

## CHAPTER IV

### IDENTITY FORMATION OF THE KOCH RAJBANGSI

The identity of the Koch Rajbangsi as an ethnic community of India has never been questioned. Yet the trajectory of the identity formation of the Koch Rajbangsi in India lacks a uniform pattern. Consequential of the changing socio-economic structure of India the course of the identity formation of Koch Rajbangsi too underwent changes. The dynamics of the Koch Rajbangsi as an ethnic group was opportunistic of the socio-political changes that India witnessed during its transition from being a colony to a self governing sovereign state. This gave fluidity to the phenomenon of the identity formation of the Koch Rajbangsi which continues to vacillate and is lacking a well structured linear progress.

### TRACES OF THE KOCH RAJBANGSI IN THE PRE COLONIAL PERIOD

The Rajbangsi constitute an autochthonous population in the north-eastern districts of Bengal including Rangpur (now in Bangladesh) and Goalpara district in Assam. They are indigenous community of the north-eastern districts of Bengal.<sup>1</sup>The history of the origin of the Koch Rajbangsi is largely based on the accounts by the colonial administrators and ethnographers. The historiographies provided by various colonial ethnographers provide a divergent view on the identity of the Koch Rajbangsi. An appraisal of their views provides an idea that the origin of the present Koch Rajbangsi community can be traced to the 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C., when they entered India from Tibet and settled on the banks of the Brahmaputra. They gradually spread over Assam and the whole of North and East Bengal. It is alleged that the Koches are of Mongoloid origin having close affinities with Bodo tribes like the Meches, Rabhas, Dhimals, Hajongs and Garos. But in course of time, they married the Dravidian and gave birth to a mixed Mongolo-Dravidian race having preponderant Mongoloid characters.

They assumed political power in the western Brahmaputra valley in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, and exercised their sovereignty over the major part of the North-East.

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<sup>1</sup> Rajatubhra Mukhopadhyay, '*Kshatriyaization Among the Rajbansi: An Appraisal*', **Man in India**, Volume 79 No 3 & 4, July-December, 1999, North Bengal, pp. 347-358.

Following the invasion of the Kamata Kingdom, which comprised the western Brahmaputra valley, by Ala-ud-din Hussain Shah, the Sultan of Bengal (A.D. 1493-1510) in A.D. 1498, Biswa Singha, a Koch chief, organized his tribe. It was he who laid the foundation of Koch Kingdom in about A.D. 1515 on the ruins of the kingdom of Kamata. His son and successor Naranarayan (A.D 1540-1587) was viewed to be the greatest of the Koch kings, and an illustrious ruler of North-east India of his time. With the help of his brother Chilarai, who was also his general, he brought most of the neighbouring states under the Koch hegemony.

Following the death of Chilarai in A.D. 1576 the political hegemony the Koches held over the region shuddered as the kingdom suffered a division in A.D. 1581. The western division was known as Koch- Behar and the eastern division as Kamrup or Koch-Hajo. Despite this division and the political events of the subsequent period, the western division, i.e., Koch Behar continued its existence till its merger with independent India. While Koch-Hajo which preferred to play an inimical role against the great Mughals allying with the Afghans, was annexed to Mughal India in A.D. 1612. Koch-Hajo was later occupied by the Ahoms after the battle of Saraighat in A.D. 1669, and it continued to remain in their possession till the annexation of their kingdom by the British in A.D. 1826.<sup>2</sup>

### **CONFLICT ON THE CONFLUENCE OF KOCH- RAJBANGSI IDENTITY**

There are diverse opinions with regard to the origin of the term ‘Rajbangsi’ as an appellation. Conflicting views by British ethnographers are expressed over whether the Koch -Rajbangsi is the same race or constitutes two different ethnic stocks. One is that the Koch king, Biswa Singha and many of his subjects, on becoming Hindu adopted the new name ‘Rajbangsi’ or ‘men of the royal race’—to denote their royal lineage. They adopted the appellation ‘Rajbangsi’ which was viewed to be honourable and dignified so as to validate their claim for the Kshatriya status. Francis Buchanan Hamilton’s Report (1807- 9) for instance, stated that the Rajbangsi were the Koches who had adopted Hindu rituals and manners in the sixteenth century. The poorer sections of the community remained

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<sup>2</sup> D. Nath, ‘*The Koches: Their Racial Affinities and Original Homeland*’, **Journal of Indian History**, Volume 64 No.1-3, December, 1986, pp. 175-84, Cooch Behar.

in the tribal fold and accepted a lower status in the Hindu social order. The affluent on the other hand, were elevated socially as Rajbangsi. Many of the poor Koches being denied the Hindu status ultimately adopted Islam. Thus a large number of the Koches became Muslims.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Hunter too observed that, about the close of the 15th century one of the Koch kings Hajo (1510-1587) founded a kingdom in the west part of Kamrup. A divine ancestry for the Chief was manufactured by the Brahmins. Accordingly the Chief together with his officers and all people of the Kingdom converted to Hinduism. The converts abandoned the appellation Koch for 'Rajbangsi' as the new appellation to denote themselves. Hunter also noticed that in the districts of Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and Cooch- Behar, the name Rajbangsi, which literally meant 'Royal Race' was adopted by the cultivators and affluent men and Koch being restricted to labourers and specially to the palanquin bearers. Hunter placed the Rajbangsi under 'semi- Hinduised aboriginals'.<sup>4</sup>

British ethnographer Rowny viewed Rajbangsi originally as Dravidian. According to Rowny, intermarriage between the Koch tribes and the Hindus led to adoption of Hindu rituals and manners by a section of the Koches who subsequently addressed themselves as Rajbangsi. He opined, "Intermarriage of Koch tribes with Hindus has considerably changed their old habits. They resemble the Bengali more than any other people. One class of this tribe, the Rajbangsi worship Hindu deities and have adopted Hindu manners" exercised by fiction in the mixing of caste... Now the great majority of Koch inhabitants of North Bengal invariably describe themselves as Rajbangsi or 'Bhanga Kshatrias'. They keep Brahmins, initiate Brahmanical ritual in their marriage ceremony and have begun to adopt Brahminical system of 'Gotras'. There is no historical

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<sup>3</sup> Rajatubhra Mukhopadhyay, '*Social formation of the Rajbangsi and the Emergence of the Kamtapuri Identity*', in N.K. Das and V.R. Rao ed **Identity, Cultural Pluralism and the State: South Asian Perspective**, Anthropological Survey of India in association with Macmillan, New Delhi, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Moumita Ghosh Bhattacharyya, '*Rajbangsi: The Deprived People of North Bengal*', **International Journal of South Asian Studies**, Volume 2 No 2, July-December, 2009, Pondicherry University, India.

foundation for the claim of Rajbangsi to be a provincial variety of Kshatriyas. The original nucleus of Rajbangsi was certainly Dravidian". Thus, British ethnographer Rowny viewed Rajbangsi as a part of the larger Dravidian tribe, i.e., Koch.

British administrator-ethnographers like Gait, Hutton, Dalton, Risley and Thompson were unanimous in their opinion that a section of Koch population of Northern Bengal adopted the appellation Rajbangsi from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is assumed that modern Assam and a part of Bengal forming the old Kamrup were formerly ruled by many tribes like Danabs, Kirats, Asuras, Burmans, Chutias and Pals. They settled in the whole or part of Kamrup followed by the Ahoms, Khens and Koches. Initially these tribes were rivals indulging into battle of supremacy but gradually came closer through matrimonial and other alliances. The Ahoms occupied the eastern zone and the Koches started dominating the west zone of Kamrup. Gradually the Koches centred round Cooch- Behar and Baikunthapur.

The ethnographers thus arrived at the conclusion that Koches abandoned their aboriginal culture and adopted Hinduism during the reign of the first Koch King Biswa Singha who embraced Hinduism. Post conversation Biswa Singha named his kingdom Behar and the people as Rajbangsi. The Koches were thought to be of the Mongoloid origin but while speaking of the Rajbangsi in general an emphasis was seen to have been given on their being more an intermixture of the Dravidian and Mongoloid bloods. It was Herbert Risley, E.A. Gait and Dalton who among others believed that the Rajbangsi were of the Dravidian stock with an intermixture of the Mongoloid blood.<sup>5</sup>

Rajbangsi intelligentsia, political leaders and social reformers, however, strongly disagreed with the views expressed by the British ethnographers about the Koch Rajbangsi ethnic identity. They emphatically denied any affinity between Rajbangsi on the one hand and Koches, Paliyas and Bodo and the other.<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup> Girindra Narayan Ray, *The Rajbangsi Identity Politics: The post colonial passages*, in ed **Social and Political Tensions in North Bengal (Since 1947)**, N.L. Publishers, Siliguri, West Bengal, 2007

<sup>6</sup> Op.cit.no.2

Rajbangsi scholars, like Haripada Adhikari and Upendra Nath Barman expressed their resentment against fabrication of the Hindu identity of the Rajbangsi by the colonial ethnographers. They also disagreed with the contention that the Rajbangsi had adopted Hinduism during the regime of Biswa Singha in the early sixteenth century. According to Rajbangsi intelligentsia the Rajbangsi were already Hindus and were recognized as *Vartya* or *Bhang* (fallen) Kshatriya.<sup>7</sup> It was the British ethnographers, who popularised the term Rajbangsi as Swaraj Basu asserts, “Nowhere at this stage can we find any reference to the Rajbangsi in the history of the locality. There was no mention of the Rajbangsi either in the Persian records, in the foreign accounts, in the Assam *Buranjis*, or in *Darang Raj Vamsabvali* (genealogical account of the Koch royal family). In this list there is no mention of the Rajbangsi, or the Paliyas or the Desis, though there is a reference to the origin of the Koches”.<sup>8</sup> They viewed ‘Rajbangsi’ as a new name adopted by a racial group which had already been identified as ‘Koch’ by the British; and this rechristening was on the basis of a Sanskritisation movement for the purpose of reintroducing themselves as Kshatriya so as to upgrade themselves in the Hindu socio-religious hierarchy;<sup>9</sup> Diverse opinion is thus expressed with regard to the origin and identity of the Koch Rajbangsi.

#### **RAJBANGSI MOVEMENT FOR THE KSHATRIYA IDENTITY**

The warrior-ruler model of the Kshatriya remained the popular and practicable model for social mobility and cultural assimilation for the lower castes and tribes in India. During the early phase of Kshatriyaisation, the process was mainly confined to the tribal chiefs and kings. It was initiated by the Koch chiefs in order to strengthen their legitimization as Hindu *rajās* in their own society and to broaden the basis of their economic and political power. It was a calculated move on the part of the tribal nobility to improve their material interests through

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<sup>7</sup> Op.cit.no.3

<sup>8</sup> Girindra Narayan Ray, ‘*The Rajbangsi Identity Politics: The post colonial passages*’, in Sailen Debnath (ed) **Social and Political Tensions in North Bengal (Since 1947)**, N.L. Publishers, Siliguri, West Bengal, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Sailen Debnath, in ed **Social and Political Tensions in North Bengal (Since 1947)**, N.L. Publishers, Siliguri, West Bengal, 2007. Pp.44.

Kshatriyaisation. Accordingly for political reasons the Koch Kings adopted Hinduism so to elevate to the status of Kshatriya. Subsequently, dominant sections of the Koches in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century abandoned their tribal practices and radically adopted the manners, customs of the Hindus. They adopted the appellation 'Rajbangsi' in order to distinguish themselves from the more plebeian brethren who continued with the appellation Koch. It was thus an attempt to be regarded as a separate caste and socially superior to the Koches.<sup>10</sup>

From 1872, the Rajbangsi of Bengal and parts of Assam demanded recognition as a distinct caste i.e. 'Rajbangsi' for a clear and concrete dissociation from the tribal Koches.<sup>11</sup> Consequently under the leadership of Rai Saheb Panchanan Barman the Rajbangsi organized the 'Kshatriya Andolan' or Kshatriyaization movement and claimed 'Kshatriyahood' for the social upliftment of the Rajbangsi community. The principal objective of the Kshatriya Movement was the promotion of the Rajbangsi from a lower to a higher berth in the Varna order and greater respectability in terms of the given conditions of the caste system in the region. Through Kshatriya Movement the Rajbangsi challenged the lower berth assigned to them in the Hindu caste system.<sup>12</sup> However the Rajbangsi of north-eastern Bengal claim for 'Kshatriyahood' was not a sudden demand. It was a manifestation of reaction to changing politico-socio situation in northern Bengal. There were many underlying reasons behind the Movement of the Rajbangsi for Kshatriya status which can be broadly classified into Social and Political context of Kshatriya movement as discussed under:

### **SOCIAL CONTEXT OF KSHATRIYA MOVEMENT BY THE RAJBANGSIS**

The society in northern Bengal was structurally undifferentiated in terms of caste hierarchy and associated occupational specialization. There were no hierarchical arrangements amongst the autochthonous groups such as Meches, Rajbangsi,

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<sup>10</sup> Op.cit.no.3

<sup>11</sup> Rajatsubhra Mukhopadhyay, '*Contradiction and Change in Social Identity of the Rajbangsis*', **Journal of Indian Anthropological Society**, Volume 34 No.2 , July,1999, North eastern Bengal and Assam, pp. 133-138.

<sup>12</sup> Op.cit.no.4

Rabhas, Koches and Garos inhabiting the region of North Bengal. Economically they were mostly peasants. The caste categories of the core Hindu society did not influence the social formation process of North Bengal. Accordingly, the social position enjoyed by the Rajbangsi which was numerically and economically dominant community was least challenged by the other indigenous communities of the region.<sup>13</sup>

However in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the influx of a large number of caste-Hindu immigrants into the region from other parts of the country challenged the social status of the Rajbangsi. The immigrants with their strong awareness of casteism started interacting with the indigenous Rajbangsi in differential terms. The Rajbangsi were even denied entry into the temple. The Rajbangsi faced humiliation and objectionable identification from the upper caste Hindus. Nagendranath Basu in *World Encyclopaedia* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, mentioned the Rajbangsi as 'barbarians' and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in *Bongo Darshan* mooted that the Koch identity cannot be synonymous with Bengali Hindu identity. The Koch- Rajbangsis were kept out of the Brahmanical fold of Hinduism in spite of their innumerable efforts to merge with the mainstream Hindu society. The Rajbangsi could not enter the Hindu fold successfully due to the resistance offered by the high caste Hindus. Consequently they remained in the periphery of the Hindu caste hierarchy.<sup>14</sup>

The incursion of the upper caste gentry into the north Bengal region changed the social milieu of the region wherein status dissonance was suffered by the Rajbangsi elites. The Hindu migrants to this region created resentment and anxiety among the local Rajbangsi as they were considered socially and culturally inferior and were accorded status of a low caste. This caused a section of the affluent and educated Rajbangsi conscious of their low position in the local caste hierarchy of the region. It provided them the impetus to make efforts for upward caste mobility and vie for the recognition as Kshatriyas. The leaders of the Kshatriya Movement were equal to the upper caste Hindus in matters of education, profession, and manners and felt quite acutely the odium of belonging

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<sup>13</sup> Op.cit.no.1

<sup>14</sup> Op.cit.no.4

to a low caste Hindu society due to their low social origin. The upper echelons (*Jotedars*, *Babus*, etc) of the Rajbangsi community demanded a corresponding high rank in the local social structure. They were the main advocates of Rajbangsi Kshatriya Movement in north Bengal.<sup>15</sup>

Subsequently the Rajbangsi became caste conscious, like any Hindu caste, and began to rank all the castes in their villages on the basis of occupation they followed.<sup>16</sup> Consequential of the land revenue system in the region over a long period of colonial rule in India the number of landowners in the Rajbangsi population increased. Effectively the claimants to the Rajbangsi-Kshatriya adage increased with an increase in the number of well-to-do landowners in the Rajbangsi population. The Movement to get Kshatriya status was thus an expression of the aspiration of the landlords, *Jotedars* and well-off peasants. They were the main participants in the conferences and activities in connection with the Movement.

#### **POLITICAL CONTEXT OF KSHATRIYA MOVEMENT BY THE RAJBANGSIS**

The Revolt of 1857 did not change the colonial attitude though it changed their ways to rule. While a policy of non-intervention in the traditions, customs and conventions of their subject peoples was adopted, it necessitated, as Nicholas Dirks, commented, ‘a new commitment to colonial knowledge about the subjects of its rule..... [It] made the anthropologization of colonial knowledge necessary for several reasons. Ethnographic knowledge could explain why the rebellion took place, how to avoid such disaffection in future, new ways to claim the loyalty of subjects on the basis of custom and culture, and how to delineate the autonomous and proper domains of religion and custom’. He further observed, “District level manuals and gazetteers began to devote whole chapters to the ethnography of caste and customs; imperial surveys made caste into a central object of investigation; and by the time of the first decennial Census of 1872,

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<sup>15</sup> Op.cit.no.3

<sup>16</sup> Op.cit.no.1



caste had become the primary subject of social classification and knowledge.<sup>17</sup> Moreover the upper caste Hindu community alienated both the Muslims and the lower castes from the nationalist Movement in the colonial India. The nationalist leadership which was dominated by the Hindu upper caste elites did not have anything on their agenda for the well-being of the depressed classes. It was rather critical of the colonial protection for them and suspicious of their collaborative relation with the British. As a result the lower castes including the Rajbangsi were more loyal to the colonial authority for the protective discrimination.

In the Census Reports from 1872 to 1931 caste formed an important criterion to examine the claims of the different castes for higher ranks or more respectable positions. Census was thus used by caste groups as an instrument to improve their position in the social hierarchy by assuming new names or titles; and advancing claims to a position than that usually assigned to them in the social scale. The introduction of Decennial Census in the late nineteenth century in colonial India opened an opportunity to the Rajbangsi for obtaining recognition of their social claim as Kshatriya in the Census. They looked at the Census as a new government-sponsored channel of social mobility otherwise denied to them by persons of upper castes Hindus.<sup>18</sup>

The claim of the Rajbangsi to be enumerated as a Kshatriya but not a tribe (Koch) began to take the shape of a movement when the Census authority gave instruction to the effect that the 'Rajbangsi is same as Koch'. The struggle of the Rajbangsi for the identity as Kshatriya ensued. A recovery of the past and its glorification was considered to be prerequisite in identity or nationalist movements. Accordingly the Rajbangsi attempted to revive their past history to strengthen their claim for Kshatriyahood. The whole history of the Rajbangsi was projected to be the history of the Kshatriya kings in the regions of Pragjyotishpur, Kamrup and later Kamtapur and KamtaBehar. The Rajbangsi identity movement for Kshatriyahood attempted a recovery of the glorious past mainly to prove its claim to be different from that of the present status in the Hindu caste hierarchy.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Op.cit.no.8

<sup>18</sup> Op.cit. no.1

<sup>19</sup> Op.cit.no.8

They pressed the British Government through persistent agitation that (i) the Rajbangsi be recorded separately from the Koch, and (ii) be recognized as a Kshatriya by descent.<sup>20</sup> In their desire to be recorded as a member of high caste, they passed through at least four distinct social identities from one census to another: Koch to Rajbangsi (1872), Rajbangsi to *Bratya/Bhanga* Kshatriya (1891), Bratya Kshatriya to Kshatriya Rajbangsi (1911 and 1921) and Kshatriya Rajbangsi to only Kshatriya (1931). The Rajbangsi presumed if they could succeed in getting themselves recorded as Kshatriya in the census, an official document of the Government, no one would indeed be able to dispute their rank in the caste hierarchy.<sup>21</sup> Thus with the onset of the census operations the whole situation assumed a new dimension. Those who were coming up from below looked to the Census Commissioner for public recognition of their higher status, for it would ensure reverence from the indigenous society.

The Rajbangsi set up their claim to be considered as Kshatriyas based on quotes from Hindu scripture and epics. They claimed that the Rajbangsi Hindus were Kshatriyas of Aryan origin against the census authority's assessment that Rajbangsi is same as Koch. Led by Harmohan Khajanchi several Rajbangsi Zamindars and Jotedars protested against Rajbangsi as recognised as Koch. Under the banner of "Rangpur Bratya Kshatriya Jatir Unnati Bidhayani Sabha", they urged F.M. Skyne, District Magistrate of Rangpur to recognize Rajbangsi as a separate caste and enumerate them as Kshatriyas in the Census. Mr. Skyne sought the opinion of the Rangpur Dharma Sabha, an association of Brahmin pundits. The Dharma Sabha after consulting the Brahmins of places like Nabadwip, Mithila, Kamrup, gave the opinion that the Rajbangsi were of Kshatriya origin, who have been degraded to a Bratya state due to non-observance of Vedic practices, and that Rajbangsi and Koches were two different castes. On the basis of this opinion Mr. Skyne recommended to the Census Superintendent to allow the Rajbangsi to be enumerated as Bratya Kshatriyas. He also issued a circular to the effect that the Rajbangsi could write their caste as

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<sup>20</sup> Op.cit.no.9

<sup>21</sup>Op.cit.no.1

Bratya Kshyatriyas in all official correspondence. This pacified the Rajbangsi and the Movement subsided. The Movement, however, gathered momentum during the Census of 1901 when the Rajbangsi, found that they were retreated under the category of Koch, which was abhorred by the Rajbangsi. This generated considerable discontent and they urged the concerned authority to accord them the status of Kshatriya caste. Their claim was however, not acceded to because of opposition from sections of upper caste Hindus.<sup>22</sup>

### **KSHATRIYA SAMITI**

The Rajbangsi for institutional support to their endeavour to get recognized as Kshatriya and for mass mobilization constituted a caste-based association, called '*Kshatriya Samiti*' at Rangpur in 1910. It was formed with the initiative of an elite Rajbangsi group of Rangpur led by Rai Saheb Panchanan Barma, a lawyer and popularly known in his community as 'Thakur Panchanan'. The immediate objective of the Kshatriya Samity was to exert pressure on the Census authorities to grant them Kshatriya status. The Kshatriya Samiti had some other objectives to fulfil too. It intended to separate the tribal Koch and the Rajbangsi identity emphasizing the superior status of the latter, to legitimize the demand to include the Rajbangsi within the Kshatriya caste and to indoctrinate Brahmanical values and practices among the Rajbangsi. The *Samiti* articulated as well as organised new initiative to mobility along the axis of status.

There were serious efforts on the part of the *Samiti* to secure the opinion of Brahman Priests of Nababwip and Banaras and other Vedic sanctions to validate their claim to Kshatriya identity. They wanted to legitimise the elevation of their ritual status into "Kshatriyas" by the priests and genealogists. With the help of the relevant clues from the Vedic literature and support of Brahmin Priests from Kashi, Nabadip, Methila, Kamrup, the Kshatriya Samiti cited the different code of laws which reinforced their Kshatriya origin. Mythology and traditions were also frequently cited in support of their claim to be recognized as descendents of Kshatriya Varna. Attempts were being made by a section of Rajbangsi intelligentsia to construct 'new' history of the Rajbangsi taking the materials

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<sup>22</sup> Op.cit.no.2

from folk tales, folk songs, legends and proverbs to establish their claim.<sup>23</sup> The earliest attempt to write the history of the Rajbangsi community was made by Harikishore Adhikari who wrote *Rajbangsi Kulaprodip* in Bengali and published it from Calcutta in 1315 B.C. He based his writings on Hindu scriptures and attempted to prove that the Rajbangsi were Kshatriyas and descendents of a Royal lineage.

However it was Sri Panchanan Barman of the “Kshatriya Sabha”, who suggested a historical link of the present Rajbangsi community with Bhaskar Barman, king of Kamrupa (present Assam) in 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. It was suggested that after the exit of Palas of Kamarupa in 12 century A.D, their capital Kamarupanagara might have grown into Kamatanagara during the reign of the Khens in the 15th Century. Husain Shah ousted Khens and assumed the title “Conqueror of Kamata”. It was in the beginning of 16th Century that the Koch Chieftain Visvasimha drove away the Muslim intruders and established the Narayani dynasty with his capital at Kamatanagari. In course of time he consolidated his power over the entire western part of the region from river Karatoya to the Barnadi, after defeating the local Bhuyans of Assam. In 1562 a Koch army under the leadership of Narnarayana, the son of Visvasimha marched to the Ahom capital Garhgaon and annexed it. But soon the kingdom was split into two, Koch Behar and Koch Hajo. Koch Hajo was better known as Kamarupa, a part of modern Assam along the border of river Sankosha. The Kamata Koch kingdom continued to exist through the Anglo Koch treaty of 1773 down to its merger with the Indian union in 1949-50 by the Cooch Bihar Merger Agreement (Aug 28, 1949).<sup>24</sup>

The Rajbangsi under the auspices of the Kshatriya Samiti boosted up their claim of pure Kshatriyahood. They began to emulate many Hindu manners and customs discarding their old practices in order to justify their Kshatriya appellation and Aryan origin. They typically attempted to improve their social standing by altering their customs to resemble the ways of life of the upper caste. They started wearing sacred thread and adopted *gotra* (clan) name. They also reduced the

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<sup>23</sup> Op.cit.no.1

<sup>24</sup> Op.cit.no.4

period of mourning and ritual pollution from thirty to twelve days to correspond with that of the Kshatriya. Discarding their original 'Das' title; many of them adopted Kshatriya surnames like Barma, Burman, Singh and Roy. As the struggle for Kshatriyahood became more insistent Rajbangsi started adopted practices associated with upper caste Hindus like marrying their daughters at an early age and keeping their women behind veil. Instead of availing ritual services from their traditional priests a section of Rajbangsi availed ritual services from the upper caste Hindu Brahmins.

The Kshatriya Samiti further launched a popular reform movement (*shuddhi*) for donning the sacred thread by all the Rajbangsi as an attempt to inculcate Brahmanical values. Since 1912, a number of mass thread wearing ceremonies (*Milan Kshetra*) were organized in different districts where Rajbangsi donned the sacred thread as a mark of Kshatriya. The Kshatriya Samiti made several attempts to sanskritize the style of life and cultural practices of Rajbangsi. The Samiti not only put forward the claim to higher social status but also urged their members to abandon the practices considered degrading by the upper castes such as the practices of informal connubial relations, polygamy, widow-remarriage and drinking of liquor.

In adjunct to above attempts to sanskritize their life ways, the leaders of the Rajbangsi Kshatriya movement felt the need of involvement in formal education and white collar jobs. They became aware that a new prestige system has emerged, in which, education, urban occupations, and a westernized style of life were important ingredients for higher social ranking and mobility. The Samiti however failed to create interest among the poor Rajbangsi on the issue of socio-cultural reforms. The activities of the Samiti became the monopoly of a handful of Rajbangsi literates and its conferences were mostly attended only by the upper section of the community. Nevertheless the Kshatriyazation movement organized by the Kshatriya Samiti was successful in the creation of identity consciousness mainly among the educated and well to do section of the Rajbangsi community.

### **IMPACT OF KSHATRIZATION MOVEMENT ON THE IDENTITY OF RAJBANGSIS**

The Kshatriya Movement was led by a group of Rajbangsi leaders who were the product of political, social and economic changes introduced by the colonial government in the nineteenth century. These Rajbangsi leaders, in their education, profession, and manners were similar to upper caste Hindu. They basically belonged to the landholding class and constituted the elite section of the Rajbangsi community. These ambitious Rajbangsi elites felt strongly than their rural counter parts the odium of caste Hindu society due to their low social origin. The poor Rajbangsi were quite unaffected by the issue involved in Kshatriya movement and the emulative practices remained exclusive to the wealthy-upper section of the Rajbangsi community. Due to their financial inability to adopt upper caste's customs and rites, the poor Rajbangsi continued to follow their old distinctive practices. They also refrained from participating in the *Shuddhi* (purificatory) ceremony. For many of them it was simply beyond their means to perform the costly rituals involved in wearing sacred thread and they preferred to follow their old non-Sanskritic (non-Varna) rites and rituals.<sup>25</sup>

Thus the Kshatriya movement got a class character where poor Rajbangsi were less represented and less concerned to the issues involved. The Rajbangsi - Kshatriya mobility movement on the whole, remained confined to upper echelons of the Rajbangsi community who modelled their behaviour along the styles of life of the upper castes Hindu. The poor, on the other hand, were unable to fully identify themselves with the higher strata of the Rajbangsi society. Consequently on the issue of Kshatriya identity, divergent concerns of the Rajbangsi elites and subalterns came to the fore. The rural poor who constituted the bulk of Rajbangsi peasantry were unable to identify themselves fully with the people of the high strata of their community. Ultimately, observances or non-observances of sanskritized socio-ritual practices led to inter-class differentiation and social distance on the issue of Kshatriyaization within the Rajbangsi community. Differences between the elites and the subalterns continued during the Tebhanga Movement when the Rajbangsi *Adhiars* (share croppers) rose against the

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<sup>25</sup> Op.cit.no.1

Rajbangsi *Jotedar* (landowners) to acquire their 2/3 share of the produce in spite of repeated appeals by the Kshatriya *Samiti*. The Kshatriya movement failed to crystallize a distinct 'social identity' for the Rajbangsi.<sup>26</sup>

The Kshatriya movement was not without its own structural contradictions and tensions. The off-shoot members of the community (*Polias*) who were considered as pseudo Rajbangsi by the leaders of the Kshatriya Movement denied from donning the sacred thread. They later got united and launched campaign against such discrimination. They gave a call to denounce the emulative customs and ritual practices followed by the Kshatriya brethren. In response to such a call, a number of Rajbangsi who donned the sacred thread discarded it. The structural differentiation within the Rajbangsi society became quite apparent. The Community ultimately got segmented into three well defined endogamous sub-groups: the *upabits* (who retained sacred thread), the *pattits* (who donned sacred thread but discarded it later), and the *anupabits* (who did not conform to change and were debarred from wearing sacred thread). There was no commensal relation among these newly emerged sub-groups. Kshatriyaization thus ultimately led to sharp social segmentation within the Rajbangsi community. It failed to play a meaningful role in achieving transformation of Rajbangsi identity as a whole.<sup>27</sup>

The upper caste Hindu was against any upper mobility of the Rajbangsi in terms of social hierarchy. The upper caste Hindu landlords and professionals strongly protested against the demand by the 'Rangpur Bratya Kshatriya Jatir Unnati Vidhayani Sabha' to adopt Bratya Kshatriya as their caste. In fact they put forward this protest to Mr. F.A. Skyne, the then District Magistrate of Rangpur. In spite of their attempt to Kshatriya mobility the Rajbangsi were not treated at par with the upper caste Hindus.

The Movement for 'Kshatriyaization' created much tensions and status-anxiety among the Rajbangsi with no benefits in concrete terms. The Rajbangsi did not receive any official recognition as Kshatriya. In 1911 Census, while the first demand to separate the tribal Koch and the Rajbangsi identity was conceded, the second one i.e. to include the Rajbangsi within the Kshatriya caste was turned

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<sup>26</sup> Op.cit.no.3

<sup>27</sup> Op.cit.no.1

down. All their efforts to get recognized as Kshatriya had ultimately failed except successfully enlisting their name as 'Rajbangsi' in the Census separately from the tribal Koches. Similarly, the princely family of Cooch Behar never encouraged its subjects to demand the same social status which was considered as its exclusive privilege. Thus the attempt to elevate their status while staying within the caste hierarchy failed whereby, the nature of social relationship between the Rajbangsi and the other "higher castes" and the rules specifying this relationship remained more or less unaltered.<sup>28</sup>

### **PROTECTIVE DISCRIMINATION AND CONSEQUENTIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RAJBANGSI SOCIAL IDENTITY**

'Protective discrimination' was a persistent feature of British policy in Bengal. The British for their own colonial interest in India introduced a system of preferential treatment in favour of certain castes and communities. The imperialistic policy of protective discrimination sought to grant special favour in matters of education, employment and constitutional rights, first to the Muslims and then to the 'depressed classes'<sup>29</sup>. It was part of their strategy to curb anti-imperialist movement and to mobilize numerous 'depressed' castes in support of the British rule. Such a policy developed a separate identity among the Depressed Classes, later called the Scheduled Castes, because the ethnic and caste status of the individual was taken into consideration by the British government for extending official patronage. Different castes and communities developed a vested interest in maintaining a separate 'backward' identity. The policy of protective discrimination opened new frontier of social alienation and restructuration in Indian society.

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<sup>28</sup> Op.cit.no.4

<sup>29</sup> The Government of India Act of 1919 constituted the new legal category of social stratum, called 'Depressed Classes', which includes the lower and untouchable castes but also the so-called tribes. In some documents (including the Census of 1931) these groups were also referred 'Exterior Castes'. The Scheduled Castes (SCs) of today were until 1935 called as the Depressed Classes. Op.cit.no.3



The Rajbangsi also realized that a new prestige system had emerged, in which education, white collar occupations were important ingredients for social ranking and mobility. Therefore, they looked at the government for official patronage and in extending them preferential treatment in matters of education, employment and legislators. The Rajbangsi thus got caught in between ritual rank aspirations *via* Kshatriyaization at one point and the prospect of material achievement via Protective discrimination on the other. The social movement of the Rajbangsi which initially began for achieving superior status in the caste hierarchy was thus ultimately reduced to a mere politics for reservation. In due course, that led to certain confusion, contradiction and change in social identity of the Rajbangsi.

The Kshatriya Samiti leaders had reservations about being classified as a Depressed Class because of the stigma of 'untouchability' attached to this particular social category. The Rajbangsi leaders, because of their claimed higher ritual status in the Varna order, were keen on demarcating themselves from 'Bengal Depressed Class Association' which represented the untouchable castes, and organized a separate forum called 'Bangiya Jana Sangh'. But later the Kshatriya Samiti was not in a position to cope with the pitiable socio-economic condition of the Rajbangsi masses.<sup>30</sup> The Samiti leaders, realized that by being included in the new legal category, they be branded as 'backward' or 'low' in the official caste category, but would certainly help in empowering the poor Rajbangsi educationally and occupationally. They conceded that merely attaining a high Varna (Kshatriya) would not help to improve the condition of those poor Rajbangsi who were economically vulnerable, and so they need special protection. Contradictions in the Kshatriya Movement became apparent as the Samiti started praying to the British Government for special favours (protective treatment) in their uncertain position in the caste hierarchy and deplorable economic condition of the Rajbangsi masses.<sup>31</sup> The leaders of the Samiti at this stage were frantically seeking accommodation in the government sponsored institutional framework of protective discrimination. Accordingly, the Kshatriya

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<sup>30</sup> Op.cit.no.9

<sup>31</sup> Op.cit.no.3

Samiti started functioning as a political interest group having no objection to be recognized as a Scheduled Caste for availing preferential treatment.

Thus, addressing a conference of the Kshtriya Samiti held at Jalpaiguri on 18<sup>th</sup> July 1935, F.W. Robertson, the Divisional Commissioner of *Rajshahi* declared that the government had recognized the Rajbangsi as one of the Scheduled Castes, and that it would specially consider them for reservation in government services and also other matters of interest. Ultimately in 1936, the Rajbangsi of Bengal had got their place in the Scheduled Castes in Bengal and thus the Rajbangsi got a new identity as Scheduled Caste. The framers of Indian Constitution also adopted the term Scheduled Castes coined by the British. And after Independence, as per Article 341 of Indian Constitution and orders of 1950 and 1956, the Rajbangsi remained as Scheduled Castes in West Bengal.<sup>32</sup> The Rajbangsi is one of the 16 major Scheduled Castes of West Bengal. According to 2001 Census, the Rajbangsi comprised about 18.4 per cent of total Scheduled Caste population of West Bengal.<sup>33</sup> Thus the immediate effectuating impact of the scheme of protective discrimination was the formation of the Rajbangsi social identity as the Scheduled Caste of West Bengal.

#### **RETRACTION TO THE KOCH- RAJBANGSI IDENTITY**

The Rajbangsi of West Bengal at present are striving for tribal status retracing to their old ethnic affinity with the tribal Koches. The major arguments which have been put forward behind such a demand are; **first**, it has been accepted by Rajbangsi intelligentsia that the Koch-Rajbangsi originally belongs to the Indo-Mongolian tribal stock; **second**, the Koch-Rajbangsi of Assam and Bengal cannot have two separate officially ascribed statuses.<sup>34</sup> While their kindred in West Bengal have been getting, some special benefits as a Scheduled Caste since 1936, the Koch-Rajbangsi in undivided Assam were declared OBC in 1953. They were further categorized as MOBC (More Other Backward Classes) in lower Assam (Goalpara district), while those in upper Assam districts were identified as simple OBC. In Meghalaya they were identified as a Scheduled Tribe, in Tripura as a

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<sup>32</sup> Op.cit.no.9

<sup>33</sup>Op.cit.no.4

<sup>34</sup> Op.cit.no.9

Scheduled Caste, and recently in Bihar as a Backward Class (BC). Thus the offshoots of the same ethnic group achieved different status and identities for administrative purposes.<sup>35</sup> To the Rajbangsi such a differential treatment leads to confusion in their ethnic identity and affects social intercourse between the Rajbangsi living in two adjoining political units. Therefore, the Rajbangsi demand that no such differentiation in fixing statutory identity to the people belonging to the same ethnic stock should be allowed and; **third**, due to their ambiguous social position in the caste hierarchy and officially as ascriptive backward groups, the Koch-Rajbangsi suffer from various discriminations in socio-economic and political spheres. Therefore, a uniform ethnic identity and official status may help them in mitigating many problems from which the Rajbangsi community have been presently suffering.

Consequently the demand for conferring ST status to the Koch-Rajbangsi was mooted in an international conference of the community held at Bhadrapur in Eastern Nepal during 9-11 March, 1996. Delegates from Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Burma, Assam, Bihar and North Bengal participated in this Conference. The Conference was chaired by Sri Purna Narayan Singh, a former MP from India and the sitting President of Koch-Rajbangsi International Committee. It was resolved that for the overall upliftment of the underprivileged Koch-Rajbangsi, they need to be immediately recognized as Scheduled Tribe in India, and also in the neighbouring States where they inhabit in large number. The Conference also urged upon the cultural integration of the Koch-Rajbangsi with the main stream of the society. The matter of recognition of the Koch-Rajbangsi as ST as such has become an important ethno-political issue in recent years adding new dimension to the social dynamics of the Rajbangsi identity.<sup>36</sup>

### **FORMATION OF THE RAJBANGSI SOCIAL IDENTITY AS A NATIONALITY**

Crystallisation of Rajbangsi identity, according to Nandy, became apparent along with hegemonies of Bengali people over the locals. The influx of immigrants from Bangladesh and Bengali Hindus into North Bengal has been on such a large

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<sup>35</sup> Op.cit.no.3

<sup>36</sup> Op.cit.no.9

scale that the local population feels overwhelmed. It is alleged that they are depriving the *desi/edesio* (indigenous people alias Rajbangsi) of political as well as socio-economic development. Effectually the Rajbangsi are resisting the domination of Bengalis for their gradual economic marginalization and the erosion of their cultural and linguistic identity. The Rajbangsi do not want to be a part of the population of West Bengal and prefer to have a state of their own called Kamtapur (the name of an early citadel Koch-Rajbangsi). The demand for the recognition of the Kamtapuri language as a separate official language during the last Census (2001) is clear expression of their deliberate move to declare their separate Kamtapuri nationality. Attempts to reconstruct their past history and revive their culture, language and traditions are indications of their nascent nationality consciousness.<sup>37</sup>

Accordingly the Rajbangsi politics of identity for the last one decade has entered into a new phase having two interrelated strands on basic issues but separate in operational spheres. As a political party, Kamtapur Peoples Party in their political proposals has made some radical departures from the various earlier demands of Rajbangsi social identity. It is not caste and religion determining the communitarian politics any longer. It is now culture and language that shape the politics of difference from the dominant Bengali community as a whole in the region. They reject the term Rajbangsi that carries the old Hindu Kshatriya caste association to adopt another term. They have popularized the word 'Kamata' having charged it with historical and cultural connotations. It indicates the area that Kamata and later kings reined for centuries and where the indigenous people spoke the same language and shared the same culture. The language was called Kamatabehari and the culture simply Kamata by Panchanan Barma. This denomination emphasizes the determination of cultural identity, not caste identity, in terms of a region, language and culture. It is on this ground that they claim Rajbangsi have formed a 'nationality'.<sup>38</sup>

However the claim of the Rajbangsi that they constitute a nation or have a separate nationality has been rejected by the West Bengal Government. The

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<sup>37</sup> Op.cit.no.3

<sup>38</sup> Op.cit.no.8

argument given by the West Bengal Government is that the Rajbangsi are in fact Bengalis who speak a dialect of the Bengali language. Thus the claim for a separate Rajbangsi identity has been in a way ignored and rejected by the West Bengal Government. Accordingly the stir created by the Rajbangsi for acceptance of their demand for a new Rajbangsi identity has been suppressed by the dominant power elite out of the apprehension that it might ultimately legitimize their claim for a separate territory as a sovereign nation state. The Rajbangsi attribute their deprivation to the hegemonic rule by the power elites mainly belonging to the dominant Bengali community, and consider it completely undemocratic and have expressed resentment against it.<sup>39</sup>

### **IDENTITY FORMATION OF THE KOCH RAJBANGSI—AN ERRATIC TRAJECTORY**

If identity politics is ‘about expressing one’s agency and creating new forms of collective agency’, then the Rajbangsi did that by playing on the politics of difference and of identity at the same time. Their caste movement was a negotiation of difference to register an altered identity from the projected view about themselves as Koches. But by virtue of that altered identity what it aspired is to be identified with the high-ups in the Hindu caste hierarchy. But another counterforce queered the pitch for them, so much so that it was engulfed in it, proving thereby the presence of a more compelling imperative in them to act as a community/ethnicity rather than a caste. It was enlisting themselves as scheduled caste and joining the Movement. This inevitable contradiction soon eroded the edge and credibility of the Kshatriya movement.<sup>40</sup> The identity formation of the Koch Rajbangsi can thus be viewed as an erratic trajectory as they demanded Kshatriya status in the regional caste structure but subsequently accepted to be recognised as a Scheduled Caste/OBC that brought them within the purview of preferential treatment at present times.

**To conclude**, the recent move of the Koch-Rajbangsi to demand tribal status is altogether a new phenomenon. It is another manifestation of seeking comfortable accommodation in the institutional framework of protective discrimination. The

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<sup>39</sup> Op.cit.no.3

<sup>40</sup> Op.cit.no.8

path of Kshatriyaization for upward social mobility of the Rajbangsi created much tensions and status-anxiety without many benefits in concrete terms. Afterwards their poor economic condition and desire for power and status led to process of downward mobility through aspiration for reservation benefits. The Rajbangsi leaders identified the backward socio-economic status, which is the prime criterion for reservation, contrary to the realization of Kshatriyaization. So Kshatriyaization and reservation appeared to them antithetical to each other. The changing social identity of the Rajbangsi is therefore an obvious manifestation of their erratic position in the caste hierarchy, poor socio- economic condition, and desire for getting suitable accommodation in the institutional framework of protective discrimination.<sup>41</sup> The transition of the Rajbangsi community can be described as a transition from caste to community or ethnicity or even nationality.<sup>42</sup> The Rajbangsi in different phases of their identity formation had to bear with disparate Government responses. In the initial phase of their identity formation the response of the Government was promotive; later became accommodative in the colonial era, and has now become somewhat repressive.<sup>43</sup> In social identity construction, such a differential treatment has already created considerable confusion with regard to the Rajbangsi identity.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Op.cit.no.9

<sup>42</sup> Op.cit.no.8

<sup>43</sup> Op.cit.no.3

<sup>44</sup> Op.cit.no.9