

ETHNOGRAPHY OF *JHAPALI RAJBANSHIS*

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Introduction

Nepal, despite being small in size, is a country with geographical and cultural diversities. The social system or structure of Nepal is based on the unity in diversity that integrates various caste, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural groups. According to 2001 census, 102 types of caste/indigenous ethnic groups dwell in Nepal and 92 mother languages are spoken (C.B.S, 2002 :28-33). A comprehensive study about all the caste and indigenous ethnic groups dwelling in Nepal has not been conducted yet from the sociological and anthropological perspectives. Even today some minority ethnic groups are about to be extinct. Some even do not have the knowledge of their own cultural history. Such ethnic groups have begun to give up their ancestral cultures/traditions and adopt the customs of other castes/social groups and forget their own cultural history.

According to Nepal's census held in 1991, the number of people speaking the *Rajbanshi* language was 85,559 which increased to 1, 29,829 in 2001's census. The Jhapa district located in the eastern *Terai* in Nepal is inhabited by various caste and indigenous ethnic groups. This district consists of 3 municipalities and 45 VDCs. According to 2001's census, its total population is 6, 33,042. Apart from *Rajbanshis*, there are other tribes of people such as *Dhimals*, *Jhangads*, *Meches*, *Koches*, *Tharus*, *Tajpurias*, etc. Compared to other caste and ethnic groups such as *Bahun*s, *Chhetris*, *Newars*, *Rais*, *Limbus*, etc; the *Rajbanshis* are

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politically, socially and economically backward in every respect. Steady changes are found over the period of 50 years in every aspect of the life of the *Rajbanshis* who are simple, naïve and honest in nature. Their culture and social structure are gradually being changed and in this process, their cultural norms and values are gradually getting lost. Sociologically speaking, a number of powerful factors like modernization, westernization, sanskritization (due to the in-migration of caste group people from hills) and globalization have contributed to the change in their society and culture. The *Rajbanshis* residing in Jhapa and Morang of Nepal are the oldest indigenous ethnic people of this region. They have been historically marginalized in the state political institutions and economic and social development sectors. Neither significant effort has been made to involve them in the state power institutions and mainstream them in the development process. Given this context, this paper aims at documenting the socio-cultural systems and the undergoing changes among the *Rajbanshis* for their holistic understanding.

History

In spite of the fact that the *Rajbanshis* are the indigenous ethnic people of eastern *Terai*, their origin can be traced back to India's Assam, Bengal and Bihar states of India. Even today, most of the *Rajbanshis* are found to have lived in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Nagaland, and Manipur in India (Shrestha, 2064). Different scholars have expressed their own opinions about their origin. But one opinion is widely accepted among the *Rajbanshis*. According to this opinion, *Bodo* people had entered India during the period of the commencement of the *Bikram Sambat* and they got settled along the bank of the Brahmaputra River and gradually migrated to Assam and north and east Bengal. Finally, they moved to Bihar of India and Nepal's various *Terai* districts such as Jhapa, Morang and Sunsari and settled there.

The meaning of the word '*Rajbanshi*' is the "dynasty of king". According to the local myths, their ancestor Koch king 'Hajo' established the kingdom of Kamrup by the end of the 15th century. Hajo's grandson Bishwo Shingh, the king of Koch, was powerful. Bishwo Singh had a significant contribution to the establishment of Kamatapur or the kingdom of Kochbihar. As Bishwo Singh, the Koch ruler, was found to be doing

the heroic deeds, he was given the title '*Rajbanshi*', indicating the *Chhetri* caste status by the *Brahmins*. At that time, Bishwo Singh is reported to have converted into a Hindu. Not only did he convert into a Hindu, but also worked to make his relatives and people as the *Hindus*. In other words, the mighty king Bishwo Singh is said to have adopted the Hindu religion and culture and changed his name into 'Bishwo Singh', Hindu name (Snyal,1967:11).

There is also another legend concerning the ancestry of the *Rajbanshis*. When Parshuram had started destroying the *Chhetria* dynasty in India as his father's revenge, the *Chhetri* kings and their people escaped to save their lives. Ancestors of *Rajbanshis* themselves being *Chhetries* fled and started living in the forests of Nepal's Morang and Jhapa by hiding (Upadhaya, 2060:56). In context of Nepal, King Prithvi Narayan Shah annexed the kingdom of the *Rajbanshis* into a unified Nepal state.

From the perspective of physical anthropology, the body structure of the *Rajbanshis* of Nepal looks like that of Mangol-Dravid people. However, in complexion, they bear a resemblance to the *Aryas*.

Settlement and Housing Pattern

The *Rajbanshis* are found to have settled in most of the villages in Jhapa. They are professionally agro-based people. They have settled in the most fertile land. Their nucleated settlements are located at the upland. There are 10-15 households in the smaller villages and 50-60 houses in the bigger villages. They prefer to live in groups so that they help each other during the period of emergency or urgent needs.

Most of the houses of *Jhapali Rajbanshis* have thatched roofs. They are erected with the help of locally available materials such as wood, bamboo and jute stalks. Houses are beautifully smeared with red clay, dung, and white clay. Visitors are not given direct entry to such houses. Instead, they are kept outside and if the purpose of coming is fulfilled there, they are sent back from there. However, the important people, if necessary, are taken to inside of the houses.

In *Rajbanshi* community, it is also common that people consult *Panjyiar* (priest) while building a house. *Devaniya (Dhani) Rajbanshis*,

who are generally well-to-do, are found to have their houses built on the basis of the traditional *Bastushatra* (architecture) as per the religious tradition. But it is not possible for the poor families to do so. While building houses in the traditional pattern, the *Rajbanshis* focus on the following things: (i) north *guwa* (be a nut garden in the north; (ii) south *dhunwa* (be open land in the south for smoke access); (iii) east *hans* (be a pond in the east where ducks swim); (iv) west bamboo (be a bamboo grove in the west that may block the afternoon sun) (Sanyal, 1967).

A *Rajbanshi* generally builds 3-7 houses as per the need and economic status. For instance, a rich family builds *Thakbar* (sleeping house), *Nadanghar* (kitchen house), *Andighar* (storehouse), *Bhojawanghar* (guest house), *Bahiraraghar* (meeting house), *Gwalighar* (shed), *Thakurwadi* (deity house), *Mutherghar* (grain house), etc. Poorer families have also compulsorily built 3-4 houses such as bed houses, kitchen houses, outer houses, sheds, etc. In most of the *Rajbanshis'* houses, toilets are not found. The families living in the towns have managed simple toilets. The non-toilet family members go to the streams, fields and open land for defecation. It happens due to the lack of the public health awareness.

Lineage

The *Rajbanshis* call themselves the desendents of Suryabansi and reveal their lineage(*gotra*) to be Kashyap. They follow *Chhetri* character and customs and add *Singh* and *Rajbanshi* to their names. The *Koches* call themselves the *Rajput Chhetris*. It is also said that *Koch*, *Bhadai*, *Paliya*, and *Deshi* including the *Rajbanshi* caste are the *Dravidian* castes of north-east and east Bengal. They are also thought to be the mixture of the *Mongolian* blood but they use *Brahmins* as priests in some of their religious rituals and follow the *Hindu* religion. There is no discrimination by status and level in their community. They can marry their co-lineage partners under the conditions of seven generations' gap if the prospective partner is from the same village and 3-4 years' gap in case of distant village.

In the *Rajbanshis'* community, '*Poruwa*' is significantly emphasized. They take '*Poruwa*' as their family god (ancestral deity). Such '*Poruwas*' are of 16 types, namely, *Chaitan*, *Nitanand*, *Aadit*, *Satguru*, *Ramaut*,

Thunthunia, Lakhigadhadar, Chaturmaria, Bholoram, Chanatkhele, Udit, Jagbandhu, Dhadigar, Kabir, Sitaudit, and Tulsia.

There are different kinds of *Rajbanshis* such as *Koch Rajbabshi, Poundra Rajbabshi, Mech Rajbabshi, Newar Rajbanshi, and Khataha Rajbanshi*. Like in Nepal, Ridge (1991), referring to Risely (1967), writes that there are also many types of sub-castes of the *Koch Rajbanshis* in the North Bengal, India such as *Paliya, Sadhupaliya, Babupaliya, Deshi, Domasir, Modasi, Jaluwa, Tongriya, Khopriya, Gobriya, Kantai, Dhalai and Koch*. These sub-castes of the *Rajbabshis* in India are not found in Nepal.

Family Structure

The survey conducted by the author himself in 2008 shows that there is the existence of two types of family, namely, nuclear family, and joint family. A slightly more than half of the families (53%) are nuclear followed by 47 percent joint families. Gradually, there is now the preference of nuclear families—a function of the fragmentation of the landholdings, education of the youths and quarrel among the daughter-in-laws. These factors of the breakdown of the joint families are also ubiquitous among other caste/social groups in the study district. However, joint families are also equally emphasized due to the agrarian nature of the economy.

Relatives in the *Rajbanshi* society have been classified into categories. These include: the relatives by blood as '*Guthiyar*', and (ii) relatives by marriage as '*Kutumba*'. '*Guthiyar*' includes the relations such as grandfathers, fathers, parental uncles, sons, nephews (brother's sons), grandsons and great-grandsons. '*Kutumba*' includes daughter-in-laws and son-in-laws, nephews and nieces (sister's children), maternal uncles and aunts, brother-in-laws and sister-in-laws, father-in-laws and mother-in-laws, etc. Besides these relations, there are other relations made by the society or social elites such as *Mit, Mister, Mita, Gharamabapa, Dharamputra* and *Danguwa Dhokar Beta*.

Rites de Passage:

Three ceremonies are briefly analyzed under the rubric '*rites de passage*'. These comprise: birth ceremony, marriage ceremony and death ceremony.

Birth Ceremony

The birth ritual of the *Rajbanshis* is an important ceremony. The *Rajbanshi* society has the norm that a woman in pregnancy should not be physically and mentally tortured and troubled. They have the concept that if a pregnant woman has tension and trouble, it will badly affect the baby in the womb. They take caution thinking that ghosts may affect a troubled and tortured woman in pregnancy. The belief is that a woman in pregnancy should avoid seeing bad stuffs, hearing abuses, lifting heavy things, jumping over cords tethered to animals and looking at animals like monkeys and horses (these animals are considered as bad omens). They put a knife under the mattress and wear amulets in order to avoid ghosts and evil spirits. They have the custom that the natal home feeds a pregnant daughter or sister rice pudding before she has a delivery. A *Haindi*-caste *Dayani* (a delivery nurse) takes care of a woman in delivery. These days, a woman is also taken to a nearby health- post or hospital for the delivery (if possible). After the delivery, baby is kept on *Nanglo* (the flat basket) to greet family god, sun god, village god and all other gods in order to get blessings. A woman in delivery is supposed to be ritually pure after five days regardless of the sex of the baby.

There was no traditional practice of giving name among the *Rajbanshis* in the past but there has been change in this regard for a couple of decades. These days the child is also named on the basis of the signs of zodiac. Traditionally, grandmother names the child. The naming practice in the *Rajbanshi* society is interesting. The child is named after the nature, events, months, days, time, seasons, cultural and social events and names of objects, birds and animals. Imitating the hills people, they also name a child on the basis of the names of gods and goddesses.

Traditionally, only the first child has rice feeding ceremony in the *Rajbanshi* society which is held between five to nine months. The rice feeding ceremony is celebrated in a grand way regardless of the sex of the baby. Maternal uncle makes pudding from milk and feeds it to the baby. The uncles bear the expenses incurred upon for the celebration of the occasion.

A person without completing *Kanapindabar* or ear piercing culture cannot get married. This culture should be completed even before the

marriage ceremony. The ear piercing of some of the babies is completed on the day of rice feeding. This ritual is performed by *Gashain Thakur*. In the *Rajbanshi* community, the menstruation is regarded simply as a natural process. Women do not take part in holy or worshipping activities for the first four days from the day of menstruation.

Marriage Ceremony

The *Rajbanshi* community is found to marry according to the *Hindu* traditions. People marry within their own community but outside their lineage. Marriage also does not take place within the three generations of the *Mit* (fictive kin) and seven generations of *Guru* (religious preacher). In the past, they had a system called 'Chumana system' under which bride's parents were given money or articles of wealth—a remnant culture of bridewealth. But now this system has almost disappeared.

Arranged marriage is generally preferred in the *Rajbanshi* community, albeit there is the occasional occurrence of love marriage. In the case of arranged marriage, *Karuwa* (matchmaker) initiates the marriage proposal and *Gasain Thakur* performs the rituals. Once the zodiac of the prospective partners is found to be auspicious, the program of meeting the girl proceeds. Five people including the groom's father and his relatives on behalf of the groom visit the bride's home. The groom's father puts a pair of betel and nut (pansupari) on the bride's hand. At the same time, the groom's father examines the bride's nature, wisdom, and practical knowledge. Likewise groom visit program by bride's father takes place at the groom's home. The bride's father puts betel and nut Rs. 101, shirt, *dhoti*, watch, finger-ring, on the groom's hand. Then the auspicious marriage day is fixed. Marriage is not certain until *Darahaguwa* ritual is fulfilled. Decision is made on the day of Daraguwa. On this day, the clothes and jewelry as demanded by the bride's father are brought and the decision is made.

On the day of marriage or just before leaving for the marriage procession, *Kasakuta* ritual is to be held according to which married sisters, aunts, and sister-in-laws prepare a mixture of turmeric, a *bhojo* (a herb) and oil and anoint it on the groom's body. *Kasakuta* is, in fact, a ritual for soul purity. Before leaving for the marriage procession, *Aam*

Mohaliwa ritual is performed in which the groom has to go around a mango tree for five times and money, betel, nut and holy grass (*dubo*) are offered to worship the deities.

On the day of marriage procession, *Gashain Thakur* takes the groom to a temple of family god and administers *mantras* in his ears for soul purification. Along with the preparation of the marriage procession, an object called *Jivanchhuri* (a full nut with a pierced knife) is placed on the hand of the groom. After this, the procession begins with bands and gunfire by riding buses or elephants in the past. Just before reaching the bride's home, children on behalf of the bride block the path to the people in the procession. They discontinue it only after the groom gives them some money. When the procession reaches the bride's home, the groom and bride get seated on *Maruwa* (dais or platform). Then, the bride's father offering his daughter to the groom asks-" Have you got my daughter?" and the groom says-" Yes, I have." These sentences get repeated thrice. Then the father-in-law hands over his daughter to the son-in-law and utters him, " Sin if killed and piety if cared for". After this, the groom puts vermillion on the forehead of the bride three times. At the time of putting the vermillion, the bride's younger sister and the relatives prevent the groom from doing so by blocking the bride's head with a piece of cloth. When the groom gives them some money, they stop doing it. Thus, the marriage is held. In the evening time, the procession returns home. Then, with much fanfare, the groom's mother makes the entry of the daughter-in-law including the procession to her home. At the marriage party, relatives, neighbors and villagers are invited for a meal. On this day, the newly wed couple serve *Haldibhat* (yellow rice) especially to the people present there. This practice helps to establish the new bride's identity and social acceptance and be socialized in the new social ambience.

Death Ceremony

Among the *Rajbanshis*, dead body is either buried or cremated according to the *Hindu* tradition. A baby with no teeth is buried and there is no observance of mortuary rite for him/her. Three to five day long mortuary rite is observed for other minors with teeth. During the death of other people, it is observed for the 13 days. The eldest son sets fire to the

corpse of father or mother. The eldest or youngest son performs *Malaluwa* (mortuary rite) and other sons are just considered as ritually impure only.

After burial or cremation at the funeral spot, the people in the death procession have a bath in the river and return home. Before a man participating in the procession enters his home, the dung or hay fire has to be placed in front of the main gate to his house for ritual purification. Along with it, a pot full of water with *Tulasi* (a holy plant) leaves is placed. All the men who have taken part in the funeral procession wash their hands and legs and touch fire and enter their homes. All the participants in the procession are served tea and lunch. The person who observes all the mortuary rites has to return home with a piece of white cloth tied to his neck. He observes ritual pollution for 13 days.

Food Habits, Dress Patterns and Religion

Rajbanshis are food-loving people. They principally consume rice, pulse, curry, beaten rice, and a variety of pickles domestically prepared. Traditionally, women wear *Petani* (a cloth similar to the loin-cloth which is tied up to the upper part of their chest) and men wear *dhoti* and shirt. But there have been changes these days. Women wear *sari* and blouse. Girls wear *kurta suruwai*, shirts, pants and skirts and boys wear all types of modern dresses. Women traditionally wear ornaments on the head, neck, waist, arms and legs. The *Rajbanshis* are one of the most *Hinduized* aboriginal people of the eastern *Terai*. Previously, they were the nature worshippers. Traditionally, they celebrate their own festival such as the *Pawani*. They also celebrate the *Dashain* and *Tiwar* like the other Hindus.

Economic System

Rajbanshis predominately practice agriculture as their profession. They are very laborious. Prior to the 1960s, they, together with the *Satars* and *Dhimals*, were the only indigenous farmers of Jhapa. But the eradication of malaria in mid-1960s and the subsequent migration of the clever *Brahmins*, *Chhetris*, *Rais* and *Limbus* triggered the grabbing of

their traditional land resources through fair or foul means. All this had, indeed, the direct bearing on the reduction of their landholding and landlessness in some cases. The political economy of the state turned many landlord *Rajbanshis* into the tenant farmers. Still they are eking out their livelihood from their reduced size of landholding and tenanted land. Some even work as agricultural laborers. Of late, some *Rajbanshis* have turned to be petty businessmen and white-collar job holders.

Recapitulation:

Rajbanshis are one of the indigenous peoples in Jhapa district who are very rich in their traditional culture. However, the hill to Terai migration has had negative bearing on their traditional livelihood systems. Their culture is also fast being transformed due to the arrival of different social groups from the hills and therefore, more efforts are to be made for their detailed holistic study of their traditional culture before its disappearance.

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