

## Chapter - 1

### Geo-Ethnic Background of the Region

In the present chapter an attempt has been made to provide geo-ethnic profile of the area of the present dissertation. At the beginning we should make clear the meaning of the terminology 'geo-ethnic' what we have actually meant for here. The terminology geo-ethnic means the geographical location of a particular area of the present study and its historical background and at the same time the ethnic identity of the people of that geographical area. It is necessary because the study is much connected with the ethnic identity of the major community of the region. Rather it can be said that it is the epicenter of the present dissertation theme, because the Uttar Khanda Dal is actually a study on the ethnic based political association of the region. It is needless to say that this is the first time of its kind is actually a study of the ethnic based political association in the plains of North Bengal nay West Bengal in the post independence era. Now let us explain geography and ethnicity in two different ways.

As the history of a country or a region is closely connected with its geography, therefore, at first, an attempt has been made to depict the geographical profile of the area of the present study. The geographical location concerned with the present dissertation is the northern part of present day West Bengal of India, officially and unofficially is known as North Bengal or *Uttarbanga*. It is to be stated that the activities of the concerned political organization i.e. the Uttar Khanda Dal, the main theme of our dissertation were mainly confined to this geographical area and the ethnic group which was mostly connected with that political organization is mainly the inhabitant of this geographical area. This geographical area comprises with at present seven districts (formerly five districts) viz. Malda, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar. The former district of West Dinajpur was later divided into North and South Dinajpur in 1992.<sup>1</sup>

However, though the main area of focus of the present dissertation will be the aforesaid districts of present day North Bengal but the geographical area of Darjeeling hill i.e. three sub-divisions of Darjeeling (Darjeeling Sadar, Kalimpong and Kurseong) will not come under the purview of our discussion because of the fact that the ethnic group which is well related to our study is not the inhabitant of that hilly region of Darjeeling. But the *tarai* region of Darjeeling district will certainly come under the geographical area of our study. It is to be considered here that the geography of present day North Bengal was not the same in pre independence period. Prior to 1874, the northern part of British Bengal was consisted of the districts of Purnia, Goalpara, Rajshahi, Malda, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling and princely state of Cooch Behar. Barring Cooch Behar the eight districts were under Rajshahi Division of British Bengal. It is to be mentioned that the Goalpara district was made a part of Assam province in 1874 and in the same year Assam was made the Chief Commissioner's province.<sup>2</sup> After partition in 1947 the whole of Rajshahi, Rangpur, the eastern part of Dinajpur with seventeen police stations, five police stations of Jalpaiguri, a few parts of Cooch Behar and one police station of Darjeeling (Phansi Dewa) went to erstwhile East Pakistan (present Bangladesh) and Purnea became a part of the state of Bihar.<sup>3</sup> With regard to Cooch Behar, a princely state, it was merged with India in 1949 and converted into a district of West Bengal in January 1950.<sup>4</sup>

The present day North Bengal is a narrow tract of land at a short distance from the Chinese border connects two divisions of India i.e. Eastern and Northern India and thereby it is thought to be a very vital geographical area of India. In fact, North Bengal has a special strategic importance because of her geographical proximity with Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan on the north; Assam and Bangladesh on the east; southern part of West Bengal, Bihar and Bangladesh on the south; Bihar in the south-east.<sup>5</sup> In other words, it lies between Eastern India and the *Aryavarta* (present North India). Thus, the region has been serving as eastern gate-way for the communication of people, trade and commerce as well as cultural relation and exchange of ideas between the Indian sub-

continent in the West and north-eastern state in the East as well as Burma ( present Myanmar ), Bhutan, China and other parts of south-east Asia since long past. Thus, the region is located in the centre of the network connecting different civilizations.<sup>6</sup>

It is very much relevant to mention here that the region is one of the greatest migration routes of different races of people since time immemorial. In consequence, almost all the races of people like Tibeto-Burma, Alpine, Aryan, Dravidian, Austric etc. assimilated in this region of India. Out of all these racial groups the people of Tibeto-Burma i.e. Indo-Mongoloid race (otherwise called '*kirata*') is most numerous and predominant.<sup>7</sup> But the fact is that all the aforesaid groups of people of different races had been inter- mingled there and had developed a mixed culture in the region of our study. As a result of which, the ethnic diversity of the concerned geographical region especially its northern part i.e. Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar of present day North Bengal has no match with that of the rest of West Bengal.

In the preceding paragraphs the geography of North Bengal in colonial period and in the post-colonial period has been discussed. Now an attempt has been made to make a glance on the historical past of the region. As it is well known to all that the social, economic, political and cultural aspects of a particular region generally get very much influenced by its geography as well as history and it is also historically true that geography and history clubbed together with other contributory factors determine culture, customs, behaviors, language and above all help in making the socio-political structure of a particular region and here North Bengal or our concerned geographical area of study is not exception to that. The geographical location of North Bengal had determined its history since the dawn of civilization; therefore, it is very imperative to make discussion on the historical past of the region. Similarly it is also very important to make our conception very clear about the predominant position of a particular ethnic group of people i.e. Rajbanshi in this particular region. This apart, the Uttarkhanda Dal, the concerned political organization or the main theme of our discussion had raised the demand of a separate state named Kamotapur from the second phase of its activities i.e. from 1980s which will be discussed in detail in chapter-6. Therefore,

the brief history of Kamotapur or Kamota (the prevailing term is Kamatapur but the *Uttarkhandists* used it as Kamotapur in their memorandum, sent to the Prime Minister of India) is needed to be discussed in order to justify the historicity of the very demand of the Uttarkhanda Dal.

Most of the historians generally discuss the historical past of North Bengal dividing into two different glorious zones of imperial kingdoms of Pragjyotishpur-Kamrup-Kamata-Koch kingdoms in the northern part of North Bengal and the Paundra-Gour kingdom in the southern part of it.<sup>8</sup> Changes in the geographical map and transfer of political powers in the vast region between the rivers Brahmaputra and the Ganges had occurred from time to time. It is found in the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranic literatures that this area overtime was known as Pragjyotisha, Kamrupa etc. In fact, the present Bangladesh and the entire North Bengal were within this region. Subsequently, a part of it was named as Pundra and the rest as Kamrupa. River Karatoya flowing in the west of Jalpaiguri district of present West Bengal was the border between two regions.<sup>9</sup>

Since the early centuries of the Christian era, one part of Pragjyotishpur began to be described as Kamrupa. The *Allahabad Prasasti* of Samudra Gupta (c.325-326A.D.) mentioned that 'Kamrupa' was a frontier kingdom.<sup>10</sup> However, with the rise of the *Varmanas* as ruling dynasty of the region, the kingdom of Pragjyotisha had been generally recorded as Kamrupa. In fact, it was during the reign of Bhaskara Varmana (600-650A.D.), Kamrupa emerged as a significant political powers. Huen Tsang (Yuen Chawang), a Chinese traveller, who visited Kamrupa during the reign of Bhaskara Varman, described in his account that Kamrupa was situated in the eastern side of Pundravardhana after a great river, the Karatoya.<sup>11</sup> However, the geographical boundary of Kamrupa was more clearly defined in the 'Yogini Tantra', a late medieval Sanskrit text. It described that 'Dikkar Basini' formed the eastern boundary while the Karatoya River was considered as the western boundary of the region. Northern side of Kamrupa was marked by the *Kanchangiri* (Kanchan Junga Hill) and extended up to the confluence of the Brahmaputra and the 'Lakshya' rivers in the south.<sup>12</sup>

In the post Bhaskara Varman era, western part of Kamrupa was described as 'Kamata' where the Khena rulers established a kingdom in the fifteenth century with its capital at Kamatapur. Subsequently, the Koch and Mech tribes founded the Koch kingdom on the ruins of Kamata kingdom which was almost identical with the latter. It should be pointed out that in the geographical area of the present study especially its northern part barring the hill region of Darjeeling, the process of the formation of a chiefdom was started in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century under the leadership of Haria Mandal (a chief of Mech Community).<sup>13</sup> This process eventually culminated in the formation of the Koch Kingdom under the kingship of Biswa Singha (C.1510–1514 A.D.) and Nara Narayan (1540–1587 A.D.).<sup>14</sup> In fact, it was under the able leadership of Nara Narayan that the Koch Kingdom reached at its highest territorial size comprising with the whole of Tista and lower Brahmaputra Valley and began to be known as 'Koch' or 'Behar'. However, the Koch kingdom was divided into two parts in 1581 due to the internal feud between Nara Narayan and his nephew Raghudeva Narayan (1597–1604).<sup>15</sup> After this division, eastern part of the kingdom had been named as 'Koch-Hazo' and the main area of the kingdom came to be known as 'Behar'. In the last days of independent status of the Koch kingdom, it was extended from Bhutan frontier in the north to Rangpur in the south and from the Tista river in the west to the Sankosh river in the east. However, "until the 28th August, 1949 Koch Behar was an Indian state ruled by the Maharaja of Koch Behar who had been a feudatory prince under the British Government. By a document dated 28th August 1949 Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan of Koch Behar ceded his territory to the Dominion of the Government of India. The transfer of the administration to the Government of India took place on 12 September 1949, from which date Koch Behar was ruled as a Chief Commissioner's province by a Chief Commissioner appointed by the Government of India. By an order under section 290 A of the government of India Act, Koch Behar was transferred and merged with the province of West Bengal on 1st January 1950. Since then Koch Behar is being administered as a district of West Bengal."<sup>16</sup>

## Pundra–Gour Kingdom

Now let us describe the brief history of the kingdom which was flourished on the other bank of the great river *Karatoya* in ancient, medieval and modern period. Pundravardhan was also a vast country and like Kamrup, its name is mentioned in the Ramayana, the Mahavarata and other Sanskrit literatures. Historians think that Mahasthangarh near Bogra (now in Bangladesh) is actually the relic of the ancient city of Pundravardhana. In fact, the administrative division of Rajshahi Division of colonial North Bengal was once a part of this region barring some parts of Rangpur and Jalpaiguri districts which were on the eastern side of the river Karatoya. However, the region, known as Varendra or Varendrabhumi was also under Pundravardhana.<sup>17</sup> Ancient 'Pundravardhana' which was consisted of the area of Bogra, Rajshahi, Murshidabad, Malda and Dinajpur, later came to be known as 'Varendra' or Varendrabhumi. Pundravardhana lasted for several centuries specially from the Mauryan period to the end of the Gupta period.<sup>18</sup> However, in the post Gupta period, the concept of 'Pundravardhana' or 'Pundrabhumi' began to change fast and most probably the area of North Bengal became a part of the kingdom of Sasanka of Gour.<sup>19</sup> In subsequent time, the major portion of the region was included in the big empire of the Palas of Bengal. In the time of the Sena rule of Bengal, the importance of the region was gradually declined, because, under the Senas, Nadia emerged to be an alternative centre of politics and culture. During long Muslim rule, following the sudden incursion of Md. Baqtiar Khalji, the region became politically more important because of the practical emergence of the concept of Gour–Banga centering round Gour and Pandua in Malda.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the change of the area of a geographical denotation of the concept of North Bengal are found in the course of history. In other words, we can say that in the earliest times some parts of North Bengal roughly correspond with the northern half of what used to be called Pundravardhana. As the present North Bengal was comprises Malda and a part of erstwhile Dinajpur, it can therefore, be said that ancient Pundravardhan and later

Varendri and Gour- Banga included a part of present day North Bengal. On the other hand, the Kamata and later Koch Behar kingdom was also included as a part of present day North Bengal i.e. Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri.

Though the hilly region of Darjeeling district i.e. Darjeeling Sadar, Kalimpong, and Karseong will not come under the periphery of our present study, but the plains area or *terain* region will certainly come under the geographical jurisdiction of our dissertation theme. Considering this, the history of Darjeeling is to be discussed which is very relevant.

The whole region of present Darjeeling district of West Bengal before second half of the 18th century was a part of erstwhile Sikkimese kingdom. It was Prithvi Narayan Shah, the *Gurkha* leader who conquered Nepal on March 12, 1770 made Katmondu his capital. Thereafter, he began to expand the boundaries of his kingdom towards Sikkim and as a result, the Nepal-Sikkim conflict was started in 1780. On October 28, 1788, Rabdalge, the then capital of Sikkim was captured by the *Gurkhas*. By 1789, the whole of Darjeeling hills from the river Tista in the North barring Kalimpong and the *terai* region i.e. between Mechi river and Tista river came under Nepalese possession.<sup>21</sup> Thus, by 1814, a large part of Sikkimese land came under the possession of Nepal. It is to be mentioned that Kalimpong sub- division of the district was possessed by the Bhutanese kingdom from Sikkim in 1706.<sup>22</sup>

However, the expansionist policy of the *Gurkhas* was against the interest of the East India Company's rule in India. Consequently, Anglo-Nepalese conflict was inevitable and finally it was started in 1814.<sup>23</sup> The British Govt. of India made two campaigns and in the second of which the *Gurkhas* were defeated by the British. "By a treaty signed at Segaulie at the end of 1816, the Nepalese ceded the 4,000 square miles of territory.....which in turn by a treaty signed at Titalya on February 10, 1817, was handed over to the Rajah of Sikkim with the apparent object of hedging in Nepal with the kingdom of an ally, and preventing all possibility of further aggrandizement by the *Gurkhas*."<sup>24</sup> However, it is to be remembered that the whole tract between the Tista river and Mechi river returned to Sikkim on the condition that Sikkim would be

compelled to refer any dispute if arises with her neighbours in future to the Governor General of Company also guaranteed the sovereignty of the Rajah of Sikkim.<sup>25</sup> In 1828, again frontier disputes arose on the Sikkim–Nepal frontier. According to the terms of the treaty of Titalya (1817), the Sikkimese king referred the same to the Governor General. Accordingly, Captain Loyd and Mr. Grant were sent to settle the dispute. They penetrated the Sikkimese hills and advanced as far as Rinchinpong, and during this journey they were attracted by the position of Darjeeling village. The climate of Darjeeling also attracted them and therefore, they desired to make it a sanatorium. Besides, it had strategic importance being in the centre of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. They reported the same to the Governor General who in turn cordially accepted the suggestion and instructed to persuade the Rajah of Sikkim for acquiring the place. The result was the ‘Deed of Grant’ on 1st February, 1835.’ By this Deed of Grant, all the lands, south of the great Rangit river, east of the Balasan, Kahail and Little Rangit river and west of Rungno and Mahanadi rivers were handed over to the British by the king of Sikkim as a mark of friendship.<sup>26</sup>

The second phase of the cession of a tract of land by Sikkim was made in 1850 when a punitive force was sent by the British following the arrest and detention of J.D. Hooker and Dr.Cambell in 1849 by the Sikkimese Dewan. This resulted in the annexation of the terai, a portion of Sikkim hills, ‘bounded on the North by the Ramman and the Great Rangit rivers and by the Tista river on the east and by the Mechi river on the west. In fact, it was the first ‘annexation of the district of Darjeeling which covers an area of 640 square miles.’<sup>27</sup> Because of the constant violation of the Treaty of Titalya by Sikkim, an expeditionary force was sent first under Dr. Cambell and then under Col. Gawler with Ashley Eden as envoy in 1860. Finally, a treaty was concluded in March 1861 at Tumlung, the then capital of Sikkim which put an end to the frontier disturbance and thereby the annexation of Darjeeling was also confirmed.<sup>28</sup>

But the formation of the full fledged district of Darjeeling was completed in 1866 only incorporating a hilly tract of 486 square miles, east of the Tista which was annexed from Bhutan following the Anglo–Bhutanese war of 1864-1865.<sup>29</sup> At that time, the

district was consisted of two sub-divisions i.e. Darjeeling Sadar and Tarai sub divisions. Kalimpong was kept in Darjeeling Sadar. The Headquarters of the Tarai sub division was first at Hanskhawa near Phansidewa from 1864 to 1880 and thereafter it was transferred to Siliguri (Siliguri was then in Jalpaiguri district but transferred to Darjeeling and made the Headquarters of Tarai sub division). However, in 1891 Kurseong was made the headquarters of a new sub division, named Kurseong and Tarai sub division was abolished and absorbed in Kurseong sub division. Later in 1907 Siliguri was made a new subdivision. It was in 1916 that the Kalimpong sub-division was created. The district of Darjeeling was included in the Rajshahi-Cooch Behar Division (Later only Rajshahi Division) till October, 1905 and after that it was transferred to Bhagalpur Division following the partition of Bengal in 1905. Again with the re-arrangement of the provinces it was retransferred to the Rajshahi Division on March, 1912<sup>30</sup> and till Independence the district of Darjeeling remained in the same Division. It was in the post independence period though the area of the district remained the same but a police station of the tarai region i.e. Phansidewa went to erstwhile East Pakistan which has already been mentioned earlier at the beginning of this chapter.

Thus it was during the colonial period that the geographical shape of North Bengal was substantially changed due to the inclusion of Darjeeling hills and later western Dooars as a part of Jalpaiguri district in the British Bengal. It has already been pointed out that as a result of the partition of India and post-independence integration the geographical shape of North Bengal was further drastically changed. Thus, in post independence era, and at its present shape, the present day North Bengal is constituted of the districts of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur and Malda which is obviously the geographical region of our present study.

In our preceding discussion, the geographical and historical background of the concerned region has been explained briefly but clearly. Now an attempt is to be made to identify the ethnic identity of the very ethnic group of people which is related very much to the formation of the concerned political organization i.e. the Rajbanshis. The

Rajbanshis are considered to be the major ethnic group of people in the concerned region and have been inhabiting in the same region since long past. But it is not irrelevant to mention here that the geographical settlements of the Rajbanshis covered not only the present day North Bengal, but also other parts of India mainly Goalpara of Assam and Purnea of Bihar. The Rajbanshi people have also the habitation in Jhapa district of Nepal and Rangpur and East Dinajpur of present day Bangladesh. In the said two districts of Bangladesh, the Rajbanshis were thickly inhabited since long past and also during colonial period. However, the epicenter of Rajbanshi life and culture was Rangpur. Therefore, the Rajbanshis of Rangpur played a vital role in organizing a social mobility movement (Kshatriya movement) in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which directly or indirectly helped to develop the idea of a separate ethnic based political party of the Rajbanshis in the post independence period. Therefore, it is very essential to explain the brief history of the ethnic identity and background of the Rajbanshi ethnic group of people of the concerned geographical area.

The society of North Bengal was composed of numerous and diverse social groups. The population generally belongs to different ethno-linguistic and cultural groups and to various castes and religious communities. It should be realized that the concerned region specially its northern part is the land of several autochthonous groups and among them the most significant are Rajbanshi, Mech, Dhimal, Rava, Garo, Toto etc. This northern portion of North Bengal, it is to be stated, popularly comprises with the districts of Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and the tarai portion of Darjeeling. It has already been mentioned that the area was a part of the kingdoms of Pragjyotish-Kamrup-Kamatapur from time to time. In addition to this political connection, the people of the area have ethno-linguistically and socio-culturally had association with common characteristics. In this respect this part is different from other sections of North Bengal as well as the rest of West Bengal. Secondly, the southern portion with the districts of Malda and North and South Dinajpur (erstwhile Dinajpur-cum West Dinajpur) had an association with the Barendri region of Central Bengal (undivided) in one hand and Purnea and Bhagalpur divisions on the other and also with Salar-Bagri region

(Murshidabad). Therefore, the early inhabitants of these districts were mostly Deshi, Poliya, Rajbanshi etc. During colonial period a large number of tribes began to settle there.<sup>31</sup> We can not also ignore the Muslim inhabitants of the concerned area which also constitutes a large number of total populations of North Bengal. The Muslims specially *Nashya-Sheik* should also be treated as autochthons because of the fact that most of them were converted Muslim from Koch, Mech, Rajbanshi etc. which will be discussed later.

Among the above mentioned ethnic groups the Rajbanshis were the most predominant Hinduized social group. This process of Hinduization and also Islamization had gone through long before the advent of the Britishers.<sup>32</sup> The Rajbanshis constituted the most predominant section of the local Hindu population in northern districts of British Bengal. Numerically they were the third largest Hindu caste in Bengal as a whole.<sup>33</sup> The 1921 Census Report shows that about 89 percent of this caste population lived in the districts of Dinajpur, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Bihar state of undivided North Bengal.<sup>34</sup>

It has already been mentioned that the main ethnic group related to our present study is Rajbanshi population. Considering this point we shall make an attempt to look back the origin of this caste. However, the history of the origin of this caste is a puzzling one and there is a strong debate among the scholars, both foreign (Colonial British ethnographers) and indigenous, about their origin.

The earliest reference to the term 'Rajbanshi' is to be found in Buchanan Hamilton's report and then the same is mentioned in all subsequent ethnographic monographs, land revenue settlement reports, district gazetteers and census reports of Bengal.<sup>35</sup> It is very interesting to note that the basic debate among the scholars is around the question of their association with the Kochs. In this regard, the term 'Rajbanshi' denotes their association with the Raja (king) of Koch Behar, a Koch tribe of Bodo origin. Here mention shall be made that the area where Rajbanshis were to be found in large numbers formed parts of the old kingdom of Kamrup, of which modern Assam was also a part. It is evident from the history of Kamrup and medieval Assam

that many tribal groups like the Kiratas, the Ahoms, the Khens, the Kochs etc. ruled over different parts of Kamrup. Among these various groups, the Kochs under the leadership of Viswa Singha established their control in the western part of Kamrup by the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century.<sup>36</sup> But it is very interesting to note that nowhere at this stage can be found any reference to the Rajbanshis in the history of this locality. Moreover, the term Rajbanshi was not mentioned either in the Persian records, in the foreign accounts, in Assam Burunjis, or in Darang Rajvamgshavali (genealogical account of the Koch royal family).<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, in the Brahmavaivartta Purana there is an exhaustive list of mixed castes, but in this list also there is no mention of the 'Rajbanshis', or the 'Polyas' or the 'Deshis', though there is a reference to the origin of the Kochs.<sup>38</sup> Out of this above mentioned puzzle about the origin of the Rajbanshis, there are different official and non-official works on this question. Broadly speaking there are two different lines of arguments in this regard. One is, by the colonial official-cum-ethnographers and the other by an indigenous group of scholars including Rajbanshi caste exponents.

Among the colonial official-cum-ethno-graphers, the work of Buchanan Hamilton's report was pioneering one. In his report 'Accounts of the district of Rangpur 1810,' Sir Buchanan mentions that Koch and Rajbanshis, both being part of the large Bodo stock, belong to the same caste but not all the Rajbanshis are Kochs, although most of them are those who have become degenerated by adopting the profession of palanquin bearers 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'.<sup>39</sup> It means that the term 'Rajbanshi' is a greater connotation where the Mongoloid tribes get entrance after abandoning their tribal customs and accepting Hindu traditions and rituals. Hamilton Buchanan was supported by B.H.Hodgson who, in the 'Journal of Asiatic society of Bengal, 1849' wrote that when Biswa Singha, the grandson of Hazo, and the founder of the Koch Kingdom, embraced Hinduism, the country was renamed 'Behar'— the people became Rajbanshis.<sup>40</sup> He had further stated that the Koch and Rajbanshis belonging to the same stock and the former belonged to the distinctively

marked type of the Mongolian family.<sup>41</sup> Waddell also expresses almost the same view that the Rajbanshis do not belong to the Dravidian stock, "but as distinctively Mongoloid though some heterogeneous..."<sup>42</sup> This apart, E.T. Dalton, Thomson, Porter etc. have expressed the same view that the Rajbanshis belong to non-Aryan stock and large Bodo population. The basis of their observation was the physical appearance (physiognomy) of the Rajbanshi people.<sup>43</sup>

W.W. Hunter makes his observation thus: "The Kochs, or Rajbanshis as they are now called, may be briefly mentioned among the semi-aboriginal tribes, although they are now recognized as a distinct caste of Hindus. The Koch race first came prominently into notice about the close of the fifteenth or the beginning of the sixteenth century, when Hazo established the Koch Kingdom upon the downfall of the more ancient Hindu Kingdom of Kamrup. Brahmanism was introduced among the people in the time of Visu, Hazo's grandson, who, together with his officers and all the people of condition embraced the new religion. The name of Koch was abandoned by the converts; who assumed that of Rajbanshi, literally of the royal kindred."<sup>44</sup> Hunter traces the use of the term 'Rajbanshi' since the time of Visu or Biswa Singha, a Koch king of Koch Bihar and believes that the Rajbanshis and Kochs are synonymous. Thus, all the aforesaid British officers cum ethnographers emphasize on the fact that the Rajbanshis and the Kochs are from the same Mongoloid stock.

Herbert Risely, on the other hand, expresses a different view from those of the above mentioned scholars. He observes that "Koch, Koch-Mandai, Rajbanshi, Paliya, Desi, a large Dravidian tribe of North-Eastern and Eastern Bengal among whom there are grounds for suspecting some admixture of Mongolian blood....The original nucleus....of the Rajbanshi was certainly Dravidian."<sup>45</sup> In the Census Report of 1901, E.A. Gait expresses the view that there was basis for the assertion of the Rajbanshis of Rangpur that they did not resemble the Kochs and sprang from entirely different sources. He asserts that in spite of considerable racial intermixture in some places the Rajbanshis appeared to be Dravidian tribes.<sup>46</sup> He further says that though the Kochs freely call themselves Rajbanshis, it is believed that the two communities sprang from

entirely different sources; the Koch Kings are of Mongoloid origin, while the Rajbanshis are Dravidian tribes who probably own the name long before the Koch King rose to power.<sup>47</sup>

However, the British officers cum ethnographers have expressed two different views about the ethnicity of the Rajbanshi community. One view is that the Rajbanshis were a section of the Koch people who had adopted the Brahmanical culture after abandoning their traditional cultural practices or tribal customs. The other view is that all the Rajbanshis were not Koch or Mongoloid like the Kochs but some of them were of Dravidian origin. Thus, it is found that there are sharp differences of opinion in colonial literature itself about the origin of the Rajbanshis.

Now let us see what the indigenous literature says about the racial identity of the Rajbanshis. In the indigenous literature, especially in the literature of some of the Rajbanshi caste exponents, the Rajbanshis were mentioned completely different from the Kochs and regarded as superior in rank to them. However, the leading exponent of the indigenous literature was Monomohan Ray. Ray had stated that “irrespective of any question as to identify or difference of origin, the Rajbanshis and Kochs form entirely distinct castes.”<sup>48</sup> Hari Kishore Adhikary, another writer of Rajbanshi Community on the indigenous literature argued that the Kochs and the Rajbanshis were not the same caste and were different in many respects. In this regard, Adhikary argues that the food habits, behavior and customs of the Kochs are the indicative of their lower social status and the upper caste Hindus including the Rajbanshis did not maintain social relations with them. He also refuted the argument that the Rajbanshis embraced Hinduism during the reign of Biswa Singha of Koch Behar and emphatically stated that the Rajbanshis were Hindus before his reign and were recognized as Bhanga Kshatriya. As according to the Shastras, term Bhanga Kshatriya had no meaning so they were recognized as Rajbanshis.<sup>49</sup> Upendra Nath Barman, another Rajbanshi personality on the subject has also argued that the Rajbanshis were *Kshatriyas* and lived in the land between the river Karatoya and Ganga called in ancient time ‘Pundra Desa’. Barman refuted the contention of colonial ethnographers and argued that the Rajbanshis had

been claiming the *Kshatriya* status long before the eighteenth century. He cited many examples from the Hindu Shastras and Puranas in this regard.<sup>50</sup> Other Rajbanshi scholars like Maniram Kabya Bhusan, Manbhola Barman had made the same claim of a Kshatriya origin. <sup>51</sup> Ambika Charan Choudhury, an Assameese Rajbanshi scholar has expressed the same view as Upendra Nath Barman did.<sup>52</sup>

However, very recently, a Rajbanshi scholar, Nalini Ranjan Ray notes: “The people were ancient but the term ‘Rajbanshi’ came in use in recent historical period. After the arrival of Aryan culture in the region, a new civilized culture developed in the plains and semi hilly terrains of the whole of North-East India. The Mongoloid stock of people from the plains started mixing up with the culturally more developed people of the region.....in the later ages, people of this vast region came to be known in different names such as ‘Kuvach’, ‘Kirata’ or ‘Chins’ and later ages one mainstream of their mixed culture, identified them as ‘Pundra Kshatriya’ or ‘Koch Rajbanshi’ or ‘Rajbansi Kshatriya’ meaning chain of royal lineage.”<sup>53</sup> Ray, thus, argues the contention of admixture of Aryan and the Mongoloid stock of people with regard to the origin of the Rajbanshis.

Other than the Rajbanshi scholars and writers in the indigenous literature, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee states that the masses of North Bengal region are very largely Bodo origin or mixed Austric-Dravidian- Mongoloid, where groups of people from lower Bengal and Bihar have penetrated among them. They are now mainly regarded as Koch i.e. Hindu or semi Hindu Bodo who have abandoned their original Tibeto- Barman speech and have adopted the Northern dialect of Bengal (which has a close affinity with Assamese ) when they are a little too conscious of this Hindu religion and culture and retain at the same time some vague memory of the glories of their people particularly during the time of Bishwa Singha and Nara Narayan, they are proud to call themselves Rajbanshis and to claim to be called *Kshatriya*.<sup>54</sup>

However, it is clear from the observations of various scholars that there are differences and contradictions in both the colonial and the indigenous literatures on the question of the exact origin of the Rajbanshi ethnic group of people and these were basically due to the differences in perceptions and purposes of the writers of such

literature.<sup>55</sup> So, the debate is inconclusive. Finally, it should be stated that whatever might have been their actual origin, there is no dispute about the fact that the Rajbanshis were the early settlers in North Bengal.<sup>56</sup>

Though the ethnic background of the Rajbanshi people is the main concern of the present study, but a brief description of the process of Islamization in North Bengal is to be mentioned as because the local muslims (*Nashya-Sheiks*) are labelled by some scholars like Ranajit Dasgupta as 'Rajbanshi Muslim.'<sup>57</sup> Moreover, it is essential to discuss with a view to understand the involvement of some of the Muslim population with the Uttarkhanda Dal and its movement.

It has already been mentioned in the preceding discussion that a parallel process of Hinduization and Islamization was gone through long before the advent of the Britishers. It is worth mentioning that the second largest component in the population of the region was composed of Muslims.<sup>58</sup>The Muslims of North-Bengal however, did not constitute a homogenous community or group. They had two major segments- (a) the local Muslims, the bulk of whom was composed of converted Rajbanshis, Kochs and Mechs and (b) the Muslims who had migrated mainly from the east Bengal districts.<sup>59</sup> It can be said from above point of view that the local Muslims are identical with the local Rajbanshi Hindus, Mechs, Kochs etc. in all respects barring in religious beliefs. However, the early history of the local Muslims is in obscurity to a large extent. The local Muslims who are also known as *Sheiks* and *Nashyas* and formed more than 99 percent of the Muslim population of the Jalpaiguri district were native to the district. <sup>60</sup> It is believed that the *Nashya-Sheiks* embraced themselves into Islamism, perhaps being attracted by the humane appeal and preaching made by the 'Pirs' and 'Darbeshes' etc. It is also believed that the term 'Nashya' is the corrupted form of 'Nasta' means fallen or degenerated.<sup>61</sup> It is historically true that the Muslim rulers and their lieutenant governors along with military army troops invaded the kingdom of Kamrup or Kamatapur and Koch Behar in many a time in medieval period. In course of their invasion they must have taken water, foods etc. from the local inhabitants in their way and sometimes they had conducted loot and plunders in the villages. These areas, after

the departure of the Muslim troops were declared by the upper caste Hindus as 'Nasta' or corrupted, because they came in touch with the 'Mlechhas' or untouchable Muslims. These people being ignored and hated by the caste Hindu Society gradually inclined to Islamism. Thus the native autochthon group of people embraced themselves into Islamic fold. In course of time, these people gradually came in touch with the sufis (who were aristocratic migrants), which inspired them to throw off their lower caste and untouchable identity and got encouraged to have the title 'Sheik', being the disciples of the 'Pir' or 'Sheik'. Therefore, the largest section of the Muslims of northern region of North Bengal is *Nashya-Sheiks*'.<sup>62</sup>

It can be said from the above explanation that the bulk of the local Muslims were converted Islamized autochthons like Rajbanshis, Kochs, Paliya and Mechs. However, with regard to the religious beliefs and practices of those Islamized Rajbanshis, Kochs or Mechs, it is to be mentioned that they were not very strict in adhering to orthodox Islamic faith and tradition.<sup>63</sup> Rather many of their observances had a folk form characterized by worship of 'Pirs' and 'Mursheds' and contained elements of nature worship and of non-orthodox Hinduism.<sup>64</sup>

It has already been mentioned that North Bengal especially its extreme northern part i.e. the district of Jalpaiguri is the land of several autochthonous groups. We have made a detail discussion about the ethnicity of the Rajbanshi group of people and thereby the local Muslims. It needs to mention a few words about the Mechs, Garos, Rabhas and Totos.

The Mechs were one of the original and numerous inhabitants of the Dooars and adjacent tracts and exercised control over fairly large areas in earlier centuries. "The Mech and Kachari are considered as the same people, but in the Duars they also call themselves Bodo which means a great people." However, since the thirteenth century the Mechs experienced a process of both Hinduization and Islamization.<sup>65</sup> Ravas and Garos, a minor autochthon groups are also found in the Dooars of Jalpaiguri. However, all these ethnic groups were considered to be the western branch of the Kachari or Bodo tribe.<sup>66</sup>

It is to be mentioned here that the references of autochthonous group of people like Mech, Garo, Rava and also the local Muslim are made along with the Rajbanshi ethnic group because all these ethnic groups of people were directly or indirectly related to each other at different stages of historical development.

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