

## **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. Ramswami , 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 14<sup>th</sup> 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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 scarified 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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*.<sup>4</sup> They were also called as 'bahe' implying their cultural inferiority by the upper caste Hindus. It is to be mentioned here that the word 'bahe' was a distortion of the word 'babahe' by which the Rajbanshis generally addressed a person like fatherly /motherly relation.<sup>5</sup> As a result the indigenous Rajbanshis used to refer to the outsiders as 'bhatia', 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.<sup>6</sup>

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*, *ajalachal* 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 Shastri has mentioned that the Caste Hindus did not accept water from the Rajbanshis.<sup>7</sup> However, after the beginning of the *Kshatriya* movement the situation gradually became changed.<sup>8</sup> Upendra Nath Barman, in his biography of Panchanan Barma namely *Thakur Panchanan Barma 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".<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> In his autobiography, *Uttar Banger Sekal O Amar Jiban Smriti* (Bengali), Upendra Nath Barman has mentioned an incident of his student life at Cooch Behar Victoria College (1916-20).<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> There are numerous incidents of the caste hierarchy in the society under review.<sup>13</sup>

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 idiom 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.<sup>15</sup>

### 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 14<sup>th</sup> 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 Barma'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 1<sup>st</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> He had established an association named 'Rangpur Bratya Kshatriya Jatir Unnati Bidhayani Sabha' for improvement of his community.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> In his two books- *Vratya Mochan Paddhati* and

*Kshatriya Upanayan 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 rites but can regain their 'kshatriyas' position.<sup>18</sup> District Magistrate F.A. Skyne, the census authority issued an order on 18<sup>th</sup> May stated that from May, 1891 the Rajbanshis would be permitted to refer themselves as *Bratya Kshatriya* in all Governmental Deeds.<sup>19</sup> 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 proverbs, 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 *Rajbanshi 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'.<sup>20</sup> 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*.<sup>21</sup> 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 27<sup>th</sup> 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, 'Rajbanshi', with *kshatriya* in bracket.<sup>22</sup> 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*'.<sup>23</sup> 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 Chhatra Samiti* was established in 1917 A.D.<sup>24</sup> which acted as a sister organization of the *Kshatriya Samiti*.<sup>25</sup>

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 worshiping 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*.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

#### 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

protection 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.<sup>30</sup> Only the ‘Bengal Depressed Classes Association’ (BDCA-1932) argued that the move by certain groups to excluded the Rajbanshis and some of the lower classes from the list of the 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 Saheb 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.<sup>31</sup> From 1920s, the *Samiti* regularly reiterated its 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*”<sup>32</sup> In its various resolutions it concentrated on the demands for formation of a Rajbanshis *Kshatriya* 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.<sup>33</sup>

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 hurt with hound.”<sup>34</sup> The commission’s rejection was, ‘to prevent the danger that they may swamp the general interests of the genuine depressed classes.’<sup>35</sup>

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 Saheb 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 caste. Therefore, exclusion of the Rajbanshis from this list of “Depressed Class” would be detrimental to the interests of the community. He was ultimately able to persuade the other members of his society in favour of inclusion to the list.<sup>36</sup>

Rai Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma now met with Sir William Prentice, the Home Minister and sent a telegram to the Secretary of the State. Sir William Prentice suggested the term “Scheduled Castes” in the place of “Depressed Classes” and it was accepted by the Government of India’s Resolution dated 16<sup>th</sup> January 1933 A.D. Untouchables, temple entry, etc. were to be taken into consideration not by themselves only, but along with other factors such as educational economic and political position of the caste. The committee finally declared that “The social and political backwardness of the castes and the necessity of securing for them special representation in order to protect their interest was recognized.”<sup>37</sup> It was the resolution of the Government of India 1933 A.D., the name “Depressed Classes” was replaced by “Scheduled Castes”. Put forwarding the new definition applied for Scheduled Caste, the *Kshatriya Samiti* leaders argued that the category for ‘Scheduled’ was not related with ritual and social hierarchical status of a caste and that the categories ‘Scheduled Caste’ just referred to certain castes included in a schedule for economic and educational purposes, hence there was no ground for having any misgiving.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> And after independences, as per article 341 of Indian Constitution and orders of 1950 A.D. and 1956 A.D., the Rajbanshis remains as Scheduled Castes in West Bengal. It was due to the systematic thinking and farsighted views of Rai Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma that the Rajbanshis 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<sup>40</sup>, 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 *kshatriyazation*. 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-

“Hindu Musalman bichar 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 Jaldai, 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 9<sup>th</sup> September in 1966 and his death remains as great loss to the Rajbanshis as well as to the people of North East India.

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