

## Ethnicization of the Rajbangsi Community in West Bengal, India

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### Introduction

Ethnicization is the process of building social boundaries to guard perceived cultural and ethnic heritages, whereas de-ethnicization is the process of removing such boundaries (Milikowski, 2000). Societies are ethnicized whenever religious or cultural identities are translated into exclusive ethnic identities, motivated by social, political, and historical factors (Wilson & Bashir, 2016). Ethnicization is a powerful political force in South Asia that captures the intersection of nationalism, caste hierarchy, and religious identity (Roy, 2021). This is particularly evident in India, where Hindu nationalist parties tried to consolidate an exclusivist Hindu identity, ethnicizing Dalits and racializing Muslims, which has led to counter-ethnicizing responses by minority groups and social polarization (Wilson, 2012).

The Rajbangsi community of North Bengal offers an interesting case for examining these dynamics. Traditionally marginalized as a low caste, the Rajbangsis launched a movement of Kshatriyaization in the early 20th century to attain a superior social position by adopting upper-caste ways of life, such as dietary taboos, rituals, and changes in nomenclature (Basu, 2003; Mandal, 2022). This Sanskritization process, as conceptualized by M.N.D. Srinivas embraced the cultural and religious insignia of powerful Hindu groups to establish legitimacy and social mobility, a practice commonly seen among other colonial-era subaltern groups (Lee & Rajoo, 1987; Shanthi, 2023). These identity claims were not symbolic; they reflected broader negotiations about political legitimacy, social position, and access to resources (Mukhopadhyay, 1999).

Both historical and present forces have shaped the process of identity formation among the Rajbangsis. Colonial classification in the census, legal enfranchisement, and post-independence social policies informed the community's claims to Kshatriya status and social mobility tactics (Bhadra 2004; Wilson 2012). Despite these efforts, the community continues to be exposed to socioeconomic exclusion, limited access to education, and structural barriers to class mobility, which highlights the gap between symbolic inclusion and material empowerment (Roy, 2021). Cultural observance, celebration, and religious practice have become the most significant vehicles for preserving community solidarity and resilience in the wake of such adversity, and

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they are sites of the convergence of identity, social structure, and political mobilization.

Understanding the Rajbangsi case illuminates the larger dynamics of ethnicization in India, wherein subaltern groups struggle over caste hierarchies, colonial and post-colonial state legacies, and subsequent post-colonial structures of the state to stake out their legitimacy and agency. The trajectory of the community illustrates how political activism, memory, and strategic cultural adaptation meet to generate new kinds of ethnic attention and unveil the contradictions and boundaries of identification-based social mobilization (Wilson & Bashir, 2016; Basu, 2003).

### Background of the Study

The Rajbangsi people of North Bengal offer a multifaceted case of caste-to-ethnic conversion in eastern India. Traditionally found in districts such as Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, and Dinajpur, the Rajbangsis transformed from being a subaltern agrarian caste to an ethnically conscious political group, mirroring more general colonial and post-colonial socio-political trends (Debnath, 2016). Their conversion reveals how caste mobility movements, originally premised on ritual promotion, became claims of ethnic distinction and political recognition.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, colonial ethnography and census classifications significantly influenced the Rajbangsi self-perception. British bureaucrats alternatively classified them as 'Koch', causing identity confusion (Debnath 2016). Avoiding the stigma of "Koch," the group increasingly became known as Rajbangsis, recalling royal Kshatriya descent. This quest for ritual distinction, conceived as Sanskritization, served to raise social standing while reifying the group identity.

The ritual centerpiece to all this mobilization was the sacred thread ceremony, especially the 1912 Milankshetra at Bhogmari, Rangpur, sponsored by the Kshatriya Samiti. Some 4–5 thousand Rajbangsis were ritually reborn, after which hundreds of thousands embraced the sacred thread throughout northern Bengal, claiming '*Dwijā*' (twice-born status) and a symbolic Kshatriya identity (U. N. Barman, 1972). This double claim of caste and ethnic difference set the Rajbangsis apart from the Koch society by mixing social mobility with ethno-cultural self-awareness (Basu, 2003). Ritual elevation thus became a means of claiming historical independence and ethnic uniqueness, producing deepened identity consciousness.

The post-colonial era consolidated these changes as socio-economic marginalization and administrative neglect in northern districts intensified ethnic consciousness. The advent of groups like the Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO) and the Greater Cooch Behar Movement addressed political mobilization based on the Rajbangsi ethnic identity, evoking memories of the ancient Cooch Behar kingdom to legitimize autonomy claims (Debnath, 2016). These movements mark the shift from Sanskritization to ethnicization, where religious ritual was joined by political and territorial assertions.

Their ethnicization process reflects the intersection of caste, ethnicity, and political factors. Early mobilization focused on ritual and religious reform through the Kshatriya Samiti, whereas today's mobilization is centered on regional ethnic pride and political

demands. Their path reveals how a community that had been marginalized in the Hindu social order could remake its identity using symbolic, cultural, and political tactics that, in turn, affect the current ethnic politics in North Bengal.

This study explores this change using an interdisciplinary approach with the following main objectives:

1. This study examines the historical and cultural origins of the Rajbangsi identity, highlighting colonial classification, Sanskritization, and socio-religious reform.
2. To understand how caste dynamics transformed into caste assertion through ritual, symbolism, and mass mobilization.
3. To examine the impact of post-colonial political mobilization and autonomy movements on contemporary ethnic politics.

Methodologically, the research uses qualitative analysis, combining historical reconstruction from colonial documents, census data, and archival reports with secondary work consisting of ethnographic and political studies. Collectively, these sources unpack the processes by which the Rajbangsi community came to terms with caste, ethnicity, and political agency, and the dynamic tension between tradition and modernity in constructing collective identity in West Bengal.

### **Reconstructing Social Hierarchy: The Rajbangsi Quest for Kshatriya Identity**

The reform movement of the early twentieth century among the Rajbangsis of North Bengal and Northeast India was a turning point in their historical process of redefining their social position and collective self-touted “as Kshatriyaization-oriented. The movement was a symbolic recovery at best and became a purposeful exercise in rearticulating caste, cultural memory, and politics. Central to this revolution was Roy Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma—benedictly titled the Father of the Rajbangsi people—whose mastery of intellectual discernment and organizational reasoning invested the campaign with cognitive nuance and institutional prudence. While Har Mohan Khajanchi had provided conceptual foundations, it was Barma’s thought of strategy that transformed Kshatriyaization into a social upliftment and revivalist tool.

### **Cultural Recuperation and Scriptural Validation**

Under Panchanan Barma’s stewardship, the reform movement gained momentum from textual reinterpretation, vernacular scholarship, and popular culture. Using *the Rangpur Sabitya Parishad* as a platform, Barma and his associates compiled local proverbs, folktales, genealogies, and songs to substantiate the community’s Kshatriya ancestry (U. N. Barman, 1972). Ancient sources like the Yogini Tantra, Kalika Purana, and Bhramari Tantra were reinterpreted to locate Rajbangsi origins among displaced Kshatriyas who, at the time of the Nanda dynasty, had arrived in Kamarupa and followed non-Brahmanical rituals (Singha, 1940; Tarkaratna, 1348 BS). Such reinterpretations told a story of ritual decline and political banishment, which was eventually reimagined as a story of survival. Vernacular thinkers such as Harikisor Adhikari (Rajbangshi Kulpradip) and poets Ratiram Das and Maniram Kavibhushan corroborated these assertions, and Barma made popular Jaga Sangeet verses to spread the concept of Kshatriyahood among peasants (Adhikary, 2014, p. 93). By digitizing oral traditions, Barma elevated subaltern voices and integrated folk culture into the fabric of caste-

based social reform.

### **From Reform to Recognition: Institutionalizing the Kshatriya Cause**

The quest for Kshatriya identity took structural shape through organized mobilization and negotiation with colonial regimes. In the Census of 1872, Rajbangsis differentiated themselves from the tribal Koches by taking on the designation Bratya Kshatriya—a strategic, if historically unproven, path of upward mobility (Nath, 1989; Risley, 1889). Under Harimohan Ray Khazanchi, the Rangpur Bratya Kshatriya Jatir Unnati Bidhayini Sabha approached the colonial administration in 1891 for recognition (D. N. B. S. Sarkar, 1985). Despite temporary reversals, such as their reclassification as Koches during the 1901 Census (U. N. Barman, 1941)—Panchanan Barma institutionalized the cause through the Kshatriya Samiti in 1910. The 1911 Census of India marked a crucial moment in classifying the Rajbangsi community. The Rajbangsis were not listed as untouchables or included in the Depressed Classes (Basu, 2003). Instead, following sustained agitation led by the Kshatriya Samiti under Panchanan Barma, the census authorities formally recognized Rajbangsis as a separate Hindu caste, distinct from the Koches (Debnath, 2016). Census Superintendent O'Malley noted the most persistent agitation by the Rajbangsis, which compelled the administration to separate them from the Koch caste (Bandyopadhyay 1990). The association led census campaigns in 1921 and 1931 to get “Rajbangsi Kshatriya” replaced with “Kshatriya.” Although Brahminical opposition continued, the 1931 Census recognized them as Kshatriyas, even though the genuineness of the status continued to be challenged (Basu, 2003). This change was a subtle mix of religious reformulation, caste assertion, and political accommodation within the colonial classificatory framework

### **Identity Reconstruction through Sanskritization**

The Rajbangsi community's bid for Kshatriyaization in the early twentieth century represents a rational process of identity reconstruction based on Sanskritisation. Thakur Panchanan Barma led this transformation, which sought to position the community above in the hierarchical Hindu social order by positing Kshatriya origin. It was not symbolic but a conscious effort to redefine caste identity through religious reinterpretation, cultural resurgence, and organizational consolidation (Barman, 2013). Panchanan Barma rallied the Kshatriya Samiti for institutionalizing this reform with the ideals of social discipline, education, and scriptural legitimation of Rajbangsi origins.

This Sanskritization was a process of restating local myths, genealogies, and rituals in accordance with upper-caste norms, but with some unique regional cultural characteristics intact (Roy, 2021). The Rajbangsis invoked ancient texts to validate their Kshatriya identity, making every day cultural practices into social differentiating symbols. The movement challenged caste hegemony through reformist strategies combining moral rejuvenation and Western education, thereby creating a new social consciousness for the marginalized sections of North Bengal (Barman, 2013).

Hence, Sanskritization as identity reconstruction was both a social mobility project and a form of resistance to caste oppression. While it enabled intra-group solidarity and acknowledgment, it also prepared the ground for subsequent ethnic and political mobilization. The Kshatriyaization of the Rajbangsis must thus be seen as an early expression of cultural politics that linked social reform with nascent ethnic identity formation.

**From Kshatriya Mobilization to Organized Social Movement (1919–1935)**

The third phase of the Rajbangsi movement started after the First World War with the Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms of 1919, a definitive departure from localized socio-religious reform to institutionalized socio-political activism. The period ended in two milestones: the Government of India Act (1935) and the passing of Thakur Panchanan Barma, the visionary founder of Rajbangsi self-assertion and modernization.

Having served the British in the war, Panchanan hoped for reformist steps in favor of backward classes (Barman 2013). The 1919 Reforms provided for representation and reservation for the oppressed classes, which the Kshatriya Samiti, which he controlled, tactfully placed in harmony with its reformist program. While the organization maintained religious and cultural activities, it increasingly involved itself with new Dalit politics, as drawn from Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, which led Rajbangsi leaders to aspire for Scheduled Caste status to gain access to institutional advantages in education, jobs, and representation (Debnath, 2016).

Between 1919 and 1935, the Kshatriya Samiti followed a twofold agenda of ritual continuity and social reform (U. N. Barman, 1941). The ceremonial upanayana (sacred thread ceremony) reaffirmed the Kshatriya identity, while new projects—specifically women’s empowerment—spoke to progressive reform. In response to abductions and violence, the Samiti also provided self-defense training to women, instilling martial discipline and moral courage embedded in the warrior code of the Mahabharata. Panchanan institutionalized this through the establishment of the Nari Raksha Sevak Dal and Nari Raksha Vibhag, addressing women’s rights and safety. Literature such as Panchanan’s Dangdhari Mao (“The Sword-Wielding Mother”) hailed female valor, whereas dress reforms promoted standardization through saree use—an ambivalent measure of balancing protection and patriarchal restraint (Debnath, 2016).

Along with this, the Samiti multiplied intellectual and cultural activities. The monthly magazine Kshatriya published essays on social, economic, and political questions, making print a tool for pedagogy and mobilization. Panchanan also established the Uttarbanga Sahitya Parishad and edited its journal, Sahitya Parishad, promoting literary and reformist debate in North Bengal.

Rajbangsi leaders shortly aligned their movement with national and caste politics at a larger scale. Panchanan and Upendra Nath Barman led the Tripura delegation to the All-India Kshatriya Sammelan (Alwar, 1924; Indore, 1928), whereas temporary alliances were made with the Bangiya Jana Sangha, a backward class association. Panchanan’s 1932 memorandum to the Indian Franchise Commission called for reserved seats for depressed classes, later merging into the Poona Pact arrangements for joint electorates (Debnath, 2016).

Politically, representatives such as Panchanan, Nagendra Narayan Roy, and Upendra Nath Barman won seats in the Bengal Legislative Council in the 1920s, institutionalizing the representation of the community and moving forward demands on education, agrarian reform, and caste justice.

Following Panchanan’s death in 1935, organizational unity broke down, yet the movement shifted from claiming Kshatriya identity to seeking Scheduled Caste status. This shift represented not retreat but readjustment—synching cultural assertion

with constitutional recognition—thus maintaining the Rajbangshis' fight for dignity, mobility, and political empowerment throughout colonial and post-colonial Bengal.

### **Politics of Identity: From Kshatriya Andolan to Kamatapur**

The twentieth-century Kshatriya movement of the Rajbangshis, under Thakur Panchanan Barma, initially sought social betterment through Sanskritisation and the assertion of Kshatriya status. However, internal contradictions soon eroded its egalitarian potential. Under the control of zamindars and jotdars, the movement portrayed elite interests while excluding poor sharecroppers from its agenda. Leaders such as Panchanan Barman (1922) and Nagendra Narayan Roy (1928) revealed the Samity's class bias, and the Rajbangshis' active recruitment into the British army during World War I, facilitated by Barma, weakened its nationalist edge. (Roy, 2021).

By the mid-1920s, exposure to B.R. Ambedkar's egalitarian thought transformed the movement from ritual reform to identity politics. The North Bengal Kshatriya Samity, in response to Ambedkar's appeal, organized for Scheduled Caste status (1926–27), a demand that was fulfilled after independence (Singha, 1940). However, this shift from caste uplift to political pragmatism created an identity crisis. The Koch-Rajbangshis of Assam, on the other hand, were excluded from SC or ST status owing to regional disintegration and linguistic assimilation into the Assamese identity (Debnath, 2016).

Politically, the Kshatriya Samity moved away from the Indian National Congress and allied itself with the Krishak Praja Party before rejoining Congress post-independence. Although the Rajbangshis remained mainly Congress-oriented in the beginning, left parties increasingly came to power by organizing the rural poor with land reforms, Barga operations, and Panchayati Raj institutions from 1978 onwards. Economic stagnation, land fragmentation, and industrial neglect have intensified frustrations among marginalized peasants and disillusioned youth.

These tensions peaked in the Uttarkhand and subsequently Kamatapur movements, calling for the creation of a separate North Bengal state. The early regionalist ideology came from Uttarkhand Dal (1969), followed by the politicized UTJUS that conflicted with East Bengali refugee settlers, particularly during the 1986 Alipurduar violence. The weakness of the UTJUS helped create room for the emergence of the Kamatapur People's Party (KPP) and the militant Kamatapur Liberation Organization (KLO) (Debnath, 2016).

The Kamatapur movement of the 1990s highlighted developmental neglect, cultural uniqueness, and the need for Kamatapuri language recognition. While the KPP resorted to peaceful mobilization, the KLO adopted militancy, indicating the radicalization of ethnic assertion. The Rajbangshi political trajectory—from Kshatriya reformism to Kamatapur separatism—mirrors the typical cycle of assertion, marginalization, and re-ethnicization that has changed North Bengal's political trajectory.

### **Reclaiming Sovereignty: The Greater Cooch Behar Movement**

The Greater Cooch Behar Movement was the Rajbangshi community's claim to regional identity and sovereignty based on the historical heritage of the Cooch Behar princely state, which merged into India in 1949. Arising from post-independence marginalization, it called for either a separate state or autonomy in the Indian Union

(Ray 2011; D. N. B. S. Sarkar, 1985). Directed by the GCPA and subsequently the GCDP, the movement appealed to the heritage of the Koch dynasty and North Bengal's unique cultural-linguistic identity as the basis for self-determination (Chakraborty, 2003). Internal conflicts and violent protests, such as the lethal 2005 hunger strike, diminished its strength (Ghosh 2020). Although the movement has lost its ground, it still symbolically represents Rajbangshi sub-nationalism and contemporary resistance to recognition, development, and political representation within India's federal structure (Debnath, 2016).

### Conclusion

The Rajbangsi people's transformation from caste-based subordination to ethnic and political assertion is a testament to the nuances of ethnicization in Eastern India. What started as a reformist project through Kshatriyaisation and Sanskritisation under Thakur Panchanan Barma transformed into a deep-seated struggle for recognition, dignity, and autonomy. The process of ritual betterment and social transformation in the early twentieth century laid the groundwork for later mobilizations that blended cultural revival and political action. Transitions from caste mobility to political self-determination over time suggest both structural exclusion and strategic adaptation to changing socio-political circumstances.

Agitations such as the Kamatapur and Greater Cooch Behar agitations illustrate the persistent negotiation of the community with the state on issues of identity, development and representation. These agitations, though disparate in modes, from nonviolent mobilization to radical assertion, spell a common yearning for self-determination based on historical sovereignty and cultural difference. The Rajbangsi experience shows how ethnicity, when initially mobilized as a tool of social ascension, becomes a platform for political articulation and resistance. Finally, their narrative highlights the circularity of ethnicization in India, where subaltern communities continuously reconstitute their identity to assert agency within the limits of state authority, social hierarchy, and development neglect.

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