



Emerging identity consciousness among the Rajbanshis of eastern Nepal: a few observations

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Abstract

Identity consciousness among the Rajbanshis of eastern Nepal is a recent phenomenon. However, the factors attributing towards the emergence of identity consciousness among the community are not new and were prevalent in the society of Nepal. Economic deprivation, social inequality, political injustice, traditional caste distance and hierarchy maintained by the larger sections of the upper caste Hindus and so on are some of the notable factors which led to the emergence of identity consciousness among the community. Trans-border activity along with the Indian border-line is another factor that has been contributing towards the identity assertion. The emergence of identity movements in India particularly in Assam and West Bengal by the Rajbanshis of the two neighbouring states and the growing relations among the community across the borderline paves the way for exchange of information, views and motivation which ignite the Rajbanshis of Nepal to assert their identity. Besides, the Maoist movement in Nepal has played a crucial role in mobilizing the community. Considering all the factors, the paper is an attempt to study the growing sense of identity consciousness among the Rajbanshis of eastern Nepal.

Keywords: ethnic identity, Rajbanshi, transnational.

1. Introduction

Nepal is a multicultural land. The tiny Himalayan region sandwiched between India and China is a home to various caste and ethnic groups having distinct ethno-cultural attributes. If the Magars and Gurungs are inhabited in the Western part and the Sherpas in the entire Himalayan region; Newars have been dominating the Valley of Kathmandu. Rias, Limbus and Sunwars inhabit the slopes and valleys of the eastern mid hills and the Tharus, Yadavas, Satars, Dhimals are inhabited in the eastern part of Terai region along with the Rajbanshis. The Brahmins, Chetris and Thakuris are generally spread over all parts of the country (Nepal Tourism Board 2001:6).

Rajbanshi is an indigenous community of Nepal. The Rajbanshis regard themselves as the *Adivasi* by which they mean primitive inhabitants of the land.

However, it is not clear, how long the Rajbanshis have been living in Nepal and where do they originally belong. But, it is presumed that the Rajbanshis of Nepal are the descendent of erstwhile Koch Kingdom of Kamatapur and the Koch Dynasty was spread up to the Kochi river of Nepal during 16th century. At present, the Rajbanshis are found in three districts of Nepal i.e. Jhapa, Morang and Sunsari out of total seventy five districts. The Nepal Population Report, 2001 figures the Rajbanshi population as 1, 29,883 which is around 0.56 % of the total population of 23,151,423. Out of the total Rajbanshi population majority of them are inhabitants of Jhapa followed by Morang and Sunsari districts. The 1991 Census of Nepal enumerates the total number of Rajbanshis in the country as 85,558 persons. In Jhapa, there was reported to be a total of 66,224 Rajbanshis, whereas

in Morang district, the census records the Rajbanshi population as 18,243 persons. This leaves only 1,091 Rajbanshis spread throughout other districts of Nepal, not restricted to Jhapa and Morang's neighbouring districts (Epple and Grimes 2001: 1). Jhapa shares its boundary with the West Bengal, the Siliguri corridor of India that may be one probable reason why Jhapa shares maximum number of Rajbanshi population than Morang and Sunsari which are westward of Jhapa. The mother tongue of the community is 'Rajbanshi' which is alike to the colloquial language of North Bengal and Western Assam.

2. Conceptualizing Ethnic Identity: Rajbanshis and Beyond

In literary sense 'Rajbanshi' implies belonging to royal dynastical ancestry. The royal lineage of the Rajbanshis of Nepal is presumed to associate with the erstwhile Koch Dynasty of Kamatapur of 16th century. The Koch Kingdom covered a large tract of regions and the territory spread up to the present western part of Assam, northern part of West Bengal, Rangpur district of Bangladesh and eastern part of the Kochi river of Nepal. Bisu was the founder King of the Koch Dynasty who had believed to have Mongoloid affinity assumed the name Bisva Singh after his coronation in about A.D. 1515. Subsequently, his followers discarded their tribal designations and called themselves 'Rajbanshis' (Gait 2008: 50). However, inclusion into the 'Rajbanshi' fold which has Sanskritised appellation gained momentum during the preparation of Census of India under the colonial period in 1891 (Basu 2003: 65). However, there are controversies regarding the existence of the Rajbanshi community before the coronation of Bisva Singh.

On the other hand, identification of the Rajbanshis of Nepal invoking the antecedents of Koch Dynasty is a new development. In fact, the dynastical ancestry of the community came into notice only after the study about the Rajbanshis in Nepal was undertaken by the Tribhuban University, Kathmandu during late 1980s. For ancestral inquiry the study invariably depended upon the documents available in Assam as well as Bengal along the works of British ethnographers in India. Besides, the frequent movements and growing relations among the community with their counterpart in India have been crucial in mobilizing the local people on the basis of common ancestry. Thus, identification of the Rajbanshis of Nepal belonging to a particular community having distinct history and heritage, common origin, as well as racial affinity i.e. the

Mongoloid and so on has become a new development in the land. In this respect, the observation made by John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith is appropriate. According to them 'Ethnic Identity' and 'Ethnic Origin' refers to the individual levels of identification with a culturally defined collectivity and it is a sense on the part of the individual that she or he belongs to a particular community. Ethnic origin likewise refers to a sense of ancestry and nativity on the part of the individual through his or her forebears (Hutchinson and Smith 2009: 5). Further, Anthony D. Smith refers six characters to identify an ethnic community. He argues that the common proper name to identify and express the essence of a community; a myth of common ancestry; shared historical memories including heroes, events, and their commemoration; one or more elements of common culture; a link with a homeland; and a sense of solidarity play crucial role while identifying an ethnic community (ibid,7).

Identity is generally defined as a sense of self, a definition characterized by both sameness and differences. Identities evolve through a process of negotiation between the self and external agencies (George, 1934 in Kakati, 2005, 14). Ethnic identity is one dimension of identity which has been gaining importance in social science research. Ethnic identity is an individual's sense of self in terms of membership in a particular ethnic group (Liebkind, 1992, 2001; Phinney, 1990 as cited in Phinney et. all, 2001, 496) and it embraces various aspects, including self identification, feelings of belongingness and commitment to a group, a sense of shared values and attitudes towards one's own ethnic group (ibid). The Rajbanhsi identity can also be analyzed as the emergence of a sense of self that evolved out of contradictions with other social forces. The emergence of self makes the Rajbanhsis believe that they belong to a particular group which is different from others. The differences were made first between "I" and "You" which invariably led to 'us' and "them" and it was made on the basis of origin, culture, homeland, history and so on. Frederik Barth also opines similar attributes while identifying the ethnic groups. A group creates boundaries between "us" and "them" in order to organize cultural differences among groups, therefore he cautions ethnicity should not be perceived in terms of culture. He argues that, ethnic identification is based in ascription and self-ascription, which means ethnic identities are malleable, not fixed or inherent and it is an aspect of a relationship, not as a property of a person or a group (Barth 1969).

3. Socio-Economic and Political Context of Identity Assertion

Udayon Misra argues, assertion of identity often leading to insurgent movement in North East India have invariably had their roots in economic deprivation and lack of distributive justice (Misra in Syiemlich, 2006: 1). Although the statement of Misra is meant for the prevailing insurgent activities in North East India, but the content and essence of the statement is without any doubt applicable to the global scenario. Acute economic deprivation in the form of land alienation, inequality of resources allocation, providing services to the minorities and so on along with socio-political injustice led to the emergence of protest movement which often snowball into violent form. The Rajbnashis of Nepal too had undergone a similar situation under the rule of the Monarchy and left with nothing but to raise their voices invoking identity affiliation.

The economic activity of the Rajbanshis of Nepal are primarily revolves around agriculture. Agriculture is the primary livelihood option of the community and their agricultural activities are based on traditional practices. The lands are fertile and rice, jute, corn and vegetables are the major crops that the community dwells with. However, the shortage of agricultural lands forces a portion of them to work as wage labourers or take lands on lease for their survival. But, owning a piece of land on lease (*adhiyar*) and sweat for survival is not easy since all the manual works are carried out by the farmers till harvesting and the owner bears the expenses. The costs will be levied by the owner deducting the amount of grains in proportion with the expenses which the owner bears during cultivation from the farmer and after that the remaining portion will be divided into two parts between the farmer and the owner. The economic conditions of the community have severely affected their education, health and other family affairs. The families often sale their lands or borrow money in interest to cope up emergency situations like medical treatment, daughters marriage and other activities. However, they get minimum prices for selling lands or borrow money in high interest rate from private moneylender since they have no other alternatives. Their abysmal economic conditions compel a section of young generations to migrate to the other places of Nepal and even abroad for their needs and care. The ailing social and economic conditions of the community ignited the feeling of deprivation and alienation from the mainstream political system which is dominated by

the higher caste Hindu sections i.e. the Chetris and the Brahmins.

The deprivation and the feeling of alienation among the community tilt the ground for the growth of ethnic assertion invoking identity affiliation. In fact, the ethnic attachment in political scenario is looming large among the Rajbanshis and they foresee to form a political party on ethnic lines since the community does not have any political platform to raise their voices. They expect the party to contest in election in near future that seems to resolve the socio-economic crisis of the community. The Rajbanshis allege that the government only cares for their votes during elections and often forgets the promises they make before elections. However, they nourish lots of expectations from the government ranging from agricultural subsidies, infrastructure development, educational up gradation, healthcare facilities, free housing, old age pension to representation of the Rajbanshis into the governance of the country.

4. Inter-Border Connectivity: Making Transnational Identity

National borders are political constructs, imagined projections of territorial power. Although, they appear on maps in deceptively precise forms, they reflect, at least initially, merely the mental images of politicians, lawyers, and intellectuals (Baud and Schendel, 1997, 211). The creation of political borders during the colonial period in the Indian sub-continent and subsequently at the dawn of independence of India proved disastrous for the people of the region. The division severely affected the socio-cultural relations among the people. In the words of Baud and Schendel, "borders create political, social and cultural distinctions, but simultaneously imply the existence of new networks and system of interaction across them (ibid)".

Nepal shares 1900 km of international border with India which have impacted the life of the people inhabiting along the borderline. The Rajbanshis constitute a transnational community which has its presence in Nepal, India and Bangladesh. However, the relatively soft border between India and Nepal makes it possible for the inhabitants to keep their relations across the borderlines. But, the relation is not usual with Bangladesh because the existence of hard border. The Rajbanshis of Nepal have their kith and kin in India i.e. West Bengal, Assam and Bihar. Many of them are married in India particularly near the villages of *Siliguri* or even their daughters are married to India and there is no restriction in their

movements. Besides, India, some among the community have relation with the Rangpur district of Bangladesh where they originally belong. The picture became vivid while an octogenarian narrated the story of their family's migration to India during partition and subsequently to Nepal.

Besides, the well established cultural relations the Rajbanshis have economic connections with India and expect more in this regard. A small shopkeeper of *Kayatuli*, Jhapa even proclaims that without the Indian support Nepal would cease to exist. Citing example of his own moribund business, he explains how often he has to visit the Indian market preferably *Panitanki* near India-Nepal border to run the small shop in his house. The relation also gets a buzz for Medical purposes in severe and critical diseases. Because it is easier to come to *Siliguri* for better treatment than to go to Birat Nagar or Kathmandu which is far away from the Rajbanshi villages. The India-Nepal relation is so important for Nepal and its people while a student cum teacher of BCA (Bachelor of Computer Application) in Dhulabari explains, for any books related to electronics or computer, *Siliguri* is the best available options.

5. Emergence of Middle Class: Mobilization and Identity Assertion

The emergence of a small middle class among the Rajbanshis in Nepal is an important development. Two factors have contributed in this regard. First, the growing relationship with their counterpart in India which have already developed an influential middle class particularly in North Bengal and to some extent in Western Assam. North Bengal has become a centre for mobilization with various literary organizations and forums came out with their literary and other activities. Although inactive in the true sense, in Western Assam too forums also have emerged out indulging in literary activities including the rewriting of history. Moreover, the demand for the creation of Kamatapur spearheaded by various organizations in India has made an impact upon the Rajbanshis of the other side of the border to raise a similar demand to felt their existence in the politics of Nepal. The frequent movement across the borderline attending seminars, workshops, meetings, festivals and so on have signaled out to form a voice in their land which can mobilize the general people and aware them about their rights and privileges.

Secondly, the impact of the Maoist movement which has considerable support bases among various the ethnic groups in Nepal. The Maoist movement got considerable support from the Rajbanshis like many others since they expect the movement to dismantle the dominant position of the mainstream political parties. Even, many of the Rajbanshis were actively engaged with the activities of the Maoist. One of the important aspects of their involvement with the movement is that, they do not conceive the principles and activities of the Maoists as insurgent or terrorist practices. In quite contrast they perceive the movement as the annihilator of the rigid caste based governance system that would mitigate their miserable socio-economic conditions. Thus, the ethnic assertion as a form of Maoist activities become apparent among the community and gradually it snowballed into the formation of small organizations based on ethnic roots demanding separate state.

6. Demand for *Kochila*: Call for a Separate State

The *Kochila Rastriya Mukti Morsa* a sister organization of the Maoist raised the demand for the creation of a separate state *Kochila* including all the Rajbanshi population spreading over the three districts of Jhapa, Morang and Sunsari of eastern Nepal. But, how far the demand of *Kochila* is inclusive as the region is multicultural in nature and apparently another demand for the creation of a separate *Limbu* state raised by the Limbu community comprising nine districts including the three districts demanded for the creation of *Kochila* which transforms the region into a 'contested homeland'.

7. Conclusion

Ethnic assertion has brought out a new dimension in the politics of Nepal. The assertion that gained mileage under the shadow of Maoist movement has encouraged other minority communities to raise similar voices. The Rajbanshis are one of them who have been raising their concerns invoking identity assertion. Not to mention that, other factors particularly the trans-border relations with their counterpart in India has increased the range of their demands. However, the formation of new government and the enactment of the constitution of Nepal have raised new hope in the minds of the people. Peace lies in how far the new government can accommodate all the issues and concerns of the communities including the Rajbanshis.

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