

**EVOLUTION OF RAJBANSHIS IN WEST DINAJPUR COMPARE TO THE NORTHERN DISTRICTS OF NORTH BENGAL**

**Dr. Sankar Sarkar:** Assistant Professor in History, Balurghat Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Dakshin Dinajpur, West Bengal, India

**Abstract**

The Rajbanshis are an important ethnic group in northern part of West Bengal. Their proportion in Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri districts and Tarai region of Darjeeling district was very high compare to erstwhile West Dinajpur (Now Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur) District. Development of the same ethnic people was also different. In the Northern districts their main concerns are land right and territorial autonomy. Though a large portion of Rajbanshi people of the districts are refugee, they accused the migrant people for land deprivation. Since independence they demanded Uttarkhanda, Kamtapur, and Greater Coochbehar etc and moved against exiting government. But the same ethnic people in West Dinajpur are almost indifference to these. They are closer to the mainstream culture. The differences in the development of demography and economy in post-independent era had caused such kind of differences. Few political elements from colonial era are also responsible to this development.

**Key words:** Partition, Refugee, Rajbanshi, Land reform, Culture, Separate state

The Rajbanshis are the most important community of the North Bengal region following number and antiquity. Unlike the origin of this community, there has been no controversy regarding the epicentre of Rajbanshi culture which was the Rangpur-Dinajpur region during the colonial period. But after the partition of Bengal in 1947, the situation altered dramatically and the demography of the whole of North Bengal changed very soon. Due to these changes, the Rajbanshi community people had faced tremendous changes in their habits and culture also. In the district of Dinajpur, the situation was somehow different from the rest of North Bengal. Whereas the whole Rangpur district had gone to East Pakistan, the district Dinajpur was divided and one-third of the district had come to India and remained as a district of West Bengal named West Dinajpur.

The district lied between 26°29' 54" and 25°10' 55" north latitudes and between 89°0' 30" and 87°48' 37" east longitudes, bounded by river Mahananda and the district of Dinajpur of East Pakistan on the north; by the district of Purnea in Bihar and by the district of Malda on the west; on the south by Malda district and the district of Rajshahi, and Bogra of East Pakistan; on the east Dinajpur and Bogra of East Pakistan (Sengupta 1965, 1). It is to mention that at the time of the creation of the district was not in the shape as described here. The northern portion that is Islampur subdivision had included in the district in 1956 to establish a connection with Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar as prescribed by State Reorganization Commission (Sengupta 1965, 2). But the district had divided into two namely Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1992( Saradiya Prottush, 1416 BS, Intriduction).

The origin of the Rajbanshi people is a matter of controversy for a long time. The term 'Rajbangshi' had been found first in the writing of British civilians and district reporters. They expressed different kinds of arguments regarding the origin of the Rajbanshis. Some of them recorded the Rajbanshis as Mongoloyed origin and some argued as the Dravidian origin. There are arguments for mixed Austric-Dravidian-Mongoloyed also. S.K. Chatterjee has argued

"The masses of North Bengal areas are very largely of *Bodo* origin or mixed Austric-Dravidian-Mongoloyed or semi-Hinduized Bodo who have abandoned their original Tibeto-Burmese speech and have adopted the northern dialect of Bengali. They are proud to call themselves as Rajbanshis and to claim to be called Kshatriyas."( Chaterjee 1998, 60)

The renowned scholar belonging to the Rajbanshi community, Dr. Sukhobilas Barma concluded that a part of Pundra Kshatriyas or Dravida people from Pundradesha in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC had come to then Kamrupa and North Bengal. Later in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, the Tibetians such as Koch, Mech, Bodo, Kachhari, and Rava people had come to the North Bengal region. Few of them maintained distinctness, but a comparatively liberal portion assimilated with Dravidians and these people are called Rajbanshi. Then these people adopted the Aryan language and culture during the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The pace of Aryanization remains among them still today (Sarkar 2002, 172). In this connection, the Rajbanshis have claimed themselves as *Kshatriya* and different from the Koch people. Although, as per colonial literature they were a group of purified Koch, by abandoning the traditional cultural practices they had adopted Hindu manners and customs.

The evolution of demography in the West Dinajpur district had an important role in the development of society and culture. After the partition of Bengal, the prime population groups of West Dinajpur district were - 1. The Rajbanshi, are the major scheduled caste people, 2. Santal, Oroan and Munda- the scheduled tribe people, 3. Muslims and, 4. The remaining are caste Hindu people. More or less the composition of the population in the districts of North Bengal is almost the same except for the hill of Darjeeling.

Though the social composition of the district was more or less similar to the northern districts of North Bengal, the development of this region from the pre-independent period was different and later on, also, the development was reflected differently (Nag 2003, 165). There were major differences in the development of socio-cultural and ethnic character between the West Dinajpur district and the extreme northern districts of North Bengal. The various ethnic groups of the northern district were demanding separate ethnic states in a sort of ethnocultural regionalism. The Uttarkhanda Movement, Kamtapuri movement, Greater Cooch Behar movement etc. are the major ethnocultural regional movement of the Rabanshi people of the northern district of North Bengal (Barman 2008, 2-50). In West Dinajpur, Rajbanshi people are of same ethnic group. But they were not involved in the Kamtapuri movement or Uttarakhand movement on a large scale like in northern districts. Another important issue was that the Rajbanshi people of West Dinajpur districts are closer to the mainstream Bengali culture than the northern districts. In the northern districts, the Rajbanshi people used to accuse the migrated people of their present day's miserable condition and maintained their aloofness from them (Adhikari 2017). In the West Dinajpur district, they showed a cordial socio-cultural affinity with the other people, especially to the other Hindu people and an environment of cultural assimilation prevailed in the district.

It is to be noticed that the foremost reason for the discontent among the Rajbanshi people of North Bengal as they used to say, was the deprivation by the migrated people. The Rajbanshis were mainly the agriculturist people and they accused that the migrated people deprived them of the land. They have questioned why they are now landless wage labourers of the region mainly those who was the owner of the land at a time in the pre-colonial and colonial period (Adhikari 2017). In colonial times, the permanent settlement was introduced in 1793 in Bengal. At that time, except for a small portion of the Jalpaiguri district, the three districts of the extreme north were not under the company's rule. Generally, the history of land reform in these areas was different from the rest of Bengal. District Darjeeling, Western Dooars of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar were not the part of Mughal Empire and these areas came under the company's rule during the expansion of the company's territory (Todarmal 2007. 56-57). The lands of these areas were given to the *Jotedars* or rich peasants by the government in exchange for some undertaking to pay annual rent and there were also variations of position and privileges enjoyed by the *Jotedars* and other tenants (Adhikari 2017). Another unique feature of these three districts was that in 1890, there was no caste Hindu *Jotedars* or *Zamindars* (Nag 2003. 165). The Rajbanshis and a few scheduled tribes constituted the *Jotedar* section. But after that, the non-Rajbanshi people were gradually entering and settling in the area. Moreover, after independence, due to the

implementation of the ceiling act, the landed class was victimized and became poor. Simultaneously, the refugee people from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) were gradually entering and those among them had come with some assets used to buy land from the indigenous people. Within a few years, a huge portion of land was handed over to the migrant people. Generally, a feeling among the Rajbanshi people had grown up that the refugees had deprived them and they were responsible for the miserable condition of the sons of the soil ( Nag 2003, 165-82). But among the Rajbanshi people of West Dinajpur district, such kind of feeling was absent or not to that extent, because in the colonial period, the development of land relations was different in the district. In this district, due to the permanent settlement, the *zamindars* were either from the upper caste Hindus or Muslims on average (Ghosh 2014, 361-369). As the land in this district was not in the hand of community fellows, the feeling of land deprivation among them had not grown up among the Rajbanshi people.

The scenario of land distribution during the land reform by the independent government of West Bengal was responsible to some extent. Before that, the distribution of Rajbanshi people in North Bengal may be relevant to this phenomenon. As per the census report of 1981, the Rajbanshi population numbered 2258760, constituted 19% of the total scheduled caste in West Bengal and of that 77.19% was found to live in North Bengal. Out of the total Rajbanshis of North Bengal, about 47% lived in Cooch Behar, 32% in Jalpaiguri, 13% in West Dinajpur, and 8% in both Darjeeling and Malda districts (Adhikari 2017). So, 79% of the total Rajbanshi population lived in Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri districts. But the profit of land reform of the West Bengal government to the Rajbanshis, the prime community of the scheduled caste was not satisfactory to those districts.

**Table: 1: District-wise land reform beneficiary of SC and ST people in North Bengal 1985.**

Name of Districts	Beneficiary of patta		Recorded Bargadars		Homestead beneficiary	
	SC	ST	SC	ST	SC	ST
Cooch Behar	61771	2274	44507	707	4973	81
Jalpaiguri	44294	21433	25769	12841	3483	1801
Darjeeling	9991	9113	4139	3028	924	762
<b>W. Dinajpur</b>	<b>58792</b>	<b>45113</b>	<b>6534</b>	<b>28699</b>	<b>6547</b>	<b>3601</b>
Malda	30360	21481	19056	18993	3101	2730

**Source:** Roy, Biswanath. "Paschimbanger Bhumi Sanskar O Gramunnayaner Ruprekha" in Paschimbanger Samajik O Arthanaitik Samikkha (Ed) B. Roy, Calcutta, Modern Book Agency Pvt. Ltd., 1988, P. 42

One thing is to remember that the Rajbanshi people along with Poliyas, a sub-caste of Rajbanshi constituted more than half of the total scheduled caste population of West Dinajpur (WBDCHB 1971, 15). So, it is clear, that the Rajbanshi people of West Dinajpur benefited more through West Bengal land reform than the northern district of North Bengal. Generally, grievances among the Rajbanshis of West Dinajpur districts like Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar have not prevailed which prompted them to live with other people peacefully.

The second aspect is that before independence in 1931, the total number of Rajbanshi people in Dinajpur district was 360368( Census of India 1931). In 1951, in West Dinajpur district, the total number comprising Rajbanshi and Poliyas was 77533 (WBDCHB 1951). So, it is clear that the Rajbanshi concentrated areas of the undivided Dinajpur district had gone to East Pakistan. The number of Rajbanshi people in the consecutive census of 1971, 1981 and 1991 was respectively 134976, 369015 and 489642 (Census of India 1971, 1981, 1991) . That means, the Rajbanshi people also entered the district as a refugee from East Pakistan.

About the migration of the Hindu refugees, an important feature was that they preferred to reside in the district of West Bengal contiguous to the border ( Nag 2003, 165-182). The refugees who entered the districts Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri were from the district Rangpur and Mymensingh of East

Pakistan. The refugees settled in the district of West Dinajpur were mainly from the eastern part of Dinajpur, Bogra and Rajshahi districts (Report 1951, 3). The trend of resettlement of the displaced person from East Pakistan districts in North Bengal's districts was as follows--

**Table: 2:Refugees in North Bengal migrated from the East Bengal districts from 1946-51**

Districts of East Pakistan	Cooch Behar	Jalpaiguri	Darjeeling	W.Dinajpur	Malda
Kustia	177	809	577	432	36
Joshor	339	1437	532	421	322
Khulna	249	840	339	749	802
Rajshahi	1063	1222	365	36132	42532
Dinajpur	1892	17491	1995	26756	2609
Rangpur	43874	25343	2228	3914	430
Bogra	2663	1224	606	20161	580
Pabna	2305	4095	1151	7296	3056
Dacca	9394	16152	3838	7029	1344
Mymanshigh	30197	17037	1661	6297	864
Faridpur	2548	4493	1004	2021	4309
Bakharganj	704	1958	310	1958	2343
Tripura	851	1714	250	247	310
Noakhali	535	1622	279	299	301
Cylate	160	528	96	32	21
Chattagram	495	1156	323	259	167
Total	97746	97111	15542	112906	60026

**Source:** Census of India 1951, West Bengal District Census Hand Book, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, West Dinajpur and Malda.

The above table unfolds the matter that the people of the main two Rajbanshi populated districts had moved to mainly three districts viz. Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and West Dinajpur. The people of Rangpur had come very little in number to West Dinajpur. So, it is clear that a small portion of Rajbanshis only from Dinajpur had come to this district. In this migration to West Dinajpur, another feature was that the people who entered the district were mainly from the adjacent area of the border, those who got the advantage of property exchange (Interview Barman). The Rajbanshis of Dinajpur had migrated to West Dinajpur and Jalpaiguri. On the other hand, the migrants resettled in West Dinajpur were the majority from the districts of Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Bogra, Pabna, Dacca and Mymensingh. So, it is to be noticed that the Rajbanshis of Rangpur and Dinajpur formed solidarity during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the 'Kshatriyaization' movement under Thakur Panchanon Barma. The Rajbanshis of West Dinajpur became aloof from that because, after the independence, the epicentre of Rajbanshi culture was moved from Rangpur to Jalpaiguri. The border of West Bengal and East Pakistan was drowned in such a shape for West Dinajpur was detached from the Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts. Generally, the Rajbanshis of West Dinajpur had become detached culturally and a feeling of affinity to the Rajbanshi of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar was deviating gradually. Naturally, when the Rajbanshis of northern districts of North Bengal were agitating for their language and culture, the Rajbanshis of West Dinajpur had moved little.

Another significant aspect of this phenomenon was that in West Dinajpur district along with a portion of migrants from Dinajpur, a huge number of migrants from the district of Rajshahi, Bogra, Pabna, Dacca and Mymensingh had settled there. Whereas in the district Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar, the Rajbanshi immigrants were concentrated in various areas, in West Dinajpur except for Karandighi

block, nowhere did the Rajbanshi people concentrate like so. Generally, Rajbanshi's solidarity was not so strong in this district. Despite that, in the villages of the district, composite culture was a basic characteristic because, after the partition, the immigrants from various districts of East Pakistan had been settled alongside at the time of distress. At that time, there was no sense of race, everyone was busy thinking about the space of livelihood.

Fourthly, demographic distribution, as well as the progress of Rajbanshi people in the West Dinajpur district, was an important factor why these people had not participated in any racial unrest. The development of the Rajbanshi population in North Bengal has shown below.

**Table: 3:Rajbanshi population distribution in North Bengal**

District	1951	%	1961	%	1971	%	1981	%	1991	%
C. Behar	252069	47.7	418839	46.63	481304	46.84	714221	40.96	865622	39.86
Jalpaiguri	172710	32.68	316020	35.19	329191	32.03	514174	29.49	656073	23.42
Darjeeling	15894	3.00	31887	3.50	31505	3.06	62770	3.60	96745	7.44
Malda	20294	3.84	38443	4.28	50693	4.94	83463	4.79	114697	4.29
W. Dinajpur	<b>67489</b>	<b>12.78</b>	<b>93371</b>	<b>10.40</b>	<b>134976</b>	<b>13.13</b>	<b>369015</b>	<b>21.16</b>	<b>489642</b>	<b>15.56</b>

**Source:** Census of India, 1961,1971,1981,1991, cited in Jagabandhu Roy, "Demographic Changes in North Bengal in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century", North Asian International Research Journal of Social Science and Humanities, Vol-3, Issue-1, January 2017

The table unfolds the matter that in the district Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri, the ratio of the Rajbanshi population was decreasing day by day. No doubt the reason was the unprecedented influx of refugees from East Pakistan. But in West Dinajpur, though the influx of refugees was not less than in any district of North Bengal, the ratio of Rajbanshi people had increased. It is clear from the fact that the number of Rajbanshis among the refugee people was bigger than in other districts of North Bengal.

In the Kamtapuri movement, a principal phenomenon was the anti-refugee feeling. They demanded to stop the influx and detection of refugees from East Pakistan and raised an eviction campaign (Barman 2008, 2-50). As the average Rajbanshis of West Dinajpur migrated from East Pakistan due to harsh treatment by the Muslims, generally this type of demand by their co-community had not satisfied them and provoked them to remain indifferent.

It is very much evident that the affinity of the Rajbanshi language and culture is closer to the other non-Rajbanshi Bengalis in West Dinajpur district than in other districts of North Bengal. The regional variety of the Rajbanshi language is a historic fact. The southern part of the undivided North Bengal, especially in the Rangpur, Dinajpur and Rajshahi districts was different from the northern district of North Bengal. After the partition, the Rajbanshi migrants in the West Dinajpur district were basically from Dinajpur and Rajshahi. As in these districts, the Rajbanshis were living with the other Bengali people, their dialect was influenced by each other and the people migrated to the West together. The development of demography in the last part of the study period shaped the psyche of the Rajbanshi people of West Dinajpur district.

The development of the Rajbanshi people in Dinajpur and post-independent West Dinajpur was another aspect of this matter. During the Muslim times, due to various reasons, a good number of Rajbanshi people had changed their *gotra* (Sengupta 1965, 69) and surname but continued to identify themselves as Rajbanshi (Barman 2015, 357). As a result, various kinds of surnames among the Rajbanshis of the district existed. This diversity of surnames and *gotras* helped the migrant people from



East Pakistan to assimilate with the indigenous Rajbanshi people during the post-independent era ( Barman 2016).

Since the communal riot in 1946, the Hindu people of East Bengal started to merge into the Western part of Bengal. As we found in the first phase of migration, basically the educated middle class and wealthy people had migrated and a good portion of them settled down by purchasing land and the rest of them had squatted the unused barren land. But after the partition of 1947, the communal tension resulted in a huge migration from the lower strata of the society and government help for them was very much scanty. Naturally, these poor refugees took shelter in the villages where the Rajbanshis were affluent families. To these homeless people, race and community etc. were not a matter of importance, the main goal of the time was getting shelter in West Bengal. The affluent Rajbanshis also sheltered them for interest in low-wage labour. With time, these migrant families settled in the land of Rajbanshi and took their surname for social protection. As the indigenous village people were Rajbanshi, the Rajbanshi identity gave them social and political benefits in West Bengal and also because the Rajbanshis were the scheduled caste people who were treated as a reserved category (Barman 2015, 375). This was the scene all around the West Dinajpur district.

This type of development became too easy for those refugees, whose surnames were the same as the Rajbanshi community people. For example 'Sarkar' is a common surname of Rajbanshis of Dinajpur and a portion of Namasudra people and upper-caste Hindus also used these surnames. Generally, the migrant people easily could identify themselves as Rajbanshi. In the southern region of Dinajpur, a good number of Rajbanshi *Jotedars* used the surname 'Mandal' as the village 'Mandal' system was started during the 'Kshatriyization' movement. Mandal was the surname of eastern Bengalis of both Hindu and Muslim communities. The migrant people with that surname also started to identify themselves as Rajbanshi. In this way, a good number of non-Rajbanshi migrants from East Pakistan included the Rajbanshi community with a huge number of real Rajbanshi refugees (Barman 2015, 375).

Such kind of development in demography in West Dinajpur no doubt influenced the process of social assimilation between Rajbanshi and migrated people. The people included newly in the Rajbanshi community had not learned the Rajbanshi customs fully and in social life, they perform like non-Rajbanshi people. On the other hand, the villages where the Rajbanshi had become a minority, adopted the non-Rajbanshi customs also (Barman 2015, 375). The new Rajbanshis and the real Rajbanshis did not use the customs of their own and they not only remained indifferent during the social tension of the northern district but also contributed a lot to socio-cultural assimilation in West Dinajpur. With time, regarding the habits of dress-coat, food, and rituals the differences between the Rajbanshi and non-Rajbanshi people who existed before to some extent were eradicated gradually in the social scenario of the district. Matrimonial relations were another important cause behind such kind of development.

This kind of development in the West Dinajpur district in Rajbanshi community not only created a crisis to the Rajbanshi culture but also the ethnographic identity was threatened. That means the Rajbanshis are facing new kind of identity crisis in West Dinajpur. It also to observe that the ethno-linguistic identity movement in the northern districts was emerged due to socio-economic development in that region.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1. Adhikari, Dr. Madhab Ch.(2017), 'Socio-Economic Transformation of North Bengal in Post colonial Era: A Case Study of the Rajbanshis', Pune Research Scholar, Vol-3, Issue-4,
2. Barman, Binay and Barman, Kartik. Chandra. (Eds)(2015) *History and Culture of North Bengal.*, Kolkata: Progotishil Prakashani
3. Barman, Kartik Chandra,(2016) 'Identity Crisis of the Rajbanshi Community in Dakshin Dinajpur After Independence: A Historical Appraisal', Jamshedpur Research Review, vol-IV, Issue-XIV,

4. Barman, Lalit Chandra. (2008), *Rajyer Dabite Uttarbange Andolan*, Siliguri: N.L. Publishers
5. Chatterjee, S.K. (1998) *Kirata Jana Kirti, The Indo-mongoloids: Their Contribution to the History and Culture of India*, (Reprinted) Calcutta, Asiatic Society
6. Ghosh, Samit, (2014) *Dakshin Dinajpurer purakirti, Sanskritik Aitiya O Itihas*, Kolkata: Amar Bharati,
7. Interview : Bhudeb Barman, Purba Hariharpur, Balurghat, Dakshin Dinajpur, age-58, Date of interview- 17.09.2018,
8. Nag, Soumen. (2003) *Bichhinnatar Utsa Sandhane*, Kolkata, Saptarshi Prakasan
9. Report on the Sample Survey for the estimating the Socio-Economic Characteristics of Displaced Persons migrating from Eastern Pakistan to the State of West Bengal, State Statistical Bureau, Government of West Bengal- 1951
10. Sarkar, Ichhamuddin. (ed) (2002), *Aitihya O Itihase Uttarbanga*, Dubrugarh (Assam,) N.L. Publisher
11. Sengupta, J.C., (1965), *West Bengal District Gazetteers*, West Dinajpur, Calcutta, Government of West Bengal,
12. Sharadiya, Prottoosh, (1416 BS) *Tathe Tathe Dakshin Dinajpur*, Balurghat, Eco-friend Organisation
13. Todarmal, (2001), *Bhumi Rajaswa O Jarip*, Kolkata: Anima Prakaskani (5<sup>th</sup> edition)
14. West Bengal District Census Hand Book, (WBDCHB), 1951, West Dinajpur