

Panchanan Barma and the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Movement in Dinajpur: A Brief Historical Study

Abstract

Panchanan Barma was a leader of Rajbanshi Community and reformer from entire north-Eastern India during the later period of British rule in India. He was born at Khalisamari village in erstwhile Cooch-Bihar State. He established Kshatriya Sabha in order to inculcate Brahminical values and practices among the people from Rajbanshi community. Panchanan Barma originally came from a jotedar. In the early years of his career, he started practicing law at Rangpur court. In Rangpur he was shocked by the refusal of a high caste lawyer to use a toga (lawyer's gown), previously used by him. In the following years, he led a kshatriyazation movement among the people of Rajbanshi community of Bengal. In order to be respected and accepted by the upper caste Bengalis Panchanan felt the Rajbanshis must get organized and educated, which he tried to achieve through the 'Kshatriya Samity'. Certainly, the samity tried to prove that Rajbanshis were Kshatriyas with a royal lineage, suggesting a historical link with Bhaskar Barman, the king of Kamrupa kingdom, through the light of the Sanskrit literature. Brahmin pundits of Kashi also supported his words that there is a true identity linkage hiding between the Rajbanshis and Kshatriyas hiding for centuries. In support of this claim the movement involved a ceremonial kshatriyaization process brahminical rituals were performed to convert thousands of Rajbanshis to 'Kshatriya Rajbanshi' in Rangpur of North-Eastern zone of Undivided Bengal.

Keywords: Indigenous People, The Rajbanshis of Dinajpur, Socio-economic condition, Panchanan Barma, Father of the Rajbanshi Community, Kshatriya movement etc.

Introduction

The Britishers utilized this colloquial society system on caste and creed in India. On the other hand, traditional rites and rituals drove many men's social and individual lives to danger. Naturally creative personality of different communities on the background of contemporary situation tried hard to come out from the shackles of the collective life. North Bengal Kshatriya movement and the performance and social thinking of its makes Maharshi Panchanan Barma the result of such reaction. It can be said in imitation of David Kopf that this changing process is one kind of Renaissance. Because Renaissance is such social and cultural process that is related with reawakening. It is such concept that free from historical time and culture. Any one can apply this concept in any sphere of culture and historical period. According to Tapan Roy Choudhury—"a seed time rich in possibilities. These possibilities depend successful creation of the creative personality or community. On the contemporary period, Roy Saheb Panchanan Barma was the towering personality of the entire Rajbanshi Community not only for the North Bengal but also the whole North-Eastern India. He grew the ethnic sentiment among the Rajbanshi society.

In India, it is basically around religion that the caste system, which is principally a custom-based structure of social hierarchy, has grown up. It is linked with the unequal distribution of power and wealth also. In essence, the caste system is a consequence of the socio-economic and political process rooted in history. One of its remarkable features was, "The constant rivalry between various communities for political and economic power which was reflected in their varying and conflicting perceptions of Brahmins and the Vedas."¹ On the other hand the British, in order to prolong their rule, lent some credibility to the caste system in the administrative sphere. That is why Dirks says, "Under colonialism caste became a specifically Indian form of civil society, the most critical site for the textualization of social identity, but also for the specification of public and private domain, the rights and responsibilities of the colonial state, the



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legitimatization consisting of social freedom and social control, and the developments of the documentation and certification regimes of the bureaucratic state.”² Susan Bayly too says, “The English word caste has come to be widely used in South Asia, even by speakers of vernacular languages, though many equivalent terms for human orders or ‘Communities’ exist in the sub continental regional languages.”³ Susan Bayly further says in elaboration of the concept of caste, “These usages include such regional vernacular terms as Quam, Sampraday, Samudi and Jati. Like other English terms made familiar through colonial administrative practice, ‘community’ is still widely employed in both English and the vernaculars. It is often a reference to ethno-religious origins, as when newspaper refers euphemistically to Hindu-Muslim riots as ‘clashes’ of two particular communities. It is also a term for caste origin, often with an implication that such a ‘community’ shares an inherited moral mandate to promote common interests by coercive means.”⁴

What these comments imply is that under the colonial rule of the British, the caste system became important in India in the cultural sphere on one hand, and similarly in the social, politico-economic and administrative spheres on the other. Because just as the feudal structure did not collapse with the fall of the Mughal Empire, its later transformation into a subservient political and economic entity in the colonial period is a historic event. In consequence, caste-based movements emerged in British India. It may be mentioned that such movements in different parts of India were anti-Brahminical in nature. In North Bengal and North-Eastern India, the Brahminical domination was absent, but other problems cropped up. It was against this background that the ‘Kshatriya’ movement led by Panchanan Barma was a remarkable phenomenon. This movement assumed the shape of a social mass upheaval in today’s North Bengal, and in North-Eastern India as a whole. Panchanan Barma gave able leadership to this movement. For this reason, Swaraj Basu has remarked, “Panchanan Barma was the main ideologue of the Movement.”⁵

For an adequate discussion of Panchanan Barma’s social thought, it is necessary to have an understanding of the larger social and historical perspective, because any type of history is written from some specific outlook. Now what needs to be thought is whether the events described and facts supplied in the work on history is correct or not. Hence it is extremely necessary to check one’s emotion and to restrain one’s devotional mood while writing the history of a region or an individual. That is why a discussion of Panchanan Barma’s social thought requires caution, for the people at large may think of Panchanan Barma’s thoughts as those of the Rajbansi community, while the Rajbansis may consider Panchanan Barma’s thoughts as their own.

The Renaissance of the nineteenth century owes its genesis to the spread of western education. This Renaissance led to many events, but it failed to touch the larger sections of Bengalis, i.e. the greater part of the Muslim community and of the educationally backward people. On the other hand, the luminaries of those days did not pay much attention to the welfare of the people. But the impact of British rule and western culture on Bengal, or for that matter, the whole of India, and their various interactions with indigenous culture initiated a change in the mode of living of the people. Nevertheless, it was confined to the educated urban middle classes, who were limited in number. Subrata Dasgupta has mentioned two characteristics of this new consciousness and process of change. The first was ‘A capability to think, perceive and create in a manner that entailed the melding of two traditions which were seemingly unconnected and even contradictory--- one being the Indian cultural and philosophical past, the other the Western creative and intellectual tradition.’ He has termed it ‘a cross-cultural mentality’. The second was ‘a belief in, and perception of, a fundamental unity amidst diversity and difference, even in the seeming differences manifest between certain Western and Indian concepts, precepts and perspective.’ Subrata Dasgupta has called this belief and perception ‘universalism’. But the twin ideas, ‘cross-cultural mentality’ and ‘universalism’ could not enter the heart of the Indian society. The various processes of Renaissance had found their fruits owing to the rise of nationalism and the pull of the ancient Hindu religion (sanatan dharma).⁶

The English too were active in perpetuating the Indian caste-based social stratification. This gave rise to various problems in the Indian society. On the other hand, various communities of different parts of India were trying to find ways of coming out of these problems. The ‘Kshatriya’ movement led by Panchanan Barma was the outcome of such a reaction. It was also one kind of Renaissance. The Renaissance came to Bengal mainly in the fin-de siècle decades of the eighteenth century and continued well into the nineteenth century. A good number of books and numerous articles have been written in various personages, who belonged to the first half of the nineteenth century. While searching for facts about them, it has been found difficult to accept many of the then prevalent notions. Hence it is not unjustified to throw light on Panchanan Barma’s social thoughts on the basis of newer facts. In truth, the concept of Renaissance is such that it can be applied to any culture and any phase of history.⁷ Panchanan led his Kshatriya movement in the same manner. The way he led the movement justifies historian Tapan Raychaudhuri’s characterization of the Renaissance as ‘a seed time rich in possibilities.’⁸

Before trying to throw light on Panchanan Barma’s Kshatriya movement, it is necessary to discuss the social situation of contemporary Greater

Bengal. In Bengal too, as in other provinces of India, caste-based movements took place. The Namasudra movement or the Mahisya movement launched by the Kaibartas of Medinipur⁹ can be cited as examples. Alongside, there were movements for building up caste-less societies. Such movements were led and advocated by illustrious figures like Raja Rammohan Roy, Henry Derozio and Swami Vivekananda etc. Yet it was not possible to banish caste-based arrogance and sentiments from the society. Persons belonging to the so-called educated 'bhadralok' community could not show much disregard or indifference to the caste system. That justified Swaraj Basu's observation, "The dichotomy between private and public life was clearly visible and under the surface of the liberal ethos of public life, caste consciousness very much prevailed in interpersonal relationships of most of the members of bhadralok society."¹⁰ The reform movement led by such a great scholar like Rammohun Roy hardly made an impact in the lessening of the strict nature of the caste system. This was the situation in urban areas, and hence the situation in rural areas can easily be guessed. The Indian nationalist movement too failed to fulfill the expectations of all sections of society. The British Government of India too, for political reasons, helped in increasing the distance between the upper castes and lower castes. That is why Swaraj Basu argues, "The political alienation of the upper castes from both the lower castes and the colonial government paved the way for the British to appear in the eyes of the lower castes as their true well-wisher. Most of the lower caste patronage seemed an easy way to salvation from the age-long upper caste domination and this perception was expressed in unambiguous terms in their literature."¹¹

If the Rajbansi Kshatriya movement is divided into two phases, we find that Panchanan Barma ably led the movement in the second phase. In the Census Report of 1891, the Rajbansi community was shown as 'Koch', which sparked off a protest movement. The centre of the movement was the Rangpur district, which belongs to today's Bangladesh. Haramohan Khajanchi, the zamindar of Shyampukur, Rangpur was a leader of the movement, and his associates were Rajchandra Sircar of Gaibandha (now belonging to Bangladesh), Nabin Chandra Sircar of Kahigunj, Pamdit Manimohan Sircar etc. It was their combined effort that initiated the Kshatriya movement. When, in the face of stiff resistance by the Rajbansi community led by Haramohan Khajanchi, the English Government consented to accept Rajbansis as 'Bratya Kshatriya', the movement subsided for the time being. But in the Census of 1901, 'Rajbansi, the same as Koches' was written, and naturally, protests followed. With the arrival of Panchanan Barma in

Rangpur in 1901 began the second phase of the Kshatriya movement. Panchanan Barma felt the need for legal assistance in the bid to secure justice for the Rajbansi community. On the other hand, in the Census Report of 1901, Buchanan Hamilton expressed a different opinion about the Rajbansi community, although this opinion did not receive much attention. Even the opinions of those Brahmins who had come from Mithila to North Bengal and permanently settled here or the views of the prominent persons of the Rajbansi community and those of Kamrup Brahmins were not given any importance. It is worth mentioning that in the Census Report, Buchanan suggested, "All Rajbansis are not Kochs, but most of them are."¹² This leads to the easy inference that Koch and Rajbansi are two different communities. The stir that the statement 'Rajbansi, the same as Koches' generated among the Rajbansi community was also expressed by Buchanan in his report: 'But this opinion is unbearable to the Rajbansi chiefs.' Under Panchanan Barma's leadership, the 'Kshatriya Samity' was formed on 1 May, 1920, in the theatre hall (*Natya Mandir*) of Rangpur.¹³ Panchanan Barma was its founder-secretary and he adorned this chair all along his life.¹⁴ The 'Kshatriya Reform' grew into a mass movement under his leadership, in consequence of which the Rajbansi community received the identity of 'Rajbansi Kshatriya' permanently. Hitherto this identity did not acquire a lasting character. One evidence in this regard is that before the formation of the Kshatriya Samity, Rajbansis received the identity of 'Bratya Kshatriya' only.¹⁵

Finally, under the leadership of Panchanan Barma, Rajbansis, in 1913, held a great union (*mahamilan*) festival in Parulbari village (P.S. Debigunj) on the bank of the Karatowa River.¹⁶ On the eve of the festival, Panchanan Barma said, 'Rajbansis know themselves as Kshatriya, and they have all along declared themselves as Kshatriya sons and daughters.'¹⁷ Here it should be mentioned that in 1910, at the time of the formation of the Kshatriya Samity, many wanted to retain the word Kshatriya only. But Panchanan Barma's stand was unequivocal, "If the term 'Rajbanshi' is dropped, our mission will be defeated (*hamra hareya jama*)."¹⁸ In a word, it can be argued that the decision, taken by Panchanan Barma, to build up the Rajbansi Kshatriya identity through the Kshatriya movement was a historic one. Moreover, it was due to the protest of the Kshatriya community led by Panchanan Barma that in the report published by O Maily, the then Census Superintendent it was said that Rajbansis and Koches are two different identities.¹⁹

The Kshatriya movement led by Panchanan Barma received widespread currency at that time on

an all-India plane. It was due to this movement that the influence and power of the Rajbansi community grew enormously in today's North Bengal and North-Eastern India. He spread the public welfare activities of the Kshatriya samity to the all-India stage. Swaraj Basu, professor of history at Indira Gandhi Open University, he remarked that Panchanan took the claim for Kshatriya status by the Rajbansis community to the all-India level through the Kshatriya movement and in this way he was able to transcend the bounds of regionalism and to achieve institutional success in the larger society. "It was perhaps through this channel that the Kshatriya movement of the Rajbansis hoped to enter the realm of modern institutional politics."²⁰

The Kshatriya movement, along with its successes, had some failures too. The Rajbansi people of Assam's Kokrajhar, Bangaigaon, the northern part of Dhubri and some parts of Dinajpur did not much accept Panchanan Barma's campaign for Kshatriya identity. The adoption of the Koch-Rajbansi identity instead of the Kshatriya one by the Rajbansi community of Assam generated an ethnic problem that lingers till date. In Dinajpur has been created a Rajbansi--- Polia or Palia debate. The fact is that the Rajbansi community of Assam could not accept Panchanan Barma's characterization of the Kshatriyas as scheduled. It was a reality that the contemporary Rajbansi society was advanced in terms of education, economic position and political consciousness. Panchanan Barma wanted the community to give up its identity snobbery and to establish itself. The crux of his message was, 'You will get the constitutional facilities'. It implied an all-round advancement of the Rajbansi community. There lay the success of his Kshatriya movement.²¹

Conclusion

In conclusion we may say that Panchanan Barma's Kshatriya Reform Movement has pushed forward his society to a greater extent of prestige and status in caste based Bengal as well as India. Panchanan Barma has been able to probe that the Rajbanshis were Kshatriya from the earliest period of time. Unity and diversity is a unique characteristic of India. People of several castes and creed, religion and belief, live here peacefully maintaining one's own individuality. So Panchanan, for his society as well as for all, tried to develop culture and tradition. Indian economy is based on villages. So he tried to develop villages with economic reformation by the scheme of micro-credit or micro finance. For making proper use of money with the help of Banks he established 'Kshatriya Bank'. Thus he wanted to form strong country self reliant and self confident one. For this purpose he wanted to form co-operative groups. A woman is an important half of a man. With any development of one half another half can't be developed. So he did much for woman emancipation and empowerment.

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