

CHAPTER - VI

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Identity crisis has become one of the most important issues in the politics of eastern India. Every ethnic group in present time is in a very active mood to preserve their ethnic-based identity. The Koch Rajbanshis are also suffering with such an identity crisis since quite some time and are struggling against it. The feeling of distinct identity has often led to identity politics which becomes very adverse in due course of time leading to assertions and violence. At present times, people fight, confront, negotiate and even re-negotiate concerning their identity. The crisis arises when people face a challenge within and around themselves concerning their identity and in such a situation they attempt to find their own space and recognition in a so called multiple identical world. Since time immemorial social entities have always tried to articulate 'self-identity' by remembering their glorious past or either by demonstrating their present reality which is hiding within and inside them and which might not have been recognized as well as classified by the state or other social institution. This ultimately leads to identity based movements claiming for their self-identity which defined their ancient basis.

The Kshatriya movement was the first popular identity based movement of the Koch Rajbanshi. It started with the beginning of the Census operation in 1882 when the British clubbed Koch and Rajbanshi as the 'same tribe', to which the Rajbanshi elites protested strongly initiating not only a debate on the origin and social status of the Koch Rajbanshi but also a reform movement.

During this period a number of ethnographic surveys were carried out which considered the Rajbanshis as more Hinduized Koch, having Semi-Mongoloid origin. A few on the other hand argued that the Rajbanshi were ethnically linked to the Dravidians. This survey resulted into the clubbing of the Koch and Rajbanshi in the census. But the elite section of the Rajbanshi differed on both these views and claimed themselves to be downtrodden Kshatriyas as very different from the Koch. By stating this they demanded their recognition as a separate category in the census and different from the Koch.

During the period from 1891 to 1915, a number of indigenous Rajbanshi writers wrote extensively in support of their argument and about their transformation from 'Kshatriya' to 'downtrodden Kshatriya'. One of their most popular arguments was that the Rajbanshi were Kshatriyas who were hiding themselves against the rage of Parsurama who had vowed to eradicate all the Kshatriyas from the world. Therefore, apprehending their total abolition they had to hide their Kshatriya identity. In this process they slowly ceased to practice the Kshatriya rituals and traditions and became 'Bratya Kshatriyas' (Kshatriyas degraded by non-observance of the sacraments), thereby losing their Kshatriya identity and status. They also stressed on the term 'Rajbanshi' which itself demonstrated that they were the royal descendants in order to reveal their forgotten past. The Kshatriya Movement made an attempt to convert the Rajbanshis back to the Hindu-Brahmanical fold not just through ceremonial purification like wearing of sacred thread but also through forming of religious societies and social reforms. It was in fact seeking symbolic objectives through the redefinition of status and privilege of the Rajbanshi. It also made a good effort in establishing the Rajbanshi as different or distinct from the Koch. The language of the movement was at par with the dominant Hindu-Brahminical order in Bengali society and the reforms were in accordance with the existing Hindu caste system. Thus, an effort was made by the Rajbanshi elites to reconstruct their history to adjust in the prevailing discussion of that particular period and also revive their forgotten past.

However, in 1926-27, the Kshatriya Samiti of North Bengal joined hands with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar for enlisting the Rajbanshis in 'Scheduled Caste' list, a demand which they achieved in 1933. This initiated a climb-down of the Rajbanshis from Kshatriya identity to Dalit identity creating thereby a new identity crisis for them. Once the Rajbanshis got themselves enlisted as Schedule Caste and became entitled for protection in education, job, electoral politics, the Kshatriya identity of the Rajbanshis apparently began to lose its relevance. Even after getting themselves enlisted into the Scheduled caste list, the Rajbanshis continued with their Kshatriyaization ceremonies but with lesser interest and it remained mere ritual and gradually the movement also fizzled out.

The Kshatriyaization process suffered from a certain identity crisis from the very beginning. A mere identification as Kshatriya could not bring a acceptable social

status for the Rajbanshis in the highly segmented Hindu society. The greater Hindu society never whole – heartedly acknowledged the Rajbanshis as a part of the Kshatriya community. Consequently, the nature of assimilation with the Hindu society and their self – identification as Kshatriya was partial and incomplete. Thus, the process could not bring any cultural nearness between the Rajbanshis and their Bengali Hindu neighbours.

The Kshatriya movement gradually started to lose its significance. But it made a good attempt not only to ascertain higher status of the Rajbanshis but also to find their ‘true identity’. In the process they not only celebrated the sacred thread weaving customs but also recreated a past for themselves through this movement that was reiterated and celebrated in their everyday practices. It also brought a period where they re-documented their history by re-reading and re-interpreting their folk songs, Puranas and Tantras.

However, by the end of the twentieth century a big transformation took place into the Koch Rajbanshi identity movement. By this time the Rajbanshis started demanding not just for mere reforms or means to climb the social ladder but a movement for a separate state on the basis of their identity and identifying themselves not just as Rajbanshi but as Koch Rajbanshi. Today the Koch Rajbanshi are fighting for greater social and political authority on the basis of another past, partly based on colonial documentations and partly on their reconstructed history. Nevertheless, the historical imagination have been sharpened and re-contextualised within existing socio-political system and secular language. According to Oomen ‘new identities are often constructed, while existing identities may mutate or transform, and some might even be rendered obsolete’. It is quite interesting to note that in the beginning of the twentieth century the questions of the Koch Rajbanshi identity centered round their Kshatriya identity and their linkages distinct from the Mongoloid Koches, which is in contradiction to their present claims. Today they prefer to call themselves as Koch Rajbanshi. Their demand centers round the Koch Rajbanshi identity and their claim for a separate homeland ‘Kamata’ or ‘Kamatapur’.

In the study of these two movements we see a conspicuous contradiction, in fact a break that seems to appear between the earlier Kshatriya Movement and the present Kamatapur Movement. Within a period of almost hundred years the Koch

Rajbanshis have taken a turn from their earlier stand of claiming themselves to be distinctly different from the Koches (and be recognized as a separate category) to being ethnically and culturally Koch. To specify from being ‘Rajbanshi Kshatriya’ to ‘Koch Rajbanshi’. This ethnographic and historical reinterpretation of being a Koch is clearly evident from the annual souvenir of the then newly formed Kamtapuri Bhasa Sahitya Parishad (KBSP).

“Seven hundred years ahead of Jesus Christ, the Aryans, the enemies of original inhabitants of India, spread from Punjab in the West to Magadh in the East..... At that time there were only two races in India, the mighty Aryans and the powerful Koches. Today the Rajbanshis are referred as ‘Baha’, ‘Polia’, ‘Adivasi’ in the government and other documents, in same manner the Aryans had renamed Koches – the followers of eternal Indian religion – as ‘Danab’(demons); ‘Kirat’ (Indo-mongoloid people); ‘Mleccha’(unclean); ‘Yavan’ (non-Hindu); ‘Kubach’(profane tongue); ‘Das’ (Servant) etc..... the Kamata civilization was upheld with utmost authority by the heroic kings for thousands of years..... The Kings of Pragjyotishpur, Kamrup, Kamatapur, Cooch Behar ensured peace and prosperity just as in heaven. This was the land of Shiva. This place, Ratnapeeth, where kings of Shivaite Dynasty ruled was the best in the world. Good governance and justice was the religion of the Kshatriya Kings. Over Koch Rajbanshi Kshatriya Kings obeyed this ideology and reigned Indian subcontinent from Burma to Rajasthan and from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari peacefully and competently. Koch Rajbanshi Kshatriya kings fought rigorously to defend the country and people. But their history is no more studied in schools and colleges since 1950s. It is sad that the present generation of Kamata Civilization remains in darkness without any knowledge of their ancestors” (Kamata Chiriti : A Souvenir of Kamatapur Bhasa-Sahitya Parishad, 1999, pp. 6-11) (cited from Rajiv Nandi’s work - Spectacles of Ethnographic and Historical Imaginations: Kamatapur Movement and the Rajbanshi Quest to Rediscover their Past and Selves).

Thus we see a clear departure from the earlier stand made by the Koch Rajbanshi elites. Now they were very keen on ascertaining the fact that the Koch Rajbanshis were not Kshatriya by birth but by their Karma (deed). The Kshatriya Movement is now being subverted by their ethnographic present.

Interestingly the colonial ethnography which was once the centre of protest at the time of the Kshatriya Movement today plays a very important role in establishing the argument for two different versions and interpretations of history and the Koch Rajbanshi Identity both at the beginning and end of the twentieth century. The very colonial ethnography which was once violently criticized and opposed by Rajbanshis today helps them to establish their Mongoloid origin and their link with the Koch, culturally, ethnically and historically.

Thus within a period of 100 years, the Koch Rajbanshi historicity has clearly taken a different, shape. The contradictions and discontinuities between the two versions are no doubt wide and distinct. As a result, their identity has been re-configured from Kshatriya to Koch in an interesting manner. Not only this, the reference points have also been changed from the Puranas and Tantras to colonial administration ethnography. It is thus understood that the shift has been brought over due to the changed social and political context of present day India. Dalit politics has to a large extent changed the overall political scenario and social compositions.

It is also quite interesting to observe the pride and joy amongst the present Koch Rajbanshis in glorifying their ancestors, the Koch Empire, who were once the antagonist of the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Movement. While on the other side, during the Kshatriya Movement almost all the Koch of North Bengal changed their identity to Rajbanshi Kshatriya, leaving behind only a handful of Koch around the Koch Royal Family. But with the beginning of the Kamatapur movement this identity has been brought back again and along with it the Royal family also came back significantly in popular imagination. In the whole process the Koch identity plays a very interesting role in the entire scope of Koch Rajbanshi identity politics. During the Kshatriya movement they were marginalized but now they have been re-integrated in the redefined Koch-Rajbanshi identity.

A closer look into the two social movements of the Koch Rajbanshi reveals a shift but the search for identity was at its core. The Kshatriya movement was a reformist cultural movement which gradually gave way to a transforming political movement in post- Independent India. The shift of identity from 'Rajbanshi Kshatriya' to 'Koch Rajbanshi' is expressed through a more powerful political action ruptured with a vague historicity and a contradictory strategic dilemma.

Consequently, the Koch Rajbanshi social movements have been affected with strange identity crisis.

The interpretations made by the Koch Rajbanshi of their history and identity are a mixer of colonial ethnography on one hand and Koch Rajbanshi mythographies on the other. Their historical awareness and imaginations is complex in nature which is at times ruptured, contested, and fluid. In the process of forming their identity they have reconstructed an ancient history of the Koch Rajbanshis that is simply a celebration of history through making of histories, both real and imagined.

The study of the Kamatapur Movement reveals that the Koch Rajbanshis are trying to get recognition of their differences with the mainstream Bengali and Assamese society which have led them to social, political and economic degradation. Today they are speaking in different forms to get recognized and to preserve their own identity.

Off late, the Kamatapur movement is infected with a number of problems. First and foremost the leaders spearheading the movement are engaged in a tussle of power which is leading to a number of frictions and factions amongst them. Because of these differences the Kamatapur movement is at times weakened. Almost all the organizations and associations spearheading the movement have been divided into factions. For example, the Kamatapur People's Party has been divided and merged a number of times between Atul Roy and Nikhil Roy's party. At present it is again in a divided state. The Greater Cooch Behar People's Association has also been divided with the formation of the Greater Cooch Behar Democratic Association. The Assam based organization All Koch Rajbanshi Students' Union has also been divided with one faction led by Biswajit Ray and another by Hiteswar Barman. There was also a time when the militant organization namely Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) was also divided with the formation of the Koch Rajbongshi Liberation Organisation (KRLO). But the latter one has in due course of time become more or less defunct.

This division amongst the organizations and associations are largely confusing the masses. The leaders are always in a mood for tussle of power and position and in the whole process they even go to the extent of undermining the movement. At times

they become so active in confronting each other and forming alliances that the movement comes to its lowest ebb.

The demands of the various associations and organizations are also not clear cut. Keeping apart the demand for Kamatapur all the other demands vary in one way or the other. The vision of a separate state of Kamatapur also has got some differences amongst them. While the KLO demands for a sovereign Kamatapur the rest of the organizations had demanded just autonomy in the form of a separate state in the Indian Constitution.

Again the organizations and associations vary on the number of districts of both Assam and North Bengal to be included in the proposed state of Kamatapur. The leaders are still vacillating on the number of districts to be included in the proposed state. While some organizations speak of the inclusion of sixteen districts of Assam, some sticks to fourteen and some to eleven districts of Assam. The Greater Cooch Democratic Association is also not clear about its inclusion of Assam in the proposed state as their demand is Greater Cooch Behar. Thus, their demands are overlapping each other. Some of them even have gone to the extent of including the Purnea district of Bihar also. Moreover, the regions demanded in the Kamatapur movement are clashing with that of the Bodoland and the Gorkhaland. Thus we see that the Kamatapur movement has got a number of inherent flaws and how far it can be a reality will depend upon the future developments.

On the other side the Dheyans in Cachar who are drawn into the orbit of their neighbouring communities - Manipuris and Bengalis are also presently trying to shake themselves off from the influences of these communities. A brief study of their socio-cultural life shows how initially they were under the cultural influence of these communities and their present effort of preserving their identity by maintaining their culture and tradition.

The Dheyans in Cachar are also becoming very conscious of their identity. Earlier they were happy with their simple life in corroboration with their neighbouring communities. But in modern time with the spread of education, means of communication and better standard of living they are striving towards maintaining their own identity. However, these efforts of the Dheyans are just in the mere forms of preserving their tradition and culture so that it doesn't completely get absorbed with

other dominant culture of the region. The Dheyans were neither a part of the Kshatriya movement of the early 19th Century (It is even doubtful if they were aware of it at that point of time) nor are they a part of the present Kamatapur movement although they fully sympathize with it.

Apart from this there is also no sign of any kind of social movements or any massive demand from them at present. This is because the growth of identity consciousness amongst them is in a very nascent stage. Today they are also aware of the demand of the Scheduled Tribe status made by their counterparts in the Brahmaputra Valley and they support it whole heartedly with the hope that they would be benefitted through it. But apart from just supporting it they don't play any active role in the movement. It is just in the form of moral support. This support however is an indicator of their feeling of belongingness to their mainland.

They were earlier known as Dheyans and even at present they are referred to as Dheyans by the other community members. They also used the term 'Dheyans' as their surnames but when their counterparts in Bengal started emphasizing the term 'Rajbanshi' and the privileges attached with the term 'Rajbanshi', they have completely abandoned the usage of the term 'Dheyans' as their surnames in place of 'Rajbanshi'. At present, they prefer to be referred to as Rajbanshi or Koch Rajbanshi rather than Dheyans. This shift can be seen as their initial attempt to maintain their identity in a region where they are very few in number and away from their mainland.

In their socio-cultural life also, the Dheyans are trying to stick to their traditional system which at one point of time was on the verge of dissolving due to their complete dependency on the Brahmins of other communities for the performance of their rites and rituals coupled with their isolation from their mainland. The Dheyans in Cachar are mono-caste. They do not have their own Brahmins. Therefore they have to either depend on the Manipuri or Bengali Brahmins for performance of their rites and rituals. Because of the involvement of these Brahmins into their social life, the Manipuri and Bengali forms of social life were introduced into the Dheyans society and it gradually began to gain ground in their society.

A number of social usages were introduced into the Dheyans society by these Brahmins. With the gradual passage of time the Brahmins began to perform the rites and rituals as per their convenience and as per the existing norms of their own

community, slowly abandoning the traditional practices of the Dheyans. At the same time, the Dheyans in the absence of their religious guide (i.e. the Brahmins) readily accepted the reforms introduced by them. The influence of these Brahmins gradually increased with the phase of time and their impact was felt on every aspect of the life of the Dheyans. Their language, food, dress, habitat, ornaments etc were largely influenced due to the presence of these Brahmins in the activities of their social life and their settlement in the vicinity of these two communities. However in most of these villages the influence of the Manipuri Brahmins is more. Out of the total 9 Dheyan villages 5 of them are under the swaddle of the Manipuri Brahmins, two under both Manipuri and Bengali Brahmin and two under the Bengali Brahmins only. Therefore the influence of the Manipuris is felt more on this community. The rituals starting right from the birth till the death also bears a stamp of both the Manipuri and Bengali culture. But in spite of all these cultural dominance on the Dheyans for such a long period of time, they have surprisingly been able to maintain their own distinct identity without completely merging themselves with the dominant cultures in Cachar. Rather they are incorporating only those ingredients which they require from them without completely absorbing themselves into it. There is no doubt that initially the influence of these communities went to such an extent that even in their marriages they used to dress like a Manipuri bride wearing the Manipuri traditional dresses and ornament and the kirtans in all the rituals were sung by the Manipuri kirtan party. But at present they have abandoned all these in favour of their own. This has been facilitated by the modern technology, modern education and improved means of communication almost everywhere even into the remote Dheyan villages. Earlier due to poor communication and transportation system and poor financial condition it was very difficult for them to sustain their culture because being far away from their mainland they could not procure their traditional dress and ornaments and other necessity from their mainland. But at present they are able to re – establish their relations with their mainland and thereby they are gradually abandoning all what they feel are alien to their culture. Here we can take another example of the forms of recreational activities which were earlier performed under the guidance of the Manipuri priest. Because of the introductions of all the Manipuri forms of Bhajans and Kirtans, Sankirtans, Rasleela, Gauda Leela, Khubak Ishei etc., these activities were performed with great pomp and show in the Dheyan society. When such an event used to take place the Manipuris of the neighbouring locality also used to visit

and often take part in it and vice versa. But at recent times, this practice has been abandoned completely in the Dheyman villages. At present time, they are sticking to either the Manipuri or Bengali Brahmins out of necessity. Otherwise they have gradually started restricting the practices which are not within their socio-cultural purview. Their dependencies on the Brahmins have also reduced a lot. At present except for a few occasions like marriage, death, birth and the Rath Yatra, these Brahmins are not required in the Dheyman society. In these rituals also the Brahmins solely do not perform the rituals rather they are assisted by a Dheyman who has been appointed by his fellow being. The Brahmins are also not present in all the series of event pertaining to birth, death and marriage. The other rituals are performed by the Dheyman themselves or by the help of the Gyati. The evolution of the role of the Gyati can also be seen as a challenge to the existence of the Brahmins. Because there are certain rituals where the presence of the Gyati is inevitable and without whom the rituals cannot be carried out. But in case a Brahmin is not available, they can carry out the event with the help of the Gyati. Therefore it would not be very surprising if in the near future, the Gyati supersedes the Brahmins.

Thus, we see that the Dheyman in present times are getting very conscious of their identity and are taking active role to preserve the same. The aged and the youth all are very enthusiastic to preserve their heritage which was planted by Chilarai way back in the 16th century. Today they sing and dance in praise of him and consider him to be their real hero. A number of folktales demonstrating Chilarai's courage are also depicted in these tales. Today they are very proud to be known as Koch-Rajbanshi. A number of meetings, cultural programmes and workshops are organized at the village level also, so that even the ignorant masses can be aware of their glorious past and contribute in their little way in preserving their identity. The children are also taught about Chilarai and his heroism since childhood in the form of folktales and it is passed down through generations. The Chilarai Diwas is observed religiously every year and songs and dances of the Koch Rajbanshi displaying their rich culture is performed. Thus, we see that the Dheyman in Cachar have made a very good effort of preserving their identity even in a place where they are lesser in number, far away from their homeland with no regular contact with their mainland and with the cultural dominance of powerful communities of the region.