

Rediscovering Identities: Rajbanshi Community and Folklore

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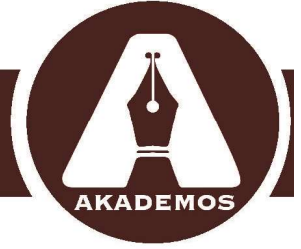
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Abstract

This paper makes an attempt to explore, how the long-submerged *Rajbanshi* community resurfaces in the Indian Literature. Whether folktales can enhance the cultural and regional backdrop of the *Rajbanshis*, there lies the question. Pluralism or multiculturalism has been playing a decisive role in the functioning of modern states throughout the world. In case of India, cultural or tribal or communal consciousness has risen mainly in post-independence era. The *Rajbanshi* community, one of the major ethnic groups of North Bengal, came up with the *Kamtapur* Movement to fight for their identity and a formal recognition in the society. Social Reform is a kind of social movement that aims to make gradual change, or change in certain aspects of society, rather than rapid or fundamental one. The folk literature was spread through the rural culture of the *Rajbanshi* community. Folk-culture is one of the main elements of folk-literature. Folk literature is thus a verbal art or expressive literature, spoken, sung and refers to the oral customs, traditions, and culture of a group of people. There are a lot of literary sources that are hiding amidst folklores. The *Rajbanshis*, the *Rabhas*, the *Totos* and many more tribes were losing their identity. Amongst them, The *Rajbanshis* led the *Kamtapur* Movement to be identified amongst all. Folklore was used as an instrument and was the sole medium to make this social reform movement bring in certain changes and help the community to move forward to rediscover their identity; the *Rajbanshis*, thus, made a march towards success.

Key words: *Rajbanshi* community, Folklore, Pluralism, Identity, Social reform movement





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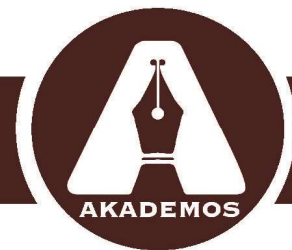
1. Introduction:

The Rajbanshi community tried to glorify their past by referring to the folklores. The main aim in this paper is to highlight how the Rajbanshis resurfaces and rediscovers themselves in the Indian Literature taking folklore as the instrument to show their progress and development in the society. The term 'folklore' was coined by the famous British antiquarian William John Thoms(16 November 1803 – 15 August 1885) in the year 1846. Prior to that, materials of folklore, in English, were referred randomly as 'popular antiquities' or 'popular literature'. W. J. Thoms, under the pseudonym of Ambrose Merton, wrote a letter to a journal titled *The Athenaeum*(1846) proposing that the singular word 'folklore' should be used in English to denote the "the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs" and other materials "of the olden time". He argued that the word 'folklore', being the composite of 'folk' (people) and 'lore' (knowledge) would be a good Anglo-Saxon compound instead of all other somewhat cumbersome terms. His letter was published in the August of 1846 and his proposal was soon accepted widely (Dutta, 23). Henceforth, the use of folklore started as an important substance and concern in literature, history, anthropology and many other subjects. Folklore hence played a pivotal role in propagating ideas of identity in the world.

2. Rajbanshi community: A Background Study:

The Rajbanshis were the indigenous people of the greater part of North Bengal and lower Assam in the pre-colonial and colonial period. The Rajbanshis were the majority people of North Bengal, particularly in the districts of Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Dinajpur and the plain areas of Darjeeling district and the Cooch Behar state. According to Swaraj Basu,





The Rajbansis 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...These Rajbanshis later on claimed to be Kshatriya. The local situation also provided a sufficient ground for the Rajbanshis' assertion of a Kshatriya identity and their endeavour to build up caste solidarity...There are many debates among the origin or ethnological identity of the Rajbanshis. The main debate was whether Rajbanshis were originated from Mongoloid race or Aryan race. This debate was initiated from the starting of the census work from 1870 onwards by the British- India Government.... (Bhawal, 56)

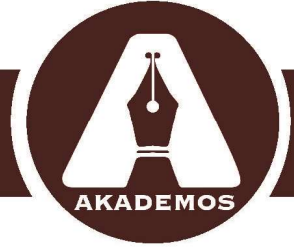
In one of the government census report, it was declared that the Rajbanshis belonged to the non-Aryan tribe which meant the lower graded people of the society who were denied of any kind of prestige or honour in the eyes of any upper strata of the society. They readily protested against the census report and that led to the emergence of the social movement called –Kshatriya Movement.

In the year 1950 a major historical decision was made by the government of merging the princely state Coochbehar with West Bengal. Large part of Rajbanshi population in general was unhappy with the merge of so called independent princely state with West Bengal as a district of the province. Their unhappiness and discontent increased with the passage of time when they found that the successive government did hardly take any comprehensive steps for the socio-economic development of the region. The Rajbanshis were bewildered. The state government could not come forward with any comprehensive programme for the development of this area. The non-Rajbanshis became dominant in all spheres of life. The peasants, workers and other section of people belonging to lower stratum found no way out to overcome this situation. The traditional working class and peasant's movements could not properly deal with ethnic, linguistic and political issues. Ultimate fall out of which was the emergence of Kamtapur movement. Their fight for their identity continued ever since.

3. Folklore complementing folk culture:

Folk culture has found its priorities in the language of literature and amid various literary sources we can get an evidence of the folklores, hiding there. It has been seen in various reports, that, North Bengal was devoid of the modern education until the British rule in India. Folk literature complements folk culture and vice versa. It is this folklore, which spreads heavily by speaking from man to man. It has been mentioned in various works that the written literature has gained its momentum and developed highly, due to the folk literature and oral literature.





Thus, it can be rightly said that folk literature stands more powerful than any written document as those enriches the culture, religion, and customs, etc. of a particular group or tribe.

The transference of oral tradition to writing and print does not destroy its validity as folklore but rather while freezing or fixing its form, helps to keep it alive and to diffuse it among those to whom it is not native or fundamental. For the folk memory forgets as much as it transmits and improves. In the reciprocity of oral and written tradition and the flux of cultural change and exchange, revival plays as important a part as survival, popularization is as essential as scholarship, and the final responsibility rests upon the accumulate and collective taste and judgment of the many rather the few. (Barman,30)

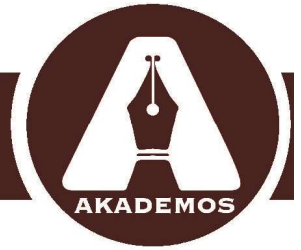
4. Status of education- holding to folklore within Rajbanshis:

While the whole country was progressing including Bengal, the northern part of Bengal was deprived of the modern renaissance. With the emergence of modern education: customs, traditions and rituals were taking the back stand in the society but on the other hand the agrarian society was unaware of the modern education again it was only the children of the higher strata who could attend the schools and colleges. Therefore, a large number of people remained uneducated.

Bengali literature had flourished in Kolkata and adjacent areas, after the establishment of the Bangiyo Sahitya Parishad. The prose literatures were spread and led by Vidyasagar and Rammohan Roy at the same time. A unit of the Bangiyo Sahitya Parishad was established at Rangpur in 1906 to spread the literary culture in Bengal. The ancient glory of our country was to be rescued by the study of folk tradition. Folk culture was spread over a large part of Bengal, especially to those places where the light of renaissance could not reach. Ancient society without the folk culture and literature cannot be imagined (Leach, 399).

Panchanan Barma moved ahead to know about the society. He looked into matters like proverbs, verses, songs, riddles, words etc. All these had a special link with society and were formulated, based on the different customs. People did not have a written document so they used these verses for different purposes, like singing the verse to a sleeping child, sometimes playing of drama etc. The actual history is hidden in folk cultures for decades. Jones Balys said:





Folklore comprises traditional creations of peoples primitive and civilized. These are achieved by using sounds and words in metric form and prose and include also folk beliefs or superstitions customs and performances, dances and plays. He used to go to several places to collect the various components of folk culture as he felt that it was the need of the hour (Barman, 31).

5. Pluralism or multiculturalism in North Bengal:

Pluralism or multiculturalism has been playing a decisive role in the functioning of modern states throughout the world. In case of India, cultural or tribal or communal consciousness has risen mainly in post-independence era. The *Rajbanshi* community, one of the major ethnic groups of North Bengal, came up with the *Kamtapur* Movement to fight for their identity and a formal recognition in the society. This community, with folk culture as their soul instrument, moved ahead to fight for their identity, to rediscover their past, to highlight their tradition and culture. They had to fight amongst so many other ethnic communities who were also fighting for their rights.

India is a land of diversities: so many cultures, so many traditional and cultural outlooks and views. The Rajbanshis had to stand out amongst them to prove their existence and to show the society how enriched their culture and tradition is. Folklore means, folk tradition of human society, custom, belief, proverbs, tradition of folk, all forms of social customs and beliefs, the stories, songs, words etc. (Barman, 31).

The Rajbanshi people were absolutely against the merging of the princely state Coochbehar with West Bengal. At one point of time, they were compared with the Koch people and were labeled as the lower sect of the society. So the Rajbanshis had to fight to prove themselves, to prove their worth and to prove who they were and where they belonged. In this multicultural society of India, the Rajbanshis had to find their way out to success.

6. Social Reform Movement and Rajbanshi community:

Social Reform is a kind of social movement that aims to make slow and steady change or changes in certain aspects of society, rather than fast or a fundamental one. The folk literature was spread through the rural culture of the *Rajbanshi* community to bring that rapid change in the society. The Rajbanshis rather led a social movement for their people to get a place in the



society where they can hold their heads high and move ahead with all the equal benefits and rights. Folk literature therefore tries to explore the potentialities of this tribe.

Folklores help in revealing how the Rajbanshi Community have their roots in aboriginal indigenous cultures and do not necessarily constitute mimicry of the West. (Chakraborty, NA) They fought to resurface themselves on the societal strata. The usefulness of folk-culture in the real life of the society is more than that of written form (Barman, 31). So, to remove the enigma of whether the Rajbanshis are capable to cope up with the other group of people in the society or not, they started this movement for claiming themselves as one of the important sectors.

It is said that folklores are a hidden treasure of any culture. In this context, Theodor said:

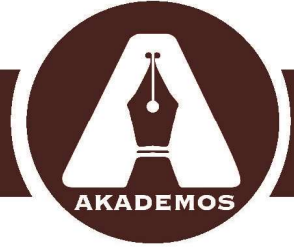
Folklore is that part of people's culture which is preserved consciously or unconsciously in belief and practices, customs and observances of general currency; in myths, legends and fables of common acceptance; and in arts and crafts which express the temper and genius of a group rather than of an individual. Because it is a repository of popular "climate", folklore serves as a constant source and frame of reference for more formal literature and art; but it is distinct there from in that it is essentially of the people, by the people, and for the people. (Barman, 31)

7. Rajbanshi community and folklore:

In 1894 Rabindranath Tagore commemorated in one of his speeches at Bangiya Sahitya Parishad that:

I welcome to the researchers to search ancient glory and heritage in novels, songs, ruins of temple, rural cottages in faithfully through the independent thinking not only search in the pages of books. If you are able to response that you will be student of the University and you may save literature from a simulated problem of fatigue and weakness.... (Malinowski, 82).

Different elements are veiled in ancient culture and society. Folklore is customarily a separate branch of modern literature. Except the towns and cities, villages in Bengal had an ambience of folk culture. It can be said that Folklore was the sole medium to make the social reform movement bring in certain changes and help the community to move forward to rediscover their



identity. Glories of the past remains treasured in the folklores and play a very important role in resurfacing a tribe and identify that to be one of the rich cultured tribes like the others. A scholar once said that the basic requirement of a living folklore is that it should be traditional, widely current and transmitted primarily through memory and practice rather than by the printed page (Barman, 32).

It was in the nineteenth century that Bengal renaissance had begun. New systems were introduced, old systems were kept aside and along with that people were giving up the customs, traditions, rituals, beliefs and folk culture, etc. With the emergence of modern literature, the British rule did not give any value to the old traditions and customs and folk culture. The Rajbanshis did not step backward; they continued their fight to be identified amongst all. They with the help of Panchanan Barma (1866–1935), also known as Thakur Panchanan and Roy Saheb, a Rajbanshi leader and reformer from Cooch Behar, established a *Kshatriya Sabhā* (caste association) to instill Brahminical values and practices in people of his own caste and to instill all the knowledge about their tribe in the society (Chatterji, 198-199).

In the multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural landscape of India, emergence of identity movements of different ethnic groups lead to lot of serious issues ranging from terrorism, economic stagnancy, cultural threats and political instability. The issue of Koch Rajbanshi identity has already transcended the limit of a mere identity movement and turns out to be a major catalyst of the socio-political scenario of the state (Borah, 2033). Assertion of identity and aspiration of the Koch Rajbanshis, in revolt against their perceived socio-economic and politico-cultural deprivation, had begun during the post independence period, particularly in the 1980s. Now in both the Indian states of West Bengal and Assam, the Koch Rajbanshis are fighting for a greater separate Kamtapur state. They also have a demand to include their language in the Eight Schedule of the Constitution of India along with socio-economic development of this community. The primary focus of the paper was to understand the identity movement led by the Koch Rajbanshis. Their identity movement is a long drawn battle to preserve, protect and develop their distinct identity.

8. Conclusion:

The fight for identity continues. To conclude it may be said that the Indian state has not been able to address the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual problems of the indigenous people living in India. The Rajbanshi community has a rich cultural past as they claimed to belong to the raj bansha or king's family. They claimed to be a part of the Kshatriya



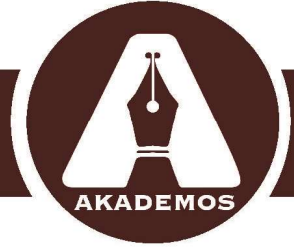


status. Their folklore says it all. Folklore reveals the folk culture and the hidden aspects of all the treasured qualities of the ethnic community. Though, they were victims of socio-cultural discrimination and domination by the dominant class in Assam and in North Bengal and their social identity suffered due to colonial caste policies which led them to fight for caste solidarity. Today the Kamtapur movement is trying to create an identity on the basis of their culture and language through their folklores. They are also trying to mobilize people's consciousness towards their history, culture, and tradition to ensure their socio-cultural development.

In context to studying indigenous groups and communities, Malinowski said, "These stories live in native life and not on paper, and when a scholar jots them down without being able to evoke the atmosphere in which they flourish he has given us but a mutilated bit of reality" (Barman, 32). Thus, folk literature has occupied a distinguished position in modern literary world. Rajbanshi people and their language have been well recognized and honoured by the government. Today in the heart of Coochbehar, stands upright, Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University a U.G.C recognised public university in Cooch Behar, West Bengal, India. The university was named after the 19th-century Rajbanshi leader and social reformist, Panchanan Barma. A total of 15 colleges from Cooch Behar district are affiliated to the university. With the various subjects that this University offers, it must be notified that, it includes the Certificate Course in Rajbanshi Bhasha.

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