

Historical Geography of The Rajbanshis of West Dinajpur: A Brief Study



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Abstract

The concept of Historical-geography towards land and people among the scholars has been started a long time ago. Recently, the studies on regional history have started among various scholars. Yet, most of the geographical region remained out of research, especially in the North-Eastern India. Dinajpur is a famous historic place located in both India and Bangladesh and its name was found in so many ancient historical texts. The general history of Dinajpur has discussed by different scholars. But the historical geography of West Dinajpur did not focused by any researcher. As well as the life, culture and society regarding the indigenous people i.e. the Rajbanshis of the land had not discussed. The state and society are changes in accordance with the change of historical geographical evaluation and it's as well. Those evaluative identities did not highlight through historical research. Any region of the world may be changed its area and boundary during the historical timelines by some rulers. As a result, histro-geographical sources of the certain region will be changed as well as the history of the people towards the concerning region. This papers attempts to focus regarding historical-geography of the land and its indigenous people.

Keywords: Historical-Geography of Dinajpur, Formation of West Dinajpur, Indigenou People, Son of The Soil etc.

Introduction

'Dinajpur' is an ancient '*Janapadas*' in north-eastern India. Since ancient times, the evolution of historical geography of the ancient land had begun since immemorial times. Dinajpur has divided into three parts in different historical times and located in India and Bangladesh but the name, 'Dinajpur' has remained unchanged till now. Geographical area of the land had been changing in different administrative affairs. As a result, sometimes the area of the land had increased and sometimes had decreased but the real name i.e. Dinajpur has not changed. During the partition of India in 1947, the land of Dinajpur has divided into two parts and located of both countries India and East Pakistan. Thus, western part of greated Dinajpur remaned as West Dinajpur under the state of West Bengal in India.

Aims of the Study

The aim and objective of this paper is to highlight the historical-geography of the Rajbanshis of West Dinajpur. The Rajbanshi community is the indigenous people of West Dinajpur. They have a rich cultural heritage which influenced over the society of West Dinajpur. The aims of the study are:

1. To recover the history of the third largest community of West Dinajpur.
2. To identify the socio-economical profile of the Rajbanshis of West Dinajpur.
3. To find out the status of livelihood towards the Rajbanshi community of West Dinajpur.

Land and its People

Historical geography towards the land of West Dinajpur is too old. Once the land of West Dinajpur was formed by the alluvium of lake. According to famous Geologist, R.D.Oldham, "The oldest alluvium is usually composed of massive clay beds of a rather pale, reddish brown colour, very often yellish when recently exposed to the air, with more or less *kandar* disseminated throughout. In places, andespecially in Bengal and Bihar, pisolitic concretions of hydrated iron peroxide, from the size of a mustard seed to that of a pea are disseminated through the clay; occasionally these modules attain larger dimensions, some being found near Dinajpur of the size of pigeons eggs." Once the land of West Dinajpur was a part of Pragjyotishpur during the age of the Mahabharata. Sometimes, the land was recognized as '*Pundra*' or '*Pundradesh*', the land

named after the Pundra people. Later, the period of imperial Guptas, the land was mentioned as Pundravardhana and sometimes Pundravardhana Bhukti mentioned in the ancient texts.

There are so many historical interpretations regarding the origin of the land. Scholars did not concur towards the origin of the land. However, after the advent of the Islam Rulers, the shape and size of the areas had been changing upto partition of India in 1947. In course of time, the importance of the land became changed during the reign of the Mughal Emperor. The emergence of the Dinajpur Raj during Mughal period, the entire area of Dinajpur was ruled under this Royal dynasty. At the advent of the British power in Bengal, some places of this region had turned as commercial or urban centre of East India. Ghorghat was turned as urban centre of the area at that time. However, the culture, society and livelihood of the people of great Dinajpur had changed by the influence of Islamization.¹ So, the socio-cultural history of the Dinajpur had changed as well as the social and human geography.

According to the statement of the European and Chinese Travelers an advanced civilization was developed from an unknown time on the bank of the river Karotoya. The civilization built on the bank of Karotoya, that's why the civilization can be called as Karotoya civilization. Mahasthangarh and Bangarh during the medieval age and Ghorghat during the Mughal era were major urban centers of Dinajpur. At the commencement of the East India Company's rule in Ghorghat, Dinajpur was turned as one of the important towns in the territory. Eight years later, the Battle of Plessey in 1765 AD, this territory conquered by the army of the East-India Company in 1765.² The Nawab's regime as well as the former capital city of Ghorghat became collapsed. After the occupation of the British Empire, the historical and geographical importance of Dinajpur will grow. Histo-geographic importance of a place depending on the geographical location. Ghorghat territory had occupied by the British and formed it's headquarter at Dinajpur town. Thus, the modern Dinajpur has been starting as head-quarter of the area from that time.

In this way, historical geography of Dinajpur became changed time to time during the reign of different historical period by the rulers. Sometimes, the rulers of Dinajpur from different caste and communities were changed its geographical area for administrative convenience. As a result, geographical area of the land has changed as well as its history. The culture and society must be changed according to geographical location and the history will be changed. Thus, the history of present Dinajpur has changed as per geographical activities. Now, Dinajpur has divided in three parts in the same name but the scenarios of historical geography are different. So, the histo-geographic impact on the land is essential terms in any historical period.

Indigenous People of West Dinajpur

The term "indigenous peoples", means native people, who were living in these areas for a long time as distinct culture and society from the dominant society. People of the Rajbanshi community

are referred as indigenous people of the land. 'Rajbanshi' is the name of an indigenous people and largest ethnic group, settled in West Dinajpur District.³ They lived in the region from ancient times but some scholars are doubted that they had entered this area from the Himalayan region or from the Brahmaputra valley. Anthropologists opined that they are looks like Mongoloids in features but their ethnic theory about the Rajbanshi people is absolutely wrong. Some portions of the Rajbanshis might be Mongoloids but not more than 30% of total Rajbanshi people.⁴ Major portion of the community are belonging to Kshatriya by origin. They live mostly in Rangpur, Dinajpur and Rajshahi districts and a small number of them in Bogra and Mymensingh in undivided North Bengal. Majority Rajbanshis were lived in undivided Dinajpur but in the period of divided India and post independent period most of the Rajbanshis were left from East Pakistan and entered into Western part of Dinajpur i.e. West Dinajpur due to communal riots. The number of Rajbanshis of Undivided Dinajpur had lessened due to partition of Bengal in 1947. On the other hand Rajbanshi population in West Dinajpur had grown than earlier. After the partition of West Dinajpur District in 1992, the Rajbanshi population has flourished than before as per man-land ratio. So, Rajbanshi population in Undivided Dinajpur has lessened than earlier. In 1991, their total population was a little more than five thousand. They are now a declining community in undivided Dinajpur.

Once the Rajbanshis of West Dinajpur were belonged to Jotedaar family. During the age of Mughal period they lost their lands and turned into a family of decaying land-lords hip. After that they had been lost their surplus lands during the colonial period. At the same time the Rajbanshis were involved in various movements to recover their lost dignity and social status. But their demand had not shape in the political scenerio due to lack of competent leader. They had lost not only their landed properties under the British colonial rule, as well as "they lost their socio-economical" and political opportunities. Whereas, the Rajbanshis were played a vital role in agricultural economy of North Bengal. So, they had gone to backward like other distress communities in the contemporary society.

Evolution among the Rajbanshi Society

Jinnah and his associate Muslim Leagues has been performed communal activities continuously after Lahore session on 22nd March in 1940.⁵ On that day Jinnah in his speech said, the Hindus and Muslims are two separate nations.⁶ Sir Syed Ahmed supported to him and expressed the same statement. On the eve of the general people of Bengal had confused to hear those words and they could not decide to settle themselves to anywhere for living on account of communal tensions. Some of the orthodox Muslim families went towards eastern parts of Bengal and on the other hand huge portion of people of the Hindu community were came to western part of Bengal for living. In this context, the long preparation of the evaluation of the Rajbanshi communities was made at that period. After 1940, when the occurrence of communal riots or any political crisis raised, then

the general people of East Bengal were came to West Bengal, either with the Rajbanshis or any other Hindu communities. Thus, most of the Rajbanshi as well as non-Rajbanshi people were came to West Dinajpur and had settled in blocks in the district.

Most of the refugees took shelter at the house of the Rajbanshi families in West Dinajpur. Because, most of the Rajbanshis of Dinajpur were Jotedaar families and they had given shelter to the homeless refugees of different caste and creeds in their home. Seeking sympathy and help from the hostess, a few portion refugees did not express his real identity and they bore the identity of the house hold. Thus, most of the homeless refugees were converted into Rajbanshi communities. Thus, today the title of the Rajbanshis communities became more than 100 categories. People from different communities were assembled to the Rajbanshi communities during the crisis phenomena before or after partition of Bengal in 1947.⁷

Keep in mind, undivided Dinajpur, Rangpur, Fulbari, Rajshahi was the most Rajbanshi populated area of North Bengal. That's why it is undesirable to have the entire region was prominence by the Rajbanshi people. The crisis event is not only made among the Rajbanshi families, other lower and upper caste Hindu community peoples were come to West Dinajpur at the same time. A large section of homeless people from Easty Pakistan were come to West Dinajpur and took shelter at the house of the Rajbanshi people. Most of the refugee Rajbanshi families had taken shelter under Rajbanshi family in West Dinajpur with some other refugees of different community were also took shelter at the same time and in the same house. After few years later, the refugees were built their houses in the land of his hostess. Above all, the helpless people were took the title of his hostess. In this way most of the refugees were converted to Rajbanshi during the partition of India.

Communal Riots broke out in East Pakistan again in 1949-50 and most of the upper caste Hindus were marched towards West Dinajpur and took shelter in rural areas. During the period of the partition of India in 1947, they understood that no future in the Eastern Bengal for themselves. They fought with the Muslim Community to keep their position in East Bengal. But they did not overcome from the great riot and compelled to extend their steps towards West Dinajpur. Majority portion of them, took shelter at the house of Rajbanshi people. It should be noted; Rajbanshis are very simple and open minded people and always helped to others in any circumstances. If we search all the reports during political crisis periods of East Bengal than we see that refugees had taken shelter to the house of Rajbanshi community. Thus, refugees from East Bengal had taken shelter in every block of West Dinajpur, especially present day Dakshin Dinajpur portion. On that day, several new colonies were made by the refugees in government vest land in every blocks of Dakshin Dinajpur. At the same time, many Kaibatyas families were marched to West Dinajpur and formed new refugee colony and they used their title after name, 'sarkar'. During the

regime of Left Front Government, a few portions of them changed their sub caste and got constitutional facilities as well as the sarkar Rajbanshis. Such evidence was found in different blocks in West Dinajpur like, Tapan, Gangarampur, Hili, Banshihari etc. As a result, Actual Rajbanshi community peoples were deprived constitutional privilege from the government. They are identified as Rajbanshi caste but their culture remained as earlier. Thus, the evaluation episode had started in different political and communal crisis period of Bengal.

At the same time, at least forty percent villages were belonged to Rajbanshi Community, especially western part of undivided Dinajpur, now Dakshin Dinajpur. Already, Namasudras were revolted to receive their identity as general people of Bengal instead of Chandal. The titles of Namasudras are 'sarkar' as well as some Rajbanshis titles are 'Sarkar'. During the partition, some of the refugee Namasudras had taken shelter to the house of Rajbanshi family, whose title was 'Sarkar' instead of 'Barman'. After a few years later, the refugee families were made relation to the local Rajbanshi families, as their titles were same. After few decades later, those sarkar families were converted to the Rajbanshis to receive the constitutional priority from the government. But the real identity of the Rajbanshis had been distorted. On those circumstances, identity crisis of the Rajbanshi community has started and even these problems are not solved.

Some refugees from different castes under Hindu community were also took shelter at Rajbanshi villages. In the context, it may be mentioned some Rajbanshi villages of present Dakshin Dinajpur, like Rajapur, Dakshin Harshura, Bhabani pur, Ramchandra pur, Jashrai, Murari pur, Bajit pur, Mirja pur, Nedair, Rajeswr pur, Bharila, Abhiram pur, kamar para and so many. Rajbanshi Jotedar families were titled 'Mondal', which received by Panchanan Barma during Panchanan Age,⁸ remained today not only for the Rajbanshi community, as well as other communities of Bengal. Refugees were took the title of host, like as 'Mondal' but they did not explore their previous identity. Thus, some of them refugees were received socio-cultural customs of Mondal Rajbanshi community. Then, they took arranged marriage ceremony among them. Thus, non-Rajbanshi refugees were assembled with the Rajbanshi families of West Dinajpur and their identity became Rajbanshi in present Dakshin Dinajpur. Some of the lower castes Hindus were participated in the mission of caste evaluation during partition and state crisis period of Bengal. During Islamization of Dinajpur, most of the lower caste Hindus and minority other religious communities were converted to Islam due to expressional activities of so called upper caste Hindu community.⁹ It is noted that, a few upper caste Hindus were converted to Islam to receive wealth and social status at the same time. The entire second decades of twentieth century, different caste, communities from different religions were took socio-economical advances and converted to other religion and community. In the same way, refugees and displaced people of East Bengal were used the Rajbanshi

Jotedars for safety and security during partition and post partition days.¹⁰ A few refugees and displaced people of East Bengal were settled separately, some of them lived along with the Rajbanshi community and borne Rajbanshis identity.

Conclusion

Once Rajbanshis were second largest community in Dinajpur. After the advent of the Islam in the land, the major proportion of the Rajbanshis was converted into Islam due to fear from Islamic tyranny or oppression and the majority of the Rajbanshi people had decreased. Rest people of the Rajbanshis were lived as other caste in Hindu community. After partition of India, the Rajbanshis were divided in two parts as well as their homeland. It was happened among different caste and communities at the same time. The problem did not create among the other castes and communities. But the Rajbanshis were affected by the problems of identity crisis. Because, the Rajbanshis of Bengal were got constitutional reservation by the Act of 1935 led by Manishi Panchanan Barma. This process will be continuing till the independence. After the divide of Dinajpur due to partition of India, the Rajbanshis of Former Dinajpur were exempted from the constitutional priority. At the same time, the Rajbanshis in Indian part of Dinajpur are enjoying that constitutional priority like as earlier. As a result, a social discrimination has arisen among the same categories.

Before partition of India, the number of Rajbanshis was majority people in former Dinajpur. After partition of India, the number of Rajbanshis was decrease there and the number of the Rajbanshis in Indian part of West Dinajpur was increased. There are

several causes behind for increasing the number of Rajbanshis in West of Dinajpur. All the Rajbanshis of Greater Dinajpur are same but today some features of the Rajbanshis of both the countries become distinct due to partition of India. Modern researcher has considered all the Rajbanshis remained same as earlier but there has come changes among them after independence. The clear conception about the culture and society of the Rajbanshis of Dinajpur will be clear through research.

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