippera (Comillah) district and Tripura State, forming a ring round the Austric (Mon-khmer) area of the Khasi and Jaintia hills, and flanked in the East and South – east by their near kinsmen the Nagas and their distant cousins the Kuki-chins .³⁷

During the rule of Palas in Bengal with their capital at Gauda (Laksmanavati), the Koches were gathering strength and like their kinsmen in Assam, had become, at least outwardly, Hinduised. It would appear that by the middle of the 10th century A.D. they had overthrown the Pala ruling house from Gauda and established themselves as rulers in the northern part of present West Bengal. The short Bangarh Inscription in Sanskrit from Dinajpur giving a date 800 Saka = 966 A.D. briefly states the creation of a temple to Siva Kambojas (Kambojanvaya-Gandapat). As Rama Prasad Chanda suggested Kamboja have an only mean the Koch people of the period .³⁸

However, certain contemporary sources, supply us with important information regarding the ethnic identity of the Koches. Thus, Minhas-ud-din Siraj ,the author of the *Tabakat-i- Nasiri*, which contains an account of the first two expeditions of Mahammad-bin- Bakhtiyar Khalji to the kingdom of Kamrupa(ancient Assam) in the first part of the 13th century. It is noted that during that time this region (meaning present North and north-east Bengal and Western Assam which at that time formed a part of the kingdom of Kamrupa) was inhabited by the Kunch

(Koch), Mej / Meg (Mech) and the Tiharu (Tharu) tribes having Turk countenance. ³⁹ S.K. Chatterjee in this connection rightly observes that their Mongoloid features and speech made a distinct impression upon the Turks who were also members of the same race. ⁴⁰ Again, Ralph Fitch who visited Koch Behar in 1585 notes: "The people have ears which he marvelous great of a span long which they draw out in length by devices when they are young." ⁴¹

On the other hand, referring to the description by Hiuen Tsang, S.K. Chatterjee has observed that the whole of Bengal including the Northern part adopted the Aryan language and culture by the 7th century. While assuming reasons for some difference between the language of Kamrup and that of middle India, as mentioned by Hiuen Tsang, he has commented that Kamrupi language has Tibeto- Burman elements and as such, the Aryan language has been a bit distorted by Kamrup pronunciation. ⁴²

In other words, S.K.Chatterjee accepted that the language of North Bengal was principally the Aryan language in the 7th century itself. Unfortunately, he had adopted two contradictory positions as reflected from his observations mentioned above. From the description of the track followed by Baqtiar Khalji for his Tibet invasion in *Tabakat-i- Nasiri*, as mention by Sukumar Das in *Uttar Banger Itihas*. It is clear that Baqtiar Khalji and his followers contact with the mountainous tribes and their language and there was no opportunity of their contact with the people of the plains, i.e. Rajbanshi. ⁴³ It, therefore, follows that the observations of S.K. Chatterjee about the Rajbanshis based on the *Tabaqat-i- Nasiri* are not well founded and have not acceptable.

The other set of sources about the history of the Rajbanshis are indigenous literature like *Puranas*, *Up-puranas*, *Tantras*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Mahabharata* etc. The materials available from such sources differ from the findings of the English and Indian researchers and scholars. According to *Bhramari Tantra*;

Nandisuta Bhayadbhime Poundradesat Samgatah

Bardhanasya Pancaputrah swaganairbandhabaih saha

Ratnapithan Bibasante Kaladbriprara Sangamat

Kshatra dharmaparakranta Rajbanshti khyatah bhube. ⁴⁴

[Free Translation: Out of fear from the son of Nandi i.e. (Mahapadma Nanda) the five sons of Bardhana including Bhimeshwara with their relatives came from Poundradesh (within Magadha) and settled down in Ratnapitha of Kamrup; and for a long time due to non-connection with Brahmans being derailed from *kshatriya* rituals, become known as Rajbanshis in the earth.]

According to *KalikaPurana-*

Jamadagnya bhayabhitah Kshatriya Purbamebahi

Mleccha Chadmanu Pudaya Jalpisam saranam gatah.(30)

Te Mlecch bachah Satatamaryabachsha Sarbada

Jalpisam Sebamanaste gopayanti cha tang haram. ⁴⁵

[Free translation: Out of fear from the son of Jamadagni, i.e. (Parasuram) the persons who were previously known as kshatriyas assuming the garb and attire of Mlecchas settled down round about Jalpesh.(30) They who always used both Mlecchas and Arya speeches used to worship Lord Siva secretly.]

The disciple of Mahapurusa- Sankardeva- *pandit* Rupnarayana in his "Kamateshwar Kula Kalika writes:

Mahanadisuta nanda Bouddharaja Sadamanda

Dhbansa kare Kshatrabansha tin Saptabar.

Seha gota bhujabale Yujhilen abhele
Dbiteeya Parashuram Jitu Abatar
Chhiriye gulardari kshatri China lupta kari
Pranbhayae iti uti Palanta Sakali.
Sangramak bhaya kari bhanga kshatri nama dhari
Apanake mane keha Rajbnashi buli.
Bardhana suta Pachjan Ratnapithe nila than
Arakeha lukaila Yonigarbhapithe
Taramadhye Bhemeswara Aradhila Mahesware
Siddha haila sita Ratnapither nikate

[Free translation: The Second Parasurama, the son of Nandi demolished the *Kshatriyas* for 21(twenty-one) time. In addition, the *kshtriyas*, being afraid of war, tore off the sacred sacrificial thread and took the name as *Bhanga Kshatriya* and some of them as Rajbnashi. The five sons of Bardhana including Bhimeswara, worshipped Siva and he succeeded in penance near Rathna Pitha.]

It is very logical to assume that this second Parasurama is not a *Puiranic* person, but historic one who followed Buddhism. However, this view seems not to be a Pedantic one, because there is no historical and rational basis.

The question, therefore, arises whether Ratnapitha and Jalpesh are situated in the same place. One has to go through the ancient history of Kamrupa to know the history of the Rajbanshis because their living place was a part of Kamrupa only. Ancient Kamrupa had four parts-viz. *Kampitha*, *Yonipith*, *Manipitha*, and *Ratnapitha*. The most western part of the Kingdom was *Ratnapitha*. *Yogini Tantra* and the account of Buchanan Hamilton also supported this view. From this point

of view the boundary of ancient Kamrupa and the present location of Jalpesh in Maynaguri Police Station of Jalpaiguri district, there is a problem to accept that the location of Ratnapitha and Jalpesh is the same.

Now, where is the location of Pundrabhumi, referred to in Bhramari Tantra? According to the *Puranic* account, the origin of the name 'Pundra' as ascribed one of the five sons of the Asura king Bali. R.C. Majumder also supports this view.⁴⁶ He says they lived in North Bengal popularly known as Pundradesh and Pundra Vardhan one of the famous cities in ancient time. Mahastangarh located at a place with distance of seven miles from Bogra. This argument of R.C.Majumder as well accepted now. According to *Manusamhita*, *Poundra*, *Odra*, *Kamboja*, *Yavana*, *Saka* and *Kirata* all these *Kshatriya* people have been degraded to Sudra because of the Brahamans. In the annotation of *Sloka 44* of Chapter 10 of *Manusamhita*, *Kulluk* commented that the *kshatriyas* who used to live in Pundra Vardhana abandoned the Vedic rites and got degenerated to Sudra.

As per Manu's prescription the pure Brahmin, Kshatriyas or Vaisyas, if and when transgress the rules of *Varnashrama* dharma, become degenerated one. From the above discussion, it can be stressed that some Pundra kshatriyas, being sacred of chased by the king Mahapadma Nanda, crossed the river Karotoya, took shelter in *Ratnapitha* located in Jalpesh area and settled there. They were gradually become degraded and converted to mleccha because of their non-association with the Brahmins and close association with the mlecchas, adopting thereby the *mleccha* language too.

From the above discussion based on the Indian scholars, foreign scholars and researchers, it is not easy to conclude about the origin of the Rajbanshi community. However, it may be concluded that they are – i) from the Davidian stock, ii) from the Mongolian stock and iii) from the intermixture of Austric- Dravid and Mongolian people. One of the main issues of controversy was whether the Rajbanshi and Koches are the same caste. Some of the Indian scholars think that the Rajbanshis were the descendants of the Koches; others argue that the Rajbanshis were a mixed race.⁴⁷ The matter therefore would be clear to us if we discuss the origin of the Koches and their establishment in power into the throne of North- Eastern India.

A few words regarding the origin of the term 'Koch' is felt necessary here. In the *Yogini Tantra* the Koches are termed 'Kuvaca', and in the *Padmapurana* as 'Kuvacaka' who are said to have dirty food, and spoken a barbarian tongue.⁴⁸ It is possible that because of their difference particularly in food habits and speeches the Aryan scholars used to call them as such, or sometimes as mleccha. Rai K.L. Barua opines that mleccha, might be a *sanskritised* form of the Mech.⁴⁹ This view is supported by Edward Gait and S.K.Chatterjee that the Koches and the Meches are the members of the same family.⁵⁰ It is clear from the point that while Biswa Singh's father has been represented as the chief of the twelve Mech families, his mother has been described as the daughter of a Koch chieftain.⁵¹

According to S.K.Chatterjee " the 'Koc' (or rather Komc) ,comes from a Middle –Indo- Aryan source from 'kawomca' written 'komoca' which can be properly *sanskritised* as 'Kamboja'.⁵² He further states that the 'Kambojas' of Bengal are apparently the ancestors of the

Koch People of Northern Bengal.⁵³ Thus, it is reasonable to stress that the appellation 'koch' is a corrupt form of the Sanskrit 'kamboja' to which have a number of reference as a group of people or as a country where these people dwelt. Buchanan Hamilton says the primitive Koches called 'Pani Koch' lived amidst the woods, frequently changing their abode to cultivate land enriched by a fallow. He further told that the koches had their original home some where in the Northern part of Bengal towards Dalimkot.⁵⁴

On the other hand, a number of scholars, like H.C.Raychoudhury and R.C.Majumder believe that the Koches came to Bengal from North West India (NWFP) and hold them to be identical with the Kambojas an ancient tribe of that region.⁵⁵ N.N.Basu also states that the 'kambojas' came originally from near the Gurjara Country.⁵⁶ The Tibetan work *Pagsam- Zon- Zang* refers to a country called *Kampo-tsa* in the upper and eastern Luchai Hill tracts lying in between Burma and Bengal.⁵⁷ R.P. Chanda has taken to mean Kambojadesh and according to the 'kamboja' people have come to Bengal from Tibet.⁵⁸ It is interesting to note that the Nepalese traditions apply the term Kambojadesh to Tibet.⁵⁹ The *Tabakat-i- Nasiri* points out that horses in large numbers were imported to Assam and Bengal from Tibet.⁶⁰ The *Riyas-us- Salatin* also refers to Bhutan and the neighboring mountainous region supplies of such horses.⁶¹ It is to be noted that there was a ruling race in Tibet called *khampa* or *Kampa* or *kamba*⁶² and that the Tibetan monasteries (Ucangne country) were called as campus or compus. In this connection, Dr. D. Nath says the term Koch (Sanskrit Kamboja, Kuvaca, or Kuvacaka) had its origin in Tibet and that these groups of Indo-Mongoloid people were from the country.⁶³

Now the matter of question arises that when the 'Kambojas Koches' came to Bengal and Assam? Gait in the Census Report of 1891 observes; " the first mention of the Koch of which I am aware in 1198. when Bakhtiyar Khalji conquered Bengal and invaded Tibet .⁶⁴ As we have already mentioned that, the Koch, Mech and Tharu tribes of North Bengal are the primitive tribes of his time. He has also recorded that one Ali Mech , a Mech Chieftain, guided Bakhtiyar's army through Kamrupa.⁶⁵ The epigraphic sources like inscriptions of the Kamboja king Nayapala (Kalenda villages of Orissa) who was the son of king Rajyapala and queen Bhagyadevi and younger brother of Narayanpala by which the king donated lands in the Dandabhukitmandala within the Vardhamanabhukti, are assigned on paleographical grounds to the latter half of the 10th century A.D. ⁶⁶ According to D.C.Sircar, these rulers belong to the same family (Of the Kombojas)⁶⁷, and occupied not only Northern Bengal(Gauda) but also the South Western part of the province, including Vardhamanabhukti.

The early Kamboja rulers were either Bhuddhist or Hindu by religion. Some of them Vaishnava (Narayanpala) and some other were Shaivaism. This proves that Hinduism to be a limited extent at least of the royal house alone began as early as the 10th century A.D.

From the above discussion, it may be presumed that Kambojas or the Koches, who migrated to India from Tibet, settled first in the North and North Eastern Bengal and then extended towards Western part of Assam. Gradually they occupied large areas as far as South and West Bengal where they came into contact numerous racial elements including Dravidian. For a brief period, they even held political power in those region and some of their rulers ruled with assumption of

sovereign titles like 'Parameswara' 'Parambhattaraka', 'Maharajadhiraja' etc. However, their power gradually dwindled when the Cholas invaded under the great king Rajendra Chola brought about the collapse of the Kamboja rule in the South. In the North; the Pala king Rajyapala, as proved by the Bhaturiya Inscription, extirpated their rule from North Bengal before the middle of the 10th century A.D. The political power extinguished, and the masses remained tribal until the beginning of the 16th century when they had a political and cultural renaissance under the leadership of Biswa Singha in Kamrup in 1515.

During the period of our study, we have seen that the entire tract of land viz. Pragjyotispur, Kamrupa, Kamta-Koch- Kingdom, Kamatapur, and Pundravardhan etc. had been inhabited by a group of people or groups of people since prehistoric period. Different stocks of people had ruled this land at different periods such as Negrito, Austric, Mongoloid, Alpaniya, and Dravidians.⁶⁸ The most important and largest group of people being the *Pundra Khatriyas*. In addition, the Pundras were perhaps the Rajbanshis who belong to Austric- Dravidian groups or Mongoloid groups called by the scholars. Whatever, may be their racial identity, they were the earlier inhabitants in this region and were quite liberal attitude and quite receptive too. Due to this nature, they could assimilate the Aryan language, religion and culture and made themselves a developing group of people. *Puranas* and *Tantras* mention that the Dravidian is the *Pundra Khatriyas* who claimed to be descendents of Aryans. According to S.K.Chatterjee Aryanization in Bengal commenced during the region of Mauryas in the 4th century B.C. and were completed in the Gupta era i.e. 7th century A.D. To him, Aryan religion, language and culture spread over the entire North Bengal of West Bengal by this time. It can be deducted that Aryanization took place in North Bengal too

during the same period as in other parts of Bengal. That the Rajbanshis adopted the Aryan language by the 7th century A.D. is supported by the Chinese Pilgrim Hieun Tsang's travel document. Regarding the language spoken by the inhabitants of Kamrup, Hiuen Tsang observed that the language sounded a little different from that of the middle India. This is explained by S.K.Chatterjee's observation that Hiuen Tsang might have heard the language of Western Assam or Kamrupa with a little different mode of pronunciation (of the same Indo- Aryan) which has made Assamese look and sound different from Bengali as a result of which Kamrupi language appeared to him somewhat different from the middle Indian language.

From this above discussion, it may be traced that the Rajbanshis was group of Dravidians or Pundra *Kshatriyas* of Pundra Vardhana came to Kamrupa and resided there towards the end of the 4th century B.C. Later on Tibeto Burmas tribes- Koch, Mech, Bodo, Kachari, Rabha, etc. of Sino- Tibetan groups entered North- Eastern part of India in the 1st century B.C. This conservative one of these tribes maintained their separate entity. The less conservative ones, however, had gradual intermingling with the Dravidians and formed a combined people. These combined people are perhaps the Rajbanshis, who in the subsequent period had admixture of blood with the so-called Aryans.⁶⁹

From the ancient period itself, this community of people tried to assimilate the Aryan languages and culture and even in the initial stages of assimilation by the 7th century, itself adopted the Indo- Aryan language as their own. However, from the standpoint of religious and culture the process of assimilation is being continuing. It is from this angle that the Rajbanshis claim themselves as the *Kshatriyas*. They claim

that Koches and Rajbanshis are not the same caste and they tried to prove their *Kshatriya* status by taking the sacred thread to get rid the degradation.

The Rajbanshis organized mass agitation from time to time to identify themselves as the descendents of Aryan and tried to establish their *Kshatriya* identity in Governments records. It took quite well organized shape towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Finally, the Rajbanshis became successful to recognize themselves as “*kshatriya*” in the final report of 1911 Census, where they were listed as a separate Hindu caste, ‘Rajbanshi, with *kshatriya* in bracket.’⁷⁰

During the Census operations of 1921 and 1931, the Rajbanshis once again mobilized the community and appealed to the census authorities to return them as only *Kshatriya* in place of Rajbanshi *Kshatriya*.⁷¹ Panchanan Sarkar alias Panchanan Burma (1866-1935) of the village Khalisamari of Mathabhanga sub- Division of Cooch Behar district and a pleader of the Rangpur Court was the chief architect of this agitation towards its final stage. It was Panchanan Burma who dedicated his life for betterment and strengthened of Rajbanshi community through the process of *sanskritization* would be discussed in the subsequent chapters.

On the other hand, Koches succeeded in building up a great empire under the Kingship of Biswa Singha from Kamtapur fort and ascended the throne of Kamrupa (A.D. 1496-1533). Maharaja Biswa Singha attempts to revamp Hinduism. He himself was a worshiper of *Siva* and *Durga*, revived the *shakta* shrine at Kamashka. This is an old shrine of hoary antiquity and of Mongoloid or possibly even earlier

“Austic origin”. It witnessed the final Brahmanization of a pre-Aryan cult. It is a symbol of the final Arynization or Hindusation of the Indo-Mongloids of North Eastern India.⁷² His son and successor Naranarayan (A.D.1533- 1587) was not only the greatest of the Koches ,but was also one of the illustrated rulers of North- East India of his time. His long reign of nearly half a century forms a landmark in the history of the Brahamaputra Valley. At first stage, a sharp distinction between the Rajbanshis and the Koches could be seen. However, hundreds of years passed on Koches rule in the throne were accepted by the Rajbanshis, in such a matrimonial connection was made, and in course of time Koches and Rajbanshis admixture themselves culturally and socially and their separate identity was lost. In fact, on such an admixture, the cultural and linguistic development took a new shape. However, at present the Rajbanshi community is facing a new identity crisis i.e. the Rajbanshis of North Bengal are as Scheduled Caste, whereas the Rajbanshis of Purnea (Bihar) are recognized as O.B.C. (Other Backward Caste). During the year 1995- 96, there was an attempt to include the Rajbanshis of Assam under Scheduled Tribe list. A parliamentary committee under the chairmanship of Sri Amar Ray Prodhon, M.P.(Cooch Behar Loka Sabha Constituency) has given into the question wheather the Rajbanshis of Assam are SC or ST and submitted a report. The findings of the committee have, however, not yet been made in public.⁷³ On the other hand, Rajbanshis of Nepal are considered as General Caste recognized as ‘Rajbanshis’ in official records.

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