



## Koch-Rajbongshi: A study of identity, politics and movement in Assam and West Bengal

Dipika Paul

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Nagaland University, Lumami, Zunheboto, Nagaland, India

### Abstract

The long process of assimilation and transformation of tribes in India has made the term tribe and caste contentious. The situation is far more complicated in North-East where several ethnic groups are associated with identity movements, separatist movements and demand for ST status. Koch-Rajbongshis is one of the largest existing community which has been equally trying to mark their presence in the ethnic politics of North-East India and also in Northern part of West Bengal. There is also variation in their official grouping or scheduling in different regions under different categories. In the Central list of Other Backward Classes of Assam, they are mentioned as Koch-Rajbonshis. In West Bengal, Koch and Rajbanshi has been mentioned as two categories separately under the SC list. Moreover, historical studies show that at various historical point of time the community is referred as—Rajbanshi, Kshatriya and Kamatapuri. Such variation in their identity made it to have thorough discussion the community's identity. Moreover, at present the community in Assam is demanding ST status and also kamatapuri state comprising portions of Assam and northern part of West Bengal. The present paper attempted to understand the socio-historical identity of the community; their process of transformation and also to analyze their movement for separate statehood and their demand for ST status in Assam.

**Keywords:** tribe, ethnicity, ethnic identity, Koch-Rajbongshis

### Introduction

In India the two categories 'tribe' and 'caste' seems to be highly contentious. The concept of *Tribe* was first developed by western anthropologists like Morgan (1877), Shalins (1961), Evans Pritchard (1950) and some others. They laid emphasis on the commonality of socio-cultural characteristics of tribal communities, for instance—common territory, language and culture as distinguished from the larger society. In contrast, in India such commonality of features among members of a particular tribal group is not necessarily visible, rather there seems to be much variations in the characteristics of tribes. This variation in their characteristics has made it practically difficult to distinguish the tribal population in India from non-tribal population. Even after continuous efforts the Government of India has not been able to evolve a definitive common criterion for identifying tribes in order to schedule them. Such a failure of the Government led to a chaotic situation immediately after independence where different communities have made demands for enlisting them as STs. Similar situation has prevailed in the North-Eastern part of India, where tribes seems to be associated with several ethnic issues such as identity movements, separatist movements, insurgency activities and inter-community conflicts and also more and more demands for ST status.

Among them Koch-Rajbongshis is another existing community which has been equally trying to mark their presence in the ethnic politics of North-East India and also in North Bengal. Koch-Rajbongshi is one of the largest and ancient ethnic communities of India residing in North Bengal (except in the hill areas), lower Assam, Western part of Meghalaya, Purnia and Kishangarh district of Eastern Bihar. At present the community in Assam and North-Bengal is found to be associated with the movement for separate statehood, constitutional recognition of Kamatapuri/Rajbanshi language and ST status for the

community in Assam. But such demands of Koch-Rajbongshis cannot be understood without taking into consideration their socio-historical position and also various political issues that came to be associated with them. Therefore, in the present paper an attempt has been made to understand the socio-historical identity of the community; their process of transformation and also to analyze their movement for separate statehood, inclusion of Kamatapuri/Rajbanshi language in the eighth schedule of Indian Constitution and their demand for ST status in Assam. The paper basically based on the review of the literature and secondary data from published books.

### Socio-Historical Identity of Koch-Rajbongshis

At present, although the people of the community designates themselves as 'Koch-Rajbongshi'. A detailed historical study of the community shows that they have been assigned with various identities at different historical point of time. There is also variation in their official grouping or scheduling in different regions under different categories. In the Central list of Other Backward Classes of Assam, they are mentioned as Koch-Rajbonshis. In West Bengal, Koch and Rajbanshi has been mentioned as two categories separately under the SC list. Initially, in places like Assam and North-Bengal the word 'Koch' was more prevalent than the word 'Rajbanshi' (the term Rajbanshi is of recent origin). Even at present in places like North-Bengal and upper Assam they are known as 'Koch'. In view of Chatterji (1974:113) <sup>[6]</sup>, the word 'Koch' came from the Sanskrit word 'Kamboja'. In Yogini Tantra the Sanskritized name for Koch is mentioned as 'Kuvaca' and in Padma Purana it is mentioned as 'Kuvacaka' (Evil or Bad speaker in Sanskrit) (Chatterji, 1974:113) <sup>[6]</sup>. In the opinion of R. K. Barman (2012:53) <sup>[2]</sup>, there is the possibility that the word 'Koch' is, in fact, the tribalized form of 'Kuvacaka'.

The reference of the term Koch as 'Kamboja' and 'Kuvacaka' in its Sanskrit form indicates the existence of the Koch community in this land since ancient period. A detailed study on their racial origin shows that although most of the thinkers including British officials like B.H. Hodgson (1874), G. A. Grierson, Edward Gait (1926) [14], L.A. Waddel (1975), Dr. Iscot Marbaniang (1970) have consensus regarding the presence of Mongoloid racial elements among the Koches and their strong affinity with the broader Bodo family (Nath, 1989:2; Choudhury, 1969:46) [8], some of them like E. T. Dalton (1872), W. F. Oldham categorized them under Dravidian racial stock (Sanyal, 1965:11) [19] and a few others like Risley (1891) and Chatterji (1974:111-112) [6] emphasized on their racial admixture with Dravidians. Such disagreement seems to arise due to the association of 'Koches' with the term 'Rajbanshi'. In the words of E. Gait (1926:47) [14], "the emphasis of some scholars on their affinity Dravidian had been out of the confusion caused by the use of the term Rajbanshi". However, the general agreement is that the Koches belonged to the broader Bodo family of Mongoloid origin who migrated from Tibet and settled in North-Bengal and then spread to other parts of south and east.

The paper also tries to focus on another identity of the Koches i.e., the Rajbanshi identity. Till the recent past nowhere in the literary work the Koches were mentioned as Rajbanshi. Neither in the Persian records nor in the foreign accounts, nor in any of the dynastic epigraph of the time, are Koches mentioned as Rajbanshi (Bhakat, 2000:5). Moreover, 13<sup>th</sup> century history written in French language and 15<sup>th</sup> century literature written in Maithili language by eminent scholars such as Barnaratnakar, Bidyapati's predecessors Jyotirishwar Thakur and also 16<sup>th</sup> century Assamese literature all mentioned about the Koch community rather than the word Rajbanshi (Bhakat, 2000:5). Even the Darang Rajvamshavali written by Surjyakhari Davyagya, a genealogical account of the Koch royal family, written in 18<sup>th</sup> century does not refer to this term (Nath, 1989:5). A look at the literary trend of the recent time shows that in most of the writings Koches are referred to as Koch-Rajbongshis. Even in the Central list of Other Backward Classes of Assam, they are mentioned as Koch-Rajbongshis. In West Bengal Koch and Rajbanshi has been mentioned as two categories separately under the SC list.

Therefore, it is likely that this raised the question regarding the relationship between 'Koch' and 'Rajbanshi' and also the identity of the Rajbanshis of North Bengal. The common observation of the British officials such as B. H. Hodgson (1849), W. W. Hunter (1974), Grierson and also in The Gazetteer of Bengal and North-East India mentioned that there were some sections of Koches who in course of time adopted Hinduism and came to be known as Rajbanshis (Basu, 2003:27-28; Basumatary, 2011:54) [5, 4]. Even same view persists among some native scholars such as Sanyal (1965) [19] and Bandopadhyay (1998). Again, we come across another explanation of their relationship which can be interpreted from the Census Report of some of the selected districts of West Bengal (Daerjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Dinajpur and Cooch-Bihar) conducted under British administration from 1872-1941.

Till 1891 in the census record all the 'Rajbanshi' and the 'Paliya' were recorded under one head of the 'Koch' (Sanyal, 1965:14) [19], whereas in 1901 all sub-sections of

Koch were included as Rajbanshi. In 1911 and 1921, Paliyas and Kaibartas were also included as Rajbanshis (Sanyal, 1965:14) [19]. Sanyal (1965) [19] maintains that a study of the census figures of other districts indicated that along with the Koch there were other tribes and caste such as Jalia-Kaibartas, Tiyars, Namasudras, Bagdis, Malos, Dhimals, Pods, Rabhas, Garo-Paliya, Desi, Mecha and Kantai, who were also recorded as Rajbanshis. Although during 1921 census, as a result of Kshatriya movement (of late 19<sup>th</sup> century) efforts were made to separate Koches from the Rajbanshis (Sanyal, 1965:14) [19]. But in view of the practical difficulties faced by the census officials like F.O. Bell (1942) (See Sanyal,1983:14) [19], to distinguish the Koches from the Rajbanshi, it is doubtful as to how many of them returned to the category of Koch. The analysis of the Census Report of that time suggests that 'Rajbanshi' is a greater connotation which includes Koch and also some non-Koch people.

Therefore, on the basis of the observation made by British Officials and census review it can be said that if not there exists close relationship between 'Koch' and 'Rajbanshi'. It indicates that there can be Rajbanshis who may not be Koches and also there are Koches who may not be Rajbanshi. Yet, here it must be noted that the census report conducted under British administration also suggests that a large section of Rajbanshis were, in fact, Koches.

Moreover, a careful analysis of the observation made by some scholars also indicates that there exists no straight forward answer about the time period as to when 'Rajbanshi' as identity came to be associated with the Koches. While some of the scholars such as B. H. Hodgson (1849), W. W. Hunter (1974) cited that it was from the 16<sup>th</sup> century Biswa Singha that Koches came to be known as Rajbanshi (S. Basu, 2003:27-28) [5], at the same time it is observed that till 18<sup>th</sup> century, literatures such as 'Darang Rajvamshavali' (Chronicles of Koch Kingdom) made no mention for the word 'Rajbanshi' in association with the Koch. Nor we can take into account the view of Choudhury (2009:2) [8] that it came into being only with the Kshatriya movement of 1910, because we find the association of 'Koch' with 'Rajbanshi' in the census report of 1872 which was before that movement. So, like some thinkers such as Chatterji (1974:112) [6], it can be maintained that it lies somewhere in the emergence of the consciousness among the common Koch people about their glorious past and their association with Hindu religion.

Apart from the Rajbanshi identity, we come across another form of identity of the community i.e., Kshatriya identity, which came into being with the Kshatriya movement that emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early part of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The necessity for such identity emerged in the face of humiliation and ill-treatment received by the Rajbanshis of North Bengal from the immigrant upper caste Bengali. The transfer of Koch kingdom (with Cooch Behar as its capital) into a British native India after 1773 exposed the region and its people to large scale immigrations of outsiders. These immigrants which consisted of mostly upper caste Bengali used to look down the Rajbanshis because of their distinct language and culture (Basu, 2003:6) [5]. They consciously put them into the category of untouchables along with the Namasudra, the Pods and the other *antyaja* caste (Basu, 2003:6) [5] and used to maintain distance from the Rajbanshis. Basu (2003:64) [5] mentioned that it was such perception of humiliation which made the

Rajbanshi elites to desire for better social status. They viewed the census as the immediate means of uplifting their social status. The large scale mobilization of the Rajbanshi leaders finally got their official recognition as 'Kshatriya' in the 1911 census (Basu, 2003:70) <sup>[5]</sup>. Such official recognition was followed by the Sanskritization process among the Rajbanshis in order to secure social recognition of their Kshatriya identity. For this purpose Kshatriya Samiti which was formed in 1910 played a major role in bringing about various cultural and religious reforms among the Rajbanshis.

In the early part of 1930s, however, the identity of the Koch-Rajbongshis received a major turn when the Kshatriya Samiti claimed SC status for the community. In 1933, the Samiti with its effort became successful to get the community included in the SC list of Bengal (Basu, 2003:90) <sup>[5]</sup>. At that time the main criteria for the inclusion in the list along with the economic and educational backwardness was the lower social status i.e. untouchables. Therefore, assigning SC status to the Rajbanshis of North Bengal stood in sharp contrast to their earlier claim for Kshatriya identity.

Therefore, a careful look at the trajectory of the identity of the community shows a significant variation from Koch to Rajbanshi and Kshatriya identity and thereby SC status. Moreover, their present demand for Tribal status in Assam adds another dimension to their identity. Here we can look at the variation of their identity from the constructivist perspective which states that ethnic identity is dynamic which is built and re-built and also dismantled over time (Chiu, 2003) <sup>[7]</sup>.

### Transformations

The Koch-Rajbongshi community has been in a gradual process of transformation into the fold of Hinduism, Vaishnavism and Islam which ultimately brought about significant changes in the socio-cultural life of the Koch-Rajbongshi people. One of the prominent processes of their transformation has been their entering into the fold of Hinduism. Such dominant process of Hinduism has also been observed among other tribes of India by scholars such as Ghurye (1963), Kosambi (1975). There have been various historical points which signify the relationship between the Koch and the Mech and the pre-historic Mleccha dynasty that began with Bhagadutta (2725 B.C.) as identified by Gait (1926:58) <sup>[14]</sup>, Sanyal, (1965:6) <sup>[19]</sup>, Choudhury, (1969:114) <sup>[8]</sup> and Vasu (1983:47). However, major influence of Hinduism can be observed with the emergence of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Koch Kingdom which was laid by Biswa Singha. One of the main events in this process was the association of Biswa Singha with 'divine origin'. It was a general tendency of that time among non-Aryan king to associate them with some divine origin. Biswa Singha's admiration for Hinduism prepared the preliminary base for Hinduisation among the Koches. After Biswa Singha, Hinduism flourished under the patronage of other successive Koch Kings. They also established several temples and began following Brahminic rituals in their day-to-day life. Such patronization of Brahminism brought about profound changes in the socio-religious life of the common Koch people. Brahmins started dominating over their customs and rituals. They also brought hierarchy among the people which was earlier absent from their society (Vasu, 1983:59-60). Another sort of change was brought about by Neo-

Vaishnavism of Sankar Deva, which basically flourished under king Naranarayana and Chilarai. It brought about several social reforms among the Koch people. It also helped in spreading knowledge and understanding of religious books among the common people which was earlier restricted to only the Brahmins (Bhakat, 2006:130). Although, during Koch kingdom Brahminism and Vaishnavism was in a position to flourish, yet it could not bring about profound changes in many aspects of the life of Koch-Rajbongshi people such as marriage, status of Rajbanshi women and also in some of their aboriginal rituals. Because of their distinct socio-cultural life, the people of the community had to face discrimination and humiliation from the new caste Hindu immigrants (Basu, 2003:75) <sup>[5]</sup>. Therefore, again the strong hold of Hinduism can be observed during the Kshatriya Movement that emerged in the later part of 19<sup>th</sup> century. The motivation of the movement to raise the social status of the community to Kshatriya led to the process of Kshatriyaization and in this process Kshatriya Samiti played a major role. The Samiti through its workers and literary activities tried to bring changes in the day-to-day customs and practices of Rajbanshis in accordance with the Kshatriya principles. The most significant changes were brought in the status of the Rajbanshi women. Purdah system was introduced and movements of Rajbanshi women were restricted (Basu, 2003:75) <sup>[5]</sup>. Thus, the influence of Hinduism during Koch kingdom and further the process of Sanskritization through Kshatriya movement introduced new elements which brought about profound changes in every aspect of Koch-Rajbongshi people.

The discussion shows that during Koch kingdom and in the initial phase of British rule, there was a tendency among them to get themselves blend into the larger society. Such tendency can be observed among communities of other parts of India, for example, Santhals, Oraons and as such. However, in the later phase of the British rule in India, we come across the political motivation among the Rajbanshi leaders of North Bengal. The Rajbanshi leaders and the Samiti seemed to be oriented in securing more political power for themselves which was earlier under the hold of upper caste. They enthusiastically participated in the first election to the Bengal Legislative Council held in 1921 and also in the subsequent elections of 1923, 1929 and 1930 under the banner of Kshatriya Samiti. Thus, the organization which was formed with the purpose of bringing socio-religious reforms among the Rajbanshi community now turned into a political organization. But their participation could not bring out adequate results in the elections (Basu, 2003:95) <sup>[5]</sup>. The situation for the Rajbanshi leaders improved after 1935 with the implementation of reservation policy which ensured their seats from reserved constituencies (Basu, 2003:97) <sup>[5]</sup>. However such a policy did not help in the development of the Koch-Rajbongshi community. In the political scenario of Bengal of 1940s, the Rajbanshi leaders seemed to be engaged in seeking alliance with powerful lobbies in order to secure their seats. Therefore, in the pre-independence electoral politics the Samiti and the leaders failed to develop a separate political identity for the Rajbanshis. However, at the same time with the formation of Hitashadhini Sabha (1946) in Cooch Behar, the Rajbanshis proved to be one of the important political forces in 1946 and also in 1949 elections to the legislative council. But the contradiction among the members on the



issue of cession of Cooch Behar state which was earlier a Koch kingdom and subsequently the merger of Cooch Behar with West Bengal made the Sabha weak, which once again gave a set back to the formation of Koch-Rajbongshi identity (Sen & Dutta, 2005:2) <sup>[20]</sup>.

### **Koch-Rajbongshis and their Political Movements**

In the post-independence period due to some political decisions the community had to undergo several socio-economic and political changes. After independence, the Cooch Behar State under Koch Kingdom merged with India as a Chief Commissioner's province. But at that time the conspiracy of some Kolkata based leaders such as Bidhan Chandra Roy (Das, 2009:60-65) <sup>[9]</sup> and also the inability of the then political organization of Cooch Behar Hitashadhini Sabha to come to a unanimous decision on the issue of cession of Cooch Behar led to the merger of the state with West Bengal as its district (Sen & Dutta, 2005:2) <sup>[20]</sup>. The merger of Cooch-Bihar with West Bengal against the will of the people turned it to a mere periphery of West Bengal and made the native Rajbanshi people dependent on the Kolkata based leader for their future developmental prospects. Another problem to the Rajbanshi was caused by the settlement of advanced and skilled Bengali immigrant in Cooch Behar and North Bengal, aftermath the partition of 1947. This led to the shrinking of job opportunity for the backward and illiterate Rajbanshi youth (Hazarika, 2002). The gradual process of land dispossession due to huge influx of immigrants, new land reform policy of Left Front Government of West Bengal (Debnath, 2010:234) <sup>[12]</sup> and stiff growth of tea plantations (Hazarika, 2002) further made the indigenous Rajbanshis of North Bengal economically marginalized. Apart from economic marginalization, Koch-Rajbongshis also had to face cultural marginalization. Rajbanshi language, one of the largest spoken languages in North Bengal and Lower Assam is reduced only to a dialect (Hazarika, 2002). Many a time it has been termed as North-Bengal Dialect, Local dialect of Bengal, North-Eastern dialect in West Bengal and in Assam it is popularized as Goalparia dialect (Bhakat, 2000:3). Non-recognition of their language has hampered the linguistic identity of the Koch-Rajbongshis. Another severe attack to their identity was caused by the 'cultural politics' of replacing the ancient historical name of some distinctive places and institute of North Bengal associated with the Koch-Rajbongshis with modern names (Das, 2009:76) <sup>[9]</sup>. Thus, all these sorts of marginalization have created a threat to the identity of the Koch-Rajbongshis which in fact serves as the basis for the rise of the demand for separate statehood among them.

The Koch-Rajbongshis of Assam in the post-independence period faced somewhat different situation unlike their community members in North Bengal. In the late 1960s the prominent organization All Koch Rajbongshi Sanmiloni raised the demand for scheduled status to the community (The Telegraph, 4<sup>th</sup> October,2002). Although there are organizations which has been raising the issue of separate state following the Koch-Rajbongshis of North Bengal, but the demand of ensuring scheduled status for the community is in the for-front. Negligence of the Assam State Government towards the economic and educational backwardness of the community, the inability of the Koch-Rajbongshis to mark their presence in the major legislative bodies of the state of Assam and also the problem of illegal immigrants into the Koch-Rajbongshi dominated areas are

the general issues that have also been faced by the Koch-Rajbongshis of North Bengal but what led to significant impact on the Koch-Rajbongshis of Assam was the emerging new political scenario of North-East India in the post-independence period (The Telegraph, 4<sup>th</sup> October,2002). Immediately after independence North-East India and particularly Assam faced vital issues with the raise of new identity and separatist movements. New states such as Nagaland, Mizoram were being carved out of Assam on the basis of tribal identity. Such a political development made the other remaining tribes of Assam conscious and apprehensive. Among them the Koch-Rajbongshi was one of the largest communities in Assam to become conscious of their backwardness and marginalized position. Most significantly the on-going Bodo movement (1967 onwards) had a major impact on the Koch-Rajbongshis because the land proposed for separate Bodoland was largely inhabited by the Koch-Rajbongshis.

Therefore, all these development and changes in the post-independence period led to the development of new political movements among the Koch-Rajbongshis of Assam and North Bengal. The movement for separate statehood, although was considered as a development of the post-independence period, a careful study shows that the background for such movement was being prepared in North Bengal even before that. Such a demand can be observed with Hitasadhini Sabha (1946) which made their every effort to retain the independent status of Cooch Behar. But the movement started by the Sabha suffered a setback in the face of opposition from other contemporary native organizations (i.e., Cooch Behar Praja Mandal and Cooch Behar People's Association) and the conspiracy of Kolkata based leaders (Barman, 2007:77) <sup>[3]</sup>. Thereafter, the movement by the Koch-Rajbongshis seemed to get momentum in the early part of 70s with the Uttara Khanda Dal (UKD). Specifically, after 1971 UKD seemed to turn its motivation from North Bengal issues to Kamatapuri identity. the failure of UKD to secure sufficient amount of attention of the government towards its initial demand of addressing the backwardness of North Bengal, made it to demand for separate Kamatapuri state comprising 5 districts of North Bengal (Barman, R.K., 2012:231) <sup>[2]</sup>. But the movement started by UKD could not sustain for long time due to their internal division and also the pro-people policy of Left Front Government of West Bengal (Sen & Dutta, 2005) <sup>[20]</sup>. After UKD, other organizations like Uttara Banga Jati O Adivasi Sangathan (UTJAS) also categorically raised the issue of Kamatapuri identity by demanding protection of their language but no demand for separate state was raised (Das, 2007:145) <sup>[11]</sup>. Likewise in Assam also similar organization was formed by the Koch-Rajbongshis in between 60s and 80s such as Kamata Rajya Sangram Parishad (KRSP) and Bharatiya Koch-Rajbongshi Kshatriya Mahasabha which seemed to raise the issue of homeland emphasizing their Kamatapuri identity. But the reaction to such demands could not be gathered much from the literatures. It was in 1990s with the formation of Kamatapuri People's Party (KPP) and Kamatapuri Liberation Organization (KLO) in North Bengal that the movement of Koch-Rajbongshis for separate state got a new direction in the form of Kamatapuri movement. These two organizations became prominent leaders during 90s. But both KPP and KLO used to follow extremely opposite principles. KPP was a moderate organization which led the movement through

democratic means such as dharna, strikes and public meetings (Das, 2009:21) <sup>[9]</sup>. Apart from Kamatapur state, KPP also laid special emphasis on the safeguard of Kamatapuri culture and demanded the inclusion of Kamatapuri language in the 8<sup>th</sup> schedule of the Constitution (Voice of the Indian Revolution, October 2004). Unlike KPP, KLO which emerged at the same time was a militant organization. From 1999 to till 2002 KLO remain in news for its extremist activities. However, the militant activities of KLO received set back with the arrest of their large number of cadres in a joint operation launched by the police force of Assam and West-Bengal (Debnath, 2010:242-244) <sup>[12]</sup>. But the news reports suggests that Government under the veil of such a situation took the opportunity to weaken the movement for separate state of the Koch- Rajbongshis by arresting number of activists of KPP leading the Kamatapuri movement, alleging their relation with KLO (Das, 2009:82) <sup>[9]</sup>. It indicates the repressing role of Government towards such a movement. In spite of that KPP continued their mobilization through democratic means. In such a situation another organization which added strength to the movement was Greater Cooch Behar People's Association. While these three were the most dominant organizations to lead the movement in North Bengal in 90s, in Assam too the movement for separate homeland was led by All Koch Rajbongshi Student's Union (AKRSU) following democratic means. At present, especially from mid-21<sup>st</sup> century a new trend can be seen where the organizations of both the region are trying to collaborate their activities to lead the movement jointly. Their major demand is to form a separate Kamatapur State for the Koch-Rajbanshi people of Assam and North-Bengal comprising six districts of West Bengal—Cooch Behar, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Malda and four districts of Assam—Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Dhubri and Goalpara (The Statesman, 23<sup>rd</sup> Oct. 2009). The analysis of their movement and the role of various organizations at different point of time show a significant development of political identity of Koch-Rajbongshi-Kamatapuri identity. Their issues and demands gradually helped in emerging a separate Koch Rajbongshi identity and gradually in this process the Kamatapuri identity became an integral part of the Koch Rajbongshis.

As have been already mentioned, along with the movement for separate statehood, Koch Rajbongshis of Assam are associated with another significant movement that is the movement for ST status. The movement which emerged in 1967 with only the demand for en-scheduling the community, in 70s it turned to the demand for en-scheduling them as Scheduled Tribe. From 60s to till late 80s All Assam Koch-Rajbongshi Sanmilani was the prominent organization which spearheaded the movement. In the late 80s other organization also participated in the movement. However, it was the emergence of AKRSU in 1993 that provided vigour to the movement with its leadership. But the movement of the Koch-Rajbongshis in Assam received resentment from the other tribal communities of Assam. Major opponent came from the Bodo organizations towards such demands of Koch-Rajbongshis. One of the reasons can be that the Koch-Rajbongshis are one of the largest communities and therefore, assigning them ST status will enhance them as a strong competitor for the other tribal communities of Assam. Such sentiment was well reflected when the bill for assigning ST status to the Koch-

Rajbongshis received strong opposition from tribal members of the Lok Sabha such as Jayanta Rongpe, Chansuma Khungur Basumatary and Urkhau Ganda Brahma (Barman, 2004:18-19) <sup>[11]</sup>. In spite of such opposition and negligence on the part of the Government the movement continued. It further got accelerated from 2003 onwards after the formation of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). The formation of BTC in four districts of Assam having more than 80 lakhs of Koch-Rajbongshis created resentment among them because it has further reduced the community into a second class citizen. Even after rejection of their plea by Register General of India (RGI) in 2003, AKRSU along with other organization is trying to pressurize the central and state government through various activities such as bandhs, dharnas and road blockades (The Assam Tribune, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2012).

### Conclusion

The overall understanding shows that Koch-Rajobongshis at various historical point of time came to be associated with different identities—Rajbanshi, Kshatriya and the newly Kamatapuri identity that made the community unique in itself. In the pre-independence period being one of the marginalized sections of North Bengal the Rajbanshi leaders tried to mark their presence in the electoral politics but at that time they could not develop a separate political identity for the Koch-Rajbongshis. Further, the development and various political decisions in the post-independence period brought about vast socio-economic changes in their life which ultimately prepared the background for new political movements, where we find them articulating their demand for separate state, protection to their Kamatapuri language and ST status for Koch-Rajbongshis of Assam.

The situation of the community can be analyzed in parallel with the tribal situation that exists in other parts of India. The tribal situation in India shows the long process of assimilation and transformation of tribes into Hinduism which led to the practical difficulty in separating them from caste Hindus. Moreover, the period from 1871-1921, as identified by Singh (1978:1228), witnessed several movements through which communities started asserting higher social status. Here we can contextualize the emergence of Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement of late 19<sup>th</sup> century for Kshatriya identity such a situation. But it will be inappropriate to draw its complete similarity with these tribal movements because during that time Rajbanshi as a community was not recognized as tribe. However, the observation shows that the general tendency among the communities at that time was to blend into the larger society. The post-independence period draws a different picture where the communities are trying to assert their separate identity and on the basis of that they are demanding ST status for them. But the long process of assimilation and also the incapability of Government to identify the tribal population have led to a chaotic situation where large numbers of communities are raising their demand for ST status such as Gujjars, Pahadiyas, Jhodias and also some others. Similarly the long process of transformation among Koch Rajbongshis during Koch kingdom and also during Kshatriya movement has made it difficult to distinctly specify their identity in terms caste or tribe. Therefore, we see variation in their constitutional status across the states which serve as one of the basis of their present movement for ST status in Assam. Moreover, following constructivist

approach to ethnicity it can be observed that the emergence of the Kamatapuri identity as an integral part of the Koch Rajbongshis is related to series of events right from the pre-independence period which in the present serves as the basis of their present-day political movement.

### References

1. Barman Bimal Kumar, Astitvar Sankat Koch-Rajbonghi Janagosthi. Chilarai Academy Bongaigaon, Assam, 2004.
2. Barman Rup Kumar. Partition of India and its Impact on Scheduled Castes of Bengal. Abhijit Publication, New Delhi, 2012.
3. Barman P. Hitasadhini Sabha. In: S. Barma, ed. Socio-Political Movements in North Bengal (A Sub-Himalayan Tract). New Delhi: Global Vission Publishing House, 2007, 65-82.
4. Basumatary D. Boro Jatir Itihas Bhasa-Sanskriti aru Kritan Missionari. Nandita Basumatary, Guwahati, 2011.
5. Basu S. Dyanmics of A Caste Movement: The Rajbansis of North Bengal, 1910-1947. Manohar Publisher and Distributors, New Delhi, 2003.
6. Chatterji SK. Kirata Jana Kriti. 3rd ed. The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, 1974.
7. Chiu SS. Ethnic Identity Formation: A Case study of Carribean and Indian Hakkas in Torronto. M.A. York University, 2003.
8. Choudhury AC. Koch-Rajbongshir Jono Gosthir Itihas Aru Sanskriti. Third ed. Sri Pradyut Prakash Choudhury, Bongaigaon, Assam, 1969. Available at: [http://www.ceris.metropolis.net/Virtual%20Library/housing\\_neighbourhoods/SChi1.pdf](http://www.ceris.metropolis.net/Virtual%20Library/housing_neighbourhoods/SChi1.pdf) [Accessed on 7th November 2013]
9. Das AJ. Kamatapur and the Koch Rajbanshi Imagination. Montage Media, Guwahati, 2009.
10. AJ Koch Rajbanshi-r Gosthigata Parichoy aaru Jaati Gathan, 2007. Available at: [http://www.kamatapur.com/sites/kamatapur.com/files/koch\\_rajbanshi-r\\_gosthigata\\_parichoy\\_aaru\\_jaati\\_gathan-ASSAMESE.pdf](http://www.kamatapur.com/sites/kamatapur.com/files/koch_rajbanshi-r_gosthigata_parichoy_aaru_jaati_gathan-ASSAMESE.pdf) [Accessed on 5th May 2013]
11. Das N. Uttar Banga Jati O Adibashi Sangathan (UTJAS): A Dalit Student Movement. In: S. Barma, ed. Socio-Political Movement in North Bengal (A sub-Himalayan Tract). Global Vission Publishing House, New Delhi, 2007, 137-164.
12. Debnath S. The Dooars in Historical Transition. N. L. Publisher West Bengal, Shiv Mandir, 2010.
13. Endle S. The Kacharis. Low Price Publication, Delhi, 1911.
14. Gait E. History of Assam. Eastern Book House, Guwahati, 1926.
15. Ghurye GS. The Scheduled Tribes. Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1963.
16. Hazarika SD. Unrest and displacement: Rajbanshis in North Bengal, 2002. Available at: [www.mcrg.ac.in/rw%20files/Rw17.doc](http://www.mcrg.ac.in/rw%20files/Rw17.doc) [Accessed on 19 April 2013]
17. Kumar BB. Ethnicity and Insurgency in North East India. In: B.B. Kumar, ed. Problems of Ethnicity in North -East India. Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 2007, 17-57.
18. Nath D. History of Koch Kingdom. 1st ed. Mittal Publications, Delhi, 1989.
19. Sanyal CC. The Rajbansis of North Bengal. The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1965.
20. Sen P, Dutta A. The Kamatapur Movement, its root and response of the State. Frontier: an independent weekly in its fortyfifth year, 2005. Available at: <http://www.frontierweekly.com/views/may-12/11-5-12-TheKaamtapuriMovement,itsrootandresponseoftheStateParthaSen&AbhijitDutta.pdf> [Accessed on 30th April 2013]
21. Singh KS. Colonial Transformation of Tribal Society in Middle India. Economic and Political Weekly, 1978; 13(30):1221, 1223, 1225-1232.
22. The Assam Tribune. Koch-Rajbongshi ST status hits road block. 22nd May 2012. Available at: <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=may2212/at07> [Accessed on 30th November 2012].
23. The Telegraph. With A Sizeable Presence In The Heart Of The Proposed Bodoland, The Koch-Rajbongshis Are Seeking St Status To Have A Say In The Decision-Making Process. 4th October, 2002. Available at: [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1021004/asp/northeast/story\\_1259016.asp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1021004/asp/northeast/story_1259016.asp) [Accessed on 4th May 2013].
24. The Statesman. Organisations from SSDC to run Movement for Seperate State., 2009 Available at: <http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-210422812/organisations-form-ssdc-run.html> [Accessed on 4th May 2013].
25. Vasu NN. The Social History of Kamrupa. 1st ed. Northern Book Centre, New Delhi, 1983.
26. Voice of the Indian Revolution. Kamtapuri Struggle A Reply to Injustices, People's march, 2004, 5(10). Available at: <http://www.peoplesmarch.com/archives/2004/oct2k4/Kamtapuri.htm> [Accessed March 18, 2004]