

## Thakur Panchanan Barma and His Social Movement: A Critical Assessment

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**Abstract:** The Rajbangsis, educationally backward, were neglected by the higher caste people of Bengal, particularly in North Bengal, not conscious about the first census report and the writing of the English authors where Rajbangsis and the Koches were shown as the same community. But while the census work of 1891 was going on they demanded to write 'Bhanga Kshatriya' in the column of caste. But this demand was denied by the Government; as a result movement was started in Rangpur district and in some places riotous incidents occurred. The president of Rangpur religious court Mahamohapadhyaya pandit Raj Jadabeswar Tarkaratna gave his views that the Koch and Rajbangsis were separate caste.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the movement Thakur Panchanan Barma appeared and took the responsibility to carry on the movement under his leadership. Thereafter the First National Conference of the Rajbanshi Kshatriya of North East India was held in the meeting hall of Rangpur Natya Mandir on the 18<sup>th</sup> Baisakha, 1317 B.S. Four hundred representatives of different places joined the conference. After that the movement of the Rajbanshis for upgradation meaning of which the Kshatriahood got a new motion and ultimately they fulfilled their demand and acquired the Kshatriahood. But many questions arise about the significance of the movement. In the present article the importance of such type of social upgradation movement like other social movements in Bengal have been analysed critically.

**Key-words:** North Bengal, Kshatra movement, Bratya kshatriya, Thakur Panchanan Barma, Kshatriya Samiti.

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### Introduction

The Rajbanshis were the indigenous people of the greater North Bengal and lower Assam in the pre- colonial and colonial period. They were the majority people of North Bengal, particularly in the districts of Jjalpaiguri, Rangpur, Dinajpur and the plain areas of Darjeeling district and the Cooch Behar state. Other than North Bengal, Rajbanshis had been living in the other parts of Bengal and Assam. Swaraj Basu, writes, "The Rajbanshis constituted the most predominant section of the local Hindu population in the northern districts of Bengal. Numerically they were the third largest Hindu caste in Bengal as a whole. The origin of this caste is shrouded in mystery & the basic debate is around the question of their association with the Koches. Whatever might have been their actual origin; there is no dispute about the fact that the

Rajbanshis were the early settlers in North Bengal. They were a socially homogenous community, in the sense that there was no sub-caste among them.”<sup>1</sup> Dr. Charu Chandra Sanyal pointed out, “The above observations point to the fact that the Koches are non-Aryan in origin. Some of them adopted Hinduism and became Rajbanshis. These Rajbanshis later on claimed to be Kshatriya.”<sup>2</sup> Swaraj Basu again writes, “The local situation also provided a sufficient ground for the Rajbanshis’ assertion of a Kshatriya identity and their endeavour to build up caste solidarity.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Ethnic identity of the Rajbanshis**

There are many debates among the origin or ethnic identity of the Rajbanshis. The main debate was whether Rajbanshis were originated from Mongoloid race or Aryan race. This debate was initiated since the census report was published in 1891 by the British- India Government where Rajbanshis and Koches were shown in the same group of caste, though the issue was not come in the light after the publication of first census report in 1872 as because the Rajbanshis were not conscious about the matter. Here, one point should be mentioned that the Koches were originated from the Indo- Mongoloid race and they were treated as tribal community. In accordance with the Aryan culture, the non- Aryan people treated as ‘Dasa’, ‘Dasyu’, ‘Kirata’, and ‘Nisada’ which means the lower graded people in the society. The non- Aryan people had no prestigious or honourable position in the eyes of upper strata of the society of so called traditional Hindus or Aryan people.

Most of the historians, authors and scholars, particularly the English authors and scholars have pointed out that the Rajbanshis and Koches have originated from same human race that was Indo- Mongoloid. In this regard Dr. Buchanan Hamilton wrote, “I have no doubt that all the Koch are sprang from same stock and that most of the Rajbanshis are Koch; but I am inclined to think that many of the former are of different tribes, and having abandoned their impure practices, have been admitted to a communion.”<sup>4</sup> H. H. Risley has shown that the Rajbanshis, Koches, Paliyas and Desis carried the mixed blood of Mongolian and Dravidian race. He wrote, “Kochh, Kochh-Mandal, Rajbanshi, Paliya, Desi, a large Dravidian tribe of North-Eastern Bengal, among whom there are grounds for suspecting some admixture of Mongolian blood.”<sup>5</sup> Risley.... Mr. Hodson and Dr. Latham also opined that the Kochs, Mechs, Kacharis and Rajbanshis are the same stock of society. In this respect Hunter wrote, “Mr. Hadson who is followed by Dr. Latham, identifies the kochs, the Mechs, the Kacharis etc. As all being members

of one great Mongolean race, of Turanean or non-Aryan origin; and both these writers express the opinion that the Koch or Rajbanshis are merely the most Hinduised form of the common stock.”<sup>6</sup> He again wrote, ‘The Koches, or the Rajbanshis as they are now called, may be briefly mentioned among the semi-aboriginal tribes, although they are now recognized as a distinct caste of Hindus. The Koch race first came prominently into notice about the close of the fifteenth or the beginning of the sixteenth century, when Hajo established the Koch Kingdom upon the downfall of the more ancient Hindu Kingdom of Kamrup.’<sup>7</sup>

The Rajbangsi intellectuals, particularly the leaders of the Kshatriya Movement could not accept the above mentioned views. They strongly protested against these views. They wanted to say that the Rajbangsis and the Koches are not the same community. Satyanarayan Roy has shown that the Koch and Rajbangsi belonged to separate race. They had separate ethnic identity. He pointed out that the segregation between Koch and Rajbangsi identified from (1) Physical features- that means physically all Kochs had Mongolean features, on the contrary Rajbangsis belonged to Aryan features, (2) Language- meaning of which the language of the Kochs was non-Aryan but the language of the Rajbangsis originated from Prakrita, Maithali that was Aryan language. (3) Religion- Koches became Hindus after converting Hinduism by Biswa Singha, but the Rajbangsis were precedent Hindus (4) Customs and usages that the worships and religious customs of the Rajbangsis originated from traditional Hindus, but the worships and practices of the Koches was not permitted by the Hindus, the water touched by the Koches was not accepted by the Hindus. From these points Sattanarayan Roy pointed out that the Koches were non-Aryans.<sup>8</sup>

Upendra Nath Barman writes, “After defeating by Mahapadma Nanda the Pundra Kshatriyas settled in the Ratnapith of Assam and they debarred from the Kshatriyahood. Thereafter they accepted the agricultural activities as their profession for their livelihood. After coming in the province covered by deep forest they continued their devotion to the God and Goddess in accordance with the Hindu religion.”<sup>9</sup>

It is stated that among the Koches who were converted into Hindu religion called the Rajbanshis and who were converted into Islam called Muslim or Mahameddan. Hunter here pointed out that the name of Koch was abandoned by the converts who assumed that of Rajbanshis literally of the Royal Kindred. The Koch or the Rajbanshis form by far the majority of

the Hindu population of Jalpaiguri district.<sup>10</sup> Whatever the identity of the Rajbanshis had, they were the people like semi- tribes, simple in habit. Swaraj Basu again writes, “As they were guided by the traditional Brahmanical cultural values, the Rajbanshis, with a tradition and culture of their own, failed to get a respectable position in the status estimation of these immigrant upper caste gentry.’<sup>11</sup> They were mainly habituated with agrarian cultivation. Almost all the people of Rajbanshis were uneducated in the colonial period. They would live in the villages. Their house was made mainly with the Bamboos and thrash and the economically solvent jotdars made their house with tin and wood. Generally in the house of the Rajbanshis four huts were seen. Sunder stated in his report “Among the Rajbanshis as well as Mahamedan there four huts in every homestead. These face North, South, East and West. Sometimes an extra hut called Darighar is also built and is used by friends who may be staying for a night so. In building a homestead care is taken to have it bounded as follows whenever possible.<sup>12</sup>

### **Kshatra Movement**

The Rajbangsis, educationally backward, were not conscious about the first census report and the writing of the English authors where Rajbangsis and the Koches were shown as the same community. But while the census work of 1891 was going on they demanded to write ‘Bhanga Kshatriya’ in the column of caste. But this demand was denied by the Government; as a result movement was started in Rangpur district and in some places riotous incidents occurred. In 1891 Rangpur Kshatriya Jatir unnati Bidhayani Sabha was formed by Haramohan Roy, the zamindar of Shyampur in the district of Rangpur and their movement was going on. In these circumstances, F. A. Skyne, the district magistrate of Rangpur sought the permission of Hindu pundits regarding the issue.

The president of Rangpur religious court Mahamohapadhyaya pandit Raj Jadabeswar Tarkaratna gave his views that the Koch and Rajbangsis were separate caste mentioning that Koches were inferior from all sides such as professions, food and nature etc. Everything of the Rajbanshis was superior to the Koches. After giving this view Mr. Skyne pointed out that the time of changing the report was over. So, in this situation he mentioned that the Rajbangsis might write ‘Bhatya Kshatriya’ those who were willing. But by this order the Rangpuries including zamindars, advocates etc. were not satisfied and they protested against it. In these circumstances Mr. Skyne again placed the issue in front of Rangpur religious court.

Thereafter the issue was dispersed in the religious court of Rangpur in presence of zamindar Sri Prasanya Chowdhury, the president of the houses and nearly four hundred Brahman pundits. In the house they unanimously resolved that the Rajbanshis were Hindus and they were 'Bratya Kshatriyas'.<sup>13</sup>

All the issues were placed to the District magistrate and the magistrate recommended to the census superintendent to allow the Rajbanshis to write 'Bratya Kshatya' as their caste. In spite of that after publication of the census report it was found that the recommendation of Mr. Skyne had not been accepted meaning of which that the Rajbanshis were not treated as 'Bratya Kshatriya'. So, the Rajbangsis became hopeless. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the movement Thakur Panchanan Barma appeared and took the responsibility to carry on the movement under his leadership. Thereafter the First National Conference of the Rajbanshi Kshatriya of North East India was held in the meeting hall of Rangpur Natya Mandir on the 18<sup>th</sup> Baisakha, 1317 B.S. Four hundred representatives of different places joined the conference. Kshatriya Samiti was formed that day and in the first proposal of the meeting Thakur Panchanan Barma was elected as secretary unanimously of the Samiti and he hold the post until his death.<sup>14</sup> He not only ended his duties by giving self confidence and self pride to the Rajbangsis, he devoted his last drop of blood in the welfare and benevolent activities of the mass people.<sup>15</sup>

In the first conference of the Kshatriya Samiti Panchanan Barma gave a large speech as a secretary where he pointed out "The development of the society is desirable by all. You are all assembled here for the development of the society. For the prosperous of the society you all have to find out the way according to your views. There may be different views about the ways and definitely will have; but consciously and deliberately consider the different views. We should accept deliberately those of which we will consider as prosperous by all or most of them. Always we have to remember that the prosper of the own community is our objective. We neutrally, deliberately and liberally will discuss the different views to aim at the prosper of the society giving up the issue of prestige and affront, anger and disparity."<sup>16</sup>

In 1912 the Kshatriya Samiti organised its first mass thread- wearing ceremony, called the 'Milan Kshetra' at Bhogramguri in Rangpur where four to five thousand Rajbanshis went through the ceremony of ritual rebirth. This was followed by many other such Milan kshetras

organised in different districts, resulting in lakhs of Rajbangsis donning the sacred thread as a mark of their Kshatriya or twice- born status.<sup>17</sup>

In the Fourth Annual Conference of the Kshatriya in 1913 decided that Mandli Samities would be set up in every village to reach the common people. Ten volunteers were appointed with regular provision for travelling and living express to spread the message of the movement to the countryside and through their initiative from 1916 such Samities began to come up slowly. At the same time, the scheme itself went through further elaboration, so that by 1918 a large developed network of village organisations was operating under the Kshatriya Samiti". Under this system every Rajbanshi village had a Mandali at the top and Patti or neighbourhood organisations, each under a Pttanayaka at the bottom. Ten to twelve Pattis formed a Gadinani, each under a Gadian and five to seven of them constituted a Mandali. Above the Mandalis at the sub-divisional level there were Mahamandali Samities, all of them being directly answerable to the central committee of the Kshatriya Samiti, located at Rangpur.<sup>18</sup>

The Kshatriya Samiti played a significant role in the different sectors of the society and it took the role as village government and courts of arbitrations. They tried to spread education and preach ritual reforms. The Samiti also tried to develop the society economically and it played the role as co-operative society. They wanted to economic development of the Rajbanshis. Near about three hundred Mandali Samities were set up for this purpose. The Samiti also tried to assist the Rajbanshi peasants to improve their cultivation by using developed technology and scientific method of cultivation. For the development of cultivation a Kshatriya Bank was established at Rangpur. For the development of education Kshatriya Samiti assisted the poor Rajbangsi students and it spent about Rs. 10,000 for the education of 70 such students. A 'Kshatriya Chhatra Samiti was formed with these students and these students were promised to help the poor people of their community as their social debt and they participated in the different welfare and benevolent activities for their own community.

In the every annual conference of the Rajbangsi Kshatriya Samiti resolved to appeal the Government to recruitment the Rajbangsi youth at a large number to form a Kshatriya regiment. The Rajbangsis, particularly the leaders of the Kshatriya Samiti were not agree to classify themselves as a depressed class because they thought that their position was on high in the social

structure of the Hindus. But they had no reservation about accepting, or for that matter also praying for, special favour from the Government offered in view of their backward condition.<sup>19</sup>

The movement for Kshatriyahood to the Rajbanshis dispersed in North Bengal, Assam, Bihar and Nepal, was not only a religious movement in the contemporary situation, rather it was a movement to place the educationally backward Rajbanshis as a prestigious position judging from the point of contemporary and its credit went to Thakur Panchanan Barma.<sup>20</sup>

As a part of programme of the movement and prove their efficiency in as a warrior Panchanan Barma encouraged the youth to join the First World War as army and as such he requested government to recruit them. In spite of having engaged in agricultural activities for their livelihood, the Rajbanshi showed their credit of warrior when opportunity came. It is well known that king Naranarayan and his brother Chila Roy occupied the areas up to Ghoraghat after defeating Hussain Shah of Gour with the Rajbanshi soldier. There were Rajbanshi regiment in Assam during the British period. After starting First World War in 1914 huge number of Rajbanshi youth participated in the Great War through the Kshatriya Samiti.<sup>21</sup>

### **Assessment of the Kshatra Movement**

All the social movements in the colonial period for up gradation mean acquiring higher grade in the social framework of the traditional Hinduism. It was not fruitful to the lower class people for their development economically, culturally or educationally. It is true that no nation or community could be developed without the economic and educational development. For any community or caste having the up gradation could not be the solution for their basic problems. Furthermore it is historically proved that the casteism in the Hinduism created the division and separatism among the Hindus which wasted the 'Unity in Diversity'. Sekhar Bandhyopadhyay writes, "Also successful were the Rajbanshis and the Namasudras. But in none of these cases there was any major change in the ritual status..... This lack of success was also because these movements were supported by those people who had gained in wealth education and influence. Even the relatively more effective 'Rangpur Kshatriya Samiti of the Rajbanshis had only about 300 members in 1912 and most of these were middle class jotdars.'"<sup>22</sup>

The Kshatra movement could not solve the problems of the poor peasants and sharecroppers of the Rajbangsi community. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay writes in this regard, "The problem of the under-raiyats and adhiars did not any more attract the attention of these caste

leaders. Indeed many of these leaders themselves belonged to this rich peasant category and were so distressed by the depression that they really had no time and mood to think about the lesser peasants. And many of them, as the Rajbangsi leader Upendra Nath Barman himself acknowledged later, constitutional politics and council elections held out a promise for financial solvency.<sup>23</sup>

It is true that there were many Rajbanshi small peasants or sharecroppers bounded in a feudal system, had no rights or liberty on lands, cultivated lands only at the will of jotdars or zamindars and at any time they were evicted from lands. The Kshatra movement could not solve the problems of these sharecroppers as most of the leaders of the Kshatra movement belonged to the jotdar and zamindar classes, whereas the erstwhile lower caste or depressed class or Dalit movements were organized against the feudal system. Ideologically, in spite of their very diverse origins, it is remarkable how many themes the dalit movements shared in common. Central to their thinking was the adi theme, a definition of themselves as the original inhabitants of the country, a claim that their own inherent traditions were those of equality and unity, and a total rejection of caste as the imposition of the conquering Aryans who used this to subjugate and divide the natives.<sup>24</sup> The dalit movements organised struggles in various ways over the rejection of all the forms of feudal bondage imposed on dalits.<sup>25</sup>

Following the general model initially such reference group behaviour of different lower castes got expression through attempt to symbolise a change in their rank by adopting a new label, or by prefixing or suffixing labels of their castes in census returns, as in the cases of Sadgop, Tili, Madhunapit, Phulnapit, Mahisya, Satchasi, Rajbansi, Jogi or Namasudra.<sup>26</sup> Each of these castes resorted to some origin myth which associated them with one or the other of these varnas, and quoted Puranic slokas, sometimes spurious and sometimes incomplete, in support of these claims. Their pretensions were later validated through securing vyavasthas (religious judgements)

Not only the caste system in India, but also the social movement for up gradation in the social structure of the traditional Hinduism weakened the National intergradations or 'Unity in Diversity' for which anti-imperialist movement against the English got a setback. In this context Sekhar Bandhyopadhyay writes, 'On the one hand, the colonial Government, through all these executive and constitutional measures, were perhaps seriously trying to redress the existing



social imbalance as Indian society. But on the other, by encouraging self awareness and political aspirations of the lower castes, they tried to keep the nation divided and weak, at a time when anti- imperialist agitation was gathering momentum all over the country. It had now become necessary to popularise the need for a continued British connection with India and in so doing maintain the stability of the British position.<sup>27</sup> B. R. Ambedkar writes in this context, ‘An anti-social spirit is found wherever one group has “interests of its own,” which shut it out from full interaction with other group, so that its prevailing purpose is protection of what it has got. This anti- social spirit, this spirit of protecting its own interests is as much a marked feature of the different castes in their isolation from one another as it is of nations in their isolations.’<sup>28</sup>

Another important point should be mentioned here that the devastating and harmful caste division among the Hindus like untouchable system which affected the Indian society, economy and culture in many respects and wasted the National Unity and the stability of the country, particularly the higher caste people never gave honour or respect to the lower caste people, rather the people of higher caste always neglected and insulted the lower caste people for which different anti- caste movements took place in the different parts of the country, whereas the Kshatriya movement demanded for the higher status in traditional Hinduism. Ranji Dasgupta pointed out in this regard, ‘On the whole, the Rajbansi Kshatriya movement represented an endeavour to find social identity and status for the rajbansi Hindus in a situation of considerable flux and contained significant elements of dissent and opposition to upper caste domination. It exhibited Sanskritizing tendencies with an assertion of Aryan origin and striving for the higher social status of Kshatriyas by borrowing higher caste customs and rituals. ....Thus the movement was a conservative one with claim to a higher status within the existing caste hierarchy and there was no attack on or even a critique of the caste system. In contrast to some of the caste movement with a radical potential which rejected Brahman religious authority, the Rajbansi Kshatriya movement attempted to great recognition from Brahman pundits and sastric sanction.’<sup>29</sup>

Caste system in Indian society was a curse which harmed the country and the nation as a whole, it created many obstacles in the way of progress of the country. B. R. Ambedkar writes, ‘The effect of caste on the ethics of the Hindus is simply deplorable. Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible.

A Hindu's public is his caste. His responsibility is only to his caste. His loyalty is restricted only to his caste. Virtue has become caste-ridden and morality has become, caste-bound. There is no sympathy to the deserving. There is no appreciation of the meritorious. There is no charity to the needy. Suffering as such calls for no response. There is charity but it begins with the caste and ends with the caste. There is sympathy but not for men of other caste.”<sup>30</sup>

In the colonial period as a result of the introduction of Western education on the basis Western philosophy and to some extent the English administration depending on the Western ideology some logical awareness had grown in the mind of Indian people, particularly the western educated intellectuals. This wave reached to the educated persons belonged to lower caste people of whom being inspired by the Westerns and realizing the abolition of age- old devastating caste system of the Hindus for the progress of the nation they started anti-caste movements. Since 1920s the lower caste people or Dalits began to organise strongly throughout many regions of India. The most important of the early Dalit movements were the Ad-Dharm movement in the Punjab, the movement under Ambedkar in Maharashtra, mainly based Mahars which had its organisational beginnings in 1924; the Namasudra movement in Bengal; the Adi-Dravida movement in Tamilnadu; the Adi-Andhra movement in Andhra which had its first conference in 1917; the Adi-Karnataka movement; the Adi-Hindu movement mainly centred around Kanpur in UP; and the organising of the Pulayas and Cherumans in Kerala.<sup>31</sup>

Two large and effective protest movements flowered in Maharastra in the twentieth century. Non- Brahman movements and attempts of Untouchable castes to organise for social and political purposes have occurred in other parts of India. The Non- Brahman movement of Madras actually has a more coherent history and an earlier period of successful political activity than that of Maharastra. There was also a movement , or a group of movements, among the Untouchable of Madras, although neither this movement nor others the Ilavas of Malabar coast, the Chamars of Chhatisgarharea, the depressed of the Punjab or the Namasudras of Bengal, were as sustained and all- encompassing as that among the Mahars of Maharastra.<sup>32</sup>

When different lower castes or depressed class or Dalit movements were going on against the oppressors of higher castes or higher classes to abolish the caste system and to emancipate themselves from different types of bondage imposed on them, the leaders of Kshatra movement fought to establish themselves in the higher status of the social framework of traditional

Hinduism. There were poverty, illiteracy, ill-health and many other problems among the Rajbanshis. There were many Rajbanshi peasants or sharecroppers who had no rights on lands, worked in the lands without any rights or liberty only depending on the jotdars or zamindars like a slave. So in these circumstances Kshatra movement could not solve the basic problems of the Rajbanshis, particularly the poor Rajbanshis.

## Conclusion

There were ample evidences to show that in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries an awareness of the class difference among the Rajbanshis, difference between the rich and poor was originated. In spite of that there was no attempt from within the society for a political mobilisation based on class, and not was there any concrete manifestation of this awareness.<sup>33</sup> It is relevant to mention here in this context that the leaders of the Kshatra Movement did not support the class difference, difference between the rich and poor and difference between the zamindars- jotdars and small peasants and sharecroppers who had no rights on lands, it can be also said that most of the leaders of the Kshara movement belonged to the zamindar- jotdar class. Ranjit Dasgupta stated that the movement remained confined in the main among the large landholders, jotdars and better off peasants. However, it would not be incorrect to view it as ‘ a distorted but important manifestation of socio- economic tension and conflict.’<sup>34</sup>

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