

Caste Marginalization and Resistance: Case of Rajbanshis in North Bengal

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Abstract

Literally the term 'Rajbanshi' means the lineage of the king. But, in reality, the Rajbanshis have been placed in the bottom of the caste hierarchy and have often been victims of discrimination. Starting with a movement for regaining the lost social status of the Rajbanshi community in Hindu society of Bengal, how their activism gradually developed into a more hard-core or confrontational political movement aiming at separate statehood has been discussed in this paper. In addition, the paper discusses in detail how the demands raised, and the modes of agitation, changed over time.

Key Words - Casteism, Discrimination, Identity, Separatism

1. Introduction

Recently a debate started amongst intelligentsia on the importance of caste in electoral process of West Bengal. Praskanva Sinharay has argued that caste has never been influential category in the electoral politics in West Bengal and that the situation has now changed with the dramatic entry of the lower caste Matuas as a major vote conglomerate.¹ Their success has surfaced the fact that West Bengal is not devoid of politics of caste. From colonial period, we see active participation of casteist groups in democratic politics. Various 'Namasudra' or lower caste groups had unified on caste lines and started politics for power. Other than, Matuas, for example, one can refer to political grouping of Rajbanshis on casteist line. But, before Matuas, the hegemonic domination of the urban-educate upper-caste gentry over the public life of Bengal never succumbed to the lower caste struggle. Now, the success of Matuas is no doubt working as impetus to other caste groupings and we can speculate about more politicization of caste in the democratic arena of West Bengal.

Democracy always gives space for divisional discontents. Cleavages got created on the basis of different parameters and different political parties formed to pursue problems of public. As caste remains one of the main reasons behind many kinds of difficulties, we see politicization of castes in many pockets of India. Caste domination and differentiation was present in Bengal also but got back-footed by the eruption of class politics instead of caste. However, some caste groups remained active in maintaining their separate identity in political space. Amongst them, one of the groups is Rajbanshi.

¹ Sinharay, Praskanva (August 25, 2012), A New Politics of Caste, Economic & Political Weekly, Vol XLVII, no 34, pp 26

Rajbanshis are the indigenous people residing in the entire region of the erstwhile Kamrup, i.e. all the districts of North Bengal, the districts of Western Assam and the northern districts of Bangladesh. Researchers have debates on the origin of the Rajbanshis. Porter says, “Rajbanshis are the Hinduized Koches of Rangpur and Goalpara.”² According to G. A. Grierson, “Those Koches, who are now Hindus, are principally known under the name of Rajbanshi. The Rajbansi dialect bears many close points of resemblance to the dialect of East Bengal”.³ Gait describes the Rajbanshis of North Bengal, “as a synonym of Koch, this represents a real caste and in this sense only it may be entered in the schedule”.⁴ S. K. Chatterjee argues, “The masses of North Bengal areas are very largely of Bodo origin, or mixed Austric Dravidian-Mongoloid...or semi-Hinduized Bodo’s who have abandoned their original Tibeto-Burman speech and have adopted the northern dialect of Bengali. They are proud to call themselves as Rajbanshis and to claim to be called Kshatriyas.”⁵ So, it is generally regarded that, the Rajbanshis were a purified group of the Koch (a semi-aboriginal tribe) who had undergone Sanskritisation and adopted Hindu manners and customs by abandoning some of their traditional cultural practices. But, after enduring neglect of being lower caste, Rajbanshis started movement for social upliftment and identity formation.⁶

Obviously identity formation is not a one day event. Often it got ‘imagined’ or ‘invented’ highlighting some identity marker.⁷ In the case of Rajbanshis, ‘caste’ became an identity marker. Here catalyst was modern political and social developments under British colonialism.⁸ The British Indian State has been twisted and mutilated caste in innumerable ways and it has also recognized

² Porter, A. E (1933), *Census of India, 1931, Vol-V, Part-I*, Calcutta: Central Publication Branch, p 473

³ Grierson, G. A (1969), *Linguistic Survey of India, Vol-III, Part-II*, (reprinted edn.), Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, p 95

⁴ Gait, E. A (1901), *Census Report of Bengal, 1901, Part-I, Appendix-I*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, p xxxviii

⁵ Chatterjee, S. K (1998), *Kirata Jana Kirti, The Indo-Mongoloids: Their Contribution to the History and Culture of India*, (reprinted edn.), Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, p 60

⁶ Ghosh Bhattacharyya, Moumita (July-December 2009), *Rajbanshis: The Deprived People of North Bengal (In the State of West Bengal)*, *International Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 2 No.2, ISSN 0974 – 2514, p 243

⁷ For details see Anderson, Benedict (1983), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso; and Leslie, Julia and Mary McGee (ed.) (2000), *Invented Identities: The Interplay of Gender, Religion and Politics in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press

⁸ For details see Bayly, Susan (1999), *Caste, Society and Politics in India from Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and Dirks, Nicholas, B. (2003), *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Delhi: Permanent Black

significance of the caste system by way of accepting caste as the basis of socio-cultural and economic standing of people as higher and lower. Gradually the existence of disjunction between status (ritual rank) and power became the hallmark of caste.⁹ Thus caste as a system has been endangered as well as shaped and perpetuated by the colonial rulers.

Previously, caste was a dynamic, diverse and multidimensional reality of Indian society.¹⁰ The origin of caste is hidden at the Varna system of Hindu religion. Chatur Varna – consisting Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra – is a neat logical construct and the position of each Varna is fixed for all time. Every caste is liable to fit into this Varna model, but in which strata it should be fitted is not always rigid. Therefore, every caste tries to fit into this model in a way that can improve its ritual ranking, thereby making it its frame of reference for upward social mobility. But with the breakdown of the closed village economy and the rise of democratic politics, the competitive element embedded in caste has come to the fore. This has resulted in the collapse of the caste system but also in the rise of caste identities.¹¹

‘Identity’ always tries to segregate ‘I’ from ‘other’. Formation of caste identities followed the same path. System of caste enrollment in administrative set up was started by the Census. In the 1881 Census, profiles of over 400 ‘races’, ‘tribes’ and ‘stereotypes’ were presented in the context of caste. The 1901 Census ranked all castes in terms of specific Varna context. ‘Ritual distance’ was the main criterion of caste ranking in 1901 Census, and the “functions” performed by the caste system was accorded primacy in the 1931 Census.¹² Rajbanshis were included in the ‘Tribal’ or low-caste strata in the first Census report of 1872, 1891, 1901 and 1911. This downgraded their status officially. Therefore Rajbanshis had started Kshatriyaisation movement to elevate their caste rankings by enrolling themselves into the Kshatriya or higher strata of the Census.

2. Initiation of Caste Conglomeration due to Social Marginalization

Apparently this movement can be called as an effect of the social marginalization of the Rajbanshis both by Bengalis and British. After becoming conscious of their low position in the local caste hierarchy in the changing social

⁹ For details see Dumont, Louis (1970), *Homo Hierarchicus*, London: Wiedenfield and Nicolson

¹⁰ For details see Sharma, K.L. (1974), *The Changing Rural Stratification System*, New Delhi: Orient Longman

¹¹ For details see Gupta, Dipankar (2005), *Caste and Politics: Identity over System*, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 34

¹² For details see *Census of India: 1881, Vol. I; Census of India: 1901, Vol. I, Part I; and Census of India: 1931, Vol. I, Part III*

milieu of this region, a section of the affluent and educated Rajbanshi intelligentsia including Haramahan Khajanchi and Harikishore Barma had started Kshatriyaisation movement in the beginning of the twentieth century. Rai Saheb Panchanan Barma (or 'Thakur Panchanan') institutionalized this movement by establishing Kshatriya Samiti at Rangpur (Bangladesh) in 1910. Very soon it acquired the status of a Central Association of the whole Rajbanshi community and Kshatriyaisation movement eventually acted as the base of the various ethno-political movements in North Bengal.¹³

Here one can ask about the silence of the real raja (King) of Rajbanshis and reason for leadership by Panchanan Barma. According to local historians, with the marriage of King Nripendra Narayan with Suniti Devi (the daughter of Brahma Samaj-leader Keshab Chandra Sen), the Koch royal family drifted gradually away from the caste rigidity and caste-based identity. Moreover, they felt pride in introducing themselves as Koch.¹⁴ On the other hand, highly educated Panchanan Barma failed to secure any suitable job in his homeland, Cooch Behar, for the dominance of non-Rajbanshi people. So, being treated ignominiously, he jumped into the Kshatriyaisation movement already begun by predecessors, like Haramahan Khajanchi and Harikishore Barma.

To achieve their declared objectives, Kshatriya Samiti took three-fold activities. With the help of the relevant clues from the Vedic Shastras and support of Brahmin Pandits from Kashi, Nabadwip, Methila, Kamrup etc., Thakur Panchanan cited different code of laws which reinforced their Kshatriya origin and legitimized the elevation of their ritual status into Kshatriya.¹⁵ With the help of local histories, he showed that after establishing Koch kingdom, the Koch ruler Biswa Sinha with his people had 'apostatized to Hinduism took the title 'Rajbanshi'.¹⁶ Astute Brahmins christened him as 'Biswas Singha' and ascribed to him the Kshatriya status.¹⁷ In fact, before the British rule, the warrior-ruler model of the Kshatriya remained the most popular and practicable model for social mobility and cultural assimilation for ambitious people of lower castes and tribal. So Kshatriyaisation was initiated in the tribal areas in order to strengthen their legitimization as Hindu rajas in their own society and to broaden the basis of their economic and political power. In other words, it was a

¹³ Barma, Sukhbilas (ed.) (2007), *Socio-Political Movements in North Bengal: A Sub-Himalayan Tract*, New Delhi: Global Vision, p xii

¹⁴ Debnath, Sailen (ed.) (2007), *Social and Political Tensions in North Bengal (Since 1947)*, Siliguri: N. L. Publishers, p 44

¹⁵ For details see Barman, Upendranath (1979), *Thakur Panchanan Barmaner Jiban Charita (Bengali)*, Jalpaiguri

¹⁶ Debnath, Sailen (2008), *Essays on Cultural History of North Bengal*, Assam: N. L. Publishers, p 42

¹⁷ Dalton, Edward Tuite (1960), *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Kolkata, p 89

calculated move on the part of the tribal mobility to further their material interests strong Kshatriyaisation. However, in this process, affluent sections of the Koches later on, particularly in the late sixteenth century, started abandoning their impure tribal practices radically and adopted the manners and customs of the Hindus and assumed the name 'Rajbanshi' to distinguish themselves from their more plebeian brethren. They, thus, wanted to be regarded as a separate caste and socially superior to the Koches. While in 1891, through 'Rangpur Vratya Kshatriya Jatir Unnati Vidhayani Sabha', the Rajbanshis described themselves as 'Vratya Kshatriya', from 1911 they began to claim pure Kshatriya status.

To intensify their demand, Kshatriya Samiti incorporated Brahmanical values and practices for a purified social image, which was legitimized by priests, genealogists and pundits.¹⁸ Moreover, in order to gratify their ritual rank aspiration, they began to imitate the values, practices and cultural styles of "twice born" castes that formed a part of Hindu great tradition. Since 1912, a number of Milan Kshetras (mass thread wearing ceremonies) were organized in different Rajbanshi-dominated districts.

They also brought out a monthly journal called 'Kshatriya', in which many provocative writings were published against the Bengali upper-caste hegemony and advised the community members to sever all socio-political ties with these castes. Even the intellectual sections henceforth discontinued their association with the literary organizations of Bengalis.

Thus, according to I. Sarkar such social uplift movement organized by the Kshatriya Samiti not only consolidated caste solidarity among the common Rajbanshis but also created consciousness of a separate identity among the educated youth of the community in particular.¹⁹ But, Rajatsubhra Mukhopadhyay thinks that, the movement got confined into a particular section of the Rajbanshis, who were mainly land-owners, jotedars and autochthonic population.²⁰ The leaders of the Kshatriya movement were equal to other caste Hindu Bhadrals in matters of education, profession, dress and manners. So, the rural poor, who constituted the bulk of the Rajbanshi peasantry, were unable to identify themselves fully with those people of their community who belong to the high strata of the society. Thus the class solidarity of the Samiti got fractured

¹⁸ op. cit. Ghosh Bhattacharyya, Moumita, p 246

¹⁹ For details see Sarkar, I. (2006), *The Kamtapur Movement: Towards a Separate State in North Bengal*, Govind Chandra Rath (ed.), *Tribal Development in India: The Contemporary Debate*, New Delhi: Sage

²⁰ Mukhopadhyay, Rajatsubhra (2009), *Social Formation of the Rajbanshis and the Emergence of the Kamtapuri Identity*, N. K. Das & V. R. Rao (eds.), *Identity, Cultural Pluralism and State: South Asia in Perspective*, Anthropological Survey of India, p 484

under the weight of class contradictions, and ultimately the Samiti failed to crystallize a distinct 'social identity' for the Rajbanshis.

The leaders of the Samiti, however, later realized that just adoption of the sacred thread and upper-caste practices could not help in raising the social status of the Rajbanshi masses whose economic condition was extremely bad. Then they started looking for being accommodated in the government-approved institutional arrangement of 'protective discrimination', especially in matters of education and employment. To avail this, they were ultimately granted 'Scheduled Caste' status in Bengal. Therefore, the social movement of the Rajbanshis, which initially began for achieving a superior status in the caste hierarchy, was ultimately reduced to a mere real politic.

3. Politicization of Caste

In the meantime, with the initiation of the representative democratic politics in India, local leaders turned politicians started to mobilize caste groupings in order to organize their power.²¹ In making politics their sphere of activity, caste groups on the other hand get a chance to assert their identity and to strive for positions. So, since 1920, castes have organized themselves to obtain representation in the provincial legislatures and this had resulted in 'horizontal stretch' of caste.²²

Rajbanshi intelligentsia also did not delay. Though the Kshatriya Samiti started its way mainly as a social organization, but from the second decade of the twentieth century, it began to partake in national politics. The Samiti gave candidates in all the four elections held in Bengal Legislative Council from 1920 to 1929 under 1919 Act and achieved striking electoral success. The elected candidates formed the 'Independent Scheduled Caste Party' in 1938 along with Scheduled Caste representatives of East Bengal. The Samiti placed their candidates against the all-India party candidates because they considered the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Communist Party of India (CPI) as associations of the upper-caste Hindus. The candidates of the Kshatriya Samiti won in the Assembly election of 1937 and 1946 against the candidates of the Congress and Communists. From the election results, it got proved that Kshatriyaisation movement had considerable influence on the political life of Jalpaiguri and its neighbouring districts of Rangpur and Dinajpur. But, against the background of the constitutional negotiations continuing since the appointment of the Simon Commission, the Kshatriyaisation movement became involved in the issue of political and economic reforms and improvement of

²¹ Kothari, Rajni (ed.) (1970), *Caste in Indian Politics*, New Delhi: Orient Longman Ltd.

²² Srinivas M. N. (Feb. 1-7, 2003), *An Obituary on Caste as a System*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 38, No. 5, pp. 455-459

ritual and social status was given the back seat. Later on this movement dried up with the death of Panchanan Barma in 1935 and merger of its leaders with Congress and mainstream politics.

With changing scenario of politics, Rajbanshi King of Cooch Behar also forced to make a people-representative party to assemble 'his' people in 'his' favour. In 1942, Cooch Behar Legislative Council was formed in response to the persistent clamour for responsible government in the princely states throughout the country. According to local historians, King's administration was so long run by the educated, non-Rajbanshi, upper-caste Hindus and there was no Rajbanshis although the king himself was belonged to their caste.²³ But, after contesting election primarily on the issue of awareness and rights of the Rajbanshi people and winning all the seats, aspirations of the Rajbanshi elected members got a big fillip. The participation in administration through this democratic medium raised hope amongst the commoners that deshi (indigenous) people can be able to capture the power of administration at last and they can achieve the ultimate goal of being administered by themselves. So they started movement against the Bhatias (outsiders) under the banner of Hitasadhani Sabha.

According to some historians, Hitasadhani Sabha was established in 1918 for the Hita (welfare) of the deshi (indigenous) people of Cooch Behar.²⁴ But this student-oriented party was banned by Prince Nityendra Narayan in 1921. Again its presence was felt in a historic meeting of 19th May 1946 in Cooch Behar. According to local historians, in a princely state of around five lakh people, this meeting was attended by around two lakh public.²⁵ The communications were not so developed at that period. Still the people came by bullock's carts or on buffaloes, by bicycles and on foot. Rajbanshi Hindu and Muslim elites and jotedars - like Satish Chandra Singha Roy, Khan Chaudhury Amanatulla, Gajendra Narayan Basunia narrated the aim of the party as the Hita (welfare) of deshi (indigenous) people. However, in 26th July, 1948, Radhakanta Sarkar wrote about Hitasadhani Sabha that - '...a most reactionary group has been formed, formulated and patronized by the Maharaja of Cooch Behar, to serve his own personal purpose of dominating and ruling the people for his own exploitation to the detriment of the interest'. So, how much 'Hita' was done - cannot be determined. But, this Sabha was carried on their demand for

²³ Dakua, Dinesh Chandra (2007) in Barma, Sukhbilas (ed.), *Socio-Political Movements in North Bengal: A Sub-Himalayan Tract*, New Delhi: Global Vision, p 54

²⁴ Varman, Lalit Chandra (2008), *Rajyar Dabite Uttarbange Andolon* (in Bengali), Assam: N. L., p 85

²⁵ Barman, Prasenjit (2007) in Barma, Sukhbilas (ed.) *Socio-Political Movements in North Bengal: A Sub-Himalayan Tract*, New Delhi: Global Vision, p 73

democratic representation by local representatives and all-round development of Cooch Behar.

Without going to the debate on the 'real' purpose of these groups like Kshatriya Samiti or Hitasadhani Sabha, it can be clearly said that Rajbanshis got identity-conscious to some extent by socio-political marginalization of the upper-caste Hindus and forced to unify themselves on casteist lines and this 'mass' get politicized soon. Starting from a pure social demand of upliftment in caste strata, the Rajbanshis ultimately demanded a separate state for themselves in post colonial period.

4. Politics for Separate State

At the dawn of independence when all were in dilemma about the political future of Cooch Behar kingdom, Hitasadhani Sabha along with Independent Scheduled Caste Party raised the first demand of a separate homeland for Rajbanshi community, 'Rajar-sthan' (abode of king), comprised of Siliguri, Jalpaiguri and Dinajpur districts of Bengal, Purnia district of Bihar, Goalpara district of Assam, certain portions of Rangpur and Darjeeling, and Cooch Behar kingdom.²⁶ This demand was popularized by the-then Central Minister Jogendra Nath Mandal in the mass meeting in Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Dinajpur in 4th, 6th and 7th May, 1947. After India's independence in 15th August 1947, Hitasadhani Sabha took the name of Cooch Behar State Praja Congress and demanded for the proclamation of 'Cooch Behar' as a separate state or keeping it under the Central Government of Indian Dominion. But neglecting all this public demands, ultimately Government of India decided to merge Cooch Behar with West Bengal as a mere 'district'. Other Rajbanshi-dominated areas assimilated with Pakistan (later Bangladesh) and Indian states like West Bengal and Assam.

In immediate protest of this assimilation, the representatives of Cooch Behar State Praja Congress - along with Jalpaiguri Gorkha League, Darjeeling Gorkha League, and Sikkim Praja Sammelon - assembled at Darjeeling on 30th October 1949 and called for a separate state, Uttarakhand Pradesh Sangha. But their demand was again looked down by both Centre and State Government and the movement gradually dried up.

Under Bengali-hegemonic rule of West Bengal Government, marginalization of the Rajbanshis continues. Social status of the Rajbanshi's was challenged with the influx of a large number of caste-Hindu immigrants with a strong awareness to casteism. In spite of all efforts, Rajbanshi's failed to alleviate in caste strata.

²⁶ For details see Ghosh, Ananda Gopal, Uttarakhand Movement: A Historical Perspective, (abstract), North Bengal University, Department of History

They faced humiliation and objectionable identification by the caste Hindus, who started interacting with the indigenous Rajbanshis in differential terms. For example, Nagendranath Basu mentioned ‘Rajbanshis’ as Mlechha (barbarians) in ‘Vishwakosh’ (World Encyclopedia) and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in Bongo Darshan moots that the Koch identity cannot be synonymous with Bengali Hindu identity. Rajbanshis were even denied entry into the temple of Jagannath Puri by a Government Act in 1911 and separate student hostels were established to board and lodge the Rajbanshi students.

Partition of India in 1947 and Pakistan in 1971 led more population influx in Rajbanshi-dominated areas. Actually the population of this area became double within a very short period. Out of total population of 10, 19, 806 of Cooch Behar in 1961 Census, 2, 98, 000 were born outside the district, of which 2, 52, 000 born in East Pakistan. Similarly, out of population of 13, 59, 292 of Jalpaiguri in 1961 Census, 4, 54, 177 were born outside the district of which 2, 18, 341 were born in East Pakistan.²⁷ According to official statistical data, in 1971, total 1, 159, 000 migrants settled in North Bengal. Except this official statistics, there remains innumerable number of Bangladeshis, who crossed the border and permanently settled in these areas. After 1971, a fresh wave of displaced persons came to North Bengal due to the turmoil in new-born Bangladesh. According to the Census of 1981, 14.4 lakh displaced persons came in between 1971 – 1981 and 6, 75, 195 permanently settled in West Bengal (See Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of Migrant Population in North Bengal by District

District	Number of Migrants from East Bengal
1. Darjeeling	48,000
2. Jalpaiguri	2,49,000
3. Cooch Behar	4,42,000
4. West Dinajpur	2,92,500
5. Malda	1,27,500
Total in North Bengal	1,159,000

Source: Census of India 1971

In the colonial period, Rajbanshis were in majority in the area. This helped in strengthening their power in democratic politics. During the 1951 – 1981, in spite of the steady decline in their proportion of the total population, they remained dominant group in North Bengal. In 1951, out of total 3, 689, 109 persons of North Bengal, Rajbanshis constituted 14.32 percent (total 5, 28, 456

²⁷ Das, Naren (2007), in Barma, Sukhbilas (ed.), Socio-Political Movements in North Bengal: A Sub-Himalayan Tract, New Delhi: Global Vision, p 138

persons). In 1981, although the ratio of Rajbanshis to the total population increased from 14.32 percent to 18.46 percent, their proportion to total Scheduled Caste population was decreased from 67 percent in 1951 to 62 percent. From 1951 – 1981, the largest concentration of Rajbanshis found in two districts of North Bengal, i. e. Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri. In 1981, these two districts share 70.45 percent of the total Rajbanshi population of North Bengal. About 21 percent of the Rajbanshis of North Bengal were the inhabitants of West Dinajpur district. In the remaining two districts, viz. Malda and Darjeeling, the corresponding share was 4 - 5 percent. In spite of the lesser increase of the number of the Rajbanshis, the colossal increase of the total population the North Bengal clearly proves the overflow of migration. This ushers marginality of the Rajbanshis, and ultimately paves way for collective mobilization (See Table 2).

Table 2: Distribution of Rajbangshi (R) Population in North Bengal

Area	1951				1981			
	Total Population	Total Rajbangshis (R)	% of the R to the Total Population	% of the R to the Total R Population	Total Population	Total Rajbangshis	% of the R to the Total Population	% of the R to the Total R Population
1. Cooch Behar	671158	252069	40.15	47.70	1771643	714221	40.31	40.96
2. Jalpaiguri	914538	172710	25.71	2.68	2214871	514177	23.21	29.49
3. West Dinajpur	720573	67489	9.37	12.78	2404947	369015	15.34	21.16
4. Malda	937580	20294	2.16	3.84	201871	83462	4.10	4.79
5. Darjeeling	445260	15894	3.57	3.00	1024269	62770	6.12	3.60
North Bengal	3689109	528456	14.32	100.00	9447601	1743645	18.46	100.00

Source: Mukhopadhyay, Rajatubhra (1997), The Rajbangshis of North Bengal: A Demographic Profile, 1951-81, North Bengal University Review (Humanities and Social Sciences), p. 26

The greatest threat of migration on the Rajbanshis is land alienation. Since the Rajbanshis were early settler in the region, it is this community that actually

owned and tilled the land. A good number of them were jotedars (landowners) or some other form of sub tenants, and the remaining were adhiars. Studies show that till the end of the nineteenth century, Rajbanshi families controlled about 53 percent of jotes (land), and thereby remained a powerful force among the rural elites. But inability of proper understanding of the Izaradari system in British rule and due to their failure to pay revenue, many medium and small jotedars lost their jotes to the state after 1932. In 1932, Regency Council identified 5000 to 6000 jotes of Cooch Behar in the list of revenue defaulters, and later declared their land as khas land (ownership vested in the government). This led to the pauperization of many old jotedars. In post-independence period, due to population influx, the pressure on land increased. In the absence of 'alternative' avenues of work, the immigrants had swollen the ranks of share croppers. Gradually, land passed from the Rajbanshis into the hands of merchants and moneylenders like the Marwaris, up-countrymen, Kabulis and many middle-class Bengali migrants. According to one source, land was acquired cheap, at the rate of Rs. 80 or Rs. 100 a bigha (a unit of land). This is one of the major sources of resentment among the landed Rajbanshis. But, successive governments of West Bengal paid more attention to the settlement of the refugees rather to the question of land alienation of Rajbanshis. Implementation of Ceiling Act rigorously, growth of the urban centers and projects like the Teesta Barrage (which is still under construction) had left a large chunk of the Rajbanshis landless and transformed them from land owning peasants to wage labour proletariats.

Along with land alienation, Rajbanshis faced cultural hegemony of Bengalis. Most importantly, indigenous language of Rajbanshis, Kamtapuri got neglected with the gradual Bengalisation of the area. So, in every manifesto of Rajbanshi groups, we find demand for recognition of their language. In fact, language is not only an ingredient of cultural identity, but also a gate pass in the commercial career. As Bengali is the official language of West Bengal, it is compulsory in educational and governmental institutions. So, the mother tongue of Rajbanshis, Kamtapuri got neglected even in the land of its people. The West Bengal Government and the majority of the Bengali linguistics are not even ready to accept this language as a separate language. But, Kamtapuri is not definitely a dialect of Bengali; rather, it historically preceded the Bengali language. Kamtapuri is a dialect of Kamrup and Kamata kingdom. It was referred in different ancient literatures in different names - like Rajbanshi, Kamrupi, Kamtabihari and Kamtapuri. We can find its reference in the 'Linguistic Survey of India' (1967: 153), "When we cross the river (Brahmaputra) coming from Dacca, we meet a well marked form of speech in Rangpur and the districts to its north and east. It is called Rajbanshi, and while undoubtedly belonging to the eastern branch has still points of difference which lead us to class it as a separate dialect." We can found different kinds of literature on Kamtapuri language - like

‘Kamteswar Kulkarika’, written by Rup Narayan Shrutidhar; ‘Uttor Banglar Lok Sahitya O Bhasa’, written by Dharmanarayan Sarkar; and ‘Kamta Jana Jiban Katha’, written by Arun Maitra. As a distinct language, Kamtapuri developed on independent line with own alphabets and grammar. But, in spite of that it is always neglected as a separate language. So, for its preservation and popularization, one of the most important demands of the Rajbanshi activists is the recognition of Kamtapuri language as a medium at educational and governmental institutions and inclusion of this language in the Eighth Schedule of Indian Constitution.

The socio-economic and cultural marginalization of the Rajbanshis aggravates with the relative deprivation of their region, North Bengal. Although there we can see extreme variation in terms of economic as well as human development, everybody - including existing government - acknowledge basic backwardness of North Bengal.²⁸ In the first Human Development Report, it was clearly written that - a major aspect of lack of development of this area is inadequate infrastructure development – which includes transport, communications, energy, and buildings for health and educational institutions.²⁹

The marginalization and pauperization of the indigenous Rajbanshis coupled with the indifferent attitude of the State Government in over-all development of their area had phoenix-rise of Uttar Khand movement. According to some sources, on 31st May 1969, a group of educated youth members of the then Kshatriya Samiti proposed first to build Uttar Khand Dal to deal with the overall development of North Bengal.³⁰ So, on 5th July 1969, the successors of the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samiti – viz. Panchanan Mallick, Harimohan Barman, Kalidranath Barman, Wazuddin Ahmed, Soma Oraon, Sitanath Roy and Jogendranath Bhattacharya - formed this Dal (Party) to convince the government in taking proper steps for the socio-economic and infrastructural development of North Bengal and maintenance of the linguistic and cultural solidarity of the Scheduled Caste and Tribes (The Charter of Demands of the Uttar Khand Dal: 1969). To pursue their demands in a democratic way, Uttar Khand Dal contested elections in different legislative seats of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar. But, in spite of assiduous efforts, they got defeated in electoral politics mainly due to lack of funds and steady dwindling in number.

²⁸ Singh Roy, Debal K.(2004), Peasant Movements in Post Colonial India: Dynamics of Mobilization and Identity, New Delhi: Sage Publications, p 227

²⁹ Human Development Report, Development and Planning Department, Government of West Bengal 2004, p 198

³⁰ Ray, Haripada (2007) in Barma, Sukhbilas (ed.) Socio-Political Movements in North Bengal: A Sub-Himalayan Tract, New Delhi: Global Vision, p 112

Finding no relief for the grievances of the people of the North Bengal given by Kolkata-based state leadership, the Uttar Khand Dal ultimately gave a general call on 22nd June 1980 for a separate state, Kamtapur, comprising five districts of West Bengal – viz. Malda, Dakshin Dinajpur, Uttar Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, and Cooch Behar. This time their demands aimed at socio-economic upliftment and cultural solidarity of the ‘sons of the soil’ (The Charter of Demands of the Uttar Khand Dal: 1989).

But state government termed all burgeoning demands for separate statehood as ‘secessionist’ activity and took repressive measures instead of dialogue or development. While commenting on the repressive attitude of the state government, Atul Roy (President of Kamtapur Progressive Party) remarked –

‘Atrocity is the weapon of Left Front... CPI (M) opposed most of the mobilizations organized by KPP... Even their placards, posters, microphones etc. are forcefully snatched away by the police and CPI (M) workers... The police had launched a terror campaign against the Kamtapuris and more than two thousands of KPP supporters had faced police harassment since 1996... The police were wrongly identifying them as terrorists... The KPP workers and even innocent Rajbanshis were being humiliated and tortured by the police... The armed forces had shot dead many of its leaders in fake encounters ... the state government would be committing a mistake if it would try to tackle the movement as law and order problem... Their coercive measures cannot stop the movement....’ (Excerpt of an interview with the author).

But according to Kamtapuris, ‘Kamtapur’, with an area of 8, 384 square kilometers would be much greater than many Union Territories of India from the point of view of area, population and natural resources. In justification of their movement, they exemplified the creation of several states – like Maharashtra, Gujrat, Nagaland, Haryana, Meghalaya and Andhra Pradesh – according to language and culture. Moreover, demand of a new state in a democratic way is legal and legitimate as a new state can be created constitutionally under Article 3 of the Indian Constitution.

But, never Rajbanshi candidates of Rajbanshi-led groups succeed to get victory in assembly or parliamentary elections. That’s why they seldom comes in the news headlines of the mainstream media or succeed to pressurize the democratic government. Internal cleavages amongst Rajbanshis also weakened their movement. For example, on 21st Oct 1986, Uttar Khand Dal renamed as Kamtapur Gana Parishad under the leadership of Panchanan Mallick. Again on 7th January 1996, two members of Kamtapur Gana Parishad, Atul Roy and Nikhil Roy, formed Kamtapur People’s Party ‘to agitate peacefully in

democratic way for the creation of the Kamtapur state'.³¹ Again in 2003 Kamtapur People's Party got bifurcate by Atul Roy to form another party, Kamtapur Progressive Party. Many Frontal organizations formed - like All Kamtapur Students Union (formed in August 1994), Kamtapur Vasha Sahitya Parishad (formed in 1997) and Kamtapur Women's Rights Forum (formed in 1998). Armed group, Kamtapur Liberation Organisation was set up in 1993.³² On 9th September 1998, Greater Cooch Behar People's Association (GCPA) formed and, in 26th December 2000, it spearheaded demand of a separate state, Greater Cooch Behar, comprising areas of preset 'Cooch Behar' along with the parts of South and North Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling and Assam (As shown in the Map of Greater Cooch Behar at their party spokesman, Taroyal).

5. Conclusion

Thus politicization of caste ended with politics for separatism. Intention of social upliftment turned into economic and cultural claims. Economic upliftment and cultural solidarity prevails in the minds of the party leaders of the Rajbanshi communities and the caste question itself got marginalized. However, we can call it a social movement as it had three distinct features – collective mobilization, ideology, and orientation to change. It is difficult to ascertain how far it appealed to the people whom they sought to mobilize, and how successful the movement was, but the defeat of different Rajbanshi-led party candidates in the democratic elections by a great margin indicates that the movement failed to evoke a strong response from the so-called 'sons of the soil' in the region. Language and culture did not appeal to all the member of the Rajbanshi communities. It is now known that in their prime, the activities of the movement were fluid, and were restricted to mobilization through rallies and a large number of group meetings in villages and towns of North Bengal.

[This article is a revised version of the 3rd Chapter (Origin & Development of the Movements of the Rajbangshis) of my D. Phil. thesis (Politics of Separatism in North Bengal : A Fight for Justice), written under supervision of Prof. Mohd. Aslam, Department of Political Science, Allahabad University.]

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³¹ For details see Halder, Ipsita (2000), Ethnic Regional Mobilisation in India: A Study of the Kamtapur State Demand in North Bengal, M. Phil. Dissertation, West Bengal: North Bengal University

³² Jana, Arun K. (2008), Development and Identity Politics in West Bengal: The Kamtapur Movement in North Bengal, Brar, Bhupinder et.al., Globalization and the Politics of Identity in India, Delhi: Pearson Longman, p 117

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