

THE CULTURAL CHANGE OF RAJBANSHIS OF NORTH BENGAL**PROF.KALAM
NARREN****Assistant Professor
Dept. of History
Dinabandhu Andrews College
Garia, Kolkata**

Rajbanshis are the indigenous ethnic group in North Bengal (Darjeeling, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur, Malda and Murshidabad districts) and constituted around 12.99 percent of the total population of North Bengal during 2001, which marginally increased to 13.48 percent during 2011 (table 1). So 'the Rajbanshis are the dominating section of the local Hindu population in North Bengal, but the mystery is shrouded regarding their origin. The basic debate arises regarding their connection with Koches. Whatever debate exists regarding their connection with Koches, the fact is that they were the original inhabitants in North Bengal' (Basu, 2003; Bhawal, 2015). There is long debate regarding origin of Rajbanshi population: will Rajbanshi population connected with Koch tribe? Who gave the name Rajbanshi? This debate arises since first census report in 1872, when the British Government treated Rajbanshi population as Koch on the basis of various studies and as there is similarity in physical appearance between Koches and Rajbanshi population. The Rajbanshi intellectuals raised voice against such inclusion: Rajbanshi population as Koches in the first census report. They argued that Rajbanshi population are not connected with Koch tribe and their status is higher than Koch tribe. Rajbanshi population belong to Kshatriya varna. Their protest is successful and in subsequent census report, Rajbanshi and Koches are treated as separately.

Barman (1401, Bangabda) claimed in his book that Rajbanshi community belong to the Kshatriya varna and said that Rajbanshi community existed even during the Vedic periods. He argued that Rajbanshi community has no connection with Koch who were inferior to Rajbanshi community and consumed 'impure' food and spoke a 'dirty' language. The presumed inferiority of Koch led them to assert that Rajbanshi are superior and distinct from Koch identity (Roy, 2022). According to legend, it is said that once Parashuram campaigned Kshatriya genocide to take revenge of his father's death by the sons of a Kshatriya king named Sahararjuna (Braua, 2008; Halder, 2017). To save from Parashuram's Kshatriya genocide, the Kshatriyas took shelter into the 'Kuch' (lap) of the goddess Kamakhya. Since that time, they started to recognize themselves as 'Koch-Rajbanshi' instead of Kshatriya (Choudhary, 2011; Halder, 2017). Then they started to reside permanently in the Koch regions, married their ladies and become Koch. But Brahmanas encouraged them to patronage Hindu deities i. e. Siva, Durga, Vishnu and Sanskrit learning. Finally, they adopted Aryan culture; changed their tribal identity and assumed the appellation 'Rajbanshi' (Barpujari, Ed 2007; Halder, 2017) and since that time they are known as 'Rajbanshi'. Historian also of the opinion that they are called 'Koch' because they have come from the valley of 'Kochi' river and with the increasing growth rate of population, some of them migrated to the valley of Mechi river and came to known as 'Mech' (Devbarman, 2006; Halder, 2017).

Grierson (1927) argued 'that Koch, Mech and Bara or bodo all belong to the same tribe or at most different steps of the same tribe. There is little differences between the original Koch and Bodos.. The Koches are originally Hinduized Bodos who have

adopted Hinduism by giving up their ancestral religion and ancestral Bodo language for Bengali or Assamese. Rajbanshis are the Hinduized Koches who are Hinduized Bodos (Nathan, 1997, Roy, 2022).

Hunter (1974) also argued that 'Rajbanshis are the converted Hinduized Koch who established powerful Koch kingdom by the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century. Koch King Viswa Singha introduced Brahminism during his reign and Koches followed the Brahminism by abandoning their tribal practices. After their adoption of Hinduism they took the name *Rajbanshi* that means *Royal Race*' by abandoning the name *Koch* (Blochman, 1872; Nath, 1989; Roy, 2022). It is noted that Biswa Singha used the name of Rajbanshi after taking Hinduism from Koch. If it is true, there is happened the shift of status of Rajbanshis from tribe to caste. So Rajbanshi population gradually gave up their tribal culture and adopted the culture of Hinduism.

The objectives of this study are to discuss the traditional culture of Rajbanshi Population in North Bengal and impact of immigrant people's culture on Rajbanshi population of North Bengal. This paper is based on existing literature, reports etc. and used census reports of 2001 and 2011.

Rajbanshi and Koch Population in North Bengal

Before going to discussion on cultural aspects of Rajbanshi population, there is need to discuss about the percentage of Koch and Rajbanshi population in northern districts of West Bengal. The Rajbanshi people even now remains dominant group in North Bengal as it constituted around 13 percent of the total population in North Bengal during 2011. The Rajbanshi population is highly concentrated in two districts: Cooch Behar district (37.72 percent) and Jalpaiguri district (23.82 percent) during 2011. The shares of two districts constituted around 61.54 percent of the total Rajbanshi population in North Bengal during 2011. Around 32 percent of the total Rajbanshi population of North Bengal are the inhabitant of two districts: Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur during 2011. The share of Koch population in North Bengal is very negligible (only .05 percent during 2011). The Koch population is mainly concentrated in two districts: Dakshin Dinajpur and Malda in North Bengal during 2011. This indicates that Koch population in these two districts even not changed their status i. e. from Koch to Rajbanshi.

Table 1

Distribution of Rajbanshi and Koch Population in North Bengal

Districts	2001		2011	
	Koch	Rajbanshi	Koch	Rajbanshi
Darjeeling	.001	8.07	.0007	8.85
Jalpaiguri	.008	23.86	.0048	23.82
Cooch Behar	.050	39.24	.0370	37.72
Uttar Dinajpur	.069	16.59	.0445	16.56
Dakshin Dinajpur	.230	14.97	.069	15.57

Malda	.159	4.38	.1985	4.00
Murshidabad	.003	1.48	.0034	1.27
Total	.059	13.48	.0490	12.99

Source: Census Reports 2001 & 2011

Traditional Culture of Rajbanshi Population in North Bengal

Historical record shows that Rajbanshi population is originated from Koch tribe and adopted Hindu culture, rituals to improve their status. So, there is found the influence of tribal culture i. e. non-aryan culture on the culture of Rajbanshi population in North Bengal. Many Indian tribal communities have profound link with nature and land. Some tribal communities engaged in hunting, gathering and collecting fruits from forests. Some tribes in hill region adopted jhum cultivation for their livelihood. Some tribal community depends on agriculture. Rajbashis mostly live in rural areas in North Bengal and their main occupation is agriculture. The knowledge about agriculture passes from previous generation to next generation. Previously the large part of agricultural land in North Bengal was under some Rajbanshi population and good numbers of Rajbanshis were jotedars, Jamindars and Mahajan in North Bengal. Different studies show that till the end of the nineteenth century, Rajbanshi families controlled around 53 percent of the jotes (land) in North Bengal, and thereby remained a powerful force among rural elites (Basistha, 2013). But after coming into power in 1977, the left front Government adopted the land reforms programmes. i. e. imposition on ceiling on agricultural holding, acquisition of land, distribution of surplus land among marginal farmers and landless labourers, recording the names of share croppers etc. The left front Government acquired the land from jotedars and zamindars and distributed it among small and marginal farmers, landless labourers in North Bengal. In this ways, agricultural land in North Bengal passes from Rajbanshi population to other communities of North Bengal.

The occupation of tribal people were generally hunting and gathering, animal herding, shifting cultivation and settled agriculture. So the pattern of livelihood was the main factor that determines their origin (Betelille, 1986; Roy, 2022). During the process of development, most of the tribal groups lost or left their primitive traits like hunting, animal herding and became settled agriculturalists with tribal and caste characteristics (Roy, 2022). Rajbanshi people had also hunting culture and they celebrated hunting festival on the last day of Chaitra (mid-April) and generally adult male members of Rajbanshi community participated in the hunting festival. Due to modernization and urbanization, this hunting festival celebration are rarely found among Rajbanshi population in North Bengal. The summer hunting ritual, requiring obligatory participation of adult males, is characteristic of all tribals of Assam, Bengal, Chhatrishgarh, Jharkhand and Orissa (Deb, 2015).

Customs and Rituals

The festivals, rituals and ceremonies of Indian tribal communities are deeply connected with their religious beliefs and nature. Various historian and social scientists argued that Rajbanshis were actually Hinduised Koches, an Indo - Mongoloid tribes. Even after adoption of Hinduism, they worshiped various non-Aryan deities like Bisto Thakur named as Jalthakur that worshiped in the month of

Bhadra (August-Sept.) as a deity of water. Besides, there were Brohma Thakur that worshiped as a deity of agni or fire, Paban Thakur that worshiped as a deity of air, Mahakal Thakur, Gram Thakur etc. Rajbanshi community performed different rituals since ancient times. When rain is not available during rainy season, Rajbanshi women arranged occasion of 'Banger Biyea' (frogs' marriage) for rain. There is belief among Rajbanshi community that when frogs croak, rain starts falling. Another occasion that was performed by Rajbanshi community was known as 'Hudum Khela' for rain during rainy season but now rarely celebrated in the rural areas among Rajbanshis. In this social event, women would go door to door in the dark of night being naked unfolding hair warning the house's male members either they would leave the house or they would stay in the room by shutting the door. By creating the environment of panic, the naked women entered the house and dance together and sang songs at the courtyard for falling rain (Bhawal, 2015). Hunter (1974) stated that the singular debris of old prejudice is the worshiping of the God Hudum Deo which is celebrated by village women who assembled together in some distant and solitary place at night, male members were not allowed to be present at the rites. A plantain or young bamboo is stuck in the ground by women who threw off their garments, dance round the mystic tree, singing old songs and charms. This rite is celebrated by village women for welcoming rain when the crops are suffering from drought' (Bhawal, 2015).

Rajbanshi community worships the nature like tree, river etc. The river goddess Tista Bari, and the forest deities saleswari are worshiped by Rajbanshi (Sanyal, 1965; Deb, 2015). They worship Saleswari as Sal Gram deity. As other Hindu community not worshipped these deities in these regions, they seem to be characteristically inherited from their earlier tribal culture (Deb, 2015). Another feature of Rajbanshi culture is the worshiping of yellow bamboo (*Bambusa vulgaris* var. *straiata*) (Deb, 2015). Sanyal (1965) in his monograph on the Rajbanshi has, however, mentioned the worshiping of a bamboo pole as the household deity. The yellow bamboo is worshipped as a deity, and its grove is held scared as the abode of the village god (Gram Deo), which is identified with Shiva (Deb, 2015). Two types of sacred bamboo groves are grown in the hamlet of Rajbanshis. At household level, a small bamboo clump is grown in the hamlet of Rajbanshis, where an earthen lamp is enlightened in every evening. At the community level, a bigger grove is grown at the outskirts of hamlet, where village deity Gram Deo is believed to reside (Deb, 2015). This cultural practice of indigenous Rajbanshi community reveals their profound link with the nature and reverential attitude toward nature.

A sacred Grove Festival was organised by Indira Gandhi Rastriya Manav Sangrahalay on its campus in Bhopal in January, 2000 where indigenous people from 11 states of India gathered and planted trees to generate a live replica of sacred groves from respected states of origin. In September, 1999 a few bamboo suckers were collected from Lataguri village of Jalpaiguri district and transplanted these on IGRMS campus prior to the festival as representative from West Bengal to create the simulation of the Rajbanshi sacred grove (Deb, 2015). The main purpose of the trans-creation of Sacred Groves was to generate consciousness about the diversity, typology and the ecological and cultural importance of the institution (Malhotra, et.al, 2007; Deb, 2015)

Dance and Songs

Indian tribes have also a rich tradition of dance, music and songs. For example,

Santhal tribes in West Bengal performs Santhal dance during their festivals and ceremonies. Rajbanshi community has also performed folk dances based on different occasions like Jakoi dance for celebrating fishing activities during rainy season, Gowalini dance for celebrating harvesting activities of agriculture, Hudum dance to bring down rain etc. (Barman et. al. 2023). But these dances are rarely performed by Rajbanshi population as their social status has been improved in the society due to spread of education, urbanization etc. The Rajbanshi people has also rich tradition in song known as Bhawaiya song that was sung by villagers, that spontaneously evoked the emotions of soul and it was sung in different pujas purbans, marriage ceremonies and various cultural and family rituals. The Bhawaiya song is the folk song that is associated with day-to-day life of the Rajbanshi society. 'Dotara' is the main instrument of Bhawaiya song. The Bhawaiya song is the song of heart, the song of the soul and the song of the soil of North Bengal people and North-East India. This song is associated with peoples love – sorrow – pain – separation between men and women of this region, also matches the image of social environment and socio-economic conditions of North Bengal (Adhikary, 2023).

Bhawaiya song has prfound link with nature and it reflects the complete picture of forest, mountains, tea gardens, rivers, fruits etc. of North Bengal. It expresses the life styles of the poorest people of the village society like Garial (cow cart driver), Mahut (one who oversees elephants) Mahishal (one who oversees buffalos) etc and love of women for them. It also expresses the terrible situation of village people due soil erosion and floods of rivers: Teesta, Torsa, Gadadhar, Dharla etc. Bhawaiya song is now increasingly popular among different section of population of the society in North Bengal and outside. State Bhawaiya festival, Tista-ganga festival is being observed every year since nineties till today with Government funding (Adhikary, 2023). Recently Gita Roy Barman, Matha Bhanga, Cooch Behar received the 4th highest civilian award 'Padma Shri' in Bhawaiya folk song. Rajbanshi community also proved their supremacy in playing folk stringed musical instrument – 'Sarinda'. The 'Sarinda' player Sri Mangla Kanti Roy, in Jalpaiguri district received the 4th highest civilian award 'Padma Shri' in 2023. These are the remarkable achievements in cultural aspect of Rajbanshi community and Rajbanshi people feel proud for these achievements.

Impact of Immigrant People's Culture on Rajbanshis

Rajbanshis, Koches, Mechs, Ravas, Todos and other local ethnic groups originally inhabited in North Bengal but since mid-19th century, the upper caste Hindu Bengalis steady immigrated in North Bengal because of the easy availabilty of land, scope of business, Government job opportunities (due to inability of local people to compete with them) and the allurements of the tea gardens that generated scope of getting jobs for both the 'babus' and labourers (Basu, 1995). Gradually, the immigrant higher caste people became the most dominant group in local society, economy and politics and did not show any respect to way of life of Rajbanshis. The immigrant upper caste people behaved in arrogant way with the local Rajbanshis and treated them as backward, uncultured and even antyaja (Basu, 1995). The Rajbanshis had no right to go the places of worship on the occasion of any public celebration of pujas or to go the kitchen in the upper caste households. Even the upper caste people did not accept water from them (Basu, 1995). Upendra Nath Banrman mentioned strange incident regading the personal life of Panchanan Barman,- one day, , the lawyer Panchanan

Barma wore the cap of his high caste colleague by mistake to go the court room. After coming back, by realising his mistake, he returned the cap back to his high caste colleague who angrily through it away (Basu, 1995).

Now with the spread of education among Rajabnshis, people of Rajbanshi are gradually leaving their tribal culture and adopted modern culture. They are also gaining importance in the society and concepts of immigrant's people regarding Rajbanshis in the North Bengal are also changing and their social status has gradually been improved over the periods. Due to modernization, westerization and regular association of new generation of Rajbanshi people with immigrant people, the culture of Rajbanshi community is facing different challenges and question arises: will the traditional culture of Rajbanshi survive in future? Many tribal groups left their religion, languages, culture, and traditional practices, and tried to elevate to the caste hierarchy to improve their social status (Roy, 2022). Rajbanshi community also elevates their social status by leaving their traditional customs and rituals. There is found changes in the traditional marriage system of Rajbanshis in North Bengal. The marriage system of Rajbanshis in North Bengal is governed by Brahmanical customs. In the traditional marriage system of Rajbanshis in North Bengal, one 'Mittar' or friend is to be choosen during the time of marriage, who remains as friend or relative of their family for the entire life. One more traditional custom is found during the time marriage that a person who poured water on the head of bride and bride-groom treated him / her as their parent called 'Pani-Chitta-Baap' and 'Pani-Chitta-Mao'. But at present, these rituals are rarely found and the spread of women education, urbanization etc. brought about major changes of marriage system of Rajbanshis and adopted modern marriage system. The young generations of Rajbanshis iin North Bengal are also celebrating their birth day, marriage anniversary day, Jamai swasty etc.

Conclusion

Over the periods, Rajbanshi community elevates their social position through upliftment from tribal status to caste hierarchy. Gradually they left their tribal culture and adopted culture of Hinduism. On the basis of legend, Rajbanshi intellectuals claimed that they belong Kshatriya Varna and their social status is after Brahmin in the society and have no relation with Koch tribe. In the Vedic literature it is mentioned that their forefathers originally belong to Kshatriya Varna, but to escape from Parashuram's Kshatriya genocide, they started to live with Koch tribe and married Koch women, and adopted Koch culture. They lost their Kshatriya identity. Due to influence of Brahmanism, they again adopted Hinduism and accepted the name of Rajbanshi who bear both tribal and caste culture. They tried to improve their social status by leaving their tribal culture and by adopting Hindu culture.

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