The demand by the the marginalised and the oppressed Koch Rajbanshi community of Assam for scheduled tribe status has been dismissed by the central government on the grounds that they had embraced Hinduism long ago and thereby lost their tribal characteristics.

Introduction

The demand for *janajatikaran* (scheduled tribe status) in Assam has emerged as one of the important debates in civil society, media and academic discussions in recent times. Six ethnic communities, including Koch Rajbanshis, in Assam are vigorously demanding scheduled tribe (ST) status for themselves. These communities claim that they belong to the “indigenous tribes” of Assam, but the government has been continuously declining their demand for ST status on the ground that the community embraced Hinduism and lost its tribal characteristics long ago.

According to the central government, any community that fulfils five specific criteria i.e., indication of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with community at large and backwardness will be eligible to get ST status. The community makes an assertive self-evaluation that they fulfil all the aforesaid conditions. Despite having a distinct culture, identity and history, the community claims that the ruthless denunciation of their demand for ST status by the centre shows its rampant apathy towards the community and its intention to subjugate the Koch Rajbanshis by forcing them to remain peripheral amongst the multitude of tribes inhabiting Assam.

The community first demanded ST status way back in 1968. As the ST movement failed to yield any result, it led to frustration and a deep sense of betrayal which crystallised into a demand for a separate Kamatapur state.[i] In this context, it may be pertinent to reflect on what political scientist Bhikhu Parekh has said. For Parekh, “Such movement form part of the wider struggle for recognition of identity and difference or, more accurately, identity-related differences” (Parekh 2000: 1).
This paper attempts to focus on the current politics of janajatikaran in Assam and also tries to trace the tribal past of the Koch Rajbanshis with a view to get an empirical insight into the question of demand for ST status by the community.

The Scheduled tribe is an administrative term used for the purpose of “administering” specific sections of people who are historically considered disadvantaged and “backward” and providing them certain specific constitutional privileges for their protection. It may be noted that the criteria which were formulated by the British colonial rulers to determine the tribal status of different communities in India are still being followed by the Indian government for the purpose of identifying the tribal status of communities despite significant changes in the geo-politics of post-independent India.

The socio-cultural identity of Koch Rajbanshis has evolved over time. Despite the community exhibiting spatio-temporal continuity, it is still attempting to find a space within the multicultural and multi-ethnic social configuration of the Indian nation-state. However, the recent emergence of the movement and identity politics of the Koch Rajbanshis in Assam is reflective of a deep sense of resentment against the government and other dominant cultural entities that have for a long period of time paid no heed to their cultural and socio-political concerns.

It is interesting to note that in Bihar and Assam the community has been classified under Other Backward Classes (OBC) category, in West Bengal as scheduled caste (SC) and in Meghalaya under ST category. It is absurd that how the same community has been classified under different categories in different states. Even the former Tribal Affairs Minister, V Kishore Chandra Deo expressed his concern over the fact that how the same community in one state was classified as OBC while in another state as SC.

Who are Koch Rajbanshis?

To engage critically with the present discourse on the movement launched by Koch Rajbanshis to acquire ST status, we have to first revisit their past. As Romila Thapar says, “To comprehend the present and move towards the future requires an understanding of the past: an understanding that is sensitive, analytical and open to critical enquiry” Thapar 2003).

The discourse on Koch Rajbanshi identity is contentious. The very term “Koch Rajbanshi” has generated some amount of confusion as to whether these terms when looked at individually denote the same community or not. Many construe that the “Koch” and the “Rajbanshis” are two different communities, whereas the community leaders rightly argue that these two terms refer to the same community having identical anthropological, cultural and historical legacies. In fact, the Koches in order to assert their royal lineage used to call themselves Rajbanshis. The term, Rajbanshi was also used as an effective nomenclature to subvert the processes of hierarchical subordination of the community largely by the caste Hindus during the colonial era.
Many historians from India and abroad have tried to define the term Koch Rajbanshi. But most of them could not generate a universal consensus on the issue. For Sir Edward Gait, “Koch” is an ambiguous term. Gait remarked that in Assam proper, the term “Koch” had come to signify a Hindu caste, into which were received converts to Hinduism from the rank of the Kachari, Lalung, Mikir and other tribes. Though being a colonial historiographer, Gait could not transcend certain limitations caused by the historians perennial preoccupation with conversion during the colonial period.

G A Greirson observed that the Koches and Kocheries belong to the same ethnic group. He argued “...the very name Koch has lost its original significance and has now come to mean a Bodo who has become so far Hinduised that he has abandoned his proper tongue and in particular what he eats”. Suniti Kumar Chatterji observed that Rajbanshis were Koch in origin and belonged to the larger Bodo group. They were Hinduised or semi-Hinduised and had discarded their Tibeto-Burman language, adopting northern Bengali sub-language as their tongue.

From the above observations, two assumptions can be drawn; firstly, the Koch Rajbanshi’s are largely Mongoloids and secondly, like other indigenous and tribal ruling dynasties, the cultural practices of the Koches, patronised by the royalty, were influenced by Vedic Hinduism. This caused some amount of peripherisation of native and indigenous religious and cultural practices, though some native rituals remained important for the community.

Today, the Koch Rajbanshi people are located in North Bengal, Assam (with a major concentration in west Assam), Garo hills of Meghalaya, Purnia, Kishanganj and Katihar districts of Bihar, Jhapa and Biratnagar districts of Nepal, Rangpur, East Dinajpur districts and some parts of north west Mymsingh, northern Rajshahi and Bogra districts of Bangladesh and lower parts of Bhutan (Nalini Ranjan Ray 2009).

In the medieval period, the community was dominant and ruled their territory of Kamatapur, which comprised a large part of Bangladesh, West Bengal, Bihar and India’s north-east. Between 1765 to 1783, the interference of the Bhutaneese in the affairs of Kamata Kingdom and their frequent attacks on it became so rampant that King Dharmendra Narayan had to sign a treaty with East India Company to get rid of the trouble caused by the Bhutias. As a consequence of this treaty signed on 5 April 1773, Koch-Kamata alias Cooch Behar (Koch Bihar) became a native state of British India. After independence, the princely state of Cooch Bihar became a district of West Bengal.

**Sanskritisation and Koch Rajbanshis**

M N Srinivas defined the term “Sanskritization” to mean a process where lower castes or tribal groups adopted customs, ritual and ideology of higher castes that is the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and even the Vaishyas to improve their status (Srinivas 1995, 1996: 6).

The Koch Rajbanshis, who were primarily animists, were immensely influenced by the
process of sanskritisation which was largely patronised by the royalty. It is believed that since the reign of King Bhaskar Varman of Kamrupa, the Koches were enveloped in the Hindu castiest fold and were sanskritised. However, the Vaishnavite movement led by Srimanta Sankar Deva (1449-1568) and later the Kshatriya movement in the colonial period were largely responsible for the sanskritisation of the community in Assam and Bengal respectively (Dipak Kumar Ray 2012: 14).

The Kshatriya Anodolan began to take shape under the leadership of Har Mohan Ray in the late 19th century. The Rajbanshis under the banner “Rongpur Bratya Kshatriya Jatir Unnati Bidhayani Sabha” sent a deputation in February 1891 to the Rongpur district magistrate with the plea to include the Rajbanshis as a separate ethnic entity in the census that was to begin that year. By 1910, under the leadership of Thakur Panchanan Burma, the Kshatriya movement was further consolidated. The claim to Kshatriya varna status through reinvention of some mythic tales provided some credibility to the ideological foundation of the Rajbanshi movement during the post-colonial period in India. This claim also led to cultural and political mobilisation amongst the community members, which resulted in a socio-cultural conflict with the dominant cultural entities both in Bengal and Assam. This movement for the first time made the Rajbanshis aware of themselves as a distinctive social entity.[vii]

Political scientist Christophe Jaffrelot rightly pointed out that the caste system underwent transformations because of the policies of the British Raj. The introduction of the census made a big impact, because it listed castes in great detail. Caste associations were therefore formed to put pressure on the colonial administration to improve their rank in the census. For him these associations claimed new benefits from the state, principally in terms of reservations (quotas) in educational institutions and in the civil service (Jaffrelot 2000: 757-758).

The Kshatriya movement of the Koch Rajbanshis was also aimed at gaining a social status that could find place within the casteist structure of Hindu society. After independence, there was massive immigration from erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), which undermined the identity of the Koch Rajbanshis. Bengali scholar Soumen Nag remarks,

In front of their (Hindu Refugees from East Bengal) developed culture, modernity of language, education and efficiency, the indigenous Rajbanshis could not stand anywhere and they gradually lost their culture, language and land. Above all they became minority due to the flow of this immigrant and ultimately they lost their last assets, which were their identity (Nag 2003: 159)

Thakur Panchanan Burma who led the Kshatriya movement failed to ensure any improvement in the socio-political status of the community. In fact, the Koch Rajbanshis were confronted with the onerous task of establishing a new identity in order to get rid of
the acute social deprivation and economic backwardness.

However, it is paradoxical that after having led a movement for the Kshatriya status for the Rajbanshis, Burma began a movement demanding SC status for the community. In fact, being a member of the Constituent Assembly, Burma came into close contact with Baba Saheb Bhim Rao Ambedkar and began the campaign to include the Rajbanshis in the SC list to gain constitutional safeguards for the Rajbanshis, who were subjected to prolonged phases of social deprivation and economic backwardness.

Burma was successful in getting the SC status for the Rajbanshis in Bengal. However, the movement did not gain much support in Assam, as the Koch Rajbanshis were not subjected to acute casteist/racial discrimination in the state as they were in Bengal. This was so because Assam was a multi-ethnic society with the pre-eminent dominance of the indigenous ethnic communities. Hence, leaders like Sarat Sinha, Bhuban Prodhani and others were not convinced that the Koch Rajbanshis in Assam should raise a similar demand.

It is interesting to note that many of the present leaders of the community have the opinion that ever since the Koch Rajbanshis were granted the SC status in Bengal, it caused them more harm and did not result in economic or socio-political upliftment of the community (Nalini Ranjan Ray 2009: 123).

**Indifference of the Government**

In Assam, the movement for ST status for the Koch Rajbanshis began in 1968. In the All Assam Koch Rajbanshi Kshatriya Sanmilani convention held at Chautara in Kokrajhar on 7 and 8 February 1969, the demand for ST status became a part of the formal agenda of the Koch Rajbanshi movement.

According to Vikram Rajkhowa, chairperson of the Centre for Koch Rajbongshi Studies and Development,

> the Tribal Research Institute of the Assam government, in its study report, found adequate justification for inclusion of the Koch Rajbanshis in the ST list in 1994. Based on the same report, the Registrar General Of India had also given 'no objection' to the inclusion of the community in the ST list of Assam subsequently[viii]

The Constitution (ST) Order (Amendment) Bill, which called for the inclusion of the Koch Rajbanshi community in the ST list, was introduced in the Lok Sabha in 1996. The bill was then referred to a 15 member select committee, which also recommended the granting of the ST status to the community. Consequently, the Constitution (ST) Order (Amendment) Ordinance, 9 of 1996 was promulgated as the Parliament was not in session at that time. The ordinance stipulated that the Koch Rajbanshis be included in in ST (Plains) list of
Assam. Though the ordinance was re-promulgated three times, it could not take the shape of law as the above mentioned Bill was allowed to lapse in April 1997.

It is clear that the demand of Koch Rajbanshis has not been addressed with sincerity by both the central and the state Government, and this has resulted in the feeling of alienation among the people. Recently, the anguish over the delay in granting ST status has led to agitations by various organisations representing the community.

Conclusions

Stuart Hall views cultural identity in two different ways. According to the traditional model, cultural identity is “shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common”. The second model recognises “critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute ‘what we really are’ or rather -- since history has intervened -- ‘what we have become’” (Hall 1990: 227-33). The above two models can help comprehend the present discourse on Koch Rajbanshi identity and their demand for ST status better.

According to Lakra, Minz and Moser, “Hinduisation does not solve the tribal problems and remove their grievances, but increases their worries, and places them as a marginal group belonging neither to a tribe nor to a caste” (Cited in Barman 1983, pp 1172-73). On the one hand, Hinduisation, or more accurately sanskritisation, has not been able to uplift the social status of the Koch Rajbanshis, on the other, because of sanskritisation, the community’s demand for ST status seems inappropriate from the viewpoint of the government’s policy towards scheduling ethnic communities.

It is important to note that in Assam, the demand for ST status has been treated more from the standpoint of a political struggle for territory rather than from a historical and psychocultural viewpoint, which explains what occurred within this community when they were compelled to adopt a new religion, or even acquire a new language in order to gain acceptance within the dominant social order which was ethnically alien to them. The very demand for ST status by the Koch Rajbanshis today has opened up a fresh theoretical space for critical engagement in order to understand the current compulsions of one of the most marginal and oppressed communities which faces a challenge to its identity from dominant ones like that of Assamese and Bengali in the region.

Notes

[i] In fact the demand for Kamatapur state was raised for the first time under the leadership of Santosh Baruah of Gauripur Raj family along with Raja Ajit Narayan of Sidli Raj family and Prakritish Ch Baruah known as Lalji of Gauripur Raj family. He submitted a memorandum to the State Re-organization Committee (SRC) for creation of Kamatapur state. However the demand was rejected subsequently by the SRC. However it is interesting
to be noted here that apart from Raja Ajit Narayan, Santosh Baruah and Prakritish Ch. Baruah did not belong to the Koch Rajbanshi community or had no royal lineage with the Kamata dynasty.


[vi] The Koch Kingdom of Kamatapur was ruled by different rulers of Koch dynasty from the period of mid 13th century to the end of the 16\(^{th}\) century. For details see Arup Jyoti Das (2009): *Kamatapur and the Koch Rajbanshi Imagination* (Montage Media Guwahati) pp. 37-53.

[vii] This observation is an outcome of a personal interview with Prof. Jyotirmoy Prodhani, Department of English, NEHU, Shillong.


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