
Chapter III

Profile of Dheyman-Rajbanshi

In previous chapter, I discussed framework of study, objectives, hypotheses, review of literature, method of data collection and fieldwork experience. This chapter deals with profile of Dheyman-Rajbanshi in Barak valley in south Assam and its successive-evolutionary growth moulding historical profile, economic profile, ecological profile, religious profile, educational profile, socio-cultural life including family, kinship and marriage and political life. Further, the chapter takes cognisance of development of the community during pre-history, history, migration and settlement in Barak valley and its transition further.

Historical Profile Reinventing Identity from Time Antiquity

The community in its entirety is cloistered or cloudy with problematique historiography. In Barak valley alone its historical moorings is principally dawn with four different processes. These are Koch, Rajbanshi, Dheyman and Rajbangshi: first subsumed the last or vice-versa¹.History of origin and

¹.D.Nath, History of the Koch Kingdom (1515-1615), Mittal Publications, Delhi, 1989, P. 2

development of the community having different phases and nomenclature in different places of inhabitation are surrounded by mist of folklore, myth, mores and little tradition. Dheyman-Rajbanshi, in Barak valley of Cachar district, who originally was known as Koch-Rajbanshi in its natal land of residence, is still an object of myriad controversy and academic quibble, because from its arrival in early 1562 to 1745 A.D and during these period of beginning and weakening of Koch kingly rule and further till date, the community experienced and also experiences transition, turmoil and trouble (TTT). In process of community life building it is coterminous with different categories of caste and tribe like *Rajvamsi*, *Mech*, *Kachari*, Bodo, Garo etc. Ironically, asymmetrical opinion exists between scholars about its racial origin and development.²

Edward Gait, Hodgson, Waddel, S.K.Chatterjee, D.C.Sarkar, R.C.Mazumder mainly regard Koch of Mongolian origin. B.M.Das, a noted anthropologist in northeast, also supports such argument. H.H Risley ascribes them Dravidian origin. D.Nath (1989) observes ‘Dheyman-Rajbanshi of Mongoloid origin having homeland in Himalaya region, most probably in Tibet, where they poured into India following probably course of Teesta and Dharla. They

². Op cited.

settled initially in North Bengal adjacent area and gradually spread to east as well as towards south and west, where they are found with Dravidian³. Few others consider the community is admixture of Dravidian and Mongolian kinship.

Contemporary data and ethnography also contain wide range of reference to Koch-Rajbanshi Dheyani-Rajbanshi having Mongoloid characteristic. Mythology and legendary belief constructed entire cosmology of the community. *Padma Purana* refers to it as *Kuvacaka* state, where it did not have choice of food and spoke a barbaric tongue. The *Yogini Tantra*, which is composed in Assam in about 16th century, refers to Dheyani-Rajbanshi-Koch as *Kuvaca* and states about its birth of a *Mec* woman. *Dharma Purana* compiled in Assam in 17th century under patronage of Ahom king Siva Singha (1714h-1744) states indulgence of the community in violence and beef eating habit⁴. S.K.Chatterjee (2000) categorises the community as admixture of Austric–Dravidian–Mongoloid race before its final descendance to Hinduism⁵. So history, geography, literature and monograph of the community reveal its life, career, migration, settlement and cycle of

³. Op cited, P- 4.

⁴. Ibid, Pp 3-4.

⁵. S.K.Chatterjee, A Socio-economic History of South Assam, Joypur, Printwell, 2000, P.41.

development process had has full of distinctive, yet unsettled controversy, and after long historical career, the community is now known as Dheyant-Rajbanshi in Barak valley of south Assam.

Economic Profile Occupation and Not Profession

Basic livelihood and everyday sustenance of Dheyant-Rajbanshi in Cachar, since its arrival and settlement, is in continuous problem and fluidity. Data collected from archive, historical record (D. Nath, S.K Chatterjee, J.B. Bhattacharjee), folklore, mores, myth and monograph highlight during early and primitive period agriculture was the chief and sole occupation of the community and its people. Land around their habitation were used for agriculture purpose. Young and adult male not female was bread earner. Old men and not women were found in wage-work except for family advice/maintenance only, because old men were revered in the Dheyant-Rajbanshi family. Hiring-labour was not seen among most people of the community. Most of them used bullock and buffalo in land cultivation. Main crop they used to grow was rice, because rice was staple food for them. Old men seen developing kitchen garden to meet their family requirement. Only perishable and daily consumable commodities were cultivated by a majority of Dheyant-Rajbanshi. Earthen-pot were used in all households and families.

A very few men and only limited number of women engaged in weaving to knit their dress. Some Dheyani-Rajbanshi also chosen to draw partial income working in nearby tea gardens. Income generated from these sources were much below requirement of people of the community. Hence, they had poor condition of life with subsistence economy.

During recent time, principal earner in a family is usually an adult male member, who shoulders entire responsibility of his family maintenance and sustenance. Male member be it--father, son, husband or brother—engages in different kinds of work, but mainly agriculture for income. Now minimum or total number of persons engaged in work in a family in normal situation is more than two--may be father and son. In selected families more than three persons used to work and in some cases one person and four persons also, depending upon family size. Monthly family income in most families are within Rs. 3,000.00 to Rs.5,000.00. Secondly only a limited few families monthly agricultural income is average of below Rs.3000.00 and in some other cases relatively above Rs.5000.00 to Rs.7000.00. In fact, a very least number of family earning remains within Rs.7000 plus and above. Some Dheyani-Rajbanshi from below poverty line (BPL) and above poverty line (APL) category now possess ration card, whose number is very limited. So, economic condition, occupation and not profession, of the Dheyani-

Rajbanshi community is continuing to be poor and below average level of subsistence since its inception, irrespective of different habitation and location. Both past and present economic life of the community and its people were almost less productive, uneven and static even they put hard work and labour, and recently show interest and use different modern technology in land cultivation, they failed to reap maximum return/benefit to maintain a proper or stable economic condition or happy life.

Ecological Profile Engulfment of Rich Bio-Diversity

As known to most of us, man-nature intimate reciprocity is very old, and in primitive-ancient society, human habitation came up in deep forest and river bank. A look at construction pattern of house, household item and artifact show an unambiguous yet close linkage of Dheyani-Rajbanshi with environment and rich bio-diversity. Further their socio-cultural institutions also corroborate with such fact. Because till date most Dheyani-Rajbanshi houses are made up of low- height with mud wall and straw and tile roof. They preferred to have such houses to escape from ravage of nature including storm and cyclone. Inside and outside walls of houses are designed and decorated with picture of nature, animal etc. as houses are developed with wood, bamboo, brick and C.I.sheet. In most house inside walls, picture

of Hindu god and goddess are found drawn, which justify the community's great reverence towards nature and animal worship for a long period of time. In outside walls, most people have been accustomed to draw or make several kinds of objects in mud, mainly from their beliefs and religious texts.

Again wood and bamboo are used in maximum number of Dheyant-Rajbanshi houses since these two were/are plentifully available in Barak valley. Outer side of every house is normally raised bamboo fence to keep wild animal and outside people away. Dheyant-Rajbanshi's use of fire at domestic households are guided by some worship and chanting of scriptural/religious verses. They are customarily habituated to plant tree and develop bamboo as part of nature. They often are of the view that nature is an integral aspect of their daily life as everything has been governed and drawn from mother earth. Disperse and unorganised house of Dheyant-Rajbanshi inhabited villages reveal how they have an instinct and closeness to nature, free air and adequate light. To them if houses are constructed very nearby and free air does not move in its desired direction that would obstruct and hinder a healthy life for all of them. Sufficient gap or distance between each house is normally regarded to give them freedom to do their daily household chores without intervention of people as well as nature order. Dheyant-Rajbanshi's relationship with nature is getting reflected owing to their innocence and

simplicity to adore to gift of nature and environment. In views of most old men and women starting from their food, habitation, dress, belief, practice, culture, religion and other activities are gift of powerful nature. That is why possibly Dheyman-Rajbanshi houses in all their habitations worship Shiva and timely organize *rasleela* to keep their community free from anger of Shiva and blessing of Krishna.

From this analysis it is well understood that from time antiquity Dheyman-Rajbanshi depended upon nature and decided its feature and character with maintenance and preservation of ecological balance in and around its habitation.

Education Profile Capacity Beyond Reach

Historiography of Dheyman-Rajbanshi reflect, from beginning of their settlement in different locations and in process of successive evolutionary development in their society, education was almost alien, beyond reach or reached to them quite late disproportionately according to their place of residence. Diasporic nature of the community did not help them to attend formal education to a minimum extent. Data base are also silent and only oral tradition speaks a very little about educational awareness among people

of the community. Oral tradition gives some scarce and sporadic information that during ancient period, a very limited number of people, having economic average life, only attained education from upper caste Brahmin, who were only imparted education to pupil of three different Varna i.e. Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya and never to Shudra or untouchable. Hence, in absence of any data, both primary and secondary, it becomes evident that the community, irrespective of place of its residence, could not avail or reach up to minimum education like other ritually superior communities of caste hierarchy.

Health Profile Problem Unresolved

Health care in traditional ancient India was primarily governed by *Veda* and *Shastra*. Ancient medicine in India from *Atharvavedic* period is characterised by supremacy of magico-religious practice⁶. During that period, most people believed sin, disgrace of god and goddess, demon, evil spirit and magic behind cause of disease and illness. Ancient-traditional India being hierarchical, any particular kind of disease was implied with

⁶. Edward Wasgburn Hopkins, *The Religion of India*, MunshiramMonoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., , New Delhi, 1977, Pp 151-160

ascription and other kinds of traditional attributes. Mind of people was almost uncritical and stagnated and religious dogma governed them to large extent. In fact, people of ancient India thought disease occurred due to sin committed by some or his/her ancestor. Gods and goddesses disgrace and curse on violation of karma and dharma also regarded cause of disease among people. As a response to action of god and goddess, devil and evil spirit or force, magical activity and religious practices were followed by ancient people⁷.

Besides magico-religious practice prevalent in traditional India, ayurvedic and herbal medicine were also used for treatment of different kind of diseases. Regardless of their positive impact and cure, people of old society blindly or superstitiously believed magico-religious pattern of treatment. Owing to gradual enlarged hierarchy and stratification of Hindu domination, ayurveda and herbal medicine use attained pure religious colour. Use of traditional medicine by saint, *muni*, *rishi* and *yogi* justify how people of ancient India availed health care practice. For them disease and health were associated with food, life and activities. To be specific all of them promulgated social taboo to uphold their hegemony among people on health.

⁷.Jaggi O. P, History of Science and Technology in India, Vol.3, Folk Medicine, Atma Ram and Sons, Delhi, , 1973,Pp 1-100

These four kinds of religious specialist sanctioned or imposed medicine of their own kind to mesmerise people. Alongside *tantra*, *mantra*, *guni* and *garedi* were used by rural folk to heal their disease and wound. For example for snake bite or any immediate problem in health was attended through *guni* and *garedi*. But extent of use of such medicine was limited. Irony was over passage of time dogmatic religious practice imposed by such people became hallmark of reference for future generation. In different socio-cultural setting of rural India, folk healer used ayurvedic medicine to some extent along with magico-religious practice to serve tribal and village population⁸. Hence it is well understood that ancient India only nurtured traditional magico-religious practice and most people accepted the same as medical science was not available before rigid Hindu social structure.

In normal situation for an individual, health becomes the most crucial requirement and likewise good health was major concern of Dheyans-Rajbanshi people since beginning of their life. Because during ancient-traditional society, many of them died out of diseases, whose name and treatment were not known to them. At that time almost all Dheyans-Rajbanshi believed in magic, sorcery, witchcraft behind occurrence or

⁸. Ibid Pp 40-77

recurrence of diseases. Even deadly diseases like cholera, malaria, diarrhea, *Kalazar*, small pox, TB, cancer, leprosy and heart were attributed to the above reasons as well as unhappiness of god or goddesses. People used to believe using root, fruit, leaf and outer part of plant to cure their diseases. They also used to visit to *guni* in village and region wise quacks to get necessary medical aid and advice.

Further, Dheyani-Rajbanshi people mostly preferred/prefer indigenous medicine than that of modern day allopathic treatment. “They used leaves of marigold for different purpose of healing and body injury. Every house had/have marigold plant, which is considered as a medicinal plant to cough and cold. They also use tulsi leaf, ginger, *baskapata* (Rajbanshiwora) and black pepper etc. for cough and cold. For dengue fever Dheyani-Rajbanshi takes small chicken with ginger, black pepper, garlic and turmeric, onion, they make a paste of all these herbs in a stone, put it in a bamboo with banana leaves, and put it in fire. They do body massage for their children and old people with spring water, morning dew from plant leaf and warm oil that is mixed with ginger. Hence health profile of the community reveal till now most Dheyani-Rajbanshi believe traditional and nature-god given healing process than depending upon modern medicine.

Religious Profile Revisit of Myth and Dogma

From olden days, Dheyant-Rajbanshis were accustomed to perform various traditional *puja*'s namely, *Gram Thakur*- symbol of several *Kali* form along with supreme god, *Mahakalor Shiva* as till now *kali* temple exists in each and every Dheyant-Rajbanshi villages. *DhanKhater puja*, *Laxmi puja*, *Manasa puja*, *Bishori Puja*, *Mahakal Puja* and *Ai-puja* are part of their religious life and performed in different periods of time expected to cure or meet their wishes.

Along with these religious ceremonies, Dheyant-Rajbanshi's important festivals include *Bihu*, *Shyama*, *Rathayatr*, *Hudumdeo or bengerbiaoa* and *Shiv Ratri*. Each festival had has its own historical background, mythological significance and now also symbolies value in 'agrarian' rural structure of them. *RathaYatra* having *Balaram* celebrated in summer season. *Shiv Ratri* has been observed by them too.

Dance and music always remained as a strength of solidarity of Dheyant-Rajbanshi. They sing folk songs and dance in tune of that. For example, both

men and women regularly participate in *Bihu* dance which is deeply rooted in their social and cultural life. The people play a variety of musical instruments as accompaniment to religious songs and dances performed in village *Mandop*. *Bordhol*, *Dhol*, *Bortal*, *Tal*, *Manjuri*, *Khol*, are main musical instruments. Mostly the instruments are percussion instruments. On occasions like *holinritya*, *RasLeela*, *Nupapala*, *Basaknritya* they used musical instruments. All religious ceremonies and seasonal festivals of Dheyman-Rajbanshis such as *Dhanerfulana*, *Lakhirdak*, *Dhankatar puja*, *Noigaor puja*, *NayaKhoi*, performed in different month of the year are linked to agriculture. Dance and various musical instruments related to them reflect folk mindset of Dheyman-Rajbanshi agrarian rural structure.

Socio – Cultural Profile Festival, Ceremony and Ritual

Koch-Rajbanshi in its early formative life believed in folklore, mores, magic, sorcery beset with little tradition per se. Their faith was admixture of both non-Hindu animistic-tribal and to a very limited extent Hinduism⁹. They worshipped nature and its various objects and animals. Their household objects and everyday nurturing values reminisce their past

⁹. Please see work of J.B Bhattacharjee, S.K Chatterjee, D, Nathetc as op cited.

glorious life and nature-culture interface. Yet the community tries to blend tradition-modernity inner value to uphold its socio-cultural ramification.

In course of time and due to covert and overt factors, Dheyant-Rajbanshi adopted Hinduism and regarded themselves Kshatriya. In next course its shift, from tribalism to Hinduism and within Hinduism Kshatriyasation to Sanskritisation magnify perplexity in identity and socio-cultural institutions existed/existing among them. In a general account beginning of Dheyant-Rajbanshi society was full of disparity between men and women and rigid social institutions, which debarred remarriage of women, extreme prevalence of bride-price and other kinds of activities that all of them regularly nurtured and felt proud of that too.

Dheyant-Rajbanshi religion originated from nature and undergone significant upheaval over time, though till now majority of their socio-cultural life is performed within domain of nature. Initially, they were divided in three clans – Kashyap, Basistha, and Bharadwaj (named after three sage). They followed clan exogamy. Being mostly Hindu, some of them were Mahapurushia and others Shakta. Mahapurushia were original follower of SrimantaSankardev and Shakta worshipped goddess of power, Durga and

also believed in blood sacrifice of animal and bird. Hinduism fold and further development with sanskritisation, Dheyman-Rajbanshi gradually shown interest towards worship of different Hindu gods, goddesses and idols: within domestic circle and in public life.

The community from its very inception followed and retained caste, but its people's notion of caste varies substantially from general notion of caste practiced elsewhere. In contemporary era they have three different caste status – scheduled caste in North-Bengal, MOBC in Goalpara and OBC in other districts of Assam. The people were/are both vegetarian and non-vegetarian and their main food were/are rice. On occasions like Bihu and other festivals they prepare *pitha* and *laru* along with *bora* rice and *dol bamboo* baked in fire extracted from *chunga*. Their household items were unique: *bokhari*, *duli*, *pali* and *dheki*. On religious functions and special days, both Dheyman-Rajbanshi women, men including children wear their traditional attire and apparel.

Family, kinship and marriage always become centre of attraction and concern in the community. Extended and joint family prevailed and still prevalent among them having eldest male member as head of the family.

Descent only reckoned through male line wherein role of women is usually minor. Marriage-alliance is regarded religious sacrament followed by clan exogamy and inter-caste marriage were/are hardly seen among its people. Monogamy, bride-price and dowry had symbolic value and therefore these institutions had have strong hold in the Dheyman-Rajbanshi community till date¹⁰.

Birth and date in Dheyman-Rajbanshi community were/are guided by rigid ritual and observation. Former is regarded gala occasion latter only brings sorrow to a family or community in general. In both occasions, the community strictly adheres to religious sanction, which are only performed by Manipuri priests and not from Assamese community¹¹. Dress and traditional attire of both male and female are ironically blend of Assamese and Manipuri tradition. No deviation is observed in regularly organising all birth and date related rituals among its people.

¹⁰ .Tanuj Kumar Dey, Role of Folklore in Constructing Identity, NERO,Gauhati,2011, P.65

¹¹., Ibid

Language of the community from beginning till now is Assamese and all of them have been taking pride to speak the language in public forum and educational institutions, which are also supported by state machinery.

Political Profile Less Politics and more Amiability

From beginning of its career, Dheyant-Rajbanshi, never had awareness nor inclination towards politics. In fact politics was completely unknown to all of them. As such people of the community did not feel to have politics at all. The community in entirety maintained a kind of mechanical solidarity and strong bond of fellow-feelingness in every aspect of their life. The organised mass never wanted anything else except having a peaceful and somber life without intervention of outside people. Uncomplex and happy life kept them united over ages.

Later period for their own interest preservation, Dheyant-Rajbanshi felt need of some aged and old people to guide them or help them at hour of unexpected crisis. That is why possibly chieftainship came up during their traditional society. Rather, chieftain maintained and upheld pro-people service attitude and rule, who remained loyal to him under his patronage.

More than a mere ruler, chieftain had a benevolent and humanistic mindset of welfare authority. He used to adopt or administer pro-people measure and sat to resolve individual-personal conflict if any. Most Dheyant-Rajbanshi accepted and abided by his popular will of succession and development of the community in comprehensive manner. During early days their community and its people were not polarised in different categories like caste and class under several regions. Simplicity and honesty were hallmark of the community life which was beset with inter-personal intimacy between them.

In absence of politics of convenience or political culture, Dheyant-Rajbanshi chieftain and people were always alert to protect or safeguard their interest from attack of outside non-Dheyant-Rajbanshi people. Sometimes even they unitedly resisted and protested against divide and rule of British and also attack of Dimasa king. Their motto was to manage, maintain and retain their own governing values and institutions, which were prime for all of them. All people of the community enjoyed liberalism and democracy within domain of their society and therefore political profile of the community, regardless of their specific location of live, were well adjusted, amiable and adaptive on all accounts.

Dheyanto Rajbanshi Upheaval and Transition

Koch-Rajbanshi-Dheyant-Rajbanshi historiography is complex, perplex and accentuated with myriad, yet very unique inter-subjectivity. The community's long journey is not mere reflection of stereotype and antagonistic discourse, on the contrary full of glaring contradiction and paradox per se. As part of our ongoing discussion and elaboration, we have come across with several historical evidence, ethnograph, monograph along with other kind of primary and secondary data to understand and realise that Dheyant-Rajbanshi probably experienced/experiences or encounters in its everyday life.

As far as use of 'Rajbanshi' is concerned, scholars view it of recent origin in the sense that Koch kingdom reached its height during rule of Naranarayan in 16th century. On the contrary 'Darang Raj Vamsavali-a genealogical account of Koch royal family in last quarter of 18th century-does not refer to this but call them Koch or Mech.'¹²

Further, 'neither in Persian record nor in foreign record and in any of dynastic epigraph, Koch are mentioned as Rajvamshi.' It is possible when

¹².D.Nath, History of the Koch Kingdom (1515-1516), New Delhi, Mittal Publications, 1989, P. 5.

Koch became conscious of their past at a later period, they began to call themselves as Rajvamshi – meaning descendent of royal kindred. This new appellation also made them feel somewhat superior to rest of their kinsmen.’¹³

Suniti Kumar Chatterjee (1974) observes when they (Koch) are a little conscious of their Hindu religion and culture and retain some vague memory of their people, particularly during day of Visva Singha and Naranarayan, they proudly called themselves Rajvamshi and *Kshatriya*¹⁴ during day of Biswa Singha¹⁵. Gait’s account (1997) reflects ‘Brahmin discovered these tribesmen were *Kshtriya* who threw away their sacred thread fleeing before wrath of *Parsuram*.’¹⁶

D.Nath views that it took long time to for the community to claim *Kshtriya* origin from ruling class to common people and concludes that the term Rajvamshi was only recently applied to erstwhile Koch. But, their *Kshtriya* origin was evolved as early as day of Biswa Singha, although it was only

¹³ Ibid, 1989. P 5.

¹⁴. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language, 1974, P.112.

¹⁵.D.Nath, History of the Kooch Kingdom (1515-1615), Mittal Publications, Delhi, 1989, P.5.

¹⁶. Edward Gait, A History of Assam, Lawyer’s Book, 1997, P.45.

towards close of 19th century, that Koch, in general, claimed themselves *Kshatriya*¹⁷. However to enlist as Kshatriya, they could not improve their social position as apparent in Arup Jyoti Das's observation.

Because according to Arup Jyoti Das (2009) Kochis one of the earliest ethnic groups of North-East India to come under Hinduism. But in caste ridden Hindu society its position was at the lowest level. During early 20th century, Rajbanshi of North Bengal challenged their low status and claimed *Kshatriya* status through a mass movement known as '*Kshatriya movement*' led by Panchanan Burman.¹⁸ This trend was observed long back by Gait.¹⁹

Further Arup Jyoti Das mentions that though Koch called themselves 'Rajbanshi', in reality they enjoyed a lower status in Hindu society and placed in bottom of caste fold.' In early 20th century, Koch Rajbanshi were even denied entry into temple of *Jagannath Puri*.²⁰ In language of S.K.Chatterjee (1974) 'though they called/call themselves Rajbanshi and

¹⁷. D.Nath, History of the Kooch Kingdom (1515-1615), Mittal Publications, Delhi, 1989, P.6.

¹⁸. Arup Jyoti Das, Kamatapur and the Koch Rajbanshi Imagination, Montage Media, Guwahati, 2009, P. 25.

¹⁹. Edward Gait, A History of Assam, Guwahati, Lawyer's Book, 1997, P .43.

²⁰ Arup Jyoti Das, Kamatapur and Koch Rajbanshi Imagination, Montagemedia, Guwahati, 2009, Pp. 69-71.

Kshatriya, yet they are content having political advantage and recognition as ‘scheduled caste’²¹.

The above analysis reflect Dheyman-Rajbanshi, who only attained this nomenclature in Barak valley and Cachar district, has had unique historical past and present socio-cultural attributes. Possibly over successive era, the community and its people felt imperative to uphold their cherished past life than accepting enlarged space of modernity. Hence, from past to present the community is blended with upheaval and transition without end.

Conclusion

This chapter reveals a great historiography of the Dheyman-Rajbanshi in Barak valley and its life and career condition. It is found the community encounters difficult situation, tension and isolation since its inception. Besides problematic historical past, economic backwardness hinder the community’s overall development. Education awareness is yet to develop and house situation and condition of road in Dheyman-Rajbanshi village is still in very bad shape in Barak valley. Socio-cultural and political life of the

21. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, *The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language*, 1974, P.42.

community were/are engulfed with simplicity and yet rigidity. And Dheyant-Rajbanshi suffers from numerous health problems as they are deprived of proper health care. Next chapter is going to address to economic dimension of the community.