Social Reform Movement in North Eastern India and Role of Rai Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma (1866-1935)

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Abstract: In nineteenth century, the basic trends of social movement were more or less as same in India as well as in Bengal. Like Rammohun Roy, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Jotiba Phule, Periyar E.V. Ramaswami, Rai Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma (1866-1935) was not only the eminent social reformer of the Rajbanshi Community of the North Eastern part of India but also an educationist, researcher, scholar, disciplined, sincere and dedicated personality, idealistic and foresighted politician. He was born on 14th February, 1866 in the village of Khalisamary of Mathabhanga subdivision in the Princely State of Cooch Behar. He secured M.A. Degree in Sanskrit in 1896 and the LLB Degree in 1900 AD. In spite of being the 1st M.A., L.L.B. in the entire Rajbanshi Community, he did not get proper responsible job in Cooch Behar State but the post of Hostel Superintendent. However, he did not continue his service and resigned from the post and went to Rangpur and started practicing law at Rangpur Court (Now Bangladesh). The lion share of his life has been spent in Rangpur and he had sacrificed himself for the betterment and empowerment the Rajbanshi society in social position, empower of women and establishment of their legitimate right in society. After 150 years of his birth anniversary, Rai Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma is still a crucial point of research in North Eastern part of India.

Key Words: foresighted, educationist, social reformer, Hostel Superintendent, responsible, meritorious, empowerment, betterment, establishment, legitimate right

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I. INTRODUCTION

The self-conscious social mobility movement among the Rajbanshis of North Eastern India as well as undivided Bengal for the demand of ‘Kshatriya’ status has been appeared throughout the Indian Census Reports of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this paper an attempt has been made to discuss the Rajbanshi social movement in two dimensions –

i. Establishment of Kshatriya identify and

ii. Enter into the list of SC in Indian Constitution.

The historical records show that in India, there had been consistent movements for upward mobility within the caste. The main purposes of this movement was its promotion from a lower to a higher berth in the ‘varna’ caste hierarchy and greater respectability in terms of the given conditions of caste system in a region. Some intermediate castes claimed up to the respectable rank in the caste hierarchy through other social mobility process. The caste pride was also very prominent and usually the upper castes claimed to be culturally superior to those lower down. There were numerous examples of daily usages of hierarchical behavior in Bengali life, which clearly indicates the mentality of the upper castes towards the lower castes. Such caste related cultural stereotyping often-generated social tension. But it was difficult to visualize any alternative means to register their protest or ventilate their grievance; the aggrieved lower castes looked for a solution within the caste structure itself by claiming higher status.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE MOVEMENT

In the social position of undivided Bengal, the Rajbanshis were placed at the bottom of the structure, along with the Namasudras, the Pods and the other antajas castes. Those among lower caste were not ready to bear this lower caste stigma, they argued and appealed in favour of their higher status. Shekhar Bandopadhyaya and Swaraj Basu have observed that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries apart from the Rajbanshis, several other lower and intermediary castes in Bengal as well as in other parts of India were also trying to claim higher caste status. Basu also argues that the local social situation also provided a sufficient ground for the Rajbanshis assertion of a Kshatriya identity and their endeavour to build up caste solidarity. The
Rajbanshis were treated as ‘backwards’, ‘uncultured’ and even antajas. They were also called as ‘babe’ implying their cultural inferiority by the upper caste Hindus. It is to be mentioned here that the word ‘babe’ was a distortion of the word ‘bababte’ by which the Rajbanshis generally addressed a person like fatherly/motherly relation. As a result the indigenous Rajbanshis used to refer to the outsiders as ‘bhata’, meaning an outsider (from East Pakistan) to their land. Thus, the attitude of cultural superiority of the immigrant people and their general tendency to look down upon the Rajbanshis prevented a closer relationship between the two communities. This alienation from the other caste did indirectly promote caste solidarity among the Rajbanshis according to Basu.

There were other causes of alienation among the Rajbanshis. They have faced insults and humiliation from the Brahmanical culture of the caste Hindus. There are numerous instances of humiliation and objectionable identities of the Rajbanshis by the other caste Hindus. The Rajbanshis were treated as barbarians or Mlechha, antajas, ajalanchal who had no right to enter the places of worship on any public places/celebration of pujas or to enter the kitchen in the upper caste households. Dharma Narayan Bhakti Shastr has mentioned that the Caste Hindus did not accept water from the Rajbanshis. However, after the beginning of the Kshatriya movement the situation gradually became changed. Upendra Nath Barman, in his biography of Panchanan Barma namely Thakur Panchanan Barman Jeeban Charit, has mentioned that one day by mistake the lawyer Panchanan Barma went to the court room wearing the ‘Toga’ (the cap) of some Maitra, who was one of his high caste colleagues in the bar. Realizing his mistake, when he was going to ‘back’ the cap to Maitra, the latter angrily threw it away and said, “I hate to use a ‘Toga’ used by a Rajbanshi”. Upendra Nath Barman has also mentioned the incident of Rangpur Normal School boarding house where a Rajbanshi student had entered the kitchen of the hostel to enquire from the cook whether the food was ready or not, but on this plea instantly two or three boys, belonging to the upper castes, refused to accept food, which ultimately had to be thrown away for the consumption of the cows and fresh food had to be prepared. In his autobiography, Uttar Banga Sekal O Amar Jiban Smruti (Bengali), Upendra Nath Barman has mentioned an incident of his student life at Coocch Behar Victoria College (1916-20). Another personal memoir related to the Swadeshi Days (i.e. first decade of the twentieth century) mentions that in the Rajshahi College hostel a Rajbanshi student who was not allowed to enter the dining hall, was ultimately compelled to have his meal in the hostel courtyard. To add to all these, the students of the lower castes were required to wash their own utensils. There are numerous incidents of the caste hierarchy in the society under review.

From the above instances, it is clear that the position of the Rajbanshi in local social life was not respectable to the caste Hindus. Consequently, a sense of alienation and a spirit of community solidarity among the Rajbanshis have been developed. Their search for Kshatriya identity was only a symbolic cultural expression of this emergent collective self-consciousness. Swaraj Basu argued that being marginalized by the upper caste gentry in the field of power race, both in economic and political, the Rajbanshi elites used the caste idioms to voice their grievances. Thus, the aspiration for higher social status and political power motivated the Rajbanshi elites to develop among the Rajbanshis in general an articulate caste consciousness in order to launch a well-organized movement for social justice.

### III. KSHATRIYAZATION MOVEMENT

Kshatrization movement was launched by Panchanan Barma, popularly known as Rai Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma to Rajbanshi society. He was belonged to the Rajbanshi community and the leader of the social reform movement of Cooch Behar. He was born on 14th February,1866 in the village of Khalisamary of Mathabhanga subdivision in the Princely State of Cooch Behar. We learn from writings of Upendra Nath Barman, ‘Thakur Panchanan Barman’s Jeeban Charit’ about his primary and higher education. He secured the B.A. Degree in Sanskrit Literature in 1893 and M.A. in 1896. Latter he secured the LLB Degree from Ripon College, Calcutta in 1900 AD. In spite of being the 1st M.A., L.L.B. in the entire Rajbanshi Community, he was not given the proper responsible job in Cooch Behar State but the post of Hostel Superintendent in Cooch Behar. In fact the rejection of Panchanan’s application for of Sub-Divisional Officer by the Cooch Behar state, prove to the blessing to Rai Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma and his carrier in the latter period. After that he went to Rangpur and started practicing as lawyer at Rangpur Court now in Bangladesh.

It was of course against the ill-treated humiliation by the caste Hindu. They became conscious of their low social position and wanted a higher berth in the local caste hierarchy. Before Rai Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma, Sri Harimohan Ray Khajanchi, a local ‘Zamindar’ of Shyampur (Rangpur) launched a movement claiming that the Rajbanshi are ‘kshatriya’ by caste. He had established an association named ‘Rangpur Bratya Kshatriya Jatir Unnati Bidhayani Sabha’ for improvement of his community. To fulfil his aim he began to collect history, proverbs, traditions, cultural heritage of the ‘Kshatriyas’. He also met many Brahmins ‘Pandits’, ‘Naiyayikas’, ‘Sastrakars’ of Rangpur and Kamarupa, and other elite sections of Hindu society in Rangpur. To his credit, he was successful in getting recognition of his caste from the ‘Pandit Samaj’ of Rangpur and Kamarupa and a section of the elite group in Rangpur. In his two books- Vratya Mochan Paddhati and

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Kshatriya Uponayan Byavastha he published the opinions of the ‘Pandits’ of Mithila, Kamarupa and Bengal stating that Rajbanshis were ‘Kshatriyas’ and had become ‘Bratya’ due to the non-observance of certain Vedic cites but can regain their ‘kshatriyas’ position. District Magistrate F.A. Skyne, the census authority issued an order on 18th May that stated from May, 1891 the Rajbanshis would be permitted to refer themselves as Bratya Kshatriya in all Governmental Deeds. But in the Census Report of 1901, the Rajbanshis and the Koches were therefore, classified as the same caste. By this time, the leadership was taken over by a more competent dynamic and forceful personality namely Rai Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma, an advocate of Rangpur originally an inhabitant of Cooch Behar State.

Under the leadership of Rai Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma, the movement had been got a new impetus. Attempts were made to collect proves, traditions, history, songs, sayings, and popular folktales, which made the task easier to be established kshatriya identity. Harikishore Adhikary, a well versed in Sanskrit and Hindu scripture published a booklet namely Rajbansi Kula Pradeep in which he established that the Rajbanshis were Paundra-kshatriyas. The Rajbanshi literary works of Pandit Jagatmohan Singh namely, Kula Kaumudi, “Kshatra Sangeet” Gobinda Chandra Ray’s Kshatra Sangeet and Maniram Kabya Bhusan’s ‘Rajbanshi Kula Dipak’ also supported this view. Rai Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma was the secretary of ‘Rangpur Sahitya Parishad’, a branch of ‘Bangio Sahitya Parishad’ wrote a number of traditional ‘chhilkas’, sayings, proverbs, myths, folksongs, tales of the community which were published in Rangpur ‘Sahitya Parishad Patrika’. Panchanan and other leaders decided to form a platform of the movement. With this idea a conference was convened on May 1, 1910 (18 Baishakh 1317 B.S.) in Rangpur town at Rangpur Natya Mandir which resulted in the foundation of the Kshatriya Samiti. It included Rajbanshis from Rangpur, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar Dinajpur, Dhubri Goalpara, Bagura and Mymensingh amounting to almost 400 representatives. The aims and objectives of the Kshatriya Samiti were formulated with Sri Madhusudhan Ray a pleader of Jalpaiguri Bar as president and Panchanan Sarkar was the secretary of the Samiti. The Rajbanshis of Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Goalpara and Purnea of Bihar urged permission from the District Magistrate to enlist them as kshatriyas and to write surname like Singh, Barman, and Roy instead of Das. The Deputy Commissioner of the Goalpara district in Assam ordered the Field Superintendents on 27th January in 1911, to enroll the Rajbanshis as kshatriyas. The Rajbanshi 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. During the census operations of 1921 and 1931, they once again mobilized the community and appealed to the census authorities to return them as only ‘kshatriya’ instead of ‘Rajbanshi kshatriyas’. Thus the Rajbanshi caste leaders tried to mobilize the community around the census to attain a respectable position in social hierarchy. By using this issue of census, the leaders wanted to develop a community consciousness among them. It could be further strengthened through the process of ‘sanskritization’ and westernization. To develop an articulate caste consciousness among the students, an association of the students called Kshatriya Chhautra Samiti was established in 1917A.D. which acted as a sister organization of the Kshatriya Samiti.

The Kshatriya Samiti published a number of pamphlets containing of these ritual and appealed to be performed by the members of the community. One of the important aspect of religious reforms was the introduction of the worshipping of goddess ‘Chandi’ as ‘Chandi’ is regarded as the symbol of ‘matri shakti’. It became a regular practice and custom of the Samiti to worship Chandi (goddess of Shakti or power) before every annual conference of the Kshatriya Samiti. The Rajbanshis began to take sacred thread through ‘upanayan’ and declared themselves as kshatriyas. It is certain that Rai Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma saved the Rajbanshis of Northern Bengal from leaving the Hindu fold. This was his greatest contribution to the Rajbanshis in fact to the Hindu society.

The Rajbanshi social leaders were painfully aware of the fact of educationally backwardness of the community. They realized that without an improvement in educational standard, the community would not realize the value of the social reforms. Therefore, the social leaders of the Rajbanshi society took initiative measures to promote education among the members of their community. The Samiti took provision for financial help to the needy students of the community. It also took initiative to set up Kshatriya Hostel for the Rajbanshi students. In this regard, The Samiti also collected funds from among the members to construct hostel for the Rajbanshi students in Rangpur district school along with the Government contribution. Rai Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma argued that Government assistance was necessary in order to spread education among the Rajbanshis and subsequent improvement of their social status. He also argued that students hostel which would serve as an umbrella for unifying the Rajbanshi Kshatriya students and would help to continue the ‘kshatriya’ movement in future.

IV. ENTER INTO SCHEDULED CASTE LIST

Rai Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma was very much aware about the socio-economic backwardness of the Rajbanshi community. So, beyond Kshatriya movement, the Rajbanshi caste movement was mainly confined to the articulation of the demand for being enlisted as a Scheduled Caste. The social leaders tried to secure special
 protección in education, employment and in matters of reservation in the legislative council and the other local bodies of administration by this policy.

Since the late nineteenth century, the colonial officials were intending to prepare a list of caste, which needed special protection from the Government. Meanwhile, the Calcutta University Commission in 1884 A.D. prepared a list of 21 caste, that required such special assistance and called these the “depressed classes.” Later the Government gradually expanded this list by including more and more caste at different stages. At the initial stage, the Rajbanshi leaders argue that they were educationally and economically backward and demanded the inclusion in the list of ‘Depressed class’. However, the local associations viz. the Bangiya Brahman Sabha,(BBS), the Indian Association, the Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha (BPHS) etc. had strong view against the demand of the Rajbanshis. Only the ‘Bengal Depressed Classes Association’(BDCA-1932) argued that the move by certain groups to excluded the Rajbanshies and some of the lower classes from the list of depressed classes was to deprive the backward section of the society of their legitimate rights. Therefore, the Rajbanshis should be included in the list of Depressed Classes. Rai Sahab Thakur Panchanan Barma also argued with the ‘Bengal Depressed Classes Association’, but the term ‘depressed classes’ bore social stigma and it smacked of social inferiority. He suggested that instead of ‘depressed classes’, it should be termed as ‘backward classes’ and education could be made the criteria for ascertaining backwardness. From 1920s, the Samiti regularly reiterated it firm loyalty to the British Government. A resolution was adopted in seventeenth annual conference of the Kshatriya Samiti (Assar 1333 B.S) that “….. we ….the Kshatriyas are expressing our sincere and firm devotion and loyalty to the British Raj” In its various resolutions it concentrated on the demands for formation of a Rajbanshi Khsatriya battalion, nomination of adequate number of Rajbanshi kshatriyas to the district board, union boards, municipalities, etc. that is local Self- Government institutions, suitable measures for spread of educations and increased job opportunities for the educated Rajbanshi kshatriya youth .

In the meanwhile, the Lord Lothian committee in 1932 A.D. was appointed to enquiry for the franchise for Indian people. The Commission excluded the Rajbanshis for the “Depressed Classes” as it was classified that those were untouchables and do not have the right to enter the temples. The commission also stated that the previous definition of ‘Depressed Classes’ created problems as high caste could also demand representation being “educationally and economically backward”. The Rajbanshis were excluded because it was clearly incompatible with their insisted demand to be recognized as ‘twice- born’ or Kshatriya. The committee commented, “The Rajbanshi is a well organized community. They want to run with the hare and hunt with hound.” The commission’s rejection was, “to prevent the danger that they may swamp the general interests of the genuine depressed classes.

A meeting was convened in Kshatriya Samiti office at Rangpur to discuss whether the Rajbanshis should be included or not in the list of backward classes. Some section of the Rajbanshi community has a strong feeling that this would be inconsistent with their Kshatriya status and would lower with their social dignity. Rai Sahab Thakur Panchanan Barma then a member of the Bengal Legislative Council tried to convince his fellow caste leaders that without protection and reservation in politics, education and administration, a backward caste could not improve its social position merely by capitalizing on caste pride. He also cited the example of Brahmin who worked as cooks and did not earn the respect of their community. Hence, the Rajbanshi leaders argued that they were consistent with their Kshatriya status and would lower their social dignity. However, the Rajbanshies and some of the lower classes from the list of depressed classes were not related with ritual and social hierarchy.

Finally at the end of 1933 A.D. the final list of Scheduled Caste for Bengal was published by the Bengal Reforms Office and the Rajbanshis were included in it. And after independences, the Rajbanshis remains as Scheduled Castes in West Bengal. It was due to the systematic thinking and farsighted views of Rai Sahab Thakur Panchanan Barma that the Rajbanshies could secure the facilities of the Scheduled Caste, reservations in jobs and in political sphere. Panchanan’s efforts had contributed largely of amelioration and awakening of the community both social and political, but at this as an opportunistic maneuver of the Kshatriya Samiti. By demanding reservation for Scheduled Caste, the Rajbanshis had identified the backward socio-economic status,
which is the prime criteria for reservation, is contrary to the realization of kshatriyaization. Thus, sanskritization and reservation perhaps appeared to them antithetical to each other.

In spite of this controversial antithetical theory of the Rajbanshis, under the leadership of Rai Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma has secured reservation of jobs in Bengal provincial service and entered in the politics as representative from backward classes. Now many of the Rajbanshis secured the position of the M.P.,M.L.A. Cabinet ministry in West Bengal, Sabhadhipati of Zilaparishad and other local bodies. Rai Saheb was elected as the member of the Bengal Legislative Council in three times and elected members of the many different committees but he could not arise any question of communal disintegration. He advised to the kshatriyas like that-

“Hindhu Musalman bichan naire, manusjan to noy bhin/
Ulsi dhaya arter uddhar ai kshatriyer chin”.
[ Free translation: There is no difference between the Hindus and the Muslims, rather it is the duty of the kshatriyas to help the others who is in danger.]

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion it might be said that the Rajbanshis were not only benefited through Kshatriya movement of Rai Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma but its result effected on the other tribes of North Eastern part of India like Jalda, Hajong, Dhimal, Madai, Rabha etc. These tribes were united themselves through this ‘Kshatriya’ movement and able to establish their social right and status. Rai Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma gave a new life and status to the majority of the people of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Rangpur and Kamrupa. This great man has died on 9th September in 1966 and his death remains as great loss to the Rajbanshsis as well as to the people of North East India.

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