CHAPTER- 2

Geographical perspective, demography and caste formation of Tista-based Rajbangshis as reflected in Debesh Roy’s literature.

The geographical condition and feature of the tribal communities in the district of Jalpaiguri attract people’s attention. This peripheral district of West Bengal occupies a sizable portion of the basement-area of the Himalayas. The favourable weather and favourable topography was conducive towards plantation of tea in the vast track of land. The numerous rivers in the district have contributed towards making the valley of Tista a fertile granary. At par with the geographical condition the demography of the valley of Tista is also rather fascinating. Different ethnic groups have formed a unified and composite demography in the region. Our area of study, however, is the bank of the river Tista as figured in the prose-fictions of Debesh Roy. In the present chapter we shall take an overview of the life of the Rajbanshi community. Of course, the study would remain incomplete if the relation of the community with the neighbouring ethnic or tribal groups is not given due attention to. Keeping the above point in view it would be tried to study the process of ethnic formation of the Rajbanshis in the present section. The study may be divided in the following way:

2.1 Geographical Condition

I. Tista and other rivers and tributaries
II. Forests
III. Tea estates
IV. Char area
V. Agricultural land and dwellings.
2.2 **Demographic Composition of Tista Valley**

I. Bhatia  
II. Charua  
III. Madesia  
IV. Muslim Rajbanshi

2.3 **Cast formation of the Rajbanshi community**

Of course, there are some other linguistic and ethnic communities residing in the Tista valley. But we shall, however, try to restrict our study to the communities that figured in the prose-fictions of Debesh Roy.

2.1 **Geographical condition**

The land area of Jalpaiguri is 6227 sq.k.m. The tea estates occupy 1987 sq.k.m of the total area, and the forest covers 1790 sq.k.m. Besides, there are regions of Jayanti hills, Baksha hills and the regions of Himalayan range. The number of major rivers in the district is seven. The district, however, has a vast track of land termed as *char* (sandy land thrown by the river). The peculiar geographical feature has been aptly reflected in the fictions of Debesh Roy. Let us now discuss the rivers.

I. **Tista and other rivers:**

There are seven major rivers in the district of Jalpaiguri. They are Tista, Jaldhaka, Torsha, Kaljani, Roydhak, Sonkosh, Dayna. It we count the tributaries and all the minor rivers and rivulets the number would be 188. Most of these have originated in Sikim or in Bhutan. Some, however, come out of the fountains and other rivers in the district and gradually assume the form of river. The rivers system of the district may be divided in three
categories: first, the rivers with immense current, mostly in the hilly terrain of the district, which cause landslide and carry blocks of stone downstream; second, the rivers which in the middle portion of the course, have high current. Here they pass along the forest areas or tea estate areas also; third, the rivers in the plains land which are rather slow in motion, and a bit shallow; the river-bed is, of course, wide. The novels have figured so many rivers, namely the Tista, Torsa, Dayna, Tini, Banguri, Dabdub, Sukhatithi, Longti, Chua, Pathang, Murti, Newa, Jurti, Mal, Dudua, Jamjama, Barabank, Barbark, Angrabhasha, Golundi, Nomai, Garati, Kuljua, Raipiya, Shiltorsa, Talma, Panga, Lish, Khish etc.

Of course, Tista is the most important among all the rivers. It covers 56 k.m. of the total land-area of Jalpaiguri district. This river originates in the glacier of Lachen and Lachhang, 22,700 ft., height in Sikim in the Himalayas. Covering areas of the state of Sikim and the district of Darjeeling the river enters Jalpaiguri through Darjeeling. In the story Dakhal there is a beautiful description of the course of the river.—

"শিবক পাহাড় দিয়ে সমতলে এসে সোজা জলপাইগুড়ি জেলায় চুক্তেছে।
জলপাইগুড়ি শহরের বেঁধে তিস্তা চুক্তেছে সেখানে শিবক পাহাড়—জাতীয় সড়ক ধরে, শিলিগুড়ি ঢুঁতে চলিয়ে বেঁধ়ি মাইলের উপর ফরাস্ট ধরে শিবক পাহাড় আট মাইল। সব মিলিয়ে ধনুকের মত অর্ধ প্রাণ, তিস্তা হচ্ছে ধনুর খুল্য—
পূর্ব দিকে, মনে শর নিঃস্ফুল করতে হবে দক্ষিণ পশ্চিম দিকে।"²

In the plains the river has expanded about two and a half or three miles in wide. Of course both the sides of the entire river is never filled with water even in the rainy season, and in winter the whole area assumes the look of a vast span of sandy shore. The course of the river is so uncertain that no one can imagine from which side the water might flow.
The river becomes shallow in the plains, which causes regular flood. The flood, however, is an annual phenomenon in Tista. The matter has been narrated by the author in his works several times. In *Tistaparer Brittanta*, he wrote:

"ভিস্তার বনায় সঙ্গে যাদের কিছু পরিচয় আছে তারাই জানে— ভিস্তার জল
যখন জলের মত ছলছল খলখল শব্দ না করে, বড় বড় বোঝার ধর্ষণের মত
গুমগুম আওয়াজ তেলে তখন পাতল থেকে ভিস্তার জল উঠিতে থাকে, সে জল
সব ডালিয়ে দেবে— গা-গঞ্জ, বাড়ি-টাড়ি সব।"3

The plains of the valley of Tista form the background of the prose-fictions of Debesh Roy. The river, however, moves along different courses. Sometime a landmass rises in the midst of river bed just to vanish within a few days again, after another inundation. Again, the sandy landmass finds its position in the middle of the river. This hilly and a sort of uncertain river Tista makes its mark in so many ways. The author gives description of other rivers in the following words:

"...ঢিক চেনা নদী নয়, এদের সবারও সবসময় বাই-পড়া নদী-বিজ্ঞানের সঙ্গে
মেলে না। বা, এই ধরনের ভৌগলিক অবস্থানের নদীর বৈশিষ্ট্য নিরে তেমন
কোনো বইগুলো এখনো লেখা হয়ে পড়েনি।"4

There was a devastating flood in Tista in the year 1968 which has been described in the novel by Debesh Roy. The novel has a description of the Tista before and after the construction of bridge on it. The later part of *Tistaparer Brittanta*, however, is cast on the background of the construction of Tista barrage in Gajaldoba. The story ended with the inauguration of the half done barrage. The author wrote:
The forest of Tista region:

A greater portion of the district of Jalpaiguri is covered with wild forest, and this forest area forms an integral part of the fiction of Debesh Roy. The novel of *Tistapuran* is woven around the commune *got* of the Burima. The author locates the *got* as:

“বুড়িমার গোত্রের উত্তরে মরাঘাট ফরেস্ট, দক্ষিণে লৌহহরের হাট ফরেস্ট।”

Again, the big episode, *Ban parba* in *Tistaparer Brittanta* takes place in the Applechand Forest.

Total forest land is 1, 73, 103 hectar. The number of settlements in the forest area is 174. The forest is abounding with one-horned rhino, elephant, tiger, wild buffalo and other animals. The elephants, tiger, and buffalo move in their own routes. Of course, the footpaths inside the forest are subject to constant changes. It is because of the frequent burning of the wilds. Of course, there are spacious roads inside the forest for the movement of the departmental personnel, as well as for the animals

“এ সব ফরেস্ট দিয়ামেটের বানারো রাজা-জীবজাতুরে বাতাসে সুবিধার জন্য, বা ভেতরের গাছ কেটে জন্ম রাখার সুবিধার জন্য। একবার বেশ মাত্রে মতো চওড়া রাজাবাজ ফরেস্টের ভেতর আছে। এইসব রাজা দিয়ে ট্রাক দুর্যোগ, হরিতর পানের অভাস হয়ে যায় এ রকম রাজা দিয়ে হাট।”

The Tista in its course through the forest area very often uproots trees by its whims and carries along these with its water. People in the plains, however, collect these trees, cut them into pieces, make logs, and also process them as timber. This is a means of livelihood for the plainsmen in
the Tista valley. In *Tistaparer Brittanta* we have seen the father-in-law, Ashindir and Gayanath started timber trade—

“এই শেষ রাতের ভাঙ্গন ফরেস্টের পড়ে যাওয়া গাছ বেঁধেছেনে তিনিয়া তাঁয়া, বাবেদিন পর জল নামলে, তাঁতে সেখানে ঠেকে থাকবে সেখানে নিয়ে দখল নিয়ে সে-মিলের কাছে বেঁধে হাজার হাজার টাকা লাভের ব্যবসায় নেমেছে জামাই-শুভরা”

The forest department cuts the trees and also plants new one in their place. Towards the end of winter, the forest area is burnt for clearing the land to start new plantation.

Inside the forest there are big cattle-shed. To use the shed the owners of the cattle have to take the license on payment of fees. Of course, the area they occupy is far too big than the area they pay for. The tenure of the license is unto the ending of the winter and the beginning of the spring. The owners of the cowshed have to vacate the space before the burning starts; but, in fact, they do not vacate; rather, they gather the information about the schedule of the forest-fire, and move from one area to other at their convenience aboinding the forest department workers. So, the cow-sheds continue to exist in the forest practically throughout the year. Moreover, the peasants also sow corn even in the forest-land; to appease the forest department they offer a share of their produce to the forest personalos. Those who dwell within the close vicinity of the forest make it a regular practice of sending their cattle inside the forest to graze in day time to return in the evening.

### III. Tea Estate:

There are 181 numbers of tea estates in the 1, 18,706 hector land area in the district of Jalpaiguri. The tea plantation was introduced in the
colonial period by the European planters. It was in 1874 that the first tea estate was established in the Gajoledoba. Labours in the estates were imported from Bihar and Orissa. Henceforth, tribes like Orang, Munda, Santal came to be the permanent settlers in the region. Their dress and apparels, courtesy and etiquette, language, food habits were different from each other. The 56th and 57th chapter of Tistaparer Brittanta carries details of the lifestyle of these different tribs. Their lifestyle is rather different from the lifestyle of the residents of Tista region, and there is a sharp mark of division between them. The movement of the labours, however, was strictly confined within the boundary of the tea estates. The estates are guarded by barbed wire with culverts on the drains, and with cow-gates to restrict the entrance of cattle also.

Agricultural land is within the close vicinity of the tea garden. The local peasants have occupied the vest part of Jotland under the estate for agricultural purpose. At the time of Settlement these peasants demanded patta. But the garden owners wanted to obtain the vest land on lease; this way they meant to convert the same waste-land in to industrial-land. In this way they also wanted to evict the peasant from the land. To win the support of the labours of the estate they assured them that, with the increase of the land area of the estate they could afford to increase the number of permanent labours in the estate; but the Krishak Samiti (union of agricultural labour) demanded that the garden owners should first of all attain the number of permanent labour which existed 5/6 years back, and then the question of increase of land would arise. The leftist labour union and peasants union fight face to face on this point.

In the eighties, the period is covered in the novel Tistaparer Brittanta, the tea estates experienced a severe depression. Narayanprasad, a
character in the novel bought a tea estate along with the factory. But the
garden was closed and hence the factory had to be closed too. Sometimes
after, even when the plantation started, the factory remained closed.
Thereafter, the factory became the godown for dry-chilly. The estate now
only sold green leaves without producing tea.\textsuperscript{15}

The unrestrained movement of the Tista has always been a matter of
great concern for the planters in the area. Rathu, a character in the story,
\textit{Rakhipurnimar Rat} was a guard in Roypur tea estate. After having ravaged
the garden three times the Tista had left nothing for him to guard,
consequently he lost his job.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{IV. Char area:}

\textit{Char} is a landmass that rises from the bed of river. Sometimes this land is
created due to the change in the course of river. People come to settle in
that place. The author in his \textit{Tistaparer Brittanta} wrote—

\begin{quote}
“ওপরে, সেই মালবাজার— ওদলাবাজির কাছে মউরামারির চর থেকে শুরু করে
নীচে হলদিবাজির কাশিয়াবাজি পর্যন্ত তিস্তার, মানে তিস্তা বলতে যে ভুঁষ্ট
রোকায়, তার, একেবারে মাঝখানে, লোকবাসি তৈরি হয়ে আসছে অনেক দিন
হলা.”\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

The displaced victims of partition sought refuge on the mudflat of
Tista in large number. The Namasudra community was the first to settle
collectively in the mudflat area. The Rajbanshis, of course, did not venture
to settle in the mudflat initially, but later on they had also moved there to
seek paddy cultivation land which is termed as \textit{hashil} land. Regarding the
settlement of the refugees from East Bengal Debesh Roy wrote—

\begin{quote}
“স্বামীনাথের পরেই সেই পথে ধাকায় যা হওয়ার হয়েছে, কিন্তু তার পরে তিস্তার
চরগুলিতে নমুনা ও রাজবংশীদের মিশ্র জনবসতি তৈরি হয়েছে। তাতে হয়ত
\end{quote}
Regarding this mixed population Debesh Roy in another occasion wrote:

“মউরামারির চরত্ চরয়াগিলান আছে, প্রমগণের চরত্ ভাটিরাগিলান আছে, বাকালির চরত্ মুসলমানের বর আছে”

The author has noticed the existence of a democratic structure in the demographic composition in the region. He means that this democracy is the outcome of the production process which is marked by a feature of democracy. The residents of char area speak a mixed language, a composition of the dialect of East Bengal and the local dialects.

The char is, as a matter of fact, an uncertain dwelling area, and as such the laws and rules of the common villages are not applicable there. This land is acquired by the peasant themselves. It is hashil land for them. There is no jotdar to exercise power over the land here. The owner himself is the cultivator. The cultivators have to maintain two establishments—(they are termed as do-kuthia) one in the char, the other on the bank. They are forced to dwell together with the snakes and tigers in winter. For protection they have to build their sheds of bamboos high above the ground. There is a marked difference between the cultivation system in the char land and in the normal land—

“চরে যায়া আবাদ করে তারা জল ও মাটির মৈলীর সম্পন্নকেই বড় করে নেবে। ভাল মাটি, যদি খাটা যায় ফসলও পাওয়া যাবে। আর সব জমিরই নিজস্ব ফসল আছে। সেইটি বুকে নিতে হয়— কোন জমিতে কী ফলবে? আসে কেউ কথনা জানে তিনার বালুবাড়িতে এত ভাল তরুণ হয়।”
Of course, there are some conventions in matters of the possession of the char land. People take the possession of the land after it emerges from the bed of the river. But people have to come to an understanding not only among themselves but an understanding between man and river. The author has narrated the process of the appearance of char in the section *Dui number char*:

“নিতাইদের চর থেকে নদী হয়ে মাইল আর আর জলপাইগুড়ি শহর হয়ে মাইল বারো ভাটিতে এই দুই নক্ষত্রটাও চর— লোকের মুখে মুখে। আসলে ভিত্তার এই খাট বছরে আট মাসেই শুকনো থাকে। যাকি চার মাসেও শুকনো থাকতে পারে যদি ভিত্তা অর্থাত দিয়ে বরে যায়। তেমন পর পর তিন বছর গেল বলেই না এইখানে লাঙ্গল নামল, মানুষজন নামল। তারপর ঘরও উঠল, কলাগাছও ফুলল, আর একসারি সুপুরি গাছও সহিসাহি করে বাড়ল। কিছু তারপরই আবার একার ভিত্তা। আর সব খাট ছেড়ে দিয়ে এই একটা খাটের দিকেই ছুটল। এরকম করতে করতে গত বছর দশকে এখন এই নিচু চরের কোনো কোনো জাগ্রা উঠে হয়ে গেছে, কোনো কোনো জাগ্রা জোড়া হয়ে আছে। আর দশ বছরে জমির অংশাভাগিণীও পরিকার। শীতকালে পুনরা জমিতেই রবিচার হয়। গড়ে আজকাল ভাল হয়ে। যদি এরকম ভালোই হয়, তাহলে অন্য রবিচার না করে গম্ভী করবে সবাই। উঠু জলপাইগুড়ি থাকে আমাদের জন্য। উঠু মানে এই চরের নিচু জমির চাইতে উঠু কিছু নদীর পাড়ের অনেক নিচু।”

The red-signal in Tista means an impending devastation; the *char* might be inundated any time. That is why the radio-broadcast is very important for them, especially in the rainy season. Under the threat of impending flood the *char* dwellers collectively spend the night sleepless.

There is always an undeclared tussle between the men in *char* and the river on the right over the land. Of course, men, that is, the toiling peasants win in the long run. The matter has been dealt in the story, *Dakhal*
V. Agricultural land and dwelling land:

In the early stage of their community-living human being had demarcated land for housing and for cultivation. They settled close to the paddy field very often. Sometime they had cultivated land far away from their housing area too.

The agricultural land in the Tista region in Jalpaiguri district is full of multiplicity. In his *Maffasali Brittanta* the author has described it thus—

"কোনো জমি দলালা (নিচু), কোনো জমি পালান (খুব নিচু), কোনো জমি ভাড়া, কোনো জমি পড়া (পলিত), কোনো জমি পার্ক (উর্বর), কোনো জমি পাঠারিক, কোনো জমি বালু, কোথাও তিনচাষী জমি তৈরি হয়েছে, কোথাও হয়ত পাঁচ চাষ পর্যন্ত লেগেছে— যদি কেউ অত বরং করে থাকে।" 24

The particular type of the land determines the particular way of tilling it. The feature of the land very much close to the river is as—

"নীচের ধাপে বালুবাড়ি, পোরের ধাপে ধানশেত, মাধার ধাপে বসত।" 25

Those who have their land and house just on the shore of the river live in the midst of uncertainties. The Tista frequently changes its course—

"কিছু শুধু নদীই খাত বদলায়, তা ত নয়, ঘুরতেই বদলে যায় বছরের ছ-মাস জুড়ে। আর তাতে ত নদীও বদলায়, নদীরা বদলায়। অদৃশ্য জলতলে কোথায় বালুবাড়ির উপর থেকে পলি পড়ে যায়, একেবারে সাত আট ইঞ্চি পুটু—"
The Rajbanshis generally never settle in such uncertainties. It is the expatriates from the East Bengal who form the majority of the settlers in the char land. Considering the abject uncertainty of Tista the Rajbanshis leave sufficient space for the river and make use of the river from a distance. Debesh Roy wrote—

"রাজবংশীয় তিন্তুর চরে সাধারণত কৃজত গড়ত না, গড়েনি। তোরা বরং বেশি অভ্যস্ত ছিল তিন্তুর পারে, জঙ্গলের মধ্যে। সেই জঙ্গল তাদের কৃত্রিম নিত, দরকারি সার নিত, যত তুলবার ডংলাপা দিত।"  

There are descriptions of Rajbanshi settlements in the forest area of the Tista region in the novel Tistapuran: The novel, however, is based on the got of Burima. Describing the geographical location of the village the author wrote—

"দক্ষিণে শিভসলি হাট থেকে উঠতে দুরুরিবিদ্ধের হাটে কোনাকুনি যাওয়ার পথে ফরেস্টের ভিতর বুড়িমার পৌতা...বুড়িমার বাড়ি থেকে ঢাল বেঁধে যাইনে বাঁধে কৃত্বাড়ি লেগে পেছে। ফারেস্ট চুকেছে সেই কৃত্বাড়িতে এখানে-ওখানে-সেখানে। নদী চুকেছে সেই কৃত্বাড়িতে এদিক ওদিক থেকে...সেই কৃত্বাড়ির উপর
The traditional dwelling-house of the Rajbanshis comprises an area of two or four bighas of land. Of course, the main dwelling area occupies a small fraction of the total land. They make one or two houses of tin roof in a small patch of land and leave the rest of the land within the dwelling area vacant. Even in the areas adjacent to the urban centres the old Rajbanshi families used to retain vacant land within their housing boundaries. In the contemporary time of the Tistaparer Brittanta, we have noted that, this land was utilized for cultivation of vegetables on contract basis. The person cultivating the land has to invest money on it, and the owner of the land would receive his share of the produce. In the area close to Mainaguri this system was gaining popularity and we have seen Birenbabu in the novel of Debesh Roy is worried at the possibility of transfer of the land of the Rajbanshis to the outsiders.
2.2 The Demographic Composition of the Tista Valley

Jalpaiguri has been a common place for different ethnic groups for its geographic, natural and environmental varieties since ancient times. The settlers representing particular ethnicity had sometimes immigrated here on their own initiative, sometimes they came at the dictates of the rulers. Presently the land is populated almost by all the religious faith. They speak different languages and dialects. Religion, language and culture, however, never had been the cause of any communal disharmony in the district of Jalpaiguri. Basically the Mongoloid, Austric and Dravid have formed the demography of the area.\(^{30}\) Suhash, in the *Tistaparer Brittanta* discharging duties of Settlement in the Kranti region of Jalpaiguri found the local tribes gathered around him. The crowd is described in the novel as—

“সম্প্র দলটাই ভিড় করে সামনে, দীঘিরের এখানে এরকম করে দাঁড়াতে হয়েছে বলেই সবগুলো মুখই মিশে গেছে। সাজানো চোখানো তুলায়, প্রায় ক্যালেন্ডারের জাতীয় সংহতির ছবির মত সাজানো চোখানো— তামাটে মোঁকলীয় মুখের পাশেই খাটো নেপালি মুখের জীব্রতা, পেছনে লা সাঁওতালি মুখ। সুহাস এখানে নতুন বলেই, ও এ-অঞ্চলের সঙ্গে তথা আর ম্যাপে আর রিপোর্টেই তার পরিচয় বলে, এই মুখগুলোর পার্থক্য তার কাছে এত সহজে ধরা পড়ে। নাইলে পেশাক-আশাকে এ ভিড়ের ভেতর বৈচিত্র এত কম যে লোকগুলির একটা ভিড় বলেই মনে হয়। আলাদা আলাদা অবিবাহী-উপজাতি বলে মনে হয় না.”\(^{31}\)

Our main purpose is to explore the life-style of the Rajbanshis of Tista region as reflected in the prose- ficitions of Debesh Roy; of course, under the backdrop of the vast geography of the region, the Rajbanshis form the majority of the population. We may now take an overview of the demography of the region:
They are termed as Bhatia, as they hailed from the Bhuti land meaning down-stream area. A large number of people from the East Bengal had immigrated to the land following the partition of the country. The same immigration took place during Bangladesh war of Independence in 1971. They are, however, residents of river-sides, and coming over here they had selected the river-banks of settling. Of course, the Tista is not the river they knew, and it took time for them to understand this river and to develop a close relation with it—

“They brought fallow land under cultivation. They introduced the cultivation of jute, mustard, coriander etc., in the land. Along with cultivation they worked as day-labour also. The dress of these Bhatia is, of course,
different from the dress of the Rajbanshis. The author describes their attire as—

"দুদুরার ভাটিয়ারা পায়ারা পরে কাঙ্গা দিয়া। তাদের হাত পৰ্যন্ত ধূতি-কাপড় কাঙ্গা দিয়ে পরে। দুদুরার ভাটিয়াদের মতেই বেটিভোয়ারা শাড়ি পরে, রঙচুর্ণ শাড়ি।
ভাটিয়াদের মতেই তাদের শাড়িগুলো লাগা। সেই শাড়ির কিছুটা কাঙ্গা ওপর থাকে আর কিছুটা কাঙ্গা থেকে পড়ে।"34

There is a description of the attire of the men folks of the Rajbanshis in Tistaparer Brittanta—

"রোগা, কোরা কাপড়ের পাড়ায়ি, বাজিতে জলকাচা ধূতি, বগলে ছাড়া, চুল
আঁচড়ানা নেই, মুখ তামার বাণ, গলায় কঠির মালা।"35

Religious beliefs had an impact on the nomenclature of the Rajbanshis. Radhabhullav, Nitai, Hrikesh are some important examples which represent the inclination of the family towards a particular trait of Hinduism they follow. The residential areas are named with para as suffix, like Mistri para, Nawo para, Mahinder para, Sarkar para etc.36 The advent of the Bhatias, the capturing of land by them and the settlement—all are known to the Rajbanshis. The following is an account of the Bhatias—

"ভাটির দেশ থেকে আসা অনেক লোক জমি দেখল নিয়ে চাষ করে। তাদের
বিযুজিয়া বলে। মানী পুনঃ প্রায় দেখার মত করেই শুনেছে, জমি নিয়ে
বিযুজিয়া আর মদেশিয়াদের মধ্যে মারামারি হয়।"37

II. Charua

A large number of people had emigrated from East Bengal after the partition. They had settled on the fallow land by the riverside; this land is termed as char-land. The local Rajbanshis were never habituated to settling in or cultivating the char- land. Therefore, the settlement of the displaced
immigrants from East Bengal had never caused any conflict. These settlers gradually came to be known as Charua. The majority of them had come from the bhati land, that is, land on the downstream, and hence they were termed as Bhatia too. A song by Nitai in the story Bana records the past and present of these settlers rather clearly. Nitai, a sort of crazy fugitive was a resident of Rajsahi district on the bank of Padma. They had taken possession of the char land after crossing over the border—

"পদার্থ ঘোড়া পিয়া আলু আমেরি
ঘোড়া স্বতঃপুঞ্জ টান দেসে
আমার জীবন
তেলাড়াসি যায় রে
নলী আমার জনমশতের নলী আমার
মরণ
tু দেশভাগের পর লইলু নলীর
পারেই বরস্থস্থন
তেলা ডাসি যায় রে—"^{38}

The Charuas or the Bhatias were politically more conscious than the Rajbanshis. We have an idea of it from the speech delivered by Kaka in a meeting.^{39} Not only the political consciousness, but this community is known for their aptitude in taking advantage of the opportunities that came their way. In Tistaparer Brittanta the government officials were looking for some boatmen to go for searching Bagharu who was missing; and these boatmen found in it the opportunity to bargain with the officials on the remuneration—

"আমরা চারজন যাবার পারি। কিন্তু মাথাপিছু আড়াইশ টাকা দিবার লাগব।
নৌকার ভাড়া আলাদা।"^{40}
Again, Nitai has shown his consciousness and tenacity in his attempt for receiving the government-relief at the time of flood.

Boat is, in fact, the only means of communication between two banks of the river. In the market day a large number of boats ply in between two banks in the market-days.\textsuperscript{41}

In the last part of \textit{Tistaparer Brittanta} the construction of Tista barrage was discussed. This construction had put an end to the cultivation and settlement on the mudflat, the movement of Tista was restricted to its main course. The \textit{char}-dwellers were mostly the Namasudras of East Bengal; they even had maintained a co-operative in the char of Mauamari. They came forward with a demand that since they were going to be evicted from the \textit{char}, they should be employed in the barrage, particularly in the earth-work. They formed a society to voice forth their protest. The company had their own men for these works, and had no scope to engage them. To face the situation, the company, however, had encouraged the local Rajbanshis in the villages to form a counter organization. The rumour was spread that, the \textit{char}-dwellers had demanded that the Rajbanshis should not be employed in the work; moreover, it was also spread that the \textit{char}-dwellers had declared that if employment be offered to a particular community without acceding to their demand there would be riots. This served the purpose of the company and they had carried on the work with their own men.\textsuperscript{42} Besides this, the relation of the \textit{char}-dwellers with the Rajbanshis, as was reflected in the works of Debesh Roy, had been one of peaceful coexistence.
III. Madesia

By this term, Madesia the tea-labourers belonging to Austro-Dravid ethnic groups is understood. The term is probably derived from, *moth-deshio* (belonging to our land/indigenous). They were brought to Jalpaiguri district to work in the tea estate in the pre-independence period. Bimalandu Mazumdar in an article had described the advent and settlement of these people in Jalpaiguri—

“The 1874 সালে জলপাইগুড়ি জেলার দুয়ার অঞ্চলে চা-বাগান পতনের সূত্রপাত ঘটে (প্রথম চা বাগান অধুনালুপ্ত ‘গজলডোরা’ চা বাগান)। সেই সুন্দর জনবিবাদ এই অঞ্চলে প্রথম দিকে দালিলিং পার্বত্য অঞ্চলের মতো নেপাল থেকে শ্রমিক নিয়ে আসা হয়। তাদের সাহায্যে বনজঙ্গল হারিল করে বন্য জানোয়ার তড়িৎে চা-বাগান পতনের চেষ্টা করা হয়। কিন্তু তা ফলাফল হয়নি। কারণ তারাই ও ডুয়ারসর উক্তি, আমল, বৃত্তিব্যয়, নৈতিকতাতে অবাধ্যক্ষ আচরণে তাদের সাথে রাখাটাই সবচেয়ে বড় সমস্যা হয়ে পড়ার। এই আচরণে তাদের প্রতাহিক কাজের অন্ধকারের পথেও অনুকূল ছিল না। তখন এই অঞ্চলের চা-কলা অসমের মতো সীতাকুল পর্যালোচনা, ছোটনাগপুর, উড়িষ্যা, মধ্যপ্রদেশ প্রভৃতি এলাকা থেকে অশ্রুক্ষ ও দ্রাক্ষি জনজাতির মানুষের শ্রমিক হিসাবে নিয়ে আসার ব্যবস্থা করে। এসব জনজাতির মানুষের বিশেষ এক্ষেত্রে বা দুর্ভিক্ষে বাঁচার করে (টিপ সহ দিয়ে) চা-বাগানে শ্রমিকের কাজ করায় এর সমাপ্তি হয়েছিল। এভাবে ছোটনাগপুরের বনজঙ্গল থেকে চা বাগান পতনের জন্যে মানুষের তথ্যকার বুদ্ধির অঞ্চলে এসে উপস্থিত হয়েছিলেন তারা হৃদেন্দু—ওরঙ্গ, পাহাড়, সাতাল, চুড়িয়া/খাড়িয়া (লোকী), অসুল, মাহিলা, ভূমিক, কোরা/কোঁটা, নাগেশি, শাহর, মালগুলি, পারহাজী, হোসে, ধারাহাজ প্রভৃতি জনজাতির মানুষ। সেই থেকে তারা এবং তাদের বংশধররা এই অঞ্চলেই চা-বাগানে থেকে গেলেন।”

The life of the Madeshia is indeed colourful. In the processions they used to come in their gorgeous apparels—
Their life is full of songs, merry making and dances. Even in the market places they find a space to indulge in dances for a while—

“মদেশিয়ারের একটা দল—একজন ঠোঁট বাজাচ্ছে, আর’একজন মেয়ে হাত দিয়ে এ ওর কোমর ধরে নাচচে লেগেছে।”

Along with dance they consume country liquor in the market. Their liquor is called *hadia* which is brewed by them and is sold under open sky in the market even after dusk with a lamp lit. Their dress is quite different from the ones of the Rajbanshis. Debesh Roy describes their attire thus—

“ঠিক সেটে লিকটার মুখে একজন মদেশিয়া বসে, ঠোল হরে। তাদের কারো পরনে গামছার মত রঙিন কাপড়ের ফালি, কারো পরনে হাফ্যান্ট, কারো উলসনি গা, কারো স্যাডা লেজ—ববধুকে, দু-একজনের ঠোলগলা নাইলেনের, অনেকের হাতে ছোটবাটুল লাঠি, দু-জনের কাঁধে ছোট কুড়ুল বোলানো—কুড়ুলটাই আংটার মতো খাড়ে লাগানো।”

Along with their distinctive attire, the Madeshias have their distinctive proper names, which are different from the names of the Rajbanshis. The most common names are—Somra, Mangla, Sukra, Fagu. The Christians among them have, of course, Biblical names instead of the Madeshian. The number of peasants among the Madeshias is, however, scanty. Sometimes, they cultivate the land, that too within the garden area. They had hardly any relation with the local Rajbanshi populace. The author wrote—
The Rajbanshis could come close to the Madesias on three occasions. First, when they go for drinks. It is an occasion which brought the two communities close to each other; second, on the occasion of Kali puja. The two communities enjoy theatre, come to their place to see puja, and have their share of kichiri; third, the two communities unite together to resist the advance made by the wild elephants, which plunder the estate and paddy fields in the area resided by them. They try to drive away the animals collectively by beating tin drums and making loud noise—

“এই দুইটি অনিয়মিত ও একটি নিয়মিত উপলক্ষ ছাড়া বাঙালির লোকজন আর গ্রামের মানুষের মধ্যে কোনো বিনিয়ম নেই বললেই চলে। তার মধ্যে আবার নেশা আর হাতি-বাঘ ততো রাজকার বায়ার নয়। দেশার ব্যাপারটা প্রকাশ নায়। কার্ত্তিক বিনিয়ম বলতে ঐ কালীপূজা তিন-চারদিন, বছরে তিন-চারদিন। অন্য হাতেবাজারে পথে না তো দেখা হবে। বাজিত বন্ধুত্ব হয়ে যায় না, পারিবারিক-সামাজিক দেয়ালও হয় না, তবে মানুষের চোখের রোজকার চেনাও তো চেন। শহুরতা না থাকলে তেমন চেনার দায়ও তা কম নয়।”

IV. Nasya Shaikh or Muslim Rajbanshi

It is not only in Tista bank, but in various parts of North Bengal Muslim-Rajbanshis also have their abode. They are all converts from the Hindus. According to the Census of 2001 the population of Jalpaiguri district was 34,03,204; and out of it 3,39,195 was Muslim in religion. These Muslim-Rajbanshis are commonly known as ‘Bahe Muslim’. The term ‘Nasya Shaikh’ means that they are converts. The word ‘nasya’ is
derived from the Bengali word *nasta*, meaning fallen. Again, the Pir Shayek Kartik has become ‘Shaikh’ on being converted Muslim. Abdul Samad wrote—

“উত্তরবর্তে এটিও [নস্য শেখ] হল অন্যতম আর একটি উল্লেখযোগ্য বিশেষ শ্রেণীর মুসলমান জনগোষ্ঠী। এই নস্য মুসলমানেরা ছিল মূলত হিন্দু ধর্মাবলম্বী কিন্তু সেই সময় সংঘটিত সময়কালে মুসলমান ধর্মাঙ্গন হেতু তাদের সেই জাতি নষ্ট হওয়ার কারণে এ নষ্ট কথাটির অপভ্রষ্ট তারা ঐ ‘নস্য’ এবং সেই সঙ্গে তাদের ঐ ‘নস্য’ পদবীর যোগে উক্ত ‘নস্য’ (মেমন আমীর নস্য প্রমুখ) অথবা ঐ ‘নস্য’ ও ‘শেখ’ পদবীর যোগে ‘নস্য শেখ’ (মেমন জমির নস্য শেখ প্রমুখ) রূপে অর্থাৎ আপাতস্থ এককভাবে উক্ত ‘নস্য’ মুসলমান জনগোষ্ঠীর সাথে বিবিধতা হলেও তারা সংঘটি শায়েস্ত (পীর) বা (অপভ্রষ্ট) শেখ কর্তৃক ঐ মুসলমান ধর্মাঙ্গন হেতু সেই ‘শেখ’ পদবী-উপাধিধৃতকৃত।”

Dr. Marufa Khatun has said about the language of the Nasya Shaikh, that—

“নস্য শেখের বাঙালি কামতাপুরী বা রাজবংশী ভাষাতে ভাব বিনিময় করে।”

As reference to the polyandry of the Muslims among the Rajbanshis there is mention of ‘payla bibi’, ‘dosra bibi’ in the novel. The Rajbanshi-Muslims do not respect the person who does not have more than one wife. Debesh Roy referred to the practice of having wives by Maizuddin Paikar where the term used is ‘bibi kara’—

“সে এত বুকুরঙ্গ যে দুই বিবি করেই সে বিবি করা শেখ করে দিয়েছে, দুই বিবিও করত না কিন্তু তাহলে দেশে সমাজে মান-ইহত্ত থাকে না।”

There is a physiological difference between a Muslim- Rajbanshi and a non-Muslim. One can easily tell them apart—
The dresses of the Muslim-Rajbanshi are different from the ones of Hindu-Rajbanshi. Kachua Mahammed in the novel of Debesh Roy used to wear pyjama, full shirt of multiple colour, and a hat. Of course, in matters of names the difference is clearly discernable. It is because of a gap with the main-stream Islamic culture there is a clear mark of distortion in the proper names of the Muslim-Rajbanshis.

Nauchar Alam *jotdar* in *Tistaparer Brittanta*, Kachua Mahammed *jotdar* in Tistapuran, and Bakalir Golam Mostafa—these are the examples of Muslim-Rajbanshis in Tista valley who enjoy a social status. Regarding the most influential person, Jabbor, the eldest son of the *jotdar* of Fulbari the author wrote—

“কথ্যন্ত্যের বাড়ি, বড় ভাইরাও সব কথ্যন্ত্য। অবর সাতসিড়ি সালে প্রথম সিইআই হল। তারপর বছর দুই পর্যায় পাটি বদলিয়ে এখন আবার বামফ্রেন্ট ঘুরে এসেছো।”

The above narration shows that the Muslim-Rajbanshis were rather active in politics. Birenbabu had explained the various facets of the influence of Golam Mustafa of Bakali in the following—

“মুসলিম সাহেব প্রথমত ছিলেন একজন জোতদার, দ্বিতীয়ত ছিলেন একজন রাজবংশী আর তৃতীয়ত ছিলেন একজন মুসলমান।”

The Muslim-entity of persons like Golam Mostafa is very much touchy. He tells the advocate Biren—
Of course, ultimately people like Golam Mostafa had crossed over to Pakistan exchanging the property. They could realize that, the days of Jotdari and Jamindari system in India was coming to an end.
2.3 **Cast formation of the Rajbanshi community**

There is controversy about the ethnicity of the Rajbanshis. The colonial civilians had studied the ethnicity of the Rajbanshis in their own way, and the native scholars had also conducted ethnic and linguistic studies on them. There were contradictory opinions about the physiology and ethnicity, and also about the process of acculturation of the Koches and the Rajbanshis. According to some scholars, the Koch-Rajbanshis belong to Mongoloid group, while some others say that they are from the Dravid or Austric stock. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee had opined that in the 7th century AD they had adopted a language of Aryan group in the North east India. Now the questions that have confronted us is—first, whether the Koch and Rajbanshi are identical or different; second—whether they are animistic tribe or Hindu? Debesh Roy opines that the Koches had become Rajbanshi after embracing Hinduism. Girijashankar and Sukhavilas Barma were the two persons to forward two contradictory opinions in this regard. Girijasankar believes that the Koches and the Rajbanshis are identical, and even though they belong to the tribe, yet they are Hindu. Sukhavilas Barma opined that the Koches and Rajbanshis are, of course, different communities; the Koches are tribes, but the Rajbanshis are Hindu Kshetriya.

Debesh Roy has shown the Koch kings ruling in Koch Bihar had adopted Hinduism. The subjects thereafter had followed their rulers and identified themselves as Rajbanshis; these people later on had joined the *Kshetriya*-movement with the view to earning the epithet *kshetriya* for themselves. The main obstacle in their way to it was the hostility of the conservative Hindus. The author had shown that even though they were tribe in their appearance, physiology, and in their customs and behavior,
yet the Rajbanshis tried to cling to the *kshetriya* identity for a pretty long time. This backward move towards Koch identity is a later day development. He does not believe that this backward move is due to a feeling of deprivation and rejection by the Hindu society, or due to any feeling of anger. The fact is that, it is with a view to receiving certain government facilities and favour they wished to move backward. Also the provocation offered by the organizers of separatist movement had incited the Rajbanshis to go back to their Koch identity.\(^{58}\)

Girijashankar Roy opines that the Rajbanshis belong to one of the ethnic group within the fold of greater Mongoloid community in the North east India, given the differences of opinion in matters relating to their origin and development as an ethnic entity and their physical structure. Of course, he never accepts the difference between the Koche and Rajbanshis. To him they are one and same. He subscribes to the view that these Mongoloid-origin Rajbanshis had adopted Aryanised culture in the 7\(^{th}\) century AD. He believes that, of the two terms, Koch and Rajbanshi the former one is ancient, while the later one is a new coinage. Even though he admits them to be Mongoloid and a tribe, yet Girijashankar never subscribes to the view that the Koch and Rajbanshis are not Hindu.\(^{59}\)

Sukhavilas Barma believes that the Koche and the Rajbanshis form separate entities. The Rajbanshis sprang out of the process of a synthesis between the Dravid (or Paundra-Kshetriya from the Paundravardhan) and the relatively less conservative among the Mongoloid immigrants in North Bengal. That is the reason why they were eager to establish themselves as Hindu or *Kshetriya*, and had joined the *Kshetriya* movement.\(^{60}\)
Professor Dipak Kumar Roy, after traversing the past of the community has come to identify the Rajbanshis as a group of the Mongoloids. After coming in contact with Buddhism, and then with Jain and Vaishnavism they came under the process of Aryanisation during the rule of Bhaskar Varma in Kamrupa. In the periods that followed they began to assimilate with different Mongoloid and non-Mongoloid groups. In the meantime, the process of Sharaniakaran and Kshatrisation had been complete. Professor Roy while delineating the position of the Rajbanshis has put the facts thus— under the common constitution the Rajbanshis in Assam are MOBC (More Other Backward Community), but OBC in Bihar, SC in West Bengal; they were, again, declared ST in Assam for one year. In Nepal they are Napalese, Bhutia in Bhutan, Assamese in Assam, Biharis in Bihar, Bengalis in West Bengal and Tripuris in Tripura. Taking all of them in total professor spoke about a united Gotal Rajbanshi Samaj.\textsuperscript{61}

Swaraj Basu had given an explanation to the tendency of the Rajbanshis who at one time joined the Kshatriya movement, and at another wished to be identified as tribe, and demanded inclusion in the list of Schedule caste. According to him the well-to-do section of the Rajbanshi community was in favour of Hinduisation, but the weaker sections realized that their economic prosperity lied in retaining tribal identity which would ensure reservation quota and the job facilities etc. The two different objectives—to go for Hinduisation or to be recorded as tribe—is the outcome of the class-conflict in the Rajbanshi community, a result of the motive of two separate classes representing their class interest.\textsuperscript{62} Presently, a severe conflict is cropping up from the contradictory views forwarded by the different groups regarding the identity of the community. The burning question before them is whether the Rajbanshis should go back to their
tribal identity or should embrace Kshatriya identity. When the movement for self governance is gaining ground the conflict of this kind is likely to deepen their crisis.
Notes and References


4. Ibid, p.444

5. Ibid, p.495


7. Ibid, p.19


11. Ibid, p.151-153


15. Ibid, p.33
18. Ibid, p.203
19. Ibid, p.280
22. Ibid, p.231
26. Ibid, p.199
27. Ibid, p.200
32. Ibid, p.200
34. Ibid, p. 489
36. Ibid, 214
40. Ibid, 315
41. Ibid, 345
42. Ibid, 446-447
45. Ibid, 19
46. Ibid, 69
52. Ibid, 111

53. Ibid, 256

54. Ibid, 432


56. Ibid, 365

57. Ibid, 365


60. Sukhavilas Barma: 'Bhawaia', Calcutta, Lok Sanskriti O Adibashi Kendra, January, 1999, p.54
