

Upendra Nath Barman: Redefining the caste Identity of the Rajbanshi in Contemporary Bengal (1910-1961)

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Abstract: *Upendra Nath Barman was the caste leader of the Rajbanshi community in North Bengal and worked with Panchanan Barma to establish the caste identity of the Rajbanshi community. His activities as a successor of Panchanan Barma helped to uplift the social and economic status of the Rajbanshi community. This article tries to understand the role of Upendra Nath Barman in establishing the Kshatriya identity of the Rajbanshi community.*

Keywords: *Caste, Rajbnashi, Kshatriya, Legislative Assembly, Movement, Identity, Kshatriyanaisation, etc.*

Introduction: The caste identity movement is a socio-political phenomenon that mobilizes individuals and communities around their caste identity. These movements encompass a range of objectives, from challenging entrenched hierarchies to preserve cultural heritage. Motivated by historical injustices, economic disparities, and political considerations, these movements often advocate for social equality, representation, and the recognition of marginalized castes. The dynamics of each movement are shaped by a complex interplay of historical, economic, political, and cultural factors, contributing to a diverse tapestry of identity assertions across different regions and communities. The social mobility movement of Rajbanshi's to claim the Kshatriya status significantly changed their population size and growth.¹ This article tries to understand the involvement of Upendra Nath Barman and the role of Upendra Nath Barman in establishing the Kshatriya identity of the Rajbanshi community. *After the death of the Panchanan Barma, he was the only leader of Kshatriya Samity who could take a dominant role for the community. The scenario of the Kshatriya movement before partition and after partition is different. The article undertakes the time period from 1910 because in the same year the Kshatriya Samity was established at Rangpur. After the Partition of India in 1947, a new Kshatriya Samity was established in the Dinhata under the leader of Upendra Nath Barman and was the registration in 1961.*

Background of Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement: Rajbanhsis mainly depended on agriculture and lived in the village areas, where communications were not good. They were predominantly Hindus and posterity of aboriginal inhabitants of the

¹ Mukhopadhyay, 1990, p.1

North Bengal region, the third-largest caste of the Hindu Community in the census of 1931. They were cultivating and landowning communities. According to the 1911 census, 89 percent of Rajbanshis were cultivators, and 1.2 percent had income from other occupations. (Bagchi and Bhattacharya (ed), 2015, p.171). Rajbanshis were rich *Jotedars* and *Chukinadars*, though the majority of the people were sharecroppers and familiars, as well as illiteracy and inane. They were referred as *Bahe* which imply to cultural inferiority by the caste Hindus who migrated from Southern and Eastern Bengal. They primarily relied on bullock carts for communication or for carrying goods. Educationally, the Rajbanshis were backward, in comparable to other section of population of North Bengal. The people used to pay for something initially, but when the novelty wore out, they found that education united the boys in ordinary work. Rajbanshis were immigrant Hindus, and their educationally and economically backward situation forced them to remain socially backward. (Bagchi and Bhattacharya ed, 2015, p.171). Due to the impact of Kolkata being ahead in education, areas like North Bengal needed to catch up. The religious manners of the Rajbanhis were different from the upper caste Hindus of North Bengal. *Saivism* and *Vaishnavism* were popular among the Rajbanshis community. Rajbanshis priests like *Adikari*, *Deosi*, *Deodba*, etc., officiated the religious etiquette and followed the Hindu *Shastric* code of conduct. (Basu, 2003, p.44). Cultural practices and traditions, including kinship systems, religious beliefs, and customary laws, also influenced the socio-economic landscape of the Rajbanshi community. These factors shaped social relations, economic activities, and access to resources within the community. The Rajbanshis were one of the most important old ethnic communities of North Bengal. Muslims converted a large number of Rajbanshis to Islam. Upper-caste Hindus infiltrated North Bengal in colonial times, taking on an essential role in the Rajbanshi community. (Adhikari, 2021, p. 10). The migrant Hindus were educationally and economically more development then the Rajbashis. Rajbashis whom they considered as untouchable and uncivilized. (Bagchi and Bhattacharya ed, 2015, p.171).

Reason for involvement of Upendra Nath Barman in caste movement: He was born on 31st March 1898 in a middle-class peasant family in the village of Gopalpur, Mathabhanga, Cooch Behar: Father Bir Narayan Barman and mother Kamini Sundari Devi. He went to Primary Education Kesribari Model School. Monthly scholarship from Mathabhanga High School for securing first rank in Cooch Behar State in the first division in the matriculation examination. His B. A. in 1920 from Victoria College, Cooch Behar, with first division, and Graduated in Law from Calcutta University in Jalpaiguri in 1925.

He faced bitter caste discrimination; an incident during his student life at Cooch Behar Victoria College in 1916-1920 is as follows "*There were two dining halls in the college hostel for the fifty students. All students have the right to sit and eat*

together anywhere they want. However, suddenly, one day, Hostel superintendent Sri Fanibhushan Chatterjee gave a notice in the notice book that 'the Smallest dining hall is reserved for Brahmins, the bigger dining hall is for Kayasthas and Vaidyas and the next hall is for others, for taking their, meals'. Upendra Nath Barman protested against this caste discrimination by the hostel superintendent and complained to the state administration. Under the pressure of the movement, the hostel authorities were finally obedient to give up the notice. The college principal was finally announced the fact that Victoria College hostel is not for those who observe caste distinction."²

At this time, Thakur Panchanan Barma, one of the caste leaders of the Rajbanshi Community, came to know him. Inspired by Panchanan Barma, he came too associated with the caste movement. After he completed his education, he became a Jalpaiguri, practicing law and spreading the caste identity movement in the Jalpaiguri district. He came into contact with Panchanan Barma and became a member of the Kshatriya Samity. Panchanan Barman, started the Kshatriya movement and claimed that. Rajbanshis are Kshatriyas; Kochs and Rajbanshis are different. Upendra Nath Barman drew evidence from the religious scriptures about the origin of the Rajbanshi community and the role of Kshatriyas in the *Mahabharata*. He wrote a research book on the origin of Rajbanshis. Where to he mentioned about the evolution of the from "Raja," "Rajan," or "kshatriyas" "gradually changing Rajbanshis. He opined that Kshatriyas was the second level of the *Varna ashram* system that existed in the Vedic period. Brahmins were protected from all kinds of wars and conflicts by the Kshatriyas. He said that "Rajon," "Raja," "Kshatriyas," and "Rajbanshi," are synonyms and word used for the Kshatriya clan.³

His effort to prove Kshatriyahood: Upendra Nath Barman claimed that the Rajbanshi communities were Kshatriyas. To establish that the Rajbanshi community as predominantly Kshatriya, Sri Harkishor Adhikari published his book "*Rajbanshi Kula Pradip*." He was a resident of Dhalagram in the Goalpara district of Assam. Quoting scriptures from many Sanskrit texts, he claimed that the Rajbanshi caste is "*Bhanga Kshatriya* or *Bratya Kshatriya*" and that "Rajbanshi" and "Koch" are separate castes. Upendra Nath Barman relied on the *Bhamori Tantra*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Kalika Puran* as scriptural evidence that Rajbanshi was a Kshatriya, and he also observed that Rajbanshi reigned in the seventh century. As an example, he said that the seventh-century Bhaskar Barman ruled in Assam and the kings of this period adopted the title of Barman, as a Kshatriya.⁴

² Upendra Nath Barman, autobiography, 2015 p. 57-58.

³ Upendra Nath Barman, 2011, p.2

⁴ Upendra Nath Barman 2011, p.14).

The Kshatriyas mentioned in the *Bhramari Tantra* and the *Kalika Purana* are the Kshatriyas of the *Pundra* country. After coming to the Ratnapith, Kshatriyas lost their caste and came to be known as Rajbanshis.⁵ In tracing the origin of the Rajbanshis, he rationally accepted two views. One on Literature or scripture claiming this, as has already been discussed and second was a systematic discussion of the opinions of English researchers, such as Walton Hamilton, G.T.B. Dalton, H.H. Rislely, and Buchanon. Their views were that Rajbanshi, Paliya, and Koch were of the same caste (Roy, 2016, p.20).

There is no difference between "Koch" and "Rajbanshi." Buchanan said that *in the parts of the district where there are many other Hindus and where the doctrine of purity has gained a complete ascendancy, the highest of the tribes who, in all things, conform to the Hindu doctrine, at last moderated in survey to suit the temperament of Kamrup, are exclusively called Rajbanshis. Although I must admit that all Rajbanshis are not Koch, the more significant portion is of that tribe. In such parts, people only who degrade themselves by carrying palanquins are called Koch, and those who are still further contaminated by eating pork and fowl and by catching fish are called Dauyi or Garol. But in other parts, where the Hindu doctrine has less prevailed, all are indiscriminately called Rajbanshis. In other parts, such as Assam, Nepal, and Bhutan, the whole tribe is called Koch* .⁶ According to Hunter in Rangpur, Jalpiguri, and Cooch Behar, the name Rajbanshis were adopted by the cultivation and respectable classes, with Koch being restricted to laborers and especially palanquin bearers".⁷

According to William Hunter, the principal difference between the Koch and Rajbanshis is that the former condescend to carry a palanquin while the latter does not.⁸ Rajbanshis were the former inhabitant of the *Khens* of the ancient kingdom of Kamrup. There were three ruling communities, *Rajbanshi*, *Khen*, and *Koch*, who ruled in this region. Buchanan argues that everyone in Nepal, Bhutan, and Assam is known as Koch. Upendra Nath Barman pointed out that this information needed to be corrected. In all those regions, the Koch and Rajbanshis were different from each other, and in the Goalpara district in Assam, a large number of people who belong to Rajbanshi castes they have never identified themselves as Koch—those who identify themselves as Koches are not Rajbanshi. The Rajbanshi is a pre-Khen inhabitant of the ancient kingdom of Kamrup..⁹ The 1872, 1881, and 1981 census reports enumerated *Koch*, *Rajbanshis*, and *Paliya* under the back of *Koch*. The term *Bhanga Kshatriya* first appeared in the 1891 census. In 1901, all sub-caste of Koch was listed as Rajbanshis, and in 1911, 1921, the Poliyas were also listed as

⁵ Upendra Nath Barman 2011, p.16.

⁶ Upendra Nath Barman, 2011, p 31

⁷ Ibid, 2011, p.45

⁸ Ibid, 2011, p,34

⁹ Upendra Nath Barman, 2011, p.34

Rajbanshis; in 1921, many Rajbanshis were listed as Kshatriya. With the full Hinduisation of the Koch and the rise in power of their chiefs, Kshatriya origin was mutually suggested to them. As the Koch became fully Hinduized and their chiefs came to power, their original Kshatriya identity was naturally fixed; Bishu was the real founder of Koch's power. He ruled from 1496-1553, and Bishu converted to Hinduism and took the name Bhiswasingha; after that, adopted Hinduism became Rajbanshis. But soon after was the Koches came to power. The religious practices of the Rajbanshis were similar to the Hindus. The Rajbanshis, later on, climbed to Kshatriya status.¹⁰

The customs, traditions, and manners of the Rajbanshis are Hindus. Water and food could be exchanged between the Rajbanshis and the Caste Hindus but not with the Koches. The Rajbanshis are the former inhabitants of the Kamrup kingdom, "*Rajbansyo Rajbiryā*". They are *Bratya*, or immoral, *Bhang Kshatriya*. "*Rajan*" or "*Rajanya*" is a Kshatriya word. Another question arises according to the difference between the Koch and Rajbanshi races are that the Koch and Rajbanshi are Aryan or non-Aryan castes. Upendra Nath Burman argued that the Kochs are non-Aryan. Therefore, with the help of the previous argument, the Koch will be called a non-Aryan race. Rajbanshi community belongs to Aryan race. The educated Rajbanshis did not wholeheartedly accept Rangpur District Magistrate's order of categorized into Koch the Koch comes from a tribal background and could never be equal to the Rajbanshis Kshatriyas. The "*Rongpur Bratya Kshatriya Jatir Unnati Bidayani Shabha*" was established to formalize this sentiment (Barman, 2021, p.38).

The educationally backward Rajbanshis were not aware of the census reports and inclusion of castes onwards. But when the census of 1891 was held, they demanded to write "*Bratya Kshatriya*" in column of the caste. On February 6, 1891, the order given by the District Magistrate of Rangpur F.A. Skyne was to register the Rajbanshis as Koch. The Rajbanshis under the banner of "*Rangpur Bratya Kshatriya Jatir Unnati Bidhayani Shabha*" with Shyampur Zamindar Harmohan Roy (Khajanchi) as chairman protested against it to District Magistrate F.A. Skyne on 10 February. Mr. Skyne asked for opinion of the Hindu Pandits. The President of Rangpur Dharmasabha Mahamahopadhyay Panditraj Jadveswar Tarkaratna opined that "*Koch and Rajbanshi are separate castes. Koch is a very inferior race. Their business, food, habits are all inferior. The rituals of Rajbanshis are excellent. Their marriages are reformed like those of all high castes. Before Manusamhita was written, several Kshatriyas lived in different regions. Those who have lived in Pundra are impure from caste and fallen. The scriptural evidence cited by Raghunandan Bhattacharya in his book 'Tithitattva' states that the river Karatoya is located on the western boundary of Rangpur, so the scriptural evidence means that Rangpur and Dinajpur are Pundras. The ancient inhabitants of both of these districts are of the Rajbanshi caste. Amarkosh, the authoritative dictionary of*

¹⁰ Charu Chandro Sanyal, 1965, p. 13-14

Sanskrit, says that the word 'Rajan' means born in the Kshatriya dynasty, so they are called Rajbanshis. The Rajbanshi language is more closely related to Sanskrit than the languages of to cal regions of Bengal. In the scriptures, the Kshatriyas, who do not have Upanayanas, are called 'Bratyakshatriyas'. So, it was the duty Rajbanshis to write as 'Bratya kshatriya.' 'Bhanga Kshatriya' was not mentioned in any scriptures. So, if unscriptural words are used, it can harm the Rajbanshi caste in the future".¹¹ These opinions began to be the stepping stove of the Kshatriya movement. This decision of the meeting was communicated to the District Magistrate on March 18, 1891. On April 3, the Magistrate wrote to the Census Superintendent to recommend the Rajbanshis caste as 'Bratya kshatriya.' On May 8, the District Magistrate issued an order that the Rajbanshis could write 'Bratya kshatriya' in place of caste all official documents if they so wished. But in reaction to this the Rajbanshis refrained from the movement and therefore, the first phase of Kshatriya Movement came to a halt.

The second phase of the *Kshatriyanisation* movement began in 1901 which took up the effort Kshatriyanisation movement. In the final census report of 1901, Rajbanshis and Kochs were described again as caste. Now efforts were taken for the forthcoming census of 1911. The first session of the Kshatriya Samity was held in the presence of about 400 delegates from Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Dhubri, and Goalpara in 1910 in Rangpur Natyamandir. An Advocate from Jalpaiguri Sri Madhusudan Roy presided. it was decided in the meeting that, Rajbanshis and Koch are two separate castes. The two races have no relationship or similarity regarding customs or anything else; Rajbanshis is not a Koch; and the Rajbanshis are Kshatriyas.¹²

The people of Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Rangpur, Dinajpur, and Goalpara districts applied to their respective district magistrates for permission to write their names as Kshatriyas and use titles like Barma, Roy, Singha, etc. After that, Rajbanshis of East Bengal, Assam, and Goalpara region claimed Kshatriya status and Barman titles. The Rajbanshis of Cooch Behar State were still not a part of the process. In the meantime, Panchanan Barma started the *Kshatriyanisation* movement. *Kshatriyanisation* is the socio- political process in which people tried to emulated the *Shatrya* way of life (Barma, 2017, p 95). The Secretary of the Kshatriya Samity, Sri Panchanan Barma, said: "*Rajbanshis have always called themselves sons of Kshatriyas and have always been known as "Bratya kshatriyas"*". Rajbanshi and Koch are completely different castes. ¹³ Although Panchanan Barma started the Kshatriya movement, Upendra Nath Barman worked on the theoretical part to claim the *Kshatriyanisation* by citing from the Hindu scriptures and religious texts. In 1912, the *Mahamilan Mela* was held on the banks of the Karotoya River in

¹¹ Upendra Nath Barman, 2011, P.53-54

¹² Upendra Nath Barman, 2011, p.58

¹³ Ibid, p 59

Jalpaiguri district at Deviganj for three day. Where *Kshatriyahood* and *Upanayana* was adopted by the Rajbanshis. Around 192 *Milon Melas* or *Upanayana Sanskar* programs were celebrated in different regions of North Bengal 1912. A riverside *Milan Mela (fair)* was held at Bhagaramguri village near Gopalpur village under Mathabhanga subdivision of Cooch Behar district. Father of Upendra Nath Barman, Sree Birnarayan Barman, presided, and Upendra Nath Barman acted as a volunteer. Upendra Nath Barman joined the Kshatriya movement for the first time. Panchanan Barma first met with Upendra Nath Barman in a Kshatriya meeting at Raichenga in Cooch Behar district when he studied the Victoria college. Upendra Nath Barman's purpose in life changed after meeting with Panchanan Barma. From then onwards, Upendra Nath Barman started to work directly in the Kshatriya Samity. While studying in Calcutta, he helped the Kshatriya Samity in various ways.¹⁴ After being elected in the Jalpaiguri constituency as a member of Legislative Assembly, he went to the Imperial Library to study the origin of the Rajbanshis opinions, about the Rajbanshis race and wrote a book, "*Rajbanshi Kshatriya Jatir Itihas*" related to the history of the Rajbanshi community, which discussed on the Rajbanshis Kshatriyas status.¹⁵

Upendra Nath Barman as the next Rajbanshs leader: Jalpaiguri district became the center of the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samity after independence and Upendra Nath Barman became a new leader of the Kshatriya Samity in Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Goalpara district. Panchanan Barma wanted Upendra Nath Barman to be a part of this movement before his death. He told Upendra Nath Barman that (*Upen mui jang baki kamla tui karis*) "*Upen I leave, you do my incomplete work*".¹⁶ The first plenary and successful session of the newly formed Kshatriya Samity's annual meeting was held at Jateshwar in 1955. Most of the leaders came from northern Bengal and Presented in the conference. Upendra Nath Barman the President of this established at Dinhat in Cooch Behar, but in 1957 it was shifted to Jalpaiguri. Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samity registered itself 19-3-1961. The political activities of the pre-partition Kshatriya Samity were transformation in the new phase. He changed the political program of the Samity and diverted more towards social activism. The mastermind behind this change was Upendra Nath Barman. The journey of the Kshatriya Samity which as a social organization was again given further focus under the Upendra Nath Barman.¹⁷ He took the responsibility given by Panchanan Barma devote himself for the cause of uplifting the Rajbanshi community of North Bengal.

Conclusion: An identity crisis in a regional area can manifest in various ways and is often influenced by social, economic, cultural, and environmental factors.

¹⁴ Upendra Nath Barman, 2015, p.60

¹⁵ Ibid, 2015, p.61

¹⁶ Upendra Nath Barman, autobiography. 2015 p.186

¹⁷ Upendra Nath Barman, autobiography, 2015p.191

Changes in the financial landscape, such as the decline of traditional industries (e.g., agriculture, mining) or the rise of new technologies, can lead to unemployment and economic uncertainty. This can create a sense of loss and displacement among the population, impacting their identity tied to traditional livelihoods. Increased social and economic disparities within a region can lead to social fragmentation. This can result in the formation of subcultures or identity groups within the area, leading to a complex web of identities that may be at odds with each other. Rajbanshi community, one of the largest communities, faced an identity crisis. Panchana Barma and Upendra Nath Barman, caste leaders, belong to the Rajbnashi community. They started t *Kshatriyanisation* he movement in the nineteenth century. Panchanan Barma started the *Kstriyanaisation* movement, but Upendra Nath Barman took this movement from a regional area to a national area. Upendra Nath Barman claimed and tried to authenticate that the Rajbanshi community was Kshatriyas. On the one hand, he gave religious evidence; on the other, he relied on English researchers. Ashutosh Bhattacharya opines about Upendra Nath Barman that Mr. “*Upendra Nath Barman is a highly educated person, a lawyer by trade, so he is an intellectual, whatever caste or community he belongs to. He wrote this book (Rajbanshi Kshatriya Jatir Itihas, Bengali book) and was a son of that community. So, what he has come to know and understand about this subject is that with his scholarship, intellect, and his own life, no one else could match him.*”¹⁸ As a result of the process of *Kshatriyanisation* the Rajbanshis could remove the social humiliation and degradation imposed upon them. This process acted as a social equalizer and moral booster for the community. It might seem to be a narrow community based caste mobility movement but it provided a psychological strength to the Rajbanshis to compete equally in society.

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¹⁸ Upendra Nath Barman, 2011, p.91

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