

## **Changing Nature of Identity of the Backward People of Assam: A Study on the transition of 'tribal identity' of the Koch-Rajbanshis to the 'constitutional tribe' through a backward caste.\***

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Identity of an individual or a community is a matter of perception. It depends on the context of analysis and approaches of scholars who aspired to reconstruct the identity of a community. In a broader sense, identity of a particular community takes shapes on the basis of certain characteristics such as language, religion, beliefs, race, caste and certainly a common cultural tradition, which differentiate that community from the others. Social identity of a community again is 'relational'. In that sense the concept of 'backwardness' of a community depends on the 'advance position' or standard of the others. Again a sense about the 'self', mobilizes a backward community for the formation of a standard (forward) social identity to be acceptable to the forward communities. In the multi-ethnic plural society of India, we do generally notice two phases in the formation of identity of a community----- (i) denunciation of imposed identity and (ii) assertion for self. In this context Assam is no exception.

Being a polyphonic and plural cultural region, Assam has a long historical experience about the formation of standard identity of several backward social communities based on tribe, caste, language, religion, etc. Since the concept of identity is 'situational' and 'contextual', the social identity of a particular community is being changed with the changing nature of context and time. With this theoretical background, in this paper I have examined the changing nature of identity of a backward community of Assam (and sub-Himalayan Bengal) called the 'Koch-Rajbanshis' whose identity has become a matter of great concern for the historians. Being a ruling community of Lower Assam and Sub-Himalayan Bengal, the Koches had developed a kind of their Kshatriya (ruling) identity from a tribe. However, 'Koch identity' began to be considered as inferior with the beginning of the nineteenth century. Instead of tribal identity, the Koches of Lower Assam and Sub-Himalayan North Bengal began to consider them as 'Rajbanshi Kshatriya'. It was further stimulated due to the *kshatriyaization* movement in entire Bengal in the early twentieth century. The Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam, however, have changed their agenda of social identity in postcolonial India. Instead of respectable caste, they have been clamouring for the recognition of their pre-colonial tribal identity along with the formation of a 'separate state'. In the present paper I'll highlight all these aspects

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of identity of the Koch-Rajbanshis in historical perspective with somewhat objective outlook.

## II

### **The Koches and the Rajbanshis of Pre-colonial period.**

In the present constitutional provision of India, the Koches and the Rajbanshis (also spelled as Rajbongshi/ Rajbangshi) or Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam have been classified as 'Other Backward Castes' (OBC). They are Scheduled Castes (SC) in West Bengal having their large concentration in North Bengal. The term Rajbanshi is also refers to a linguistic community of India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan having somewhat social cohesiveness bonded by linguistic and cultural features. Such international distribution of the Koch-Rajbanshis can be understood from the history of their settlement and polity formation. It has been accepted in the historical researches on the 'Koch history' that Tibet was the land of their early settlement.<sup>1</sup> They migrated to North Bengal and northeast India through the route of Eastern Nepal. On the basis of inscriptional evidences D.C. Sircar has argued that the Koches appeared as a settled tribal community in North Bengal in the ninth century after their migration from Tibet.<sup>2</sup> Settlements of the Koches as settled tribe in Sub-Himalayan Bengal and Lower Assam in the early thirteenth century have been clearly confirmed in the *Tabakat-i-Nasiri*, a Persian text compiled by Minhasuddin Shiraj.<sup>3</sup>

Political history of the Koches, however, was started with the beginning of formation of their chiefdom under the leadership of Haria Mondal (a Mech tribal chief) in the early sixteenth century. Haria Mech, together with the Koches; had founded a small chiefdom at Khuntaghat (Chikina Hill) of Lower Assam. It transformed into a territorial kingdom under the kingship of Biswasimha (c 1515-1540). So the Koches began to transform into a political community. The Koch kingdom got highest territorial size during the reign of king Nara Narayan (1540-1587). However, the kingdom was divided between Raghudeva Narayan (1581-1587, son of Chilarai the Koch military general and brother of Naranarayan) and Naranarayan in 1581. Due to the internal conflicts between Koch- Hazo (eastern Koch kingdom under Raghudeva and his successors) and Cooch Behar (main branch under the successors of Naranarayan), the Koches lost their unity. Koch-Hazo was annexed to the Mughal territory of Bengal. Southern part of Koch-Hazo was finally annexed to the Mughal Empire in 1612. At the same time, the northern part of Koch-Hazo (including Darrang) came under the domination of the Ahom rulers. So the Koch kingdom was reduced to a small territory, extended from the *Tista-Karatoya* in the west to the *Sankosh* river in the east including some portion of Dhubri. The Mughal followed a policy of regular intervention to the Koch kingdom till the 1750s. On the other hand, Bhutan appeared as a great challenge for the Koches in the 1760s from the northern frontier. By 1770s the Bhutanese troops had captured the whole of Koch kingdom except a small tract. So the officials of the Cooch Behar had concluded an agreement with the East India Company (the emerging political power of Bengal) in 1772. Cooch Behar was agreed to pay a suitable indemnity and half of the revenue of the kingdom at the cost of the expulsion of the Bhutanese. By 15 February, 1773, the Company expelled the Bhutanese force from Cooch Behar. Since 1773 the Cooch Behar State maintained its

relations with the British Indian Government (till 1947) as a Native State. It was merged to India in 1949 as a C category State and finally it transformed into a district of West Bengal in 1950.

It appears from the brief political history of the Koches that their settlements have been extended in different parts of Bengal and northeast India through a gradual manner both as 'rulers' and 'ruled'. As rulers, the Koch kings had embraced Hinduism and the neo-Vaishnavism (propagated by Sankardeva) in order to legitimize their rule over the multi-ethnic plural society of Assam and Bengal.<sup>4</sup> Literary sources of the Koch history particularly the *buranjis* (chronicles) and *vamsavalis* (genealogies) have created a fictitious Kshatriya origin of the ruling family of the Koches. These sources have categorically mentioned that king Biswasimha was born due to the adulterous union between Hira (mother of Biswasimha) and lord Shiva (a prominent male deity of the Hindu pantheon).<sup>5</sup> Hence, the ruling family was described as '*Shivabanshi*' (descendants of Shiva). They were thus not *Rajbanshis*. Rather, the *Guru Charita* of Ramcharan Thakur, a sixteenth century biography of Sankardeva, had described that the *Rajbanshis* were different than the Koches.<sup>6</sup>

The *Rajbanshis* on the other hand have been appeared as a social community in the pre-colonial period. The Koches who embraced the Hinduism and Vaishnavism began to consider them as *Rajbanshis*. Early colonial sources on the history of Cooch Behar and Assam have recorded the large scale presence of the *Rajbanshis* in Rangpur, Cooch Behar and in Lower Assam.<sup>7</sup> Buchanan Hamilton, who visited Rangpur and other parts of North Bengal in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (1807-14 A.D.); had observed that 'the Koches were designated as *Rajbanshis* although *Rajbanshis* are not Koch'.<sup>8</sup> It Means that the term '*Rajbanshi*' was a social designation where the tribal Koches got place after abandoning their tribal customs and accepting Hindu traditions and rituals. Hamilton's view was further echoed in B.H. Hodgson's (1847) observation who expressed that the Koches, Meches and the Kacharis originated from the great Mongolian race and Koches or *Rajbanshis* are merely the most *hinduized* form of the common stock.<sup>9</sup> To them, the Koches were transformed into *Rajbanshi* after their *hinduisation*. So it seems that the Koches began to be designated as *Rajbanshi* since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### III

#### Colonial Anthropology and Racial Identity of the Koch-Rajabnshis

With the beginning of the colonial anthropology, identity of the Koches and *Rajbanshis* became more complex due to the multiple perceptions and opinions of the colonial observers regarding the people of Lower Assam and Bengal. There are two opinions about the racial composition of the Koch-Rajbanhi people of the Tista-Brahmaputra regions. In 1872, Mr. E.T. Dalton identified the Koches as Dravidian for their physical characteristics.<sup>10</sup> Dalton's view was accepted by Mr. Beverley in the '*first colonial census report*' (1872).<sup>11</sup> H.H. Risley, another notable administrative anthropologists, had also described the Koch tribe as Dravidian (in 1891) and stressed on the possibility of their admixture with the Mongoloids.<sup>12</sup>

However, colonial ethnographic view in favour of Mongoloid origin of the Koches was more prominent than the Dravidian racial identity. In his Monograph, *Essay the First on the Koch Bodo and Dimal Tribes*, B.H. Hodgson had convicted that the Koches belonged to the Mongoloid family.<sup>13</sup> Hodgson was followed by Dr. Latham who accepted the Mongoloid origin of the Koches.<sup>14</sup> Similarly L.A. Waddell had categorically expressed in 1911 that the 'Koches do not as stated by Colonel Dalton, Mr. Risley and others, belong to the dark Dravidian aborigines of India but are distinctly Mongoloid though somewhat heterogeneous.'<sup>15</sup> Similarly S. Endle had accepted the Mongoloid origin of the Koches. He even classified the Koches, Meches, Rabhas, Dhimals, Hajongs, Lalungs, Garos and such other tribes of Northeastern India within the same category.<sup>16</sup> Postcolonial anthropological studies on the tribes of Northeast India also recognized the Koches as Mongoloid.<sup>17</sup> These anthropological studies have created a kind of perception both among the scholars and general public about the physical characteristics of the Koch-Rajbanshis along with their identity as a backward community. To some extent, these studies are considered to be valid proofs for the reconstruction of tribal identity as claimed by the Koch-Rajbanshis in the postcolonial period.

#### IV

#### Formation of Kshatriya Identity of the Rajbanshis of North Bengal

Anthropological perceptions of the colonial scholars had created a serious problem in the 1890s regarding the social identity of the Rajbanshis of North Bengal and lower Assam when F.A. Skyne, the District Magistrate of Rangpur (of Bengal), had issued an order to classify the Rajbanshis as Koch in the decennial census.<sup>18</sup> The Rajbanshis had denied accepting that order considering themselves superior than the Koches. They argued that in remote past their forefathers were compelled to take shelter in North Bengal being persecuted by Mahapadma Nanda, the founder of the Nanda dynasty of Magadha (fourth century BC).<sup>19</sup> And they were forced to conceal their Kshatriya identity. So their identity can't be identical with the Koches as 'constructed' by the colonial administrators. The educated section of this community began to reconstruct their identity as kshatriya by composing their self-history.<sup>20</sup> It was a significant step in the announcement of a self-identity by discarding the imposed identity.

Feeling of caste Kshatriya origin of the Rajbanshis became more stronger with the foundation of their 'Kshatriya Samity' in 1910 in Rangpur.<sup>21</sup> Main objectives of this Samity were --- (i) establishment of a *kshatriya* identity of the Rajbanshis, (ii) to inform the government that the Koches and the Rajbanshis are different castes and (iii) publications and circulations of newspapers and periodical about the Rajbanshis and their cultural heritage.<sup>22</sup>

Demand for *kshatriya* caste identity of the Rajbanshis was recognized by the colonial government in 1911. The Census Officer of Purnia district (of present Bihar) had issued an order in 1911 to stratify the Koches and the Rajbanshis separately. The Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara (of present Assam) also allowed the Rajbanshis to classify them as *kshatriya*. Even Mr.E.W. Denith, Superintendent of Cooch Behar State; issued a similar order.<sup>23</sup> So O. Mally, the Census Superintendent wrote in 1911 that 'the former

request (of *kshatriyas* status) was granted without hesitation as there is no doubt that at the present day irrespective of any question of origin the Rajbanshis and the Koch are separate castes.<sup>24</sup> So it appears that the announcement of 'self' (by the Rajbanshis) by denouncing the ambiguous and imposed identity got official stamp from the colonial state.

Third step of identity formation of the Rajbanshis was the transformation of their kshatriya feeling into practical life. Under the leadership of Panchanan Barma, the Rajbanshis had acquired the prescription of the Brahmins of Mithila, Kamarup, Cooch Behar, Rangpur and Navadwip regarding their kshatriya origin and procured the process of elevation of their social status.<sup>25</sup> Eventually 400 delegates of the Rajbanshis of different districts of Bengal and Assam gathered at Deviganj of Jalpaiguri district in 1913 under the banner of the Kshatriya Samity and they publicly declared them as *Kshatriya*. They now began to hold *paita* or sacred thread, a symbol of the Caste Hindus.<sup>26</sup> Within a year, the Rajbanshis organized total 292 such gathering in different towns and villages of North Bengal and Assam. More than one lakh Rajbanshis had hold sacred threads (*paita*). They had also adopted some rituals and customs of the caste Hindus. Even they now assumed caste Kshatriya surnames like Barma, Barman, Ray, Singha etc., as prescribed in the *Brihatddharma Purana*.<sup>27</sup> So adoption of caste rituals from the so-called dominant caste communities was not merely an attempt of 'sanskritization'.<sup>28</sup> It was also a significant step in the process of formation of 'self-identity' of the Rajbanshis.

The Rajbanshis of Bengal had crossed the level of *sanskritization* in regards to their material gain. They had given maximum emphasis on their educational development. Thus they founded a hostel for their students at Rangpur in 1914. The Kshatriya Samity also founded the Kshatriya Chhatra Samity, (a student organization) to mobilize the Rajbanshi students along the line of its caste assertion. It is interesting to note that the Rajbanshis had placed themselves as a kshatriya community in the greater society of all India level (Bharatiya Kshatriya Mahashabha) in the 1920s. In 1920 Panchanan Barma was elected as the Vice President of Bengal branch of the Bharatiya Kshatriya Mahashabha. Representatives of the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samity attended the all India conferences of the Bharatiya Kshatriya Mahashabha held at Alwar in 1924 and at Indor in 1927.<sup>29</sup> All India connection of the Rajbanshis enhanced their social prestige because most of the Kshatriya leaders of the Bharatiya Kshatriya Mahashabha were the rulers of Native States. The Rajbanshis of Bengal, however, had accepted the Scheduled Caste identity in the 1930s. So their movement for respectable caste Kshatriya identity was transformed into a backward caste identity at least in official level. The Rajbanshis of Bengal also took interest about the provincial politics of Bengal. From 1920 to 1947 the Kshatriya Samity had played a significant political role in the election of Legislative Councils and Legislative Assembly of Bengal.<sup>30</sup> Reservation in the political assemblies, government jobs and in the educational institutions had the inspired the Rajbanshis to remained attached with the Scheduled Caste identity since 1936.

### Assertion for the construction of Koch-Rajbanshi identity in colonial Assam

While the Kshatriya identity became a matter of prestige for the Rajbanshis of North Bengal in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam were not remained silent. It is interesting to note that the attempt of formation of Kshatriya identity of the Koches through the construction of 'self-history' was first started in Assam by Hara Kishor Adhikary. His *Rajbanshi Kulapradip* (1909),<sup>31</sup> after reviewing the classical literatures (such as *Epics, Puranas, Tantras*, etc.), had proved that the Koches and the Rajbanshis have been originated from the Kshatriya dynasties. Immediately after the composition of the work, the Koch- Rajbanshis of Assam (especially upper class and the educated section) began to think about their social identity. The Koch Raj family of Sidli (an offshoot of Koch-Hazo) showed its active interest to the work of Shri Adhikary even when it was in manuscript form.<sup>32</sup> In a meeting held at Vidyapur (the capital of Sidly) on 1312 BS (1904), the royal family members of Sidli (including King Avay Narayan Dev, Prince Kumar Niranjan Narayan Dev, Lalit Narayan Dev and others) and the royal priest Shri Saradakinkar Vidyavagis had declared that the opinion of Hara Kishor Adhikary regarding the origin of the Rajbanshis is beyond doubt.<sup>33</sup> Lalit Narayan Dev (prince of Sidli) had also shown respect to this work. The Queen of Bijni Estate (a branch of Koch-Hazo) had also patronized the work of Shri Adhikary.<sup>34</sup> So it appears that two branches of former Koch rulers of Assam were highly influenced by the work of Adhikary especially regarding their kshatriya identity. Adhikary's work had also stimulated caste sentiment of the non-ruling section of the Rajbanshis of Assam.<sup>35</sup> Being inspired by Adhikary, the Rajbanshis of Bagribari, Vidyapur, Dhubri, Tamarhat, Dhalgaon and Antgao (of Goalpara and Dhubri district of Eastern Bengal and Assam) began to think about the standardization of their caste.

The Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam were also easily induced by the *kshatriyazation* movement of the Rajbanshis of Bengal<sup>36</sup> because 'Assam and Eastern Bengal' was a single province for a short span (1905-1911). The Debiganj Mahamilan Conference for elevation of social status of the Rajbanshis was attended by a large number of delegates from Assam. The organizational ability of Rangpur Kshatriya Samity had influenced the Rajbanshis of Assam to form their own social organization. It was translated into practice with the birth of a few social organizations of the Koch-Rajbanhis in different places of Assam in the early twentieth century as given in the following table.

Table 1: Social organizations of the Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam of the first half of the twentieth century

Sl. No.	Name of the Organization	Year of Foundation and Place
1	Koch Sammilani	Upper Assam, 1910s
2	Koch Sammilani	Garo Hills, 1910s
3	Baithamari Kshatriya Samity	Bongaigaon, 1930
4	Kshatriya Yubak Sangh	Bongaigaon, 1933
5	Goalpara Zilla Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samity	Goalpara, 1933
6	Kachar Rajbanshi Barkoch Samity	Kachhar, 1920s
7	Kachar Barkoch Rajbanshi Kshatriya Assamiya	Kachhar, 1920s

Source: compiled by self.

At the same time, the trend of composition of 'self-history' (for self identity) was continued in Assam by the Koch-Rajbanshi social workers-cum-thinkers. Here we can mention a few works such as -----*Prachin Kamrupar Kshatriya Jati* of Nagendra Narayan Choudhury (1945),<sup>37</sup> *Koch Rajbanshi Dehan Itihas*(1963) and *Kachar Koch Rajbanshir Itihas* (1968) of Khelendra Rajbanshi;<sup>38</sup> *Koch Rajbanshi Kshatriya Jatir Sankshipta Itibritya* of Shashi Bhushan Foujdar (1923)<sup>39</sup> and *Rajbanshi Kshatriya Jatir Sankshipta Itibritya* (1972) of Sibendra Narayan Mondal,<sup>40</sup> etc.

Announcement of 'self-history' of the Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam got a practical shape with the performance of rituals for *kshatriyaization* (as they did in Bengal). For *kshatriyaization*, they popularized the policy of public gathering called *Milan Kshetra*. First conference of this kind in Assam was held in 1912 at Salkocha (Pradip Tila, Dhubri). It was followed by the Milan Kshetras of Sapatgram (Bhelakoba). Within a decade the Rajbanshis of Lower Assam had organized such large number public conferences in different places of Assam.<sup>41</sup>

Kshatriyaization of the Rajbanshis of Lower Assam was further stimulated by the outbreak of the First World War (in 1914) when the Rajbanshi youths of that region began to join the British Indian Army. Publication of news on the performance of Rajbanshi soldiers in different war fronts of the world had strengthened their Kshatriya feeling. At the same time, frequent visit of the Rajbanshi social reformers of Bengal had immense impact on the Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement of Assam. Even the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual conference of the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samity (Rangpur) was held at Dhubri in 1327 B. S (1920).

Till the 1920s, the 'kshatriya identity movement' of this backward community of Assam was dependent on the Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement of Bengal. However, with the growth of social movement among the Bodos of Lower Assam (The Brahma movement), the Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam had showed their interest to form their own organization in Assam. Among such organizations, the Baithamari Kshatriya Samity was pioneering one. It was founded in 1930.<sup>42</sup> Main purpose of this Samity was to spread the message of kshatriya identity of the Koch Rajbanshis in Lower Assam. This Samity gradually extended its activities in different places of Assam what led to the birth of Uttarpar Kshatriya Samity (1933). It was eventually transformed into Goalpara Zilla Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samity. However, the Baithamari Kshatriya Samity continued to exist in colonial and post colonial period with its original objectives.

First conference of the Goalpara Kshatriya Samity was held at Birjhora (Bongaigaon) in 1933 (30<sup>th</sup> & 31<sup>st</sup> December). Shri Avay Narayan Dev (the king of Sidli) as the president of the Samity had announced a few purposes of this Samity such as -- (i) to reconstruct the Koch-Rajbanshi society along the line of kshatriya identity; (ii) to spread the education among the Koch-Rajbanshis for their empowerment; (iii) social reforms among the Rajbanshis. In the second conference of this Samity (held at Salmara, Bongaigaon, 1934) it also adopted a resolution to show the allegiance of the Rajbanshis to the British Government for drawing the attention of the government in their favour.<sup>43</sup>

The Goalpara Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samity became truly independent after the death of Panchanan Barma in 1935. In its third conference held at Bijni (in 1935), the Rajbanshis of Goalpara began to assert themselves as Assamese instead of Bengali for

legitimizing their demand for government jobs in Assam. However, it denied accepting the 'Scheduled Caste' status for the Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam (considering it as a derogatory identity) while the Koches and the Rajbanshis of Bengal had accepted the Scheduled Caste status.<sup>44</sup>

The Koch-Rajbanshis of Barak Valley had also announced themselves in the 1940s as Assamese Rajbanshi or Rajbanshi Kshatriya Assamese. We do notice the formation of certain other sociopolitical organizations of the Koch- Rajbanshis of Assam such as Kamrup Rajbanshi Kshatriya Sammilani, Salmara (Police Station) Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samity, Sadow Assam Koch-Rajbanshi Kshatriya Sammilani, etc. with different purposes of social reforms and identity formation.

It appears that the Koch-Rajbanshis could not establish themselves as a homogenous social group in Assam. Moreover, they were less concerned to identify themselves as 'backward' in the colonial period. They were trying to move forward with their respectable social identity. It is also a fact that the Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam were less concerned about the political empowerment like their brethrens of Bengal. They were even less forward looking like their neighbouring tribal communities of northeast India. When the Nagas, Mizos, Garos and the Bodos had formed their political organizations (such as MNFF = Mizo National Famine Front, Naga National Council= NNC, Garo National Council= GNC, 1946) the Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam were remained silent about their political future.

## VII

### **Demand for Tribal Identity and Separate State**

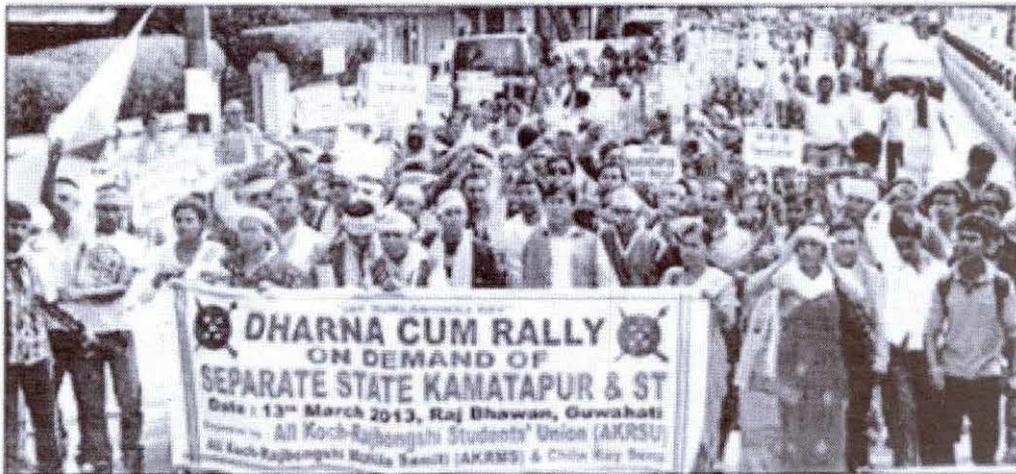
Social movement for the formation of a forward caste identity of the Koch-Rajbanshi of Assam and North Bengal got a new dimension after the independence of India. Since the 1950s to till date, they have been clamouring for certain issues. Such as -- --(i) to establish themselves as backward community especially as Scheduled Tribe in Assam, (ii) to establish a separate state in North Bengal of West Bengal including certain territories of Lower Assam; (iii) enhancement of reservation for the Koch-Rajbanshis, (iv) preservation and advancement of their culture, etc. In order to materialize their demands, they have formed several sociopolitical organizations. In the subsequent section of this article we'll discuss about this trend

#### **VII.I. Demand for Scheduled Tribe Status**

We have already mentioned that the Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam denied accepting the Scheduled Caste (SC) status while their fellows of Bengal utilized the opportunity of reservation in the late colonial period. After the independence of India, with the adoption of the '*Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Modified) Order (1950)*', like many other socio-economically backward caste communities of India; the Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam came forward with their demand for backward status. It became a vibrant trend after the appointment of Kaka Shaheb Kalelkar Commission (First Backward Class Commission) in 1953. The Kshatriya Samity of Goalpara met the Commission and submitted a memorandum under the leadership of Sri Lalit Narayan Dev<sup>45</sup> claiming backward status

for the Koch-Rajbanshis. On the basis of the recommendation of the Kalelkar Commission, the Koch-Rajbanshis of Goalpara got Most Other Backward Class (MOBC) status with some opportunities. It was, however, not sufficient for the upward development of the Rajbanshis. So the Sadow Koch Rajbanshi Kshatriya Sammilani of Assam had raised the demand for their Scheduled Tribe (ST) status.<sup>46</sup> This demand got more specific form in 1969 in the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Sadow Koch Rajbanshi Kshatriya Sammilani held at Chowtara, Kokrajhar (7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> February 1969). The demand for ST status of the Koch-Rajbanshis was continued what eventually recognized by the Government of Assam in 1991 on temporary basis. The Koch-Rajbanshis could not enjoy this status for a long time. It was withdrawn in 1996. So a sociopolitical movement for the recognition of ST status of the Koch-Rajbanshis is going on in Assam under the banners of the All Koch-Rajbanshi Student Union (AKRASU, 1996), All Kamtapur Student Union (AKSU), All Kamtapur Student organization (AKSO), Chilarai Sena, etc. These organizations are frequently organizing strikes in Assam to draw the attention of the Government towards their demand for ST status. Very recently the AKRASU has submitted a memorandum to the Governor of Assam (13.3.2013) with a justification of their demand.

Photograph 1: Rally of the Koch-Rajbanshis for Scheduled Tribe Status 13.03.2013



## VII.II. Demand for Separate State

After the independence of India, demand for smaller state has become a common phenomenon all across the country. In case of the Koch-Rajbanshis it was initiated in Bengal particularly with the question of merger of Cooch Behar State to India in 1949. The Hitashadhani Shabha (a socio-political organization founded by some civil administrators and some notables of the Cooch Behar State) had tried to maintain a separate entity of the State instead of merger with India. But due to its small size and contemporary political situation, Cooch Behar ultimately was merged with India as a 'Chief Commissioner's Province'. Finally it was merged to West Bengal as a district in 1950. This merger issue and the historical past of the region got special attention of the

socio-political organizations formed in North Bengal and Assam under the leadership of the Koch-Rajbanshis. At the same time formation of Andhra state in 1953 and the appointment of the State Reorganization Commission (1955-56) had added fuel to their movement.

In such a situation, the Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam had placed a demand to the State Reorganization Commission for the formation of a separate state (Kamtapur) in lower Assam and North Bengal. Santosh Barua and Prakitesh Barua of 'Gouripur Raj family' and Ajit Narayan (of Sidly Raj family) took leading role in this movement. The demand for political autonomy with a separate state was further stimulated with the formation of Maharashtra and Gujarat (in 1960) and Punjab and Haryana (in 1966) on linguistic ground. The Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam and Sub-Himalayan Bengal now founded the Kamtapur Rajjya Sangram Parishad (KRSP) under the leadership of Ajit Narayan (Sidly Raj Family), Girija Sankar Roy, Shibendra Narayan Mondal and Prakitesh Barua (Gouripur Raj Family) for attaining political autonomy.<sup>47</sup> But this organization was diverted from the political movement when Ajit Narayan was appointed as the Chairman of the Oil and Natural Gas Commission. The KRSP was basically an elite based organization where the Koch-Rajbanshi masses had little participation.

Although the KRSP could not reach to its goal, the Koch-Rajbanshis of North Bengal and Lower Assam were once again organized in 1969 with their new organization called Uttarkhanda Dal (UKD). It raised the questions of influx of the refugees from East Pakistan and their cultural domination, political subordination of the Koch-Rajbanshis and engendered condition of Kamtapuri (Rajbanshi) language. The UKD had also demanded 90% reservation in government jobs for the SCs and STs of North Bengal (SC 50%, ST 40%).<sup>48</sup> Being induced by the *Bideshi-Kheda* (expulsion of the foreigners) aspect of the Assam movement, the UKD raised the *Bhatia-Khedao* (expulsion of the immigrants) slogan.<sup>49</sup>

While the UKD was engaged in mobilization of the SC/STs of North Bengal, one sociopolitical organization called Bharatiya Koch-Rajbangshi Kshatriya Mahashabha (BKRKM) was born in Assam in 1984. The BKRKM was planed in 1983 under the leadership of Dr. Purna Narayan Sinha (ex M.P. from Tezpur). It got its final shape in 1984 at Dhubri on the occasion of the 474 birth anniversary of Chilarai (Commander of the Koch military as mentioned earlier). This conference expressed that 'the Koch-Rajbanshis are indigenous people of Eastern and Northeastern India, highly backward in social, political, educational and economic affairs although they have Scheduled Caste status in West Bengal and Tripura. But in other states they do not have Scheduled status. So all Koch-Rajbanshis of India should stand united and make efforts to secure equal social, political and economic status as one class'.<sup>50</sup> The BKRKM also demanded that (i) the Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam and Meghalaya should be declared as Scheduled Tribe, (ii) Union Territory status should be given to the erstwhile Cooch Behar State along with the areas specified by the UKD, (iii) the Government of India must stop the infiltration of refugees and deport them from India by detecting them as foreigners, and (iv) the Kamrupi-Kamtapuri culture should be protected from further degradation.

In its second conference (1986), the BKRKM was renamed as the Koch-Rajbanshi International (KRI). The conference resolved that

since the interests, language, culture, social and economic background of the Koch-Rajbanshi Kshatriya are the same whether they live in India or outside, the Bharatiya Koch Rajbangshi Kshatriya Mahashabha be renamed as the Koch-Rajbangshi International and broad based as an international of the Koch-Rajbangshi ethnic nation spread over Indian states of Assam, Meghalaya , North Bengal, Tripura, Sikkim and Bihar and countries like Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh' with a view to consolidate , ameliorate their condition and develop this race of great heritage.<sup>51</sup>

The KRI was strongly supported by the UKD, Kamta Rajjya Parishad, Chilarai Sangha, All Assam Koch-Rajbanshi Kshatriya Sammelan and the Rajbanshi Bhasha Prachar Samity (of Nepal).<sup>52</sup> Inspite of a demand for a separate state in North Bengal leadership and the head office of the KRI had been remained in Assam.

Like the KRI, another political organization operated from Lower Assam (Gauripur) called Bharatiya Kamta Rajjya Parishad (BKRP) began to mobilize the linguistic and cultural feelings of the Koch Rajbansis. It demanded a separate state (Kamtapur) for overall development of the Koch-Rajbanshis of North Bengal, and Lower Assam.<sup>53</sup> It's main objectives were (i) 'introduction of the Kamtapuri mother tongue in the primary level schools of North Bengal, (ii) broadcasting of cultural programs from Siliguri, Calcutta and Guwahati Centers of the All India Radio, (iii) enhancement of reservation for the Kamtapuris, and formation of a separate state in North Bengal called Kamtapur.<sup>54</sup> The KRI and BKRP, however, failed to achieve their goals.

Demand for Kamtapur state once again revived in the 1990s with the foundation of the Kamtapur Peoples' Party (KPP, 1996). The KPP is determined to create a separate state (Kamtapur) and recognition of the Kamtapuri/Rajbanshi language. The KPP is said to have supported by a militant organization called KLO (Kamtapur Liberation Organization). It also got active support from the All Kamtapur Student Union (AKSU) and the AKRASU (All Koch-Rajbanshi Student Union). The KPP and the AKSU had tried to mobilize the Koch-Rajbanshi people by organizing mass rally and meetings, publishing books and pamphlets, etc. The KPP was divided in 2003 into KPP (Nikhil) and Kamtapur Progressive Party.

However, the Koch-Rajbanshis have founded a new organization called Greater Cooch Behar Peoples' Association (GCBPA) in 1998.<sup>55</sup> The GCBPA categorically raised the question of merger of Cooch Behar State to India in 1949 and its transition to a district of West Bengal. To the GCBPA, this transition is invalid and hence Cooch Behar should be declared a separate state .The GCBPA submitted its first written memorandum to the home minister, Government of India, on 26<sup>th</sup> December, 2000.<sup>56</sup> Again another memorandum was submitted to the President of India on 5<sup>th</sup> April 2001 claiming a separate centrally administered territory for Cooch Behar.<sup>57</sup> It became very much active in Cooch Behar district during the general election of 2004. The GCBPA organized a hunger strike in Cooch Behar town on September 20, 2005 which turned violent. Internal dissension among the members, led to the split in the GCBPA. The breakaway faction formed the Greater Cooch Behar Democratic Party (GCBDP).

In June 2008, the GCBDP organized a fast-unto-death hunger strike, demanding the release of its members from Jail. The fast was, however, called off by the party on June 9, 2008, after a talk with the District Magistrate of Cooch Behar and other senior officials.<sup>58</sup> The GCBDP has established close link with other separatist forces of North Bengal such as the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha (GJM) and Kamtapur Progressive Party (KPP).

In spite of internal conflicts among different political wings, in the recent years KPP and the GCBDP have come together to form the Greater Kamta United Forum (GKUF) on October 24, 2006 to foster the demand for the separate state in North Bengal.<sup>59</sup> Again very recently the GCBDP, GCPA and the KPP formed a joint committee called Separate State Demand Committee (SSDC). SSDC had also organised hunger strike following the recent development in Andhra Pradesh on Telengana issue and the GJM's movement in Darjeeling.

Apart from North Bengal, the Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam have become very much active for the creation of Kamtapur State. Organizations of the Koch-Rajbanshis such as the AKSO, AKRASU, Chilarai Sena, Koch Rajbanshi Mahila Samity, etc, have been actively working for Kamtapur since the late 1990s. They have raised the demand for a Kamtapur State for the Koch-Rajbanshi of Lower Assam by dividing Assam and West Bengal. The recent strike in Assam on 20<sup>th</sup> July 2012 and 5<sup>th</sup> March 2013 organized by the AKRASU and its allies had significant impact in Lower Assam. These organizations are frequently raising slogans like 'No Kamtapur No Rest', 'Divide Assam Fifty Fifty', 'Achhe Astra Dhara Nai', 'Dharle Astra Raksha Nai.' etc.<sup>60</sup>

A brief survey on the organizations claiming Kamtapur State shows that the Koch-Rajbanshis have failed to unify themselves as a strong political force. Formation of numerous organizations for the same purpose instead of materialization of their demands, have led the Koch-Rajbanshis in mutual conflicts and factional politics. So the Scheduled Tribe identity has remained merely as a demand in political movement of the Koch-Rajbanshi of Assam.

**Photographs 2a and 2b:** Demonstration for Separate State and Scheduled Tribe status for the Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam



কোচ-ৰাজবংশীক জনজাতিকৰণ আৰু পৃথক কমতাপুৰৰ দাবীত বঙাইগাঁও আক্ৰমছুব ধৰ্মা, মঙলবাৰে



জনজাতিকৰণৰ দাবীত গোসাঁইগাঁৱত আক্ৰমছুব অৱস্থান ধৰ্মঘট, মঙলবাৰে

## VIII

### Conclusion

Identity, as a matter of perception; appears as changing in nature at least in case of a backward community like the Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam. The Koches, beyond the ruling section were not concerned about their identity in pre-colonial period. So the pre-colonial literatures without any exaggeration have identified the non-ruling ordinary Koches simply as Koch people. Only the ruling section was propagated as Kshatriya or as the follower of Vaishnavism. However, adoption of Vaishnava culture and Hindu religious rituals had changed the tribal culture of the Koches. Instead of forming a separate caste community, the detribalized Koches got the Rajbanshi identity in the society of Lower Assam.

With the beginning of colonial rule, tribal Koches and detribalized Koches (or Rajbanshis) were identified in the dominant and alien observations as 'Koch tribe' and "Rajbanshi caste" respectively. This minor distinction had placed the 'Koches' and Rajbanshis in a great dilemma. The educated Rajbanshis of North Bengal had rejected their relations with the Koches considering the social identity of the later as a derogatory one. On the other hand, the Non-Rajbanshi caste Hindus of Bengal used to consider the Rajbanshi as almost untouchables. So the Rajbanshis of North Bengal tried to get relief from the bondage of casteism through *kshatriyaization* what crossed the level of *sanskritization*. They adopted all methods for their social, cultural and economic development. In the 1930s both the 'Koches' and Rajbanshis in Bengal got a new and common identity called 'Scheduled Castes'. The Koches and Rajbanshis of Assam, however, denied accepting the SC identity considering themselves as Caste Kshatriya people. But the outcomes of reservation from 1936 onwards have changed the attitude of the educated Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam. They were looking for enjoying reservation in the post-colonial period like their brethrens of North Bengal. They got another new identity called Other Backward Class (OBC) what according to the Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam is not sufficient. So they have been clamoring for the recognition of their tribal identity in the constitution of India.. At the same time, they came forward with a new identity based on their language which has been a common point in their political demonstration for 'Kamtapur State'. So it appears that the identity of the Koch-Rajbanshis is transitional in nature. For this feature we need a new model of research for analyzing the history of self-identity of the Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam.

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20. Sri Hara Kishore Adhikari: *Rajbanshi Kulapradip*. (1315 B.S.), Maniram Kavya Bhusan: *Rajvanshi Kshatriya Dipak* (1318 B.S.); *idem: Paundra Kshatriya Kula Dipana*, (1319 B.S.); Jaganmohon Singha: *Kshatriya Rajbanshi Kulakoumudi*, etc.
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28. The term *Sanskritization* has been used in social science since the 1950s as a process of elevation of social status of Non-Caste/ low-caste communities to the respectable caste status through adoption of rituals and customs from the Upper castes and by discarding the social customs considered to be impure. For details see M.N. Srinivas: *Caste in Modern India: And other essays* (Bombay, Asia Publishing House, 1952).
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