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## **GRT** IDENTITY CRISIS OF THE KOCH RAJBANSHI

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**Abstract:-**The Koch Rajbanshi community has been striving for safeguarding their identity for quite sometime. It has evolved a lot over time. Their effort has taken the shape of the Kshatriya Movement and the Kamatapur Movement. At present they are trying to voice their demand through the Kamatapur Movement which is spearheaded by different associations and organizations.

**Keywords:** Identity, Koch Rajbangsi.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Social entities have time and again tried to seek their identity either by relating to their glorious past or by demonstrating their present status that has not been recognized by others. People are conscious about their identity and they are also sensitive about it. People fight, confront or even negotiate and re – negotiate concerning their identity.<sup>1</sup>

Every ethnic group is very enthusiastic to preserve their identity. At present, the Koch Rajbanshi in Assam and North Bengal are jointly striving to preserve their ethnic identity. They have been striving for it for quite sometime. Over time and space it has evolved a lot. The Koch Rajbanshi are found in India at West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, and Bihar. They are also found in Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan.

The objective of the present paper is to look into the identity crisis of the Koch Rajbanshi and to understand and explain the identity issue historically.

### **Racial Affinities and Historical Background of the Koch Rajbanshi:**

The racial origin of the Koch Rajbanshi is a matter of controversy. They are but akin to the Garos, Rabhas, Mechs, and Dhimals etc. While some group of scholars like Risley, Colonel Dalton, Dr Latham, Oldham opines that the Koch Rajbanshi belong to the Dravidian race, the other group headed by Sir Edward Gait, Sidney Endle, Bryan Hodgson, G A Grierson, Waddel, W W Hunter and Buchanon opines that they belong to the Mongoloid stock. Although there is a difference in opinion it can be very well said that the Koch Rajbanshi belong to the Mongoloid race as per their religious beliefs, rites, social manners and customs, speech and their physical features. But in due course of time with the gradual intermixture with the Dravidians, it paved the way for the evolution of a mixed type – the Mongoloid-Dravidian<sup>2</sup> type in which the characteristic feature of both the races was found.

The invasion of the Kamata Kingdom by Hussain Shah of Gauda (Bengal) in the 15th century put an end to the rule of Nilambar of the Khen dynasty. With the end of his rule there was no powerful ruler in Kamata for quite a long period. Instead a number of petty chiefs rose. Amongst them the most powerful was Bisva Singha, son of Hariya Mandal, a resident of Chiknagram in present day Goalpara district of Assam. Hariya was the recognized head of twelve leading Koch families living in that area.<sup>3</sup> After his father, Bisva Singha was able to subjugate the neighbouring Bhuyans and gradually built an empire that was later further extended by his son and successor Naranarayan. In fact it was the reign of Naranarayan in which the Koch Rajbanshi power reached its zenith. It is his reign that serves as a glorious past for the present day Koch Rajbanshi people.

#### EMERGENCE OF THE IDENTITY CRISIS:

With the passage of time the glorious period of the Koch Rajbanshi gradually diminished. Of the politics going on in the country along with incompetent rulers, the once huge empire was broken down. Many tributary rulers also asserted their independence. The situation reached to such an extent wherein the Koch Rajbanshi ruler Dharendranarayan had to seek help from the British and became a British protectorate on payment of annual tribute. With the involvement of the British in the administration of the country, a different episode of the Koch Rajbanshi started. The East India Company's penetration into the region was marked by their interest in trade and commerce and further access to the North East Frontier of India and Nepal.<sup>4</sup>

The British in order to run their administration and for their political purposes brought English educated Hindu upper caste Bengali people from Southern Bengal. With the settlement of this group of people in the region, the phase of turmoil for the Koch Rajbanshi started. This group of people in due course of time increased and began to dominate over the indigenous Koch Rajbanshi people. They began to hold all the key position in administration while the natives remained educationally, economically, politically and socially backward. Not only this, in the whole process, the Koch Rajbanshi were categorized as the lowest class of people in the society and placed at par with the shudras. This naturally aggrieved the elite section of the Koch Rajbanshi and they tried to voice their resentment through the Kshatriya Movement. Started by Panchanan Burma, the movement aimed to elevate the position of the Koch Rajbanshi into higher caste group i.e., Kshatriya by proving their Kshatriya origin. Myths that traced their descent from the Kshatriyas were reinvented along with their descent from Hindu Gods and Goddesses and recalling Srimant Sankardeva's Vaisnavite Movement prevalent during Naranarayans reign. Moreover, emphasis was given to the use of the appellation 'Rajbanshi' to prove their royal lineage or Kshatriya status.<sup>5</sup> In fact the Kshatriya Movement was largely responsible for the Sanskritization of the Koch Rajbanshi.<sup>6</sup> The creation of myths was followed by appeals for the reform of socio-religious and cultural practices of the community. The Kshatriya Movement was to a large extent successful but Panchanan Burma soon shifted the movement towards demanding Scheduled Caste status for the community and finally in 1933 the Koch Rajbanshi were enlisted as Scheduled Caste. This inclusion no doubt helped the community in getting special concession, but the inconsistency between their claimed social rank and the special privileges achieved as a member of the Scheduled Caste category remained unresolved.<sup>7</sup> Once the Scheduled Caste status were conferred to the Koch Rajbanshi, the Kshatriya identity began to lose its relevance and the Kshatriya Movement gradually fizzled out.

The Koch Rajbanshi are also given different status in different states. In West Bengal they are given Scheduled Caste status; in Meghalaya they are given Scheduled tribe status and Other Backward Class category in Assam and Bihar. The very fact that they are given different status in different states is also adding to the prevailing identity crisis. At present, in Assam they are demanding for a Scheduled Tribe status and the delay over granting this by the Government of India is creating great resentment amongst the Koch Rajbanshi.

In North Bengal also the Koch Rajbanshi were found to have passed through at least three distinct identities in different censuses – from Rajbanshi to Bratya Kshatriya(1891) Bratya Kshatriya to Kshatriya Rajbanshi (1911, 1921) and Kshatriya Rajbanshi to only Kshatriya(1931).<sup>8</sup>

There are also other reasons for the prevailing identity crisis. They live within politically demarcated territories where Bengalis and Assamese people form the majority. So, because of their long assimilation with these communities they are mostly drawn within the orbit of the Bengalis and Assamese. Moreover, most of them do not have sufficient knowledge about their past, marginalization of the Kamtapuri or Rajbanshi language and culture and deteriorated social, economic and political condition.<sup>9</sup> Some of them also lack interest in using their own language and culture.

At present, the Koch Rajbanshi are making an effort to save their losing identity through the Kamatapuri Movement. A number of organizations and associations either in collaboration or individually are spearheading the movement. The primary aim of the Kamatapuri Movement is the formation of a separate state within the Indian Dominion with Koch Rajbanshi dominated areas of North Bengal and Assam. Initially the number of districts of North Bengal included in the proposed state was 6 but now it has increased to 7 with the addition of Alipurduar. Now it includes Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Malda and Alipurduar. The number of districts of Assam in the proposed state has also kept on increasing with time. The districts are Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Goalpara, Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Darrang, Morigaon, Lakhimpur, Nalbari, Sonitpur, Kamrup (rural), Dhemaji, Kamrup (metro), Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri. There is also news of inclusions of three districts of Bihar in the proposed state of Kamatapuri.

#### CONCLUSION:

The Koch Rajbanshi demand for a separate state is an old one. The idea has been mooted since Independence Days. Since then the demand for a separate state by the Koch Rajbanshi organizations and associations has evolved a lot. Sometimes it has been very active becoming a cause of concern for the Government and sometimes it has remained at its lowest ebb as if it no longer existed. At present the Movement is back to momentum. Main

factors that are responsible for demanding a separate state is to have an identity of their own, safeguard their socio-economic interests, development of their cultural heritage and language and have some say in economic- political fields.<sup>10</sup>

However there are some inherent problems with the Kamatapur Movement. A major portion of the area demanded by the Koch Rajbanshi for their state is also included in the land demanded by the Bodos in Assam for the Bodoland and Gurkhas in North Bengal for the Gurkhaland. Moreover, frictions and factions are being observed amongst the associations and organizations spearheading the movement. The KPP (Kamatapur People's Party) has been divided into two with the formation of the AKPP (All Kamatapur People's Party). The AKRSU (All Koch Rajbanshi Students' Union) has also been divided into two factions. One led by Biswajit Roy and another by Hiteswar Barman. This division among themselves is engaging them into unwanted confrontations that in turn are hampering their struggle. Therefore the question of their identity is still hanging and in doldrums.

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