

CHAPTER FOUR

EMERGENCE AND GROWTH OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS 1905 – 1953: CASE STUDIES OF THE SANTALS AND THE RAJBANSIS

Caste and caste mobility in Bengal has become a popular subject of research for modern historians and sociologists who study the problem from many angles¹. Social mobility in various degrees and forms has been present in Bengal's social life since pre-colonial times, as Hitesranjan Sanyal has shown in his book. Indeed, he has argued that the caste system was able to survive for such a long time because of this inner dynamism or ability to accommodate upward social mobility and thereby absorb tensions from below². However, though the avenue for mobility was open, the scope was very limited in pre-colonial times. A process of change is supposed to have set in with the coming of the British. Colonial rule released certain forces, which directly and indirectly widened this scope. The opening of various job opportunities, emergence of a new working culture and urban life, growth of facilities for modern education gave the traditional lower castes new opportunities to be at par with the upper castes³. A new impetus was thus provided for mobilization along caste lines in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal as in the rest of India.

In this historical backdrop, the present section is an attempt to present a systematic analytical history of the *santal* social mobility movement and Rajbansi caste movement in the first half of the twentieth century in the district of Malda.

THE SANTAL SOCIETY

The community life of the *santals* was centered in the village and so was organized as to make common action inevitable in social, economic and religious affairs. The village was known as *santalpara*⁴. The houses were clean and well constructed with solid walls of clay. The social system was under the direction of a village headman, called *manjhis*. His duty was to administer the rights, rules and ceremonies of the *santal* village community. No public sacrifice, no festival, and no ceremony, such as a marriage- in short, nothing of a public character- can be properly done without the participation of *manjhi*⁵. No administrative job has been assigned to the *manjhi* in Barind. Unlike the *manjhis* in the Santal Parganas, he does not collect rents etc., nor does he deal with the civil authorities. In the Barind, the Majistrate of the district does not appoint the *manjhi*. His office was normally hereditary, but if the successor of a *manjhi* incurred the displeasure of his co-villagers, another replaced him. The ordinary duties of the *manjhi* were to control his people and punish by fines or other means for breaches of social customs. When there were disputes between different *santal* villages, their *manjhissat* together as a tribunal⁶.

In his official capacity, a deputy headman called *paranik* or *paramanik* assisted the *manjhi*. He worked as an advisor and as acting headman when the *manjhi* was ill or away. Next in importance was the *jogmanjhi* who may be called a kind of 'Censors of Morals'⁷. The *jogmanjhi* had an assistant called *jog-paramanik* who officiated when he was absent. Another village official was the *gorait* who acted as the *manjhi*'s orderly, called the villagers together at his command, and collected sacrificial fowls for the village sacrifices. Each

village had its own priests called the *naiki* who perform all the sacrifices to the aboriginal deities⁸.

Unlike the Hindu society, the *santals* recognized the necessity of combining the temporal and spiritual leadership in one individual at the apex. At the village, the *manjhi* is the temporal leader. Though he has some religious functions to perform, viz. worship of the *manjhi haram* situated invariably opposite to his house, the religious functions of the community are conducted by the *naike*. In the field of rituals, the *naike* is in no way dependent on the *manjhi*. Thus, it is very clear that the santal community had two strains of leadership⁹. The community gods are placed at the *Jaher than* (place of worship) outside the village boundary and the *naike* and his assistant perform religious rites on behalf of the village community there as well as in the village¹⁰.

Along with kinship ties, clan organization and the well-knit village system, another factor, which served to cement the solidarity of the tribe, was *raska* or pleasure in *santali*¹¹. Their conception of good life was "one with ample scope for and indulgence in pleasure, while maintaining social obligations to separate groups"¹². The content to pleasure was dancing, singing, eating, festivity, playing etc. It constituted the dominant form of socialization and the chief expression of communal solidarity¹³.

THE SATYAM SHIBAM MOVEMENT

As has already been stated, *santals* had begun to pour into Malda from the Santal Parganas in about 1871¹⁴. Consequently, local zamindars employed them for clearing of *jungle* lands of Barind. Stiff red clay of Barind was another consideration, which needed sturdy *santal* peasants for cultivation. They were

settled in Barind at nominal rents and often with occupancy status to extend cultivation¹⁵. In Barind, the *santals* lived in close proximity with Hindus, retaining the core of their tribal identity against odds.

The caste Hindus, in general, were averting to any kind of social intercourse with the *santals*. The aversion, however, seldom caused overt hostilities between Hindus and *santals*. The Hindus were careful not to antagonize the *santals*, believed to be 'powerful in witchcraft'.¹⁶ A more important reason perhaps was the demonstration of the *santal* skill as waste reclaimers.

The *santals* were obviously keen to adjust themselves to the pattern of settled agricultural life. This changed pattern of life again had generated a stress in the society and a very high form of anxiety had been prevailing among them in view of the perceived threat from the environment. In fact, the alienation of land had been very extensive. In most cases, vast areas of land had been transferred from the *santal* agriculturists to Hindu zamindars, moneylenders and traders. Growing alien domination constituted a decisive influence on *santal* society. The *santal's* perspective, as Tanika Sarkar observes, on the process of alienation and dispossession was ambivalent, made up of more than anger against the non-*santaldiku* who robbed his land. It included a harsh self-contempt for losing out so thoroughly¹⁷. In the *santal* folklore, the *santals* often associated with small and weak animals. Nevertheless, the weak animals in the end overpower bigger and dangerous beasts through a mix of cunning and tricks¹⁸. The *dikus*, as folk tale imagined, led foolish *santals* to their ruin with gestures of friendship and offers of drink. The anger against the *diku* merges with anger against the self-destructive gullibility of the *santa* who allowed him to be tricked¹⁹.

This negative self-image often drove the *adivasis* to seek out the ways of the very *dikus* whom they bitterly blamed for their troubles. The perception that a structural insufficiency making the *adivasis* vulnerable in changing times led them to initiate movements to lift the members up towards the custom of the dominant society by emulating them. Attempts were thus made to revise tribal custom through waves of conversion to Christianity or Hinduism. Out of this train of thought emerged the Safa Hor (pure men) movement in the Santal Parganas under the leadership of Bhagirath Manjhi and Satyam Shibam movement in the Barind region of Malda under the leadership of Jitu and Arjun Santal.

The eventual rise of the Satyam Shibam sect in Barind in Malda may be traced to the Safa Hor movement of Santal Parganas. The Safa Hor movement was launched, largely inducting Hindu ideas of pollution and purifications. In 1871, one Bhagirath Manjhi of Godda Subdivision announced that he would restore the Golden Age to the *santals* if they returned to the worship of one God and cleaned themselves of their sins. It was proclaimed that their present oppression was a divine punishment for abandoning the worship of God and for venerating the spirits²⁰. Deliverance could come only through a radical change of heart. It would bring back the Golden Age when the *santals* had been the undisputed masters of their land. Then they had worshiped God alone and no evil spirits²¹. Bhagirath exhorted his fellow tribesmen to abstain from eating pork and fowl's meat and from drinking liquor. The *santal* should also cease to worship Marang Buru (their chief spirit) and venerate only Thakur, the Supreme Deity. He instructed the *santals* to take bath before cooking their food, and not to pollute the Burma rice with meat of fowls and pigs. The new norms of behaviour which Bhagirath sought

to impose on the *santals* certainly reflected Hindu notions of purity and pollution. Bhagirath's teaching, however, had also a political slant. He proclaimed that 'the land belonged by right to the *santal* and that no Government could demand taxes from them'²².

Thus the Safa Hor or Kherwar movement initiated by Bhagirath Baba conjured up the Golden Age of the *santal* traditions in the minds of the tribals when they lived in Champa in absolute independence and had no rent or tribute to pay but only to bring a small annual offering to their leaders in virtue of their office. After Bhagirath Baba, the movement was kept alive by several preachers. In 1880 Dubia Gossain, who himself lived like a Hindu *sannyasi*, introduced the worship of the Babaji in the manner of the Hindus.

During the following decades, the Kherwar movement split in three sects – the Safa Hor, Samra and Babajiu. There was however little to differentiate one group from the other. Among these, the more sanskritised group was the Safa Hor. They abandoned practices such as the keeping and eating of fowls and pigs. They used to take a purificatory bath before taking their morning meal and recognized *Mahadeb* or *Shib* as their one God. Because of the Safa Hor movement the santals were generally moving towards Hinduism. The emulation of Hindu socio-religious practices was regarded as a means of improving their socio-economic status. Apart from the Safa Hor movement, various Bhagat movements had sympathetic vibrations among the *santals*. The movements that emerged among the *Oraons*, *Bhils* and several other tribes of Chhotanagpur were highly sanskritised.

Soon reverberations of these movements came to be felt in the distant Malda. The Satyam Shibam Sect was almost a continuation of the Kherwar

movement without a break, with the additional prospect of better placement of the converts in the Hindu caste hierarchy²³. However, the Satyam Shibam movement in Barind was not just a replication of the Kherwar movement in Santal Parganas. The specificity of its locale, particularly the agrarian economy dominated by the Hindu – Muslim *joteders*, the exploitation and oppression by the village *mahajans* and keen competition from the Muslim *shershabadiya* agriculturists in Barind, had its distinctive imprints on the movement.

The time of origin of the Satyam Shibam Sect among the *santals* of Barind is not a unanimous one. According to J.N.Sengupta, Satyam Shibam sect was founded in 1905²⁴, but M.O.Carter mentions the time as 1917²⁵. The sect was founded by Kashishwar Chakraborty, a Dinajpur based *swarajist* pleader and very active among the Dinajpur *santals*. He used to visit the adjacent district of Malda with proselytizing aims. Opinions also differ as to his real motive in founding the Satyam Shibam Sect. Official records suggest that the real motive of Kashishwar Chakraborty was financial gain. He used to charge three *rupees* and four *annas* from each *santal* convert²⁶. There is no doubt that at a time when the annual rent for one *bigha* of land in Barind was six *annas*, the fees of three *rupees* and four *annas* for conversion was quite some money. Sometime later, however, M.O.Carter stated that the sole motive of Kashishwar Chakraborty 'appears to have been to claim the *santal* for the Hindu community rather on the lines of the Arya Samaj'²⁷. Carter wondered why the founder picked up 'Satyam Shibam' as the motto of the sect. 'Satyam Shibam Sundaram' is one used by the Brahmos but it is not clear why it was adopted by the reformer. Left to themselves, the *santals* are naturally very much more truthful than most of their neighbours'²⁸.

Whatever might be the motive in founding the Satyam Shibam Sect, it seems that Kashishwar Chakraborty came out of a wider movement around this time, when Hindu ascetics came close to the Congress movement and functioned as preachers, combining Hinduization as well as populism among labourers, peasants, and tribals²⁹. From the late 1920s, as Joya Chatterjee has shown, some Hindu leaders began to recognize the need to 'reclaim' the low castes in order to create a unified Hindu political community³⁰. Pradip Datta has traced the origin of this type of 'Hindu communal common sense' to U. N. Mukherjee's book 'The Dying Race', published in 1909 which expressed concern for the future of the Hindu race and argued that the *dalit* and *adivasis* were vitally important for physical power of the Hindu community³¹. Stories of the militant tradition of the *santals* date back to the Santal rebellion of 1855. Likewise, in rural Bengal the *lathiyal* retinues of most zamindars came from *dalit* groups like the Bagdis, Namasudras or Patnis. Therefore, for projecting the martial qualities of the Bengali Hindus as a 'race', inclusion and mobilisation of the *dalit* and the *adivasis* had become a political necessity³².

A number of Hindu organisations, therefore, embarked upon a project to mobilize such groups. The Hindu Sabha movement underlined solidarity among the different Hindu castes. At its provincial conference in 1924, the Sabha declared that its chief focus would be on the removal of untouchability and the purification (*shuddhi*) of 'polluted' peoples³³. The Hindu Mission founded by Swami Satyananda started a train of conversions. Later, Hindu Mission and Hindu Sabha worked hand in hand in propagating the Hindu ideals and in arranging the conversion of ethnic groups of people standing in the periphery of the Hindu society. Swami Pranabananda of the Bharat Sebashram Sangha started working among the Namasudras, Paunda-

Kshatriyas and other scheduled caste villagers in Jessore, Khulna, Faridpur, Bakarganj and Nawabganj in Malda³⁴. However, the All India Hindu Mahasabha played the most crucial role in this respect. The Mahasabha ever since it started functioning in Bengal in 1923 also targeted the lower caste peasantry for political mobilisation as a part of its campaign for Hindu Sangathan (organisation). Around 1924 it made contact with the Rajbansis of North Bengal, particularly with their charismatic leader Rai Sahib Panchanan Barma. Ultimately, however, this alliance did not bear any fruit³⁵. Apart from conversion, branches of Hindu Sabha were set up in the districts with definite programme of propaganda and conversion. There was a branch in Malda also of which Ashutosh Choudhury, one of the richest landlords of Malda, was a patron³⁶.

A trend was thus set and Malda *santals* too formed part of this general trend. There began an organized campaign to instill in them a sense of belonging to the Hindu community and to mobilise them in defence of the Hindu religion. Joya Chatterjee, in fact, argues that the Satyam Shibam activities in Malda were clearly part of a 'Sangathan' movement to redefine the Hindu political community³⁷. This Hinduisation process started around 1924 and ended in Jitu Santal's attack on the Adina mosque in 1932.

It has already been stated that Kashishwar Chakraborty was a Dinajpur-based pleader maintaining a link with the Swarajist politics. As was common with many Swarajists at that time, Kashishwar Chakraborty had an affinity toward the Hindu association. He had tried to establish contact with the Hindu Sabha sometime later in 1926. On November 26, 1926, Kashishwar wrote a letter to Padamraj Jain, vice-president of the Hindu Sabha and sought his help for setting up a Hindu Sabha at Dinajpur. Whatever may be his politico-religious

affiliations, Kashishwar Chakraborty was instrumental in founding the 'Satyam Shivam Sect' whose object was to bring *santals* into the 'Hindu Community'³⁸. With the support of other local Swarajist leaders, he launched a programme to 'reclaim' aboriginals and untouchables into the Hindu fold through ritual purification (Shuddhi) and social reform³⁹. By Satyam Shivam, the founder of the Sect wanted to convey to the *santals* that they happened to be an integral part of the Hindu society as Shiva, a non-Aryan deity, was taken in the Aryan Pantheon.

In not only Dinajpur and Malda, Kashishwar Chakraborty used to convert the *santals* in many other parts of India, especially in Assam. With the purpose to unite the *santals* he established " All India Santal Committee." ⁴⁰ Though he started the process of proselytisation of the *santals* of Malda in 1905, success came only after 1920. One thing was very crucial to his success. Kashishwar Chakraborty used to prescribe medicine to the patients of malaria, influenza etc. in Barind region of Malda that had experienced malaria and influenza repeatedly⁴¹. Later in 1932 he wrote a book titled " *Satyam Shivam Sundaram Kria Puthi, Bhajan, Bakhera Aar Chhere E'*" in which religious customs were described and the last page generally contained details about how to cure several diseases. He pointed to ham, chicken and intoxicating stuffs as the reason of these diseases and forbade his disciples to domesticate such pets and take them as foods. ⁴²

Kashishwar made a deep impression on the *santals* and a large number of them embraced Hinduism. They gave up eating pigs, fowls and other food considered obnoxious by the Hindus. It needs to be mentioned here that there was a similarity in observances and tenets between the Sapha Hor of Santal Parganas and the Satyam Shivam of Malda. The followers of the Sapha Hor

also did not take pigs or fowls nor did they drink toddy or pachwai. While the Sapha Hor was santals and half way to Hinduism, the Satyam Shibams were full-fledged Hindus. Both these sects had adopted the principles of pollution and purification of the Hindus.

Kashishwar Chakraborty selected his favourite disciples from every village and conferred him with the title *sardar*. Every *sardar* received the particular cloth, turban and a piece of silver, in which the words “ *Satyam Shibam Sundaram*” were inscribed. Sardars had to look after the practice of social norms and customs of their villages. The title *sardar* was a prestigious one and disciples rendered a habitual obedience to them. At every village there was a “*Kalithan*” where on every Tuesday evening disciples used to pray, worship and sing.⁴³

Among the *santal* acolytes of Kashishwar Chakraborty, Jitu and Arjun Santal eventually emerged as the leaders of Hinduisation movement initiated by the Swarajist pleader. Jitu Hembram (popularly called Jitu Santal) was born in 1883 at Khochakandar in Mangalpura *anchal* within Habibpur P.S. His father Biram Hembram and mother Tele Murmu had migrated to Khochakander with the first batch of *santals* from Santal Parganas. Irrepressible in spirit, he was called the Marang Sardar or the Great Chief. Nothing is known about his early boyhood. Nevertheless, he was born amid spreading cultivation, and as he grew up, the simmering discontent among his fellow-tribals could not have escaped him⁴⁴. Arjun was almost inseparable from Jitu.

After his conversion to Hinduism, Jitu, along with Arjun Santal set up a band of *sanyasi dol* with santal sharecroppers of the Habibpur – Bamangola- Gajol range and conducted a Kali Puja, defying police orders, to proclaim his new

Hindu status⁴⁵. Kashishwar Chakraborty was also referred to as '*sanyasi baba*'. Though the word *sanyasi* was freely used, it seems unlikely that either Chakraborty or Jitu's group was actually ascetics⁴⁶.

Throughout Barind, Jitu held many meetings among the tribals and large number of *santals* became Hindus and came within the fold of Satyam Shibam Sect. According to Bangi Hembram, the daughter of Jitu, he had erected a Kali temple beside his house – a thatched hut on high plinth. Every afternoon, many people used to come at his house; gossips and religious songs used to continue for hours⁴⁷. During the evening religious recitals, Jitu used to compose songs and sing them. Bangi remembered one such song⁴⁸:

Nun-ah marang dhartire

Manwa chikata bape bujhau

Dariakhan

Shermapuri neaotapa bachha

Jatidharam

(In such a wide world, O man, why don't you realise that Divine Rule is your religion.)

In fact, what is striking about Satyam Shibam movement is the element of this performance. The hymns that sung by Jitu and Arjun in the form of questions, answers, stories and injunctions were part of the Satyam Shibam mode of performative pedagogy. In his preachings to the *santals*, Jitu urged them to be clean in observances and live like the Hindus. He advised the *santals* not to drink *handia* or *pachwai*, or to keep pets like pigs, hens etc. He assured the *santals* if they lived a clean life like the Hindus, God would shower his

blessings on them. Jitu preached all these tenants through songs composed by himself⁴⁹.

Horjanamdo hindudharam dharma duaor – rebon

Lebet akan,

Jatibon dishaya dharambon dohoya chandoduarrebun

Sabudena

(We are *santals*, we are Hindus, we shall have to protect our religion. Ram is our lord, bearing him as such, we shall have to wade through the life. We are his subjects.)

It needs to be pointed out here that pigs and fowl were a necessary part of *santal* ritual feasting. Santal harvest festival began with the sacrifice of three hens by priests. Bongas were pleased with these. The *santal* folktales were full with stories of miraculous benefits that accrued from fowl sacrifices⁵⁰. However, Jitu, as Tanika Sarkar has shown, insisted emphatically on the ritual avoidance of pigs and fowl and warned to take stern measures of social boycott and intimidation against those who still practised such ritual⁵¹. It was believed that the new observances would bring changes in the prevailing situation and usher in a new *Raj* under which the *santal*sharecroppers would attain secure status in society.

Collectively transmitted rumours and prophecies were powerful vehicles of mobilization by Jitu. Rumours are herbingers of charismatic leader as well, and are the first signs of people's acceptance of the leader as such. Around this time, an area of 104 square miles of Habibpur and Bamongola P.S. was

surveyed by the air survey methods. The aeroplane was entirely a new object to the *santals* of Barind. Jitu told his followers that the Garuda, the mighty carrier of Lord Vishnu, had come to visit the area. Miracles are concomitant to charisma⁵². By then Jitu had become a charismatic leader and his followers accepted whatever he said. So the *santals* believed in the miracle of the visit of Lord Vishnu on his divine carrier Garuda⁵³. Jitu also claimed miraculous powers to cure fever, sore eyes and other diseases. He again claimed divine authority through a proclaimed association with the Thakur who was said to be communicating with him through letters. Sheets of paper were produced, inscribed on them were the Divine Orders. Jitu promised that *Raj* would return to the *santals*. It is significant that Jitu did not promise to restore Champa, the mythical homeland to the *santals* of Malda. He did promise, however, a new world that required new ritual modalities⁵⁴. Jitu thus combined in himself the roles of a preacher who could reveal the true path, a healer who could cure disease, a prophet who could exercise divine powers and a deliverer who would be the harbinger of a new age.

The Satyam Shibam world-view expressed conflicting impulses. It presented an exhaustive critique of *santal* customs and traditions while drawing upon *santals* symbols and practices in order to define their self-identity. It was true that the Satyam Shibam Sect banned the ceremonial use of pigs and fowl, but in marriage and local customs, this group has nothing to distinguish itself from ordinary *santals*⁵⁵. Under the influence of Jitu, the *santalsanyasi dol* began to worship the Goddess *Kali* in place of *bongas*. Scholars are of the opinion that *Kali* originated as a tribal deity whom brahmanical religion absorbed into its own mythology. Even after the absorption, as Kunal Chakraborty observes, she retained a strong resemblance with the more malevolent *bongas*⁵⁶. Jitu

made no effort to alter the *raska* or pleasure orientation, which was a principal distinction between the *santal* and the Hindu. In fact, the typical attributes of *santal* life were retained: drinking, merry-making, dancing and festivities. Jitu also insisted on the maintenance of typically *santal* weaponry and arts of warfare⁵⁷.

In this Hinduisation movement among the *santals*, the role of Kashishwar Chakraborty has been highlighted by colonial officialdom as well as by the nationalist media. Santals of Malda were seen as reacting to external agency. It cannot, however, be denied that Kashishwar did play a crucial formative role in the initial stages of the movement. He inspired the idea of a *sanyasi dol* and brought Kali worship to Jitu. District officials saw Chakraborty's relationship with Jitu as *guru's* with his disciple. As the district officer of Dinajpur reported in 1928 that the 'Santals are blindly led by the *guru* Babu Kashishwar Chakraborty, pleader'⁵⁸. However, the available evidences suggest that Chakraborty's role in this Hinduisation drive among the *santals* of Barind was much exaggerated. Kashishwar Chakraborty seems to have quickly disappeared from Jitu's life. By 1926, as Tanika Sarkar observes, all connection between Chakraborty and Jitu disappeared and Jitu was laying down his own version of the new religion⁵⁹.

In his own version of Hinduism, Jitu laid much stress on caste stratification that governed local Hindu society. In this respect, also Chakraborty's own message, echoing Arya Samaj lines of a unified, composite Hindu society, had little direct or meaningful bearing on the *dol's* own ideology. Another aspect of the *dol's* ideology was a deep – rooted hatred for the non-Hindu and, in particular, the Muslims. This vision was probably influenced by the Hindu Sabha message.

In final analysis, it may be stated that though the santals belonging to Satyam Shibam Sect embraced Hinduism, yet they did not entirely identified with the Hindus. As Tanika Sarkar points out, 'if a few markers of *santal* existence had been demonstratively abjured, many others remained a vital part of the movement'⁶⁰. They were *santals* of a new kind: Hinduized *santals*, but not Hindus. The Satyam Shibam movement was a striking case of self-reform among *santals*, in interaction with ideas and images from outside, but according to terms decided by the *adivasi* leader. The leader selected some elements from the non-*santal* world to follow and discarded others. At the same time, he alone decided what to follow from the older *santal* life and what not to practice. The Barind region of Malda saw the advent of this charismatic leader in the person of Jitu who founded a religious sect. With the passage of time, this religious movement swivels into a political nature, confronting the British government. However, this is another part of the story, which is discussed in Chapter Seven of the present dissertation.

THE RAJBANSI SOCIAL MOBILITY MOVEMENT

It needs to be mentioned here that the movement of the Malda Rajbansis aiming to claim for the *kshatriya* status is an extension of the Rajbansi Kshatriya Movement, which was then making much headway in the northern part of Bengal. So this attempt by the Malda Rajbansis to achieve higher social status should be understood in relation to the general trend of the Rajbansi Kshatriya Movement of northern Bengal.

THE SOCIAL POSITION OF THE RAJBANSIS

The Rajbansis constituted the most predominant section of the local Hindu population in the northern districts of Bengal. Numerically they were the third

largest Hindu caste in Bengal as a whole⁶¹. The district in which they were mostly to be found were Rangpur, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur, Malda, and Darjeeling in North Bengal, Purnia in Bihar and Goalpara in Assam. In Malda, the Rajbansi population was concentrated mainly in Gajol – Habibpur – Bamongola p.s⁶². They were called *bangals* and the village where they resided was called *bangalpara*. The Malda Rajbansis was predominantly agriculturists⁶³.

In respect of socio – cultural practices, the Rajbansis had very little in common with the local upper caste Hindus. This cultural distinction separated the Rajbansi community from the upper caste Hindu society of North Bengal. The Rajbansis occupied a low position in the caste hierarchy of Bengal. They were placed in the caste hierarchy along with the Namasudras, the Pods and other *antyaaja* caste. Hunter noted that in Malda the high caste Hindus treated the Rajbansis contemptuously⁶⁴. Lalbihari Majumdar, a noted local literati, has mentioned in his '*memoir*' that the social status of the Rajbansis was extremely low and high caste Hindus did not take cooked food from their hands⁶⁵. They did not accept invitation of even an affluent Rajbansi on ceremonial occasions⁶⁶. Discrimination against the Rajbansi was rooted even in rural educational institutions. At the time of the Saraswati Puja, there was a custom that the Rajbansi students offered flowers standing outside the temporarily built shrine⁶⁷. They had no right to enter the kitchen in the upper caste households⁶⁸. In other parts of northern Bengal similar forms of discrimination was prevalent. To upper caste Hindus the Rajbansis were backward, uncultured and even *antyaj*⁶⁹. They called the Rajbansis as *bahe*, implying their cultural identity. The word '*bahe*' originated from the word '*babahe*', which was used by the Rajbansis to address a person⁷⁰.

CRYSTALLIZATION OF THE RAJBANSI IDENTITY

The precise origin, status and folk history of the Rajbansis remain obscure. Existing history is largely based on the accounts left by the colonial administrators and colonial ethnographers. All of them generally arrived at the conclusion that the Rajbansis were a purified group of 'Koch' who had abandoned their aboriginal culture and adopted Hinduism during the reign of the first Koch king Viswa Singha who ruled in the western part of Kamrup by the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century⁷¹. B. H. Hodgson wrote that after his conversion to Hinduism Viswa Singha named his kingdom Behar and the people who are said to be of the same stock came to be called Rajbansis⁷². W. W. Hunter also opined that the Rajbansis and Paliyas were the offshoots of the Koch tribe. They abandoned the name 'Koch' after they embraced Hinduism and took the name Rajbansi which literally means 'Royal Race'⁷³. Herbert Risley, E. A. Gait and Dalton believed that the Rajbansis were of the Dravidian stock with an intermixture of the Mongoloid blood⁷⁴.

Rajbansi intelligentsia, social reformers and caste publicists, however, refuted the view stated above and emphatically denied any affinity between the Rajbansis on the one hand and the Koches, Paliyas and Bodos on the other. In their writings, the Rajbansis were referred to as different from and superior to the Koch. The *Rajbansi Kula Pradip* (1907) by Hara Kishor Adhikari of Goalpara, the *Rajbansi Kshatriya Dipak* (1912) by Maniram Kavyabhushan of Dinajpur and the *Rajbansi Kula Kaumudi* by Jaganmohan Singha Pandit of Rangpur all argued that the Rajbansis were Kshatriyas and were different from the Kochs. Hara Kishor Adhikari argued that the Rajbansis were Hindus before the reign of Viswa Singha and were recognized as Bhanga

Kshatriyas⁷⁵. Upendranath Barman also equated the Rajbansis with Kshatriyas who lived in the land called '*Paundra Desa*', between the river Karatoa and Ganga. He attempted to show that the Rajbansis were claiming the Kshatriya status long before the eighteenth century⁷⁶. This claim to Kshatriya status received a fillip in later years, particularly in the early decades of the twentieth century and came to be associated with a social reform movement⁷⁷.

THE RAJBANSI KSHATRIYA MOVEMENT

The origin of Kshatriya movement, as A. K. Roy has observed, could be located in the hatred and ill-treatment received by the community at the hands of the upper castes of the Hindu society; but the immediate cause of the movement was census of India, 1891⁷⁸. From 1881, census authorities not only listed and described various Hindu castes but also ranked them in a hierarchy based on the ancient *varna-jati* system. People turned to successive census reports for a record of their claim of the desired social status, and the Kshatriya status claimed by the Rajbansis was part of this process.

However, Sibsankar Mukherjee has shown that the Kshatriya caste status was claimed by a section of the Rajbansis well before census operations began. Basing on the account of Francis Buchanan - Hamilton, Mukherjee has shown that the well-to-do Rajbansis of Rangpur and Goalpara districts used to describe themselves as *kshatriyas* giving a historical explanation of this claim⁷⁹. The poorer section of the Rajbansi community, stated Buchanan-Hamilton, remained in the tribal fold, whereas the affluent section elevated themselves socially⁸⁰.

However, the claim of the Rajbansis for Kshatriya caste status began to take the shape of a movement at the time of the census of 1891⁸¹. This time the official attempt for lumping together the Rajbansis and the Koches as members of the same caste caused resentment among the Rajbansi elites. At this juncture, an organization called the *Rangpur Bratya Kshatriya Jatir Unnati Bidhyani Sabha* was formed under the leadership of Haramohan Roy, a Rajbansi zamindar of Shyampur in Rangpur district. This heralded what can be termed the modern phase of the Kshatriya movement though yet, unlike in the later periods, there was no attempt at a general mobilization of the entire community to press the demands⁸². Under the auspices of this organization a Dharma Sabha was assembled where the local *pandits* present declared that the Koches and Rajbansis were separate group of people, the latter being superior to the former, and that the Rajbansis were *bratya kshatriyas*, i.e., *kshatriyas* who had fallen from the caste for not performing the assigned rituals. Based on this ruling, the District Magistrate of Rangpur issued a circular permitting the Rajbansis to write Bratya Kshatriya in all government documents⁸³.

While this development was taking place in Rangpur, the Rajbansis of Malda were no silent spectators. Some rich cultivators and lawyers of the local Rajbansi community began practicing Kshatriya customs and manners by the last decade of the nineteenth century⁸⁴. When the Census Report of 1881 classified Koches, Rajbansis and Paliyas under the head of Koches, Dharani Das, a local Rajbansi lawyer, raised a voice of protest against this designation and claimed that it lacked any foundation whatsoever. He tried to organize the local Rajbansi people but achieved little success. Dharani Das, however, sent an application to the Census Superintendent claiming that the Rajbansis were

in no way similar to that of the Koches in respect of social customs, rituals and food habit⁸⁵. This movement led by Dharani Das, lacking popular support, subsided within a very short time.

The movement gathered momentum again during the census of 1901. In the primary enumeration the Rajbansi Kshatriya were entered as only Rajbansi and this naturally caused resentment among them. In the census report of 1901, the Rajbansi and the Koches were again classified as member of the same caste⁸⁶. In 1910, at the time of the census operations, the Rajbansis once again started their campaign for having themselves enumerated as *kshatriyas*. This time a new genre of Rajbansi leader emerged and they gave the movement a new dimension. They were the product of political, social and economic changes introduced by the colonial government in the nineteenth century. The social origins of this Rajbansi *bhadralok* class lay in the system of land revenue administration and legislation introduced by the colonial government. The need for a new class of people conversant with the rules and regulations regarding property rights, tenures, classification and assessment of land was felt. Rajbansi landholders realized the need for formal education, and those who could afford to do so, sent their children to schools in district and sub divisional towns. The educated Rajbansis were brought up in a social environment dominated by the caste Hindu *bhadralok* and they entered the professions and services whenever opportunity permitted⁸⁷. They could articulate the community's cause before the government since they felt more strongly than their rural counterparts did the odium of caste Hindu society due to their low social origin⁸⁸.

So the ground was prepared for the formation of a modern type of organization for the Rajbansis that would transcend the class and local

boundaries. The man who played the leading role in founding a well-knit organization for the Rajbansis was Panchanan Barma (1865 – 1935), revered by his community as Thakur Panchanan⁸⁹. He was originally an inhabitant of Cooch Behar, obtained his post – graduate, and law degrees from Calcutta University in 1896 and 1898 respectively. He joined the Rangpur Bar in 1901 and spent the rest of his life at Rangpur. He took the initiative in mobilizing Rajbansi Hindus in striving for a proud Kshatriya identity.

The new leaders of the community were not satisfied with petitioning the District Officers for the fulfillment of their demands. The years 1910 to 1921 witnessed a large-scale mobilization of the community in an attempt to prove its *Kshatriya* status⁹⁰. In 1910, the Kshatriya Samiti was formed at Rangpur under the leadership of Panchanan Barma. Its formation, as Swaraj Basu observes, gave a new direction to the Rajbansi caste movement⁹¹. The immediate objective of the Kshatriya Samiti was to force census authorities to recognize their *kshatriya* caste claim. About four hundred members from Rangpur, Goalpara, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Dinajpur attended the first conference of the Kshatriya Samiti held at Rangpur in May 1910. Madhusudan Roy, a pleader from Jalpaiguri and Panchanan Barma became the president and the secretary of the Kshatriya Samiti respectively⁹².

The formation of the Kshatriya Samiti gave a new direction to the Rajbansi caste movement. The first meeting of the Samiti clearly spelt out the principles of the movement:

- a) The Koch and the Rajbansi were different *jatis*; and
- b) The Rajbansis should be returned as *kshatriyas*⁹³.

During the next few years the Samiti tried to popularize the rituals, customs and manners of upper caste Hindus, beginning with the *shuddhi* (purification) ceremony to uplift them from their *vratya* (fallen) position by donning the sacred thread (*upanayana*). Representatives of the samiti were sent to Nabadwip, Mithila and Benares to get the *upanayanavyavastha* or sanction for donning the sacred thread from celebrated *pandits* who were the ritual guardians of Hindu society. On 27 Magh 1319 B. S. (corresponding to 9 February 1912) the Rajbansis performed the sacred thread wearing ceremony on the bank of the river Karatoa at Debiganj in Jalpaiguri. In this way, the Rajbansis formally celebrated their re-attainment of *kshatriyahood*⁸⁴. The place of investiture was known as *milankshetra*. Within the next couple of years 192 such ceremonies were held at different places and according to one estimate 182, 154 Rajbansis were initiated into *kshatriyahood*⁸⁵. The wearing of the thread now became a rallying point for recruiting a band of local supporters committed to the goal of carrying forward the Kshatriya movement.

THE RESPONSE OF THE MALDA RAJBANSIS

While the Rajbansi Kshatriya movement was making headway in the northern part of Bengal, the Malda Rajbansis did not lag behind. They quickly grasped the significance of this movement aiming to achieve a higher position for the Rajbansis in the social hierarchy and responded to it enthusiastically. In fact, two Rajbansi leaders of Malda, Karpur Mandal and Banbihari Mandal of Habibpur, attended the first conference of the Kshatriya Samiti held at Rangpur in May 1910. They were deeply impressed by the speech of Jagatmohan Singha who, quoting sastric authority from his book *Rajbansi Kula Kaumudi*, tried to prove that the Rajbansis were Kshatriyas⁹⁶. Karpur

Mandal felt the necessity of founding a branch of the Kshatriya Samiti in Malda and for this purpose, he met Panchanan Barma. Barma advised Mandal to make necessary groundwork for establishing a branch of the Kshatriya Samiti in Malda⁹⁷.

In 1912, an attempt was made by Karpur Mandal and some of his followers to set up a branch of the Kshatriya Samiti at Gajol-Habibpur-Bamongola belt. Several meetings were organized to mobilize the community for attaining a respectable position in social hierarchy. The ritualistic and cultural message of the Kshatriya movement was circulated among the Rajbansis. In 1913, Karpur Mandal and Banabihari Mandal organized a *milankshetra* at Bamongola and 100 Rajbansis donned sacred threads. However, this feverish activity soon waned. The poorer Rajbansis, mostly sharecroppers and small peasants, could not afford the expenses for the *shuddhi* ceremony needed for donning the sacred thread. Apart from this, a number of Rajbansi *jotedars* and rich peasants of Gajol-Habibpur-Bamongola region did not like the idea of poor Rajbansis donning the sacred thread. This Rajbansi *jotedars* had a remarkable influence on the Rajbansi sharecroppers who did not like to invite the wrath of their *jotedars*. Their resistance against organizing *milankshetra* by the Kshatriya Samiti leaders was primarily responsible for the failure of the early phase of the Kshatriya movement in Malda⁹⁸.

The Kshatriya movement again received an impetus during the visit of Panchanan Barma in Malda in 1923. With the help of Karpur Mandal and some other rich Rajbansi peasants, Panchanan Barma undertook the task of propagating and popularizing the very concept of Kshatriyahood among the Rajbansis living in Gajol, Habibpur, Bamongola and Englishbazar town. In several meetings, Panchanan Barma highlighted the need for social reform.

Among the measures emphasized by him were the wearing of the sacred thread, reduction of the days of mourning on the death of either parent from thirty days to twelve days, which was the mourning period of high caste Hindus, and change of surname from Das to Barman, Singha and Roy. He also emphasized the need of taking up a *gotra* name or clan identity, as was the custom of upper caste Hindus. The Rajbansis initially identified themselves with *kashyapa gotra*. In Bengali, there is a saying '*haraye maraye kashap gotra*'. This caustic remark implies that those who have no other *gotra* identity are included in the *kashyapgotra*. The Rajbansis, later on, took the *gotra* name of their *gurus* or preceptors. Panchanan Barman also asked the Rajbansi *Kshatriyas* to follow the *dashakarma* or 10 sacraments⁹⁹.

The personal appeal of Panchanan Barma thus instrumental in organizing a sizeable section of the local Rajbansi community. Karpur Mandal, Banbihari Mandal, Kamalakanta Sarkar, Sudhicharan Mandal emerged as the most popular leaders of the local Rajbansi community. It was due to their efforts two *milankshetra* were organized, one at Gajol and the other at Bamongola and, according to an estimate, over 1,000 Rajbansi people donned sacred thread¹⁰⁰. The *Kshatriya Samiti* of Malda tried to ensure that the Rajbansi *Kshatriyas* discarded their non-*kshatriya* social customs, manners and habits in favour of those followed by the superior castes. With the passage of time, the Rajbansi *Kshatriya* movement of Malda began to gather support from the literati of the community. Sudhicharan Roy, a lawyer by profession, hailed the sacred thread ceremony as marking the rebirth of the community¹⁰¹.

The Rajbansi *Kshatriya* movement of North Bengal, as Swaraj Basu observes, was not confined merely to the emulation of upper caste culture or religious behaviour. The secular aspects of community formation were not

neglected either¹⁰². The leaders attempted to reawaken the *kshatriya* martial spirit. Since the Kshatriyas were regarded as a martial group, in order to develop that spirit among the Rajbansis, the Kshatriya Samiti tried to inspire the youths to join the army¹⁰³. Because of these appeals, a number of Rajbansi youths had joined the army. It was reported that from the three North Bengal districts of Jalpaiguri, Rangpur and Dinajpur 400 Rajbansis joined the army, from Dhubri around 800 and from Goalpara 600¹⁰⁴. Panchanan Barma made an appeal to the Bengal Government to raise a separate regiment for the Rajbansis¹⁰⁵.

In Malda also, the leaders of the Kshatriya Samiti stressed the need for joining the army by the local Rajbansi youths to show their Kshatriya prowess. A number of physical training centres were opened in Habibpur and Bamongola to popularize the call for joining the army¹⁰⁶. Just as in the case of the sacred thread ceremony, so in the case of recruitment for the army, tradition was brought into play for the fulfillment of more pragmatic and immediate necessities. The effort was directed at opening up a permanent job opportunity for the community¹⁰⁷. A Kshatriya regiment, according to one leader, would serve two purposes. It will arouse the Kshatriya prowess, and once the door for the recruitment in the army is open, the problem of livelihood will be solved. Like the Sikhs and the Gurkhas the youth of the community will be recruited in the army easily¹⁰⁸. Responding to the call as many as 72 youths from Gajole-Habibpur-Bamongola region joined the army¹⁰⁹.

The Rajbansi social reformers of North Bengal did not limit their movement to mere wearing of sacred thread; they also undertook measures for establishing

primary schools and hostels for students. This had two-fold objectives in view viz.

- (1) It would inspire the Rajbansi students for carrying on studies and
- (2) In the hostels, the Rajbansi students would develop a sense of unity among themselves, which was essential for carrying on future movements¹¹⁰.

In fact, the spread of modern education features prominently on the agenda of the Kshatriya movement¹¹¹. The obsessive belief that education was the panacea of all the ills affecting the society was clearly expressed in the speeches of Panchanan Barma : *Many people wrongly believe that if they have enough wealth there is no need to pay any attention to the education of their children. However, it must be kept in mind that education is necessary not only for jobs. Education is necessary for gaining knowledge and fame. Education is the basis of the greatness of a community. That is why I urge you a hundred times, my friends, please educate your children*¹¹².

Likewise, the Rajbansi leaders of Malda stressed the need of education for social reform. They undertook several steps to promote education among the members of the community. As Harimohan Sarkar, a Rajbansi teacher of Malda Zilla School and a leader of the Kshatriya Samiti, comments: 'education and employment were essential for the economic development of the community and these were the new sources for higher social status'¹¹³. The Kshatriya Samiti of Malda collected funds, which was spent in constructing the building of a primary school at Dahil village of Gajol. The Samiti also donated a sum to the A. C. Institution of Malda for the establishment of a student hostel on the condition that some seats would be reserved for the Rajbansi students¹¹⁴.

However, this feverish activity soon waned due to several reasons. It was not possible for the poorer Rajbansis, mostly sharecroppers and small peasants to afford the expenses needed for the *shuddhi* ceremony, which was essential for donning sacred thread. Furthermore, as in the case of other Northern Bengal districts, the response of the local upper caste gentry towards the Kshatriya movement of the Malda Rajbansis was in no way favourable. The caste Hindu *jotedars* and *mahajans* did not like the idea of poor Rajbansis donning the sacred thread¹¹⁵. Their attitude towards the Kshatriya movement is well demonstrated by the writings of a contemporary literati, Lalbihari Majumdar who remarked, 'the cast Hindus often made ridiculous statements about the movement. The local Brahmins ridiculed the emulative rituals and customs of the Rajbansis. They stated that *suchashastric* practices would condemn their forefather to hell for ever'¹¹⁶.

However, the Kshatriya movement in Malda failed to achieve much success due to the opposition from certain section within the community. A number of rich Rajbansi *jotedars* embarked upon a project of opposing the movement from its onset. These *jotedars* were the traditional social leaders in their respective villages. The pretext of their opposition was offered by the over enthusiastic Kshatriya Samiti leaders who tried to enforce strict vigilance over the emulative social and ritual practices of the common Rajbansi people. In fact, the social upliftment movement divided the Rajbansi community into two social exogamous social groups. The first group was those who donned the sacred thread and followed new customs and rituals. The second group was those who did not wear the sacred thread and followed their traditional customs and practices. In addition, there is some evidence to show that in the Rajbansi pockets of Gajol – Habibpur – Bamongola, as elsewhere in other

northern Bengal districts, those who did not adhere fully to the ideals of the Kshatriya Samiti were looked down upon by those who did. Therefore, it is clear that the Kshatriya movement led to a new disunity among the members of the community¹¹⁷.

The matter came to a head when some Kshatriya Samiti activists of Bamongola P.S. attempted to forbade interdining or intermarriage among the Rajbansi social subgroups – ‘purified’ and ‘impure’. These attempts by the Kshatriya Samiti leaders to develop caste solidarity invited the wrath of Shymacharan Mondal, a local *jotedar* and man of influence. He made contacts with other big *jotedars* of Bamongola, Gajol and Habibpur and began to oppose the thread wearing ceremonies (*milankshetras*) held in various places in the district. Panchanan Barma and Karpur Mondal were accused of misleading the common folk for their own benefit. Shyamacharan Mondal alleged that the so-called Kshatriya movement was dividing the community in the name of social upliftment. Some other big *jotedars* also expressed doubts about the importance and necessity of Kshatriyaization movement and stated categorically that unity within the community was immediately needed¹¹⁸.

Shyamacharan Mondal convened a meeting of the Rajbansis at his village Gupinathpur of Bamongola on 6 May 1925. It was attended by a number of big *jotedars* of Gajol-Habibpur-Bamongola as well as by poor Rajbansi peasants and sharecroppers. Satish Das, a *jotedar* of Gajol, stated that a number of poor Rajbansi peasants of Gajol were forced by the leaders of the Kshatriya Samiti to discard their traditional customs and rituals as well as to wear sacred thread.

This should not be allowed to continue as it is creating polarization within the Rajbansis. Shymacharan Mondal argued that the wearing of the sacred thread, changing of surnames, emulation of upper caste Hindu cultural practices were meaningless for the majority of the Rajbansis. A resolution was unanimously adopted, which stated that the Rajbansis would continue to retain their traditional customs and rituals and would discard the sacred thread if they wore it¹¹⁹.

Therefore, it is apparent that the Kshatriya Samiti movement in Malda failed to be very appealing to a major section of the rich and poor Rajbansis alike. Generally speaking, the Kshatriyaization movement in northern Bengal had failed to break out of the close circle of the elites or the better-off section of the community¹²⁰. The movement lacked any well-defined theory or programme. It did not have any programme for the poor peasants and sharecroppers who constituted the bulk of the Rajbansi Hindu peasantry. The programmes of the Kshatriya Samiti offered no solution to mitigate the economic hardship of the poor Rajbansi peasants and sharecroppers who were facing acute financial crisis due to depression and transfer of land. The ritualistic and cultural changes of the Kshatriya Movement had little significance for the poor Rajbansis¹²¹. While commenting on the rural social scenario of the Barind region of Malda, a contemporary observer noted that “the majority of the people belonging to the Rajbansi community do not wear sacred thread in Gajol, Habibpur and Bamongola p.s.”¹²²

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