

Trace out the Identity Crisis of the Two Castes of British Bengal: A Study

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Abstract: *Introduction of the term Identity Crisis is the sense of being or of becoming a badge that distinguish one from others. Peoples identity is a universal that is often treated as self-evident and problematic. As a concept, it is linked to state identity, national identity, ethnic identity, tribal identity, individual or personal identity. The formation of the identity based on their culture, language, religious belief, gender, ethnicity. Now identity crisis is a most important issue of the society in colonial time to post-colonial time of India. This, paper try to understand that every ethnic groups seeks to asset their ethno-based identity but except Rajbanshi and Namasudra communities of Bengal (West Bengal) faced identity problem from long time. Why Rajbanshi and Namasudra communities suffer identity crisis and this paper focusses on Rajbanshi and Namasudra communities of North Bengal. This work also based on their origin, development and social religion activity and reform movement. This paper used the Method of the writing is descriptive with applying historical analysis. Data has been collected from different secondary sources like books, research papers, research thesis, newspapers, and especially field report and also personal interview.*

Keywords: Religion, Gender, Ethnic, Society, Crisis, Identity, Colonial, Namasudra, Rajbanshi

1. Introduction

Human identity is the sense of being or becoming a badge that distinguish one from others. Human identity is a universal that is often treated as self-evident and problematic. As a concept, it is linked to state identity, national identity, ethnic identity, tribal identity etc. The state is seen as an active contributor to identity politics through creation and maintenance of state structure which defines and recognised people in terms of certain identities. Hence, we find that identity questions of the various caste and communities around in India are based on language, religion, castes, ethnicity, or tribal identity. Identity crisis had become one of the most serious issues in British colonial period to post-colonial period. Every ethnic group based on individual identity. Social mobility of the caste in Bengal has in recent times become the subject of enquiry by the historians like Hiteshranjan Sanyal and Sekhar Bandyopadhyaya. In their works a rational objectives analysis as to how dissident groups of castes of lower strata, such as the Rajbanshi, Namasudra. In the 19th century Bengal society, most of the dissident groups of some caste rose into prominence by economic and organized movement for projecting them as superior section. In this process they claimed to be as higher caste in the social hierarchy. In fact, economic prosperity in case of some other castes, apart from the said once, had facilitated in raising dominance in the countryside in some regions of Bengal. This paper only focusses on Rajbanshi and Namasudra communities of North Bengal. This work based on their origin, development and social religion activity and reform movement.

The 19th century of the India is often referred to as the century of Reformation', The main element of reformation movement are society and religion. While southern and western Indian social movement largely focussed on anti-Brahmanism, in northern India the movement was for Kshatriyazation. This movement with its epicentre in Calcutta also affected Eastern India. In my discussion on Kshatriya or social upliftment movement enlightened the society of North Bengal. Rajbanshi kshatriya movement flourished in the same flow. Social-religious movement of

the Rajbanshi community started in northern India and ultimately came to an end at the edge of Tista and Torsha by completing its journey from the Bay of Bengal.

On the other hand, social upliftment of the Namasudra communities was started in eastern Bengal which later spread to northern Bengal. Like the kshatriya movement, the Namasudra movement or Mathua movement was against the traditional Varna system in Hindu society. In fact, the Namasudras were known as 'Chandal' or 'Charal' earlier. Most of the report says about the educational movement and social reformed movement. Arguing from facts now observable, it seems likely that some of the castes alleged by Manu to be the result of more or less complicated crosses are really tribes which had lost their identity like the Rajbansis (Risley).

Origin of the two caste

Historical origins of the terms 'Rajbanshi' and 'Namasudra' and their emergence as distinct identity in North Bengal. It examines various views of Indian and foreign historians, scholars, writers and ethnographers of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial time of period regarding their origin and development or ethnographical aspects of the kshatriya Rajbanshi. The identity is a historical phenomenon and not a given or natural thing. We know every communities have their own special identity and history. This history and identity clearly understand the communities. H.H. Risley says in his book that Rajbanshi belonged to Dravidian origin. William Wilson Hunter also given similar view. Some British officials believe that the Rajbanshi hailed from Mongoloid stock. But the census commissioners and the colonial ethnographers, faced a major problem regarding the identification of the Rajbanshi. Other hand, many colonial ethnographers such as O'Malley and indigenous historians such as Monoranjan Roy, Harikishore Adhikari, Maniram Kabya Bhusan tried to establish Koches and Rajbanshi as two separate entities.

About the Namasudra H.H. Risley says that Namasudra derived from Chandal, Chaurals, Chang, Nama, Or Nishad a non-aryan caste of eastern Bengal. They engaged with the

most part of the beating and cultivation. Some of the scholar says that Namasudra not belong from Chandal, but Brahmins. Namasudra derived from Sanskrit name. Some scholar says Namasudras are neither Sudra nor Chandal rather they are brahmin offspring by birth. Sena king Ballal Sen conferred the name Chandal in place of Namasudra and Brahmin and he abolished the name Namasudra from all kinds known religious book forcefully. He suspended from job and they will be physically punished. Namasudra and Chandal not similar in respect of their occupation, food habits, and lifestyle. It is quite probable therefore that before 19th century there was no caste in Bengal called the 'Chandal' it was only the generic term used to refer to a wide variety of lower caste people. Then colonial government and its ethnographer lumped together several such low-ranking occupation sub-caste and branded them as Chandal.

Development of the two castes

The religious of the Rajbanshi was quite distinct from the upper caste Hindus of Bengal through in some cases the former were also adherent of Hinduism. Saivism and Vaisnavism were popular among the Rajbanshi, they little common with the upper caste Hindu. A crisis in rural credit that followed the depression compelled many Jotedars and middle peasants to sell their lands. The rise in price of food grain and other necessities, following the world war II. Regarding education it may be said that the Rajbanshi and the Namasudra gradually living in village. British colonial spread modern education was mainly confined to urban and its surrounding areas. Therefore, there were limited opportunities to spread education in the rural areas. To economically backward Rajbanshi and Namasudra education was a far cry because majority of them were financially not in a position to send their children to school. Besides the need provide helping hands to the family also become a stumbling block for children's education. At the earlier stage, some of the Rajbanshi hold plenty of lands to cultivation. They reluctant to take education for other profession. In addition to these, those who could afford in education for their children also shared a belief that if their sons were educated, they would take to write-collar and abandon cultivation, their family occupation. Whatever may be the causes, the Rajbanshi and Namasudra were lagging behind in the education and professional field in practical. However, the Rajbanshi were confined to their own social-cultural. Rajbanshi struggle for social upliftment against the Brahmins as well as the elites within their own community also probe the basis behind the assertion for Kshatriyas status. In the late 19th century and early 20th century the Rajbanshi made attempt to claim higher caste status by assertion themselves from as Kshatriya. Rajbanshi are also known as Bahe¹ this alienation from the caste Hindus did indirectly promote caste solidarity among the Rajbanshi. They were not against caste system, they aimed at was an adjustment of position and sharing the power with the upper caste and not the abolition of the caste system. But, later on, the urge to protest was submerged in the dominant trend of Sanskritization. So, it may be argued that regarding claiming for Kshatriyahood, every Hindu Pandits by analysing various ancient scriptures expressed their consent that the Rajbanshis were the Kshatriyas and can adopt sacred thread. In fact, this entire movement for

Kshatriyaization had received the patronage of the colonial government.

Other hand Namasudra leaders like Harichand Thakur, Guruchand Thakur and Pramatha Ranjan Thakur and others struggled relentlessly to do away with social ills like untouchability, inequalities of caste system, right to enter temples or shrines and an overall development of rural Bengal as well as North Bengal. They united the people of the lower community and protect them from religious conversion. They established many educational institutions in order to step up the condition of the down-trodden of the society. Their relentless struggle for upliftment of the down-trodden made them popular among thousands of people. The Namasudra movement, which is also popularly called the Matua movement, also received patronage from the colonial government as well as Christian missionaries. Colonial interest to counter 'Bhadralok nationalism' was one of the reasons behind its support for the Matua movement. It is interesting to note that the gradual transformation of the Namasudra movement from socio-religious movement to against social disabilities to a movement for separate political identity.

Identity Crisis among them

Caste consciousness and political awareness of the Namasudras led them to form caste association which later on turned into political organ for extracting their demands. They also brought about renaissance among the members of his community. As a farsighted man he realized that in order to be socially elevated the Namasudras must have education, for education brings wealth and without wealth no caste can move up in social scale. He stood firm against the suspicion of the elder Namasudras and on the 'ulterior motive' of the Christian missionaries. Thakur donated a piece of land where the Australian Baptist Mission was started. Besides, Mead began to run a charitable dispensary for their treatment. The elementary school was later developed into a high school. Realizing the importance of western education Guruchand Thakur induced C. S. Mead, the Australian missionary, to visit Orakandi for spreading education among the Namasudras. The Namasudras of Orakandi were immensely indebted to him for his contribution to their all-round development. Though his main intention of preaching Christianity did not achieve much success, yet his contribution towards the social upliftment of the Namasudras was remarkable. C. S. Mead fought against illiteracy and spread education among the Namasudras. They opened schools for all children and importance was attached to merit and not to caste. Their spirit of equality and liberal education system had attracted the depressed classes especially the Namasudras. The impact of the Kshatriyaization and Matua movement on the caste and communities or twentieth century's society, economy and politics. Actually, the formation of caste association as the socio-political platform of the different castes was to great extent the result of colonial policies. Right from the beginning of the British rule colonial policies brought about awakening among the lower castes. Firstly, they made inroads into the traditional caste structure by developing market economy.

The British rulers introduced the element the competition in the Indian economic system eliminating the occupational monopoly of different castes. Secondly, it stimulated caste consciousness which manifested itself in form of organized caste movement. The impact of the British rule though lately felt by the rural people, brought about renaissance among the depressed classes. The major sphere where the impact of the British rule was immensely felt was in the realm of education. The craze for learning was steadily growing among the Rajbansis and the Namasudras. Unlike other parts of Bengal, here in North Bengal, reservation policy of the government has created a complex social relation among the inhabitants, both indigenous and migrants. Grievances regarding the sharing of reservation benefits resulted in an unprecedented social tension in the region which is still a continuing phenomenon. It is interesting to note that in spite of such socio-economic tension the undercurrent of cultural fusion and assimilation is simultaneously working in the region, for instance, the Bhaoiya of the Rajbansis and Bhatiyali of the refugee migrants from east Pakistan, now Bangladesh have become part and parcel of the life of the people in this region. Actually, the Indian sub-continent has been linked to a deep net into which various races of Asia and other parts of the world had been drifted and mingled with the Indian population. Different races, languages, religions, customs and rituals have made India which have no equals. North Bengal being a small region of Eastern India carries a great importance considering from multiplicity of caste, sect, religion, language and culture. Historical sources adequately bring out the fact of social mobility among the autochthones in different forms including the emergence of new castes in the social claim of undivided northern Bengal. The Rajbansis appellation and the claim of Kshatriya status goes back to the early historical period. The colonial administration-ethnographers like Gait, Hutton, Dalton, Risley and Thompson were unanimously supportive that a section of Koch of northern Bengal began to call themselves as 'Rajbansi' from the early nineteenth century. But there was also a belief among others that all the Rajbansis were not Koch.

Some of them were Dravidian and not Mongoloid like the Koches. My view of observation is that the Koches were non-Aryan in origin. Some of them adopted Hinduism and became Rajbansis. These Rajbansis later on claimed to be Kshatriya. And Namasudras are neither Sudra nor Chandal rather they are Brahmin offspring by birth; but because of some social imposed force they lost their identity as Brahmin and as a result they had to live like a Sudra for their survival. Sen King Ballal Sen conferred the name Chandal in place of Namasudra and Brahmin and he abolished the name Namasudra from all kinds of known religious book forcefully; and he made a rule that those who will not consider Namasudra as Chandal they will be suspended from job and they will be physically punished. Namasudras and Chandals have no similarity in respect of their occupation, food habits, and lifestyle. It is quite probable therefore that before nineteenth century there was no caste in Bengal called the 'Chandala' it was only the generic term used to refer to a wide variety of lower caste people. Later on, the colonial administration and its ethnographers lumped together several such low-ranking occupational sub-caste and branded them as Chandala. A generic term was thus

transformed into a caste name, which its recipients later tried to break out of by adopting a more respectable appellation, Namasudra.

The Namasudra leaders like all other depressed classes welcomed British rule as they thought that it would emancipate them from Hindu tyranny. They realised that without British help socio-economic elevation of the depressed classes could not have carried through. Similarly, the British rulers wanted to get the help of the Muslim and the depressed classes people to curb Indian nationalism. In order to get the support of the depressed class, the British special favour in matters of education, employment and constitutional right for them. It may be said Government pursued the policy of 'Protective discrimination' i.e. policy to grant that the Rajbanshi Kshatriyas movement, its plans and programmes were sectarian in nature. But if we analyse the contemporary social situation it clearly unravels that under such circumstances movements of these nature were inevitable. The Kshatriyas movement of the Rajbanshi not only gave a new lease of life to the dying society but also channelized it on the path of development. Had it not been so, a large section of the Rajbansis would have had discard Hinduism and take recourse to new religion. C. C. Sanyal in his PanchananBarma Memorial Lecture commented that in this way 'Hindu society of bordered North Bengal was saved.'

2. Conclusion

Lastly say that, today the prestigious place in the social hierarchy and financial soundness of many of the Rajbansis and Namasudra communities as well as other Dalits—all owe to Thakur PanchananBarma and Guruchand Thakur and many others responsible leaders who carried forward the movement for upliftment or entire development of their society as well as other backward classes. In recent time the Rajbansis and Namasudras of North Bengal demand for separate state and separate dominion. This is almost introducing another new crisis.

Note:

Rajbanshi known as bahe. They used to refer word bahe, implying their culture inferiority. The word bahe was a distortion of the word 'babahe', by which the Rajbanshi generally addressed a person. They used to refer to the Bhatia, meaning an outsider to their land.

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