

Different Phases of the Kshatriyaisation Movement of the Rajbansi Communities in North Bengal (1891-1935)

Bipul Mandal¹

¹Bipul Mandal
Assistant Professor & Head
Department of History
Kaliyaganj College
Kaliyaganj, Uttar Dinajpur, WB
Email: bipulmandalklg@gmail.com

***Abstract:** Social mobility is defined as a transition of individuals or groups from one position in the social hierarchy to another. However, according to Sociologist Andre Beteille mobility in a closed and stratified caste system is difficult. M. N. Srinivas, however, suggests that in such a situation an alternate method like Sanskritization are evolved to move up socially, albeit such method affects only the cultural aspects and not the structural aspects. Hiteshranjan Sanyal and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay have made a rational objective analysis of how dissident groups of castes of lower strata, such as the Rajbansis, Namasudras, Sadgops, Tilis etc. raised their status in the caste hierarchy and climbed up to the respectable nabasakha rank. Social mobility was a common phenomenon in colonial India. The socio-religious reform movement or Kshatriyasation movement of the Rajbansis may be divided into three phases or period. The first period was from 1891 to 1901, the second period from 1901 to 1918, the third period from 1919 to 1935 and after.*

***Keywords:** Brahmanical Domination, Census, Kshatriyaisation, Nabasakha, Sanskritization.*

Date of Submission: 13-12-2021

Date of Acceptance: 15-01-2021

Different Phases of the Kshatriyaisation Movement of the Rajbansi Communities in North Bengal(1891-1935)

Introduction

On the question of social reforms the colonial government started intensive study about the caste society of India. The result was the first census of 1872 which brought about an unprecedented response on the part of the Indians to place their respective castes, according to the traditional order in a recognized and prestigious stratum of the society.¹ After the publication of the first census report in 1872 the people belonged to various lower caste category of south and western India launched a vehement agitation against Brahmanical domination in the society and demanded the colonial government's intervention to change this social anomaly. The Census of 1872 actually flamed the fire of anti-caste movement in south and western India as it (census) had disclosed the picture of social status of various lower-castes existed in Indian society. So, these people burst against the age long privileged caste-group and demanded their own respective caste protection and opportunities of all kinds. The anti-caste movement of south and western India had marked its influence upon the society of south Bengal in the first phase. The intermediary and lower castes people of south Bengal initiated a similar movement against the Brahmanical oppression, the anti-caste movement immediately took the shape of a caste - solidarity movement with the demand of higher social status, which desired recognition from the colonial Government.² It is interesting to note that most of the lower and intermediary caste groups of Bengal demanded recognition of their Kshatriya status. Therefore the demand for Kshatriya status became the most significant feature of the nineteenth century caste movement. The anti-caste movement of South Bengal then influenced to start a similar movement in Northern Bengal. In this region as mentioned earlier the most predominant caste group was Rajbansis though other minor caste group people were also in existent. The Rajbansis had received inspiration from the movement of southern Bengal provoked by census report in 1891. Another reason for their resentment was that they were described as Koch in the report that they considered as inferior to them. The census operations had created a notion among the members of various lower and intermediary castes that if they could have their names listed in the census reports in the category of twice born, their social rank would automatically be raised and recognized by the indigenous society. So this kind of false notion of legitimacy that census created in

Different Phases of the Kshatriyaisation Movement of the Rajbansi Communities in North Bengal(1891-1935)

local society led a sudden growth of caste association and caste movements. This affected the Rajbansis as well.³

The socio-religious reform movement or Kshatriyaisation movement of the Rajbansis may be divided into three phases or period. The first period was from 1891 to 1901, the second period from 1901 to 1918, the third period from 1919 to 1935 and after.

The First Phase (1891-1901)

The first period was the formative stage of the movement. At this stage simple protest in the form of sending applications were made to the superintendent of census operation for in the census of 1891 the Rajbansis were identified and recorded as Koch.⁴ The leaders of the movement contended that the Koches were separate from the Rajbansis; and there was no reason of amalgamating the two communities together.⁵

Such communal contentions were perhaps, placed forward with the apprehension that the Koches had been looked down upon by the *Bhadralok* Bengalis and the way out of that ignominy was to establish the claim to higher caste origin by adopting the name of 'Rajbansi'. The leaders, to lead the movement at this stage were Haramohan Roy of Rangpur, Raj Chandra Sarkar of Kaliyaganj, Nabin Chandra Sarkar of Charbari and Haramohan Ray (Khajanchi), the Zamindar of Shyampukur etc. Since they demanded to be named 'Rajbansi' and *Bratya-Kshatriya*,⁶ it was ultimately accepted by the superintendent of census operation though it was revealed afterwards that the demand of 'Bratya-Kshatriyahood' was actually not recorded and published. The non-acceptance of the latter part of the demand gave birth to the second stage of the movement to be led by the Rajbansi elite of that time.

The circular of the census authority barred the people of the community to register their caste as Kshatriya. This created resentment among these people and in many places in Rangpur, Dinajpur, and other part of North Bengal, they refused to disclose their names to the census officials and field workers. Many untoward incidents took place, Rangpur became the centre of Kshatriya movement.⁷ Under Sri Haramohan Ray Khajanchi, a local Zaminder of Shyampur (Rangpur), a movement against the census authority had been started and claimed

Different Phases of the Kshatriyaisation Movement of the Rajbansi Communities in North Bengal(1891-1935)

that the Rajbansi are Kshatriya by caste. ⁸ He had established an association named '*Rangpur Bratya Kshatriya Jatir Unnati Bidhayani Sabha*' for improvement of his community.⁹

Sri Haramohan Ray Khajanchi had been working to awake the Rajbansi 'Kshatriyas' urging them to give up their inertia and exert their right and influence as they used to do in the past. He realized that to give spontaneity to the movement it was necessary to educate the Rajbansi that will help to know their glory past, history, society, and tradition .To fulfil his aim he began to collect history, proverbs, traditions, culture heritage of the Kshatriyas. He also met many Brahmins Pandits, Naiyayikas, Sastrakars of Rangpur and Kamrupa, and other elite section of the Hindu society in Rangpur. To his credit, he was successful in getting recognition of his caste from the Pandit Samaj of Rangpur and Kamrupa and a section of the elite group in Rangpur.¹⁰ In his two books '*Vratya Mochan Paddhati*' and '*Kshatriya Uponayan Byavastha*' he published the opinions of the Pandits of Mithila, Kamarupa and Bengal stating that Rajbansis were Kshatriyas and had become 'Bratya' due to the non-observance of certain Vedic rites but can regain their 'Kshatriyas' position . On 10th February 1891, a protest letter was lodge with the district magistrate F. A. Skyne urging him to recognize Rajbansis as a separate caste from the Koch and allow them to enrol as Kshatriyas in this census.¹¹ The latter referred the matter to the local 'Pandits' for this opinion. On their behalf Mahamohopadhyay Pandit Yadaveswara Tarkaratna gave the verdict that the manner and customs of the Rajbansis were superior to those of the Koches. He further suggests that they practiced ritual and ceremonies, which were similar to those of the upper caste Hindus. He also drew references from the 'Shastras' and finally concluded that the Rajbansis of North Bengal were Kshatriyas. They should be recognized as '*Bratya Kshatriyas*' not '*Bhanga Kshatriyas*'.¹² The District Magistrate accepted the opinion of the Pandit Yadaveswara Tarkaratna on behalf of the 'Dharma Sabha'a mouth piece of Hindu religion and an association of the '*pandits*'and issued a fresh order February 17, 1891. The order stated that the Rajbansis would be permitted to refer themselves as '*Bratya Kshatriyas*'. However few zaminders and a section of elite of Rangpur town lodged a protest to the Magistrate against the decision. The District Magistrate then referred the matter back to the 'Dharma Sabha for a solution.¹³

The 'Dharma Sabha' called a meeting on 15th March, 1891 of Brahman Pandits ,Sastrakars, Naiyayiks, and influential members of the Hindu Religion from Navadwip. The

Different Phases of the Kshatriyaisation Movement of the Rajbansi Communities in North Bengal(1891-1935)

Sabha had also interviewed a large number of Rajbansis, important Brahmana Pandit of different places to know the social customs, habits, and religious practices of the Rajbansis. The convention was held in Rangpur town under the presidentship of Prasanna Nath Choudhury where more than 400 representatives of the pandit among the Hindu religion participated. On the other hand, Navadwip Pandit Mandali was under the leadership of Mahamahopadhyaya Bhubaneswar Vidyaratna, the greater Naiyayik of his time and five other learned pundits also participated in the convention . After a prolonged discussion it was concluded that the Rajbansi of North Bengal had Kshatriya descent and were Hindus. They had fallen as degraded from the Kshatriya position because of non-observance of Vedic rites and rituals and should be considered as ‘Bratya Kshatriya’¹⁴ The decision of the convention was conveyed to the District Magistrate on 18 March, 1891. According to the opinion, Skyne issued an order on 18 May stating that from 1st Jaistha 1298 B.S. (May, 1891) the Rajbansi would be permitted to refer themselves as Bratya Kshatriya in all Governmental Deeds. Then the Kshatriyas and the movement came to a temporary halt in 1891.¹⁵

The movement however, created a great enthusiasm among the people who began to shake off their inferiority complex, declare themselves openly as Kshatriya and adopt Kshatriya customs and titles. However, although it was getting popular and social awakening was visible; its nature was still sporadic and localized. By this time the leadership was taken over by a more competent dynamic and forceful personality namely Panchanan Sarkar later known as Panchanan Barma, an advocate of Rangpur originally an inhabitant of Cooch Behar State. His original name was Panchanan Sarkar; in 1272 B.S. he was born of a peasant family of Khalisamari of Mathabhanga Sub-division in Koch Bihar. He was Master of Arts in Sanskrit and Bachelor of law. Even after this academic qualification he was refused any high post in service of Koch Bihar, the kind of which he was offered did not prove to be befitting to him. He continued in that service for a short period of time and eventually out of disgust and frustration left Koch Behar for Rangpur to join the Bar. There at Rangpur he was humiliated in the court. This incident shocked him to the bottom of the heart and he began to contemplate upon the possibilities of retrieving the prestige and dignity of his people, the Rajbansis. In view of this he joined the other leaders, as mentioned earlier, of the movement and he became the most active person in the midst of all. As the Sanskrit language and

Different Phases of the Kshatriyaisation Movement of the Rajbansi Communities in North Bengal(1891-1935)

literature was within his perusal and access, he devoted himself in the effort of detecting a way out in order to upstage the position of the Rajbansis.¹⁶

The Second Phase (1901-1918)

The second phase of the Kshatriya movement was, in fact, the most important formative stages of the Rajbansi socio-religious as well as socio-political ideology and mentality that created a climate of opinion of the community. This climate of opinion and activities there upon reconstituted and embodied the legacy of the Rajbansis. The second phase of the Kshatriya movement, however, had its beginning with the inception of the census in 1901. In 1901 Census the Rajbansi Kshatriya were categorized as Rajbansi only and this naturally caused resentment among them. The Rajbansi leaders met in Rangpur and in a protest note to P. C. Maitra, the District Magistrate of Rangpur on 1 February 1901 urged him to recognize the Rajbansis as Kshatriyas. However, the latter in his order on 2nd February 1901, refused to re-open the case. Then it was quite clear that the recommendation of F. A. Skyne in 1891 were not accepted. The Rajbansis there upon appeared to the Census Superintendent who also turned down their prayer, as it was too late to issue any fresh order on the point. On 19 April 1901, the Rajbansis submitted a memorandum to Sir John Woodburn, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, who in a letter of 22nd April informed them that their application had been referred to the secretary of the Revenue Department for necessary action, had been taken. In the Census Report of 1901, the Rajbansis and the Koches were therefore, again classified as member of the same caste.¹⁷

The Rajbansis were disappointed and launched a vigorous movement with new enthusiasm. They now consented mainly on social issue. The movement spread throughout North Bengal of present west Bengal and touched even in the village level. Charges in religious rules like reduction of the mourning days on death of either parent from thirty days to twelve days like upper caste Hindus were carried out particularly in Dilma (Rangpur) and Mathabhanga (Coochbehar). Many Rajbansis as a Singh of 'twice born' (Dwijia) began wearing Sacred thread (Upabita) imposing their higher status like Sri Josharath Adhikary and others of Mekhliganj police station.¹⁸

Different Phases of the Kshatriyaisation Movement of the Rajbansi Communities in North Bengal(1891-1935)

Under the leadership of Panchanan Sarkar, the movement had got a new impetus. He urged the Rajbansis that unless the Kshatriyas stood on their own feet, nobody will give them their Kshatriya status and they should achieved it by merit and their right. He brought the historical past and tradition of the Rajbansi Kshatriyas. He had started his campaign with the contention that Rajbansis were different from the Koches who were a degraded caste and the Rajbansis were royal lineage. According to the history narrated by him the anti-Kshatriya King Nanda, popularly known as Parusuram II lodged a fierce attack on the Pundra King i.e. King of Paundradesh in North Bengal and western Assam. The descendants of his agnates for many years to come concealed their Sacred thread and their Kshatriya identity. Panchanan also argued that being of royal lineage the descendents of the agnates now claim to be Rajbansis. The popular notion quoted by Hunter (1879) that Rajbansis were similar to the Koch royal family of Majo, Bijni, Sidly and Cooch Behar.¹⁹ But Panchanan did not support this view. The agnates of Paundra King Panchanan Sarkar had started once broke away from the Kshatriya ancestry they now claim to be Bhanga Kshatriya.²⁰ Panchanan claimed the Kshatriya status for the Rajbansis cited *Jago Sangeet*; a kind of *Palagan* composed Ratiram Das during the time of Warren Hastings (1777-1785). Ratiram Das was a famous person of this time who launched an armed peasant rebellion against the tyrannical Izaradar, Debi Singha, appointed by East India Company with the collaboration of a Zaminder of Itakumari, district of Rangpur namely Shib Chandra Ray with Rajbansi Kshatriya followers.²¹ He further stated that Rajbansis were not Non-Aryan. While considering the physical structure of the Rajbansis the 'principle of heredity' should not only be noticed but also the place, geographical condition, climate, food habits as well as the language, customs, religious rules, historical past which proves that Rajbansis were Kshatriyas.²²

But the Rajbansi Kshatriya movement inevitably brought about face to face confrontation with other caste as the latter was not prepared to accept the Kshatriya status of the Rajbansis. Even Brahmins began to refuse to serve the Rajbansis as priest in religious and social ceremonies and some officials refused to record the caste of these people as Kshatriyas. But Pandits of Mithila, Kamrup and some local Brahmins continued to support their cause and even participated in the movements.²³ In the meanwhile, enthusiastic attempts were made to collect proverbs, traditions, history, songs, sayings, and popular folktales, which made the task easier to be established Kshatriya identity. Harikishore Adhikary, a well versed in

Different Phases of the Kshatriyaisation Movement of the Rajbansi Communities in North Bengal(1891-1935)

Sanskrit and Hindu scripture published a booklet namely *Rajbansi Kula Pradeep* in which he established that the Rajbansis were Paundra Kshatriyas. The Rajbansi literary works of Pandit Jagatmohan Singh namely *Kula Koumudi*, *Kshatra Sangeet*, Govindra Chandra Ray's '*Kshatra Sangeet*' and Maniram Kabya Bhusan's '*Rajbansi Kula Dipak*' also supported this view. Panchanan Sarkar was the secretary of 'Rangpur Sahitya Parishad' a branch of Bangiys Sahitya Parishad wrote a number of traditional *Chhilkas* sayings, proverbs, myths, folksongs, and tales of the community which were published in *Rangapur Sahitya Parishad Patrika*.

During this period Panchanan Sarkar and other leaders decided to form a platform of the movement. With this idea a conference was convened on 1 May 1910 (18 Baisakh 1317 B.S.) in Rangpur town at *Rangpur Natya Mandir* which resulted in the foundation of the Kshatriya Samiti. It included Rajbansis from Rangpur, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Dinajpur, Dhubri, Goalpara, Bogura, and Mayamansingha amounting 400 representatives. The aims and objectives of the Kshatriya Samiti were formulated with Sri Madhusudan Ray, a pleader of Jalpaiguri, as president and Panchanan Sarkar as Secretary of the Samiti.²⁴ They demanded that the Rajbansis and the Koches should be treated separately and they should be given the status of Kshatriyas.

In the conference it was decided that Rajbansis were the Kshatriyas known as 'Bhanga Kahatriyas' or 'Bratya Kshatriya'. It forms a separate Hindu caste from that of the Koch. They have no social intercourse with Koches or other castes. The Rajbansis of Nepal and Purnea district of Bihar did not participate in the first Annual conference of the Kshatriya Samiti. The Rajbansis of Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Dinajpur, Goalpara and Purnea of Bihar urged permission from the District Magistrate to enlist them as Kshatriyas and to write surname like Singh, Barma and Ray instead of Das.²⁵

The District Magistrate of Rangpur C. Tindal wrote to the Census Superintendent of Assam and East Bengal on 16 December, 1910 that Rajbansis should be recognized as Kshatriyas and they should also be put within the bracket to distinguish the community from the other castes.²⁶ In the year 1911 the Census Superintendent, O'Malley, commented in his Census Report, 'The formal request was granted without hesitation as there is no doubt that as the present day, neutral of any question of origin, the Rajbansi and Koches, are separate caste.'²⁷ But their prayer for Kshatriya status was not granted. Next the Samiti sought the opinion of the Hindu Pandits and their rulings or Vyabasthapatras.²⁸ Pandits like

Different Phases of the Kshatriyaisation Movement of the Rajbansi Communities in North Bengal(1891-1935)

Mahamahapadhyay Siddhinath Vidyabagish and others of Cooch Behar, Mahamahapadhyay Disewar Bhattacharya and others of Kamrupa, Pandit Shreshtha Kamaksha Nath Sharma and others of Calcutta, Panditraj Yadaveswar Tarkaratna and others of Rangpur, Mahamahapadhyay Bhuvanmohan Sharma of Nabadwip, Pandit Chitradhar Misra of Mithila, Pandit Chandra Bhushan Sharma and others of Kashidham (Benaras) and others expressed their consent that the Rajbansis were Kshatriyas and can adopt sacred thread. The rulings of the Pandits were distributed among the members of the Samiti in the Third Annual Conference. Following this the day of adopting Sacred thread and performing expiation was fixed in 1912 (27 Magh 1319 B.S.) at Debiganj, then in Jalpaiguri district on the bank of the river Karatoya, which was considered by the Rajbansis as a holy river. Thousands of Rajbansis from different places gathered there. Many eminent Sanskrit Pandits of Nabadwip, Kamrupa and Mithila were invited to solemnize and authorize them to 'reaccept' the sacred thread.²⁹ Thousands of Rajbansis took sacred thread and as prescribed by the pundits they had to shave their heads and bear. The ceremony continued for three consecutive days.³⁰ This was followed by similar 'Milankshetra' in different district of North Bengal where many more Rajbansis were given the sacred thread which would signify their Kshatriya status. Along with this they began to adopt Kshatriya surnames like Barman, Deb Barman etc. Moreover, previously the sons of a Rajbansi had to observe penance for thirty days as a funeral rite after his death, but now as they adopted Kshatriyahood, the period of penance was reduced to 13 days.³¹

The demands grew so persistently that O'Malley, the Superintendent of the 1911 Census operation in Bengal commented that 'a most persistent agitation was carried on by the Rajbansis'.³² At last the demand for separation of Rajbansis from the Koch was granted. Malley also mentioned that there was no reason to object if the Rajbansis use surnames like Singh, Barma and Ray.³³ The Deputy Commissioner of the Goalpara District of Assam ordered the Field Superintendents on 27 January in 1911, to enroll the Rajbansis as Kshatriyas. Similar instructions were issued in other district including Purnea in Bihar except Cooch Behar where the state authority was reluctant to grant Kshatriya status to the Rajbansi. The local Rajbansis appealed to the state Superintendent, F.W. Dentith, who granted their prayer. But in spite of a general order issued by District Magistrate and authorities the field workers stood against the order and created a problem for the Rajbansis. It was also held in

Different Phases of the Kshatriyaisation Movement of the Rajbansi Communities in North Bengal(1891-1935)

the district of Rangpur. Panchanan brought the matter to the Superintendent. The Superintendent replied that the problem would be shouted out and although they were returned as Rajbansis, their caste Kshatriya would be considered in the Census Report. The Kshatriya Samiti, however, continued to exert pressure on the Government. A delegation of the community then met with Sir Lancelot Hare, the Lieutenant Governor of East Bengal and Assam at Dacca and Census Commissioner, E. A. Gait at Calcutta and conveyed them their demands and grievances. A memorandum signed by more than 2000 Rajbansis from Rangpur, Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar was also given to the Lieutenant General of East Bengal and Assam in January 1911. The memorialist submitted the rulings of various pundits in support of their claim for Kshatriya status and appealed for being classified as Kshatriyas, as distinguished from the Koches. In different districts the Rajbansi caste leaders at last succeeded in getting recognition of Kshatriya status in the Census Report of 1911 as a separate Hindu Caste, 'Rajbansi', with Kshatriya in bracket.³⁴ During the Census operation of 1921 and 1931, they once again mobilized the community and appealed to the Census authorities to return them as only 'Kshatriya' in place of Rajbansi Kshatriya.³⁵

The Third Phase (1919-1935) and after

The third phase of the movement began soon after the First World War or better to say along with the enactment of the Montagu-Chemsford Reforms. This phase came to an end with two important incidents: (i) the death of Thakur Panchanan Barma in 1935, the patriarch of the Kshatriya Movement and, (ii) the passing of the Government of India Act, 1935. Since Panchanan rendered service to the British Government during the years of the War, therefore, he could expect good return from the Government after the war. The Montagu-Chemsford Act spelt out reservation facilities in government service for people lagging behind in terms of economy and education.

The Kshatriya Samiti after 1919 in one hand carried on the socio-religious programme of the Kshatriyas on the other maintained collaboration with Ambedkar who after the War steered the Dalit movement in India laying the foundation of the facilities given to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes. It has to be noted that because of the arousal of the Rajbansi

Different Phases of the Kshatriyaisation Movement of the Rajbansi Communities in North Bengal(1891-1935)

leaders to this new situation, the Rajbansi afterwards were declared as Scheduled Caste and there upon were entitled to get reservation facilities.

During the third phase i.e. 1919-1935, activities like 'Upanayan' and sending the youth to the police force and army, whenever the Government needed, continued unabated. Some new phenomenon marked the progress of the work of the Kshatriya Samiti since the end of the World War I. These new phenomenon included : (i) training of women folk in martial art, playing with clubs in mock battle and doing physical exercise in order to build in them the confidence for self-defence. This was felt urgent when Rajbansi women were abducted and robbed of their Chastity allegedly by Muslim from time to time. Many women really got remained for self-defence, and sometimes even took the better of their atteckers.³⁶ This was done in remembrance of the women warriors of the Mahabharata age. Many abducted women were saved by the members of the Kshatriya Samiti and given Shelter under their protection. In many cases the Samiti field a criminal case the abductors and had then punished. For the purpose of maintaining the affairs related to all problems of women, Panchanan opened new organs namely *Nari Raksha Sevak Dal* and *Nari Raksha Vibhag* within the 'Kshatriya Samiti'. It was the duty of these two organisations to save women from the culprits and file cases against them in the court.

Panchanan Barma and Govinda Roy of Dinajpur composed many thought-provoking poems to the effect of apprising all people about women's dignity, Chastity and position in society. Panchanan's poems, under the caption *Dang-Dhari Mao* were all intended to install into the minds of all the ideas of virility and alertness for the protection of women. Moreover, attention was given to the type of dresses. Rajbansi women were asked by the Samiti to put on previously the Rajbansi women used to put on a piece of long cloth reaching down the knees tightly bound over the breast. The unmarried girls used to put on *rihe* (lower garment) and *Mekla* (upper garment).³⁷ The Kshatriya Samiti asked all women nicely to put on Sharis and not one piece of cloth or *rihe* and *mekla*. Besides they asked women not to go to market places for selling goods and buy other communities. The latter step of prohibiting women to go to market, perhaps, was not a progressive one probably this step was taken to save some form the sight abductors and criminals.

Along with this, attempts were made by the leaders of the Samiti to develop linkages with 'All India Kshatriya Movements'.³⁸ In this field also Panchanan Barma came into

Different Phases of the Kshatriyaisation Movement of the Rajbansi Communities in North Bengal(1891-1935)

forefront as he was successful in making contacts with them through Krishna Mohan Singha, a descent of Rajput Kshatriya whose family resided Cooch Behar for generation. In 1922 Panchanan Barma was elected the Vice-president of Bengal branch of the *Bharatiya Kshatriya Mahasabha* known as Bengal Prantik Sabha. Janaki Pal Singh a Panjabi Kshatriya came in close contact steps recognizing the Rajbansi Kshatriya Samiti as the sub-branch or Prantik Committee of Bharatiya Kshatriya Mahasabha of Eastern India. As a result of his relation Panchanan Barma and others leader of the Samiti attended the annual conference of the All India Kshatriya Mahasabha at Puri in 1920; Similarly, Janaki Pal Singh attended with other leaders of the conference of Kshatriya Samiti at Gainbandha, Chakdulia and Bhootmari as the representatives of the All India Mahasabha. In 1331 B.S. (1924) Barma went to Alwar along with Kamini Kumar Singha and Upendra Nath Barman to attend the conference of Bharatiya Kshatriya Mahasabha. In 1927 the conference was also attended by Panchanan Barma, Harikishore Barma and others.³⁹

Under the leadership of Thakur Panchanan, the 'Kshatriya Samiti' began to publish a monthly journal named 'Kshatriya'. It included articles of socio-economic and political conditions of the time in order to educate the Rajbansis in the realms of different branches of knowledge. Moreover, it used to give information of abductions and steps taken against the criminals. In this regard mention may be made of the *Uttarbanga Sahitya Parishad*⁴⁰ established by Thakur Panchanan in collaboration with Surendra Nath Roy Choudhury. Under the auspices of the *Parisad* was published another monthly, *Sahitya Parisad* edited by Thakur Panchanan himself.⁴¹

Another very important dimension of the 'Kshatriya Movement' was to make the presence of the 'Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samiti' felt in all India conference of the Kshatriyas. In view of this intention Panchanan Barma in the company of a few other members of the Samity including Upendra Nath Barman of Jalpaiguri attended the all India 'Kshatriya Sanmelan' held at Alwar and Indore respectively in 1924 and 1928. This country wide awareness of the leaders ultimately brought them to a newer and better field of understanding and that was Indian Politics.

Though the Rajbansis strongly fought for Kshatriyahood, but they did not fail to grasp electoral seats and all facilities assigned for the depressed classes; they even got Scheduled Caste status in postcolonial India. In view of attaining the prospective facilities given to the

Different Phases of the Kshatriyaisation Movement of the Rajbansi Communities in North Bengal(1891-1935)

depressed classes and afterwards to the Scheduled Caste, the 'Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samiti' under the leadership of Thakur Panchanan maintained solidarity in the right earnest with other depressed classes in Bengal. The Rajbansis thus, purposively joined the *Bangiya Jana Sangh*, an organisation representing the backward classes in Bengal. On behalf of the *Bangiya Jana Sangha*, Thakur Panchanan submitted a memorandum to the Indian Franchise Commission in 1932 and supported the provisions for reserved seats and separate electorate for the depressed classes and later on its modified version-reserved seats but joint electorate under the Poona Pact of 1932.⁴²

The Kshatriya Samiti was formed with the objectives of socio-religious reforms and social awakening of the Rajbansi community, with the passage of time responding to the consequent administrative developments it changed its outlook and decided to take part in electoral politics. The Samiti pulled its candidates in the council elections between 1920 and 1929 and the Assembly election of 1937 & 1946. In the Montagu-Chemsford Reform Act of 1919 the diarchy was established in the province and size of the Provincial Legislative Council was further enlarged. It divided each constituency as Mahamedan. In Rangpur, the Non-Mahamedan constituency consisted of two members and every voter had to cast two votes. There were four candidates for the Rangpur non-Mohamedan constituency. In 1920 the candidates for the election were Panchanan Barma, Rai Bahadur Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, Jogesh Chandra Sarkar and Ashutosh Lahiri. In the election Rai Saheb and Jogesh Chandra Sarkar were elected as Kshatriya Samiti members by defeating Ashutosh Lahiri and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee.⁴³

One important point has to be considered that the Rajbansi Kshatriya could not get the fruits of reservation till 1935. The Election of 1923 the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samiti projected Panchanan Barma and Nagendra Narayan Roy as candidates. They contested elections and several times became members of the Legislative Council of Bengal (in 1920, 1923, 1926 and 1929). After the death of Panchanan Barma in 1935, Upendra Nath Barman of Jalpaiguri in collaboration with Nagendra Nath Roy of Rajpur represented the Rajbansis in the Legislative Council and endeavoured for their uplift and interest. It has to be remembering in this respect that, Panchanan Barma and Upendranath Barman, the two leading personalities of the Rajbansi community received success in their academic as well as professional life not through reservation but their merit.

Different Phases of the Kshatriyaisation Movement of the Rajbansi Communities in North Bengal(1891-1935)

In 1941 under the patronage of Maharaja Jagadwipendra Narayan some social thinkers of the time set up an organisation named the 'Cooch Behar Kshatriya Society' the leading patrons and advisors of that organisation were Dharani Shankar Bhattacharya, Devendranath Chakraborty and Ansar Uddin Ahamed. It had its branches in different parts of the district.⁴⁴

The main objective of the organization was to render social service. Maharaja Jagadwipendra Narayan was the first lifelong president of the society. In view of amelioration of the Rajbansi Kshatriya of Rangpur, Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Bogura, Goalpara and Cooch behar, socially, educationally, morally, spiritually the Kshatriya Samiti of aforesaid district applied to Maharaja Bhup Bahadur to extend sympathetic help towards the movement inaugurated by the Kshatriya Samiti from humanitarian point of view. In 1954 they took some resolution. But the resolutions of 1954 were a clear departure from those of the early stage of Kshatriya movement.⁴⁵

Early movement of Kshatriya Samities emphasised on socio-ritual life like acceptance of Sacred thread, proclamation of Kshatriyahood better social prestige etc, but in later phases the resolution gave importance upon government resolution, funds, aid, drinking water, Scheduled Caste reservation etc. As a result of their tireless efforts they were able to get rid derogatory occupations which Koch have clung. The Rajbansis who were occupying the lower rank have elevated their social rank have elevated their social position but the groups who occupied the higher ranks remained as they were.

It is truly that while the Kshatriya movement gets its popularity in Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and Dinajpur, it was faced strong opposition from the Cooch Behar state authority. As the administration was under the control of the Upper Caste Hindu gentry and the local people being backward in education, they could not compete with them for positions of powers.⁴⁶ Swaraj Basu has observed that the construction of a new identity for the Rajbansis also assumed a dimension of territoriality, as their conflict with the upper caste was defined in terms of a construction between the autochthons and the outsiders, both contending for power.⁴⁷ Apart from the non-cooperation of the Cooch Behar state towards the Kshatriya movement, an unthinkable event took place in 1926 that not only the life of Panchanan Barma but also the great shock of the history of Rajbansis. Panchanan Barma was banished from the State of Cooch Behar by a notice of 24 hours. In addition, it is further ordered the said Panchanan is prohibited from entering the State for a period of five years from the date

Different Phases of the Kshatriyaisation Movement of the Rajbansi Communities in North Bengal(1891-1935)

of this order is communicated to him without the special permission, previously obtained Regency Council. However, it may be say regarding claiming for Kshatriyahood, every Hindu Pandits by analysing various ancient scriptures expressed their consent that the Rajbansis were the Kshatriyas and can adopted Sacred thread. On the other hand Colonial Government also recognizes it.

Actually the Rajbansis growing concern for Kshatriya identity indicates their conviction that caste was not necessarily a given and fixed identity; rather it was stark social inequality, born mainly Brahmanical culture domination that actually made the Rajbansis conscious of their degraded caste position. 'The continued exclusion from social privileges, economic resources and political power'⁴⁸ created grievances among the lower caste and made them vocal against the upper caste domination. But what could be a protest movement against the hegemony of upper caste, turned into a limited movement for social adjustment. It was not the Rajbansi alone who treat this path, the other mobile caste of Bengal like Mahisyas, the Sadgops, the Namasudras, the Pods, etc. , followed the same course. As a result of this policy of adjustment rather than a protest, the main focus of these mobility movements was on specific symbolic reforms. The major thrust of the Rajbansi Kshatriyaisation movement was on the wearing of the sacred thread and the adoption of upper caste Hindu practice. This movement could be seen as a protest against assimilation or integration of the local indigenous people by dominant socio-cultural groups of this region .But while ethnicity can be used to fight social discrimination, there is always the possibility of its subsequent use to achieve narrow reactionary objectives.

Conclusion

However, it is to be remembered that caste formed a very important item in the census operation in British India. A substantial portion of the census reports from 1872 to 1931 was devoted to work out the details of caste ranking and examining the claims of the different castes for higher ranks or caste respectable positions. So census was used by caste groups as an instrument to impure their position in the Social hierarchy by assuming new names or titles and advancing claims to a position than that usually

Different Phases of the Kshatriyaisation Movement of the Rajbansi Communities in North Bengal(1891-1935)

assigned to them in the social scale . The endeavor of the Rajbansi to be placed higher up in order of precedence and be recognized as Kshatriya continued from 1872 A.D. to 1931A.D. Census assuming new names viz., from Koch to Rajbanshi (1872), from Rajbansi to Bratya or Bhanga Kshatriya (1891), from Bhanga Kshatriya to Rajbanshi Kshatriya (1911 and 1921) and from Rajbansi Kshatriya to only Kshatriya (1931). The Rajbansi presumed that 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. Further to confirmed their Kshatriya identity, there were serious efforts on the part of the Rajbansi leaders to secure the opinion of Brahmin Pandits of Nabadwip and Ben eras and other shastric sanctions from them to validate that claim. They also wanted to get it legitimized by the priests and genealogists. Mythology and traditions were also frequently cited in support of their claim to be recognized as descendents of Kshatriya Varna. Attempts were being made to recognize Kshatriyahood as by the Rajbansi taking the materials from folk tales, folk songs, legends, proverbs etc.

¹ Shekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal, 1872-1937*, Kolkata: K. P. Bagchi and Company, 1990, p.29-36; Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Caste in the Perception of the Raj; A Note on the Evolution of Colonial Sociology of Bengal', *Bengal Past And Present, Vol.CIV*, no.198-99, part I-11, Jan-June 1985, p. 57-8.

² Srinivas, *Social Change*, pp. 100-1.

³ Swaraj Basu '*Dynamics of a Caste Movement: The Rajbansis of North Bengal 1910-1947*, Delhi: Monohar Publication, 2003, p. 65.

⁴ Debnath, *Essays on Cultural*, p.115.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ray, 'Some Notes on the Kshatriya,' p. 51.

⁸ Haripada Ray, Parishtha thake Kshatriya Andolan, *Swaranika*, Rai Saheb Panchanan Barman 125 the Birth Anniversary Publication, Calcutta, 1991, p.30.

⁹ Barman, *Thakur Panchanan*, p. 8.

¹⁰ Ray, 'Some Notes on the Kshatriya,' p. 50.

¹¹ Barman, *Rajbansi Kshatriya*, p. 3.

Different Phases of the Kshatriyaisation Movement of the Rajbansi Communities in North Bengal(1891-1935)

¹² Ibid., pp.4-7 ; Sarkar, *Rai Saheb Panchanan*, p. 21. ; Ray, 'Some Notes on the Kshatriya', pp.49-52.

¹³ Barman, *Rajbansi Kshatriya*, pp. 56-9.

¹⁴ Dhananjay Roy, *Uttar Banger*, p. 117.

¹⁵ Ray, 'Some Notes on the Kshatriya', p. 51.

¹⁶ Debnath, *Essays on Cultural*, p.117.

¹⁷ Barman, *Rajbansi Kshatriya*, pp.11-13;Dhananjay Roy, *Uttar Banger*, pp. 47-8.

¹⁸ Barman, *Rajbansi Kshatriya*, p. 13.

¹⁹ Hunter W. W., *A Statistical Account of Bengal* Vol. X, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Kuch Behar, Delhi: Concept Publishing Company(P) Ltd, 2009, p. 90-5.

²⁰ Karyabibarani, First Annual meeting, Kshatriya Samiti, Rangapur, 1317 B.S.

²¹ Ratiram Das, *Jagsangeet*, a Palagan, cited in Dalia Bhattacharjee, *Ray Sheb Panchanan Barma: Life and Times (1866-1935)*, unpublished M.Phil Dissertation, NBU,2001, p. 25.

Das composed a song:

'Rane bhanga diya mora aye deshe aschilam,

Bhanga Kshatri Ranbansi aye name achi'

(Free translation: we have left out landing due to the fear of Parasurama and breaking from the Kshatriyahood,we have labeled ourselves as Bhanga Kshatriya)

²² Karyabibarani, First Annual meeting, Kshatriya Samiti, Rangapur, 1317 B.S.

²³ Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Conference, Kshatriya Samiti,Doma (Rangpur),1325 B.S.

²⁴ Barman, *Rajbansi Kshatriya*, p. 16.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 9-10.

²⁶ Dahlia Bhattacharjee, *Rai Saheb Panchanan Barma*, p. 28.

²⁷ Comment of L.S.S.,O'Malley cited in Barman, *Rajbansi Kshatriya*, p.12.

²⁸ *Census of India*, 1911, pp. 440-3.

²⁹ J.A. Miligan , *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operation in the Jalpaiguri District 1906-1916*,p.10 ; U.N. Barman, *Thakur Panchanan Barman Jiban Charait*, 2nd edition, 1387 B.S., Jalpaiguri, pp. 20-30; Ray, 'Some Notes on the Kshatriya ', pp. 56-7

³⁰ Barman, *Rajbanshi Kshatriya*, pp.11-2 ; Harimohan Barman, 'Sataisha Magher Kahini' (in Rajbanshi) in *Degar* (a half-yearly Journal of North Bengal Academy of culture in Rajbansi), vol. 3, no-4, December to June, 2004-2005 published in 2006, pp. 11-6.; Barman, *Thakur Panchanan Barman*, pp. 20-3.

³¹ Debnath, *Essays on Cultural*, p.118.

³² *Census of India*, 1911, p. 445.

³³ Ibid.

Different Phases of the Kshatriyaisation Movement of the Rajbansi Communities in North Bengal(1891-1935)

³⁴Barman, *Thakur Panchanan Barman*, pp.8-10; Ray, 'Some Notes on the Kshatriya', pp. 55-6; Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam General (miscellaneous), File No.IC-2g/11,B, March, 1921, Proceedings Nos.27-41, cited in Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste*, p.71; Dhananjoy Roy, *Uttar Banger*, pp.38-9, 50-1.

³⁵ GB, Political (Political), File no. 8A B, December 1931, Progs.nos. 394-406 cited in Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste*, p. 70.

³⁶ Debnath, *Essays on Cultural*, p.120.

³⁷ Ibid., p.121.

³⁸ 'Kshatriya' Sraban 1331 B.S., p. 69.

³⁹ 'Kshatriya' Bengali Journal, p. 215.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Sushil Roy Sarkar, 'Thakur Panchanan Karme O Monone' in *Madhuparni*, Bishes Koch Bihar Sankhya, Ajitesh Bhattacharya and Dr. Ananda Gopal Ghosh (ed.), Balurghat, West Dinajpur, 1990, p. 363.

⁴³ Ranjit Dasgupta, *Economy, Society and Politics in Bengal, Jalpaiguri 1669-1897*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992, p.145.

⁴⁴ Madhuparna Guha, *Social and Religious movement*, p.13.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Durga Das Majumder, *West Bengal District Gazetteers, Koch Behar, 1937*, pp. 2-9.

⁴⁷ Basu, *Dynamics of a caste*, p. 53.

⁴⁸ Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, p. 129.