

# Identity Politics and Ethnolinguistic Mobilisation in North Bengal: The Rajbanshi Community and the Kamtapur Movement

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**Abstract**—The Rajbanshis are an indigenous community of northern West Bengal. In the past, they constituted the majority population in North Bengal, particularly in the districts of Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Dinajpur, the plains of Darjeeling district, and the princely state of Cooch Behar. Besides North Bengal, the Rajbanshis also lived in other parts of Bengal and in Assam. Although there has been considerable debate regarding the origin and ethnic identity of the Rajbanshis, most researchers and historians agree that the Rajbanshis originated from a tribal community known as the Koch, who belonged to the Indo-Mongoloid ethnic group. Since the colonial period, large-scale migration of people belonging to different castes, classes, and religions into this region pushed the Rajbanshis towards relative marginalisation, landlessness, and socio-economic challenges. Against this background, the Kamtapur Movement emerged as a significant ethno-linguistic and political mobilisation. Its foundation is associated with the historical memory of the ancient Kamata Kingdom and the cultural identity of the Rajbanshi community. The movement has been driven by feelings of economic deprivation, cultural marginalisation, and inadequate political representation. It has put forward the demand for the creation of a separate Kamtapur State. The movement has witnessed different forms of mobilisation, ranging from democratic political participation to, in some cases, the adoption of militant or confrontational methods. The movement reflects the broader tensions existing within the federal structure of India, where regional aspirations become intertwined with issues of identity-based politics, autonomy, and governance. Through a detailed examination of historical narratives, linguistic struggles, and political mobilisation, this research paper analyses the historical evolution of Rajbanshi identity and the trajectory of the Kamtapur Movement. The study argues that the movement is not merely a demand for regional reorganisation; rather, it is a deeper struggle for cultural dignity, linguistic preservation, and inclusive development. By highlighting the interrelationship among identity, marginalisation, and the establishment of political self-determination, this research paper contributes to a nuanced and deeper understanding of ethno-linguistic movements in contemporary India. At the same time, it also emphasises the significance of identity-based politics in articulating regional aspirations within the context of a multicultural society.

**Index Terms**—Indigenous, Identity, Movement, Regional, Politics

## I. Introduction

Identity politics has become an important framework for understanding regional political mobilisation in contemporary India, particularly where ethnicity, language, and cultural recognition intersect with demands for political representation. North Bengal provides a significant example of this process through the mobilisation of the Rajbanshi or Koch-Rajbanshi community and the emergence of the Kamtapur Movement. Historically associated with the Koch kingdom and possessing a distinct linguistic and cultural identity, the Rajbanshi community has increasingly articulated demands for recognition, development, and

autonomy within the Indian federal structure. During the colonial and early post-independence periods, community leaders such as Panchanan Barma attempted social upliftment through caste reform and the assertion of Kshatriya identity. Over time, however, identity politics shifted from caste mobility to ethnolinguistic consciousness, particularly around the recognition of the Kamtapuri language. Perceptions of economic marginalisation, demographic change, and administrative neglect further strengthened regional aspirations in North Bengal. The formation of organisations such as the Kamtapur People's Party transformed cultural demands into structured political mobilisation, while the emergence of the Kamtapur Liberation Organization reflected a more radical phase of the movement. State responses also evolved over time. Governments led by the Left Front relied largely on security and rehabilitation strategies, whereas later administrations under Mamata Banerjee combined law-and-order measures with cultural recognition and development initiatives. Thus, identity politics in North Bengal represents a complex interaction between linguistic assertion, historical memory, electoral competition, and regional governance, making the Rajbanshi mobilisation and the Kamtapur Movement important subjects for analysing ethnolinguistic politics in contemporary India.

## II. Origins of the Rajbanshi or Koch Rajbanshis Community

The Rajbanshi, also known as Rajbongshi or Koch-Rajbanshi, constitute a significant ethnic community distributed across Lower Assam, North Bengal, parts of eastern Bihar in India, the eastern Terai region of Nepal, the Rangpur Division of northern Bangladesh, and certain areas of Bhutan. Historically, the community has maintained a strong cultural and symbolic association with the Koch dynasty, which continues to influence its claims to social prestige and political recognition. The Koch-Rajbanshi population speaks Kamatapuri, an Indo-Aryan language that functions as an important marker of collective identity across regional boundaries. According to Swaraj Basu, "... The Rajbanshis constituted the most predominant section of the local Hindu population in the northern districts of Bengal. Numerically they were the third largest Hindu caste in Bengal as a whole. The origin of this caste is shrouded in mystery & the basic debate is around the question of their association with the Koches. Whatever might have been their actual origin; there is no dispute about the fact that the Rajbanshis were the early settlers in North Bengal. They were a socially homogenous community, in the sense that there was no sub-caste among them." (Basu, 2003) Dr. Charu Chandra sanyal stated, "The above observations point to the fact that the Koches are non-Aryan in origin. Some of them adopted Hinduism and became Rajbanshis. These Rajbanshis later on claimed to be Kshatriya." (Sanyal, 1965) According to Swaraj Basu, "The local situation also provided a sufficient ground for the Rajbanshis' assertion of a Kshatriya identity and their endeavour to build up caste solidarity." (Basu, 2003)

## III. Early Historical Background

In ancient times, the region inhabited by present-day Rajbanshis formed part of the kingdom of Kamarupa. Early inhabitants are believed to have spoken Tibeto-Burman languages, indicating a complex ethnic history. Historical records such as Persian chronicles, Ahom Buranjis, and genealogical documents of the Koch Behar royal family make reference to the Koch as a distinct social group but do not mention the term Rajbanshi. (Nandi, 2014) From the seventeenth century onward, Koch society gradually came under increasing Brahmanical influence. By the late eighteenth century, large sections of the community had adopted Hindu social customs and religious practices, marking an important phase of cultural transformation. (Shin, 2021)

Starting from 1872 to 1891, in a series of social movements, a section of Koch who were at tribal or semi-tribal form in present North Bengal and Western Assam in an effort to promote themselves up the caste hierarchy tried to dissociate themselves from their ethnic identity by describing themselves as Rajbanshi (of the royal lineage). This attempt of social upliftment was a reaction against the ill treatment and humiliation

faced by the community from the caste Hindus who referred to the Koch as mleccha or barbarians. (Adhikari, 2009) The term Rajbanshi was used to connect the group with Koch royalty who called themselves Shiva-banshi or Rajbanshi under Biswa Singha, the founder of the Koch dynasty and a tribal who was Hinduised and promoted to Kshatriya varna in the early 1500s. (Sheikh, 2012) In 1891, under the leadership of Harimohan Ray Khajanchi, the Rangpur Bratyakshatriya Jatir Unnati Bidhayani Sabha promoted the identity of “Bhanga Kshatriya,” presenting the community as part of the warrior caste. Religious texts such as the ‘Kalika Purana’ and ‘Yogini Tantra’ were used to construct myths of Kshatriya origin, including narratives of migration to northern Bengal to escape destruction by Parashurama. However, these claims failed to gain widespread acceptance within orthodox Hindu society. (Adhikari, 2009)

A more organised phase of identity transformation began in 1910 under the leadership of Panchanan Barma, who founded the Kshatriya Samiti at Rangpur to distinguish Rajbanshi identity from Koch tribal associations and promote recognition as Rajbanshi Kshatriyas. (Hazarika, 2009) Support from Brahmin scholars helped legitimise these claims, and administrative authorities allowed the adoption of new surnames such as Roy, Ray, Barman, Sinha, and Adhikary. The community’s Kshatriya status was reflected in the 1911 census. (Das, 2004) The movement showed strong elements of Sanskritisation, as many Rajbanshis adopted upper-caste customs such as the sacred thread ceremony, gotra identification, ritual reforms, abstinence from alcohol, and abandonment of pig rearing. Between 1872 and 1911, census records captured this gradual transformation from Koch to Rajbanshi, then Bhanga Kshatriya, and finally Rajbanshi Kshatriya. (Adhikari, 2009)

#### **IV. Post-Independence Transformation of Rajbanshi Identity**

The Partition of India in 1947 significantly reshaped Rajbanshi organisational politics, as the Kshatriya Samiti lost its headquarters at Rangpur, which became part of East Pakistan, and later reorganised its activities from Dinhata in India. In the post-independence period, several new organisations emerged to represent community interests. In Assam, Rajbanshis were classified under a special category of OBC called MOBC, while in North Bengal identity discourse gradually shifted from caste-based status claims to ethnolinguistic consciousness. The linguistic reorganisation of states in 1953 further strengthened this trend. Organisations such as the Siliguri Zonal Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samiti demanded administrative restructuring and proposed the inclusion of Rajbanshi-speaking regions like Purnia and Goalpara within West Bengal. During the 1960s, activists increasingly sought official recognition of their language as distinct from Bengali, linking linguistic identity with broader regional political aspirations. (Barman R. K., 2015)

#### **V. Historical Origins and Development of linguistic identity in the Kamtapur movement**

Linguistic identity has played a crucial role in the Kamtapur Movement, significantly influencing the Rajbanshi community’s quest for both political and cultural recognition. In a multilingual country like India, language often becomes a key marker of ethnic identity and is closely associated with demands for regional autonomy and self-determination (Chakrabarty, 2023). Within this context, the Rajbanshi community, spearheading the Kamtapur Movement, maintains that Kamtapuri (or Rajbanshi) is a language distinct from Bengali and therefore merits recognition as a separate linguistic entity. This demand for linguistic acknowledgment is not merely cultural but is intricately connected to the larger political objective of establishing a separate Kamtapur state, thereby turning language into a potent symbol of identity, assertion, and resistance (Barman P. , 2016).

The Kamtapur Movement emerged from the long historical, socio-political, and cultural experiences of the Rajbanshi community, a distinct ethnic group primarily inhabiting North Bengal, Assam, and adjoining regions of present-day Bangladesh. The movement developed around demands for linguistic recognition,

cultural preservation, economic development, and political autonomy, eventually crystallising into the demand for a separate Kamtapur state (Barman P. , 2016). The roots of this demand can be found in the historical legacy of the Koch Kingdom, which once ruled over present-day North Bengal and Assam before being annexed into the colonial and later post-colonial Indian state (Bhattacharya, 2019).

The historical roots of the movement can be traced to the rise of the Koch Kingdom under Maharaja Naranarayan (1554–1587), when the kingdom emerged as a powerful regional polity in North Bengal and western Assam. The state successfully resisted Mughal expansion and maintained a distinct administrative system, culture, and linguistic identity (Ghosh B. , 2020). This historical memory later became an important symbolic resource for political mobilisation among the Rajbanshis. Following the decline of Koch political authority and the incorporation of the region into British India, the Rajbanshi community experienced gradual political and economic dispossession. Colonial land revenue policies and the introduction of the zamindari system led to the displacement of many indigenous Rajbanshi landholders, pushing large sections of the population into agrarian distress (Chakrabarty, 2023). At the same time, British ethnographic classifications identified the Rajbanshis as a “backward caste” rather than recognising them as a separate ethnic community. This administrative categorisation intensified anxieties over identity, status, and social mobility.

A significant turning point occurred after Indian independence. The princely state of Cooch Behar signed merger agreements with the Indian Union in 1949 and was subsequently incorporated into West Bengal in 1950. The division of the former kingdom between West Bengal and Assam disrupted historical administrative unity and contributed to emerging regional discontent. Early demands for a separate homeland emerged through organisations representing Rajbanshi landed elites and political leaders. The Hitasadhani Sabha, founded by Satish Chandra Singha Roy, was among the first organisations to articulate demands for political autonomy centred on Cooch Behar. After independence, it transformed into the Cooch Behar State Praja Congress. In October 1949, representatives from regional organisations—including the Darjeeling Gurkha League and Sikkim Praja Sammelan—met in Darjeeling to propose a separate administrative unit known as “Uttarakhand Pradesh Sangha.” However, the proposal was rejected by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, delaying institutional recognition of regional aspirations. The demand resurfaced in 1969 with the formation of the Uttar Khanda Dal (UKD), which explicitly raised the issue of a separate homeland for Rajbanshi people. These early political efforts laid the organisational groundwork for later movements. (Ghosh S. , 2007)

## **VI. Post-Independence Marginalisation and Identity Politics**

Despite independence in 1947, the Rajbanshi community continued to experience economic and political marginalisation. The linguistic reorganisation of Indian states during the 1950s largely ignored their demands for recognition. Simultaneously, the large-scale migration of Bengali refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) altered the demographic structure of North Bengal. Many Rajbanshis perceived this demographic transformation as a threat to their cultural identity, land ownership, and employment opportunities. (Basu, 2003) During the 1960s and 1970s, sporadic demands emerged for recognition of the Kamtapuri language and socio-economic development of the region. However, these demands received limited attention from both state and central governments. As a result, identity discourse gradually shifted from caste mobility toward ethnolinguistic nationalism. (Roy, 2017)

The movement entered a more organised phase during the late twentieth century. Inspired partly by regional mobilisation movements in Northeast India, including those led by student organisations in Assam, Rajbanshi leaders began institutionalising their political demands. The formation of the Kamtapur People's Party (KPP) in 1996 marked a major turning point. Emerging from the earlier Kamtapur Gana Parishad, the party systematically articulated demands for a separate Kamtapur state. It emphasised historical claims

rooted in the Koch Kingdom, linguistic distinctiveness, economic underdevelopment, and perceived administrative neglect. (Choudhury, 2022) Unlike earlier organisations, the KPP placed strong emphasis on language as the central marker of identity. Recognition of the Kamtapuri language became a major mobilising issue linking cultural identity with political autonomy. During this period, Rajbanshi leaders also intensified demands for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status in order to assert indigenous identity rather than remain categorised solely as a backward caste.

## **VII. Militancy and Armed Assertion (1990s–2000s)**

The movement took a more radical turn in the late 1990s with the emergence of the Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO), founded in 1995. The organisation adopted armed struggle as a strategy to achieve a separate Kamtapur state. (Barman P. , 2016) The KLO reportedly maintained close links with the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), a major insurgent organisation in Northeast India. ULFA allegedly provided military training and logistical support, viewing cooperation as strategically beneficial for expanding insurgent networks beyond Assam. Training camps were reportedly established in Bhutan, including areas such as Samdrup Jongkhar. The militant phase saw attacks on security forces and incidents of extortion, prompting strong counterinsurgency responses from Indian authorities. In 1997, the Indian government declared the KLO an unlawful organisation. A major setback occurred during joint India-Bhutan security operations, particularly Operation All Clear in 2003, when the Royal Bhutan Army dismantled insurgent camps located inside Bhutanese territory. (Dey, 2022) By the mid-2000s, sustained counterterrorism measures significantly weakened the organisation's operational capacity. (Dutta, 2021)

## **VIII. How did the Left Front and the Trinamool Congress government manage the Kamtapur Movement?**

During the rule of the Left Front government (1977–2011), the Kamtapur Movement was largely viewed as a separatist tendency lacking broad popular support. Leaders of the Front, particularly the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M), described pro-Kamtapur organisations as anti-people forces. Then Chief Minister Jyoti Basu believed the agitation had limited social backing, although his successor Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee showed willingness to initiate dialogue with the Kamtapur People's Party (KPP). However, negotiations never materialised. The government primarily relied on a security-centred strategy to address militancy associated with the Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO). Following incidents of violence in North Bengal, counter-insurgency operations and rehabilitation programmes were introduced. In 2004, surrendered militants were reintegrated through rehabilitation initiatives aimed at restoring stability, while development schemes helped the government retain support among sections of the Rajbanshi population. (Mukhopadhyay, 2011)

During the first half of the Left Front's tenure, the politics of Rajbanshi identity were overshadowed by class-based politics. However, from the mid-1990s onwards, sections of the Rajbanshi community began to mobilize around the demand for the creation of a 'Greater Cooch Behar' state. At the time, Mamata Banerjee was the Leader of the Opposition; seeking to defeat the Left, she sent Mukul Roy to Cooch Behar to stir up Rajbongshi sentiments. Mukul Roy visited Bansi Badan, the leader of the Greater Cooch Behar movement and appealed for Rajbanshi support for the cause of 'Parivartan' (political change). After assuming power in 2011, the administration led by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee adopted a comparatively accommodative and welfare-oriented approach. Rather than relying only on policing measures, the government emphasised cultural recognition and socio-economic development. It established the Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University in 2012 in honour of Rajbanshi reformer Panchanan Barma and created separate boards and academies to promote Rajbanshi and Kamtapuri language and culture. Ahead of the 2021 assembly elections, Mamata Banerjee announced that 161 former members of the banned Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO) would be employed as houseguards. Her government also sanctioned ₹10 crore for the



Rajbanshi Development and Cultural Board and ₹5 crore for the Rajbanshi Language Academy. Additionally, it approved recognition for around 200 previously unrecognized Rajbanshi schools. She further stated that the curriculum for the Rajbanshi language had been prepared and emphasized that the language should be taught alongside other languages. (Chatterjee, 2021)

## IX. Conclusion

Finally, it may be said that the experience of the Koch-Rajbanshi community reflects a complex historical trajectory of identity formation, which has primarily been shaped by the processes of assimilation, social mobility, and the establishment of political self-determination. From the period of adopting the 'Rajbanshi' and 'Kshatriya' identities during the pre-independence era to the contemporary assertion of a distinct 'Kamatapuri' identity, this community has continuously redefined its identity in response to changing socio-economic and political contexts. Whereas the earlier efforts were mainly focused on integration into the Hindu social structure and the enhancement of social status, a fundamental shift became evident in the post-independence period, which moved towards the assertion of distinct ethnic, linguistic, and political demands; these included the demand for Scheduled Tribe status, recognition of the language, and regional self-governance.

Therefore, the Kamatapuri Movement is not merely a regional or economic demand; rather, it is a broader struggle for the establishment of dignity, cultural recognition, and the right to self-determination in the context of historical deprivation and marginalisation. This movement clearly demonstrates how language, ethnicity, and historical consciousness can collectively shape a regional political movement. At the same time, the existing diversity in constitutional status and the long history of assimilation have made the question of identity more complex, which is also influencing the present tensions and the emergence of various demands. To address these concerns, there is a need for inclusive policies, sensitive governance, and meaningful dialogue, which can play a supportive role in achieving coordination among competing identities and maintaining overall stability in a diverse and pluralistic society.

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