

From Kshatriya Assertion to Kamtapur Movement: The Evolution of Rajbanshi Identity Politics

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Abstract:

This article examines the historical evolution and contemporary reconfiguration of caste politics in Bengal, focusing on the Rajbanshi community of North Bengal. Challenging the notion of Bengal as an “exception,” it argues that caste has remained a persistent—though often less visible—force in shaping social and political mobilization, expressed through social reform, cultural assertion, and regional identity politics rather than primarily through electoral arenas.

Tracing Rajbanshi politics from the late nineteenth century, the study highlights the Kshatriya movement as an early effort at status mobility within the colonial order. It then shows how processes such as Partition, migration, and the rise of class-based politics under Left Front rule reshaped caste expression, often subsuming it within class frameworks while allowing it to persist in latent forms.

The article further examines the resurgence of Rajbanshi identity politics through the Kamtapur movement, linking it to regional marginalization and identity-based mobilization, while also noting the limits of caste politics due to fragmentation and weak political representation.

Engaging nationalist, Marxist, and Subaltern perspectives, the study concludes that caste in Bengal is dynamic and context-dependent, interacting with region, class, and state power to shape the evolving landscape of identity and politics in eastern India.

Key Words: Caste Politics; Rajbanshi Community; North Bengal; Kshatriya Movement; Kamtapur Movement; Partition and Migration; Subaltern Politics.

1. Introduction

The history of caste politics in Bengal follows a distinct path compared to other parts of India, where caste has often played a central role in electoral politics. In states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Tamil Nadu, caste identities have strongly shaped political mobilization. In contrast, Bengal is often seen as an “exception,” where caste appears less visible in formal politics. However, this does not mean that caste is

unimportant. Instead, caste in Bengal has usually expressed itself through social reform movements, cultural activities, and regional forms of mobilization rather than direct electoral politics.

Within this context, the Rajbanshi community of northern Bengal is particularly important. Concentrated in areas such as Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, and Dinajpur, the Rajbanshis developed a gradual process of social and political mobilization from the late nineteenth century. The Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement was one of the earliest organized efforts by a lower-caste group in this region to challenge social hierarchy and demand recognition within the Hindu social order.

This article traces the historical development of Rajbanshi politics from the colonial period to the present. It focuses on three key questions: how Rajbanshi identity politics emerged under colonial rule; how major events such as the Partition of India and post-independence changes affected their political position; and why Rajbanshi identity politics has re-emerged in recent decades despite the dominance of class-based politics in West Bengal.

The article argues that caste politics in northern Bengal has not disappeared but has changed over time. During the colonial period, caste became a basis for social reform and claims to higher status. After independence, especially under left-wing rule, caste identities were often absorbed into broader class politics, making them less visible. However, in recent years, issues such as regional inequality, migration, and identity have led to a renewed expression of caste and ethnic politics, particularly through movements like the Kamtapur movement.

By engaging with different historiographical perspectives, including nationalist, Marxist, and Subaltern approaches, this study highlights how marginalized communities actively shape their own political identities. It shows that caste continues to play an important—though sometimes less visible—role in the politics of eastern India.

2. Historiographical Trajectories: From Nationalism to Subalternity:

The historiography of caste politics in Bengal has long been shaped by the perception that the region represents an exception within the broader landscape of Indian caste politics. Early nationalist historians emphasized the role of educated elites and anti-colonial political mobilization while paying relatively little attention to the social movements of marginalized communities. In these narratives, Bengal appeared as a centre of nationalism and reform, where caste divisions were less politically significant than in other parts of India.

However, more recent scholarship has challenged this assumption by highlighting the importance of caste-based mobilization among lower-caste communities in colonial Bengal. Scholars such as Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Swaraj Basu have demonstrated that caste identities played a crucial role in shaping political movements among marginalized communities such as the Namasudras and the Rajbanshis. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's study of the Namasudra movement revealed how lower-caste communities mobilized around issues of social discrimination, education, and political representation in colonial Bengal. According to Bandyopadhyay, caste-based mobilization was closely linked to the emergence of new forms of political consciousness among marginalized groups.¹ Similarly, Swaraj Basu's research on

the Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement highlighted the complex relationship between caste identity and colonial governance. Basu argued that the Rajbanshi movement represented a strategy of social mobility in which a marginalized agrarian community attempted to renegotiate its status within the colonial social hierarchy.²

The dominance of Marxist historiography in post-independence Bengal further influenced the marginalization of caste as an analytical category. Marxist scholars prioritized class relations and agrarian structures, often treating caste as part of the ideological superstructure. While this approach yielded important insights into land relations and peasant struggles, it tended to subsume caste within class, thereby overlooking its autonomous political significance.

The analytical framework of Subaltern Studies offers an important perspective for understanding such movements. Scholars associated with this intellectual tradition have emphasized the agency of marginalized social groups whose political voices were often excluded from elite nationalist narratives. As Ranajit Guha argued, the history of colonial India cannot be understood solely through the actions of elite political actors; rather, it must also account for the autonomous political initiatives of peasants, workers, and lower-caste communities.³ The Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement can be interpreted within this framework as an attempt by a marginalized agrarian community to assert social dignity and political agency.

Another important theoretical contribution comes from the work of Partha Chatterjee. In his analysis of postcolonial political society, Chatterjee argues that marginalized groups often engage with the state through collective mobilization rooted in community identity rather than through formal liberal institutions. Such mobilization frequently involves demands for recognition, representation, and access to resources. The Rajbanshi movement illustrates this dynamic, as community leaders organized associations, educational initiatives, and social reform campaigns to negotiate their position within the colonial social order.⁴

Scholars studying eastern India have also highlighted the importance of regional and subnational identities. According to Uday Chandra, caste and regional identities often intersect with agrarian structures and local political institutions, shaping patterns of mobilization in rural societies.⁵ In northern Bengal, the Rajbanshi movement emerged within a context of agrarian inequality, low literacy, and social marginalization. These structural conditions contributed to the development of a collective political consciousness among sections of the community.

Another important body of scholarship has focused on the politics of displacement, migration, and borders in eastern India. The work of Ranabir Samaddar has been particularly influential in this regard. Samaddar's studies of migration and refugees in eastern India emphasize how the aftermath of the Partition of India transformed the political and social landscape of the region. The influx of refugees into West Bengal altered demographic patterns and intensified competition for land and employment. In northern Bengal, these changes significantly affected the Rajbanshi population, reshaping patterns of agrarian power and political representation.⁶

The transformation of Rajbanshi politics in the post-independence period must also be understood within the context of broader political changes. The demographic shifts triggered by the Partition of India and the

subsequent influx of refugees into northern Bengal altered patterns of land ownership and political representation. At the same time, the rise of class-based mobilization under Left rule in West Bengal tended to subsume caste identities within broader narratives of peasant and worker struggle. Despite these developments, caste identity never disappeared entirely from the political landscape of northern Bengal. In recent decades, movements demanding recognition of the Kamtapuri language and the creation of a separate Kamtapur state have revived Rajbanshi identity politics. These developments demonstrate that caste and regional identities continue to play an important role in shaping political mobilization in contemporary India. Thus, the Rajbanshi experience illustrates how marginalized communities negotiate power through a combination of social reform, cultural assertion, and political organization. Examining this history through the lenses of Subaltern Studies and identity politics allows for a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between caste, region, and political power in eastern India.

Taken together, the historiography of Rajbanshi politics demonstrates a gradual shift from colonial ethnography to more complex analyses of identity, power, and regional politics. Scholars increasingly recognize that caste politics in Bengal cannot be understood solely through the lens of class or nationalism. Instead, it must be examined in relation to regional histories, migration, and the changing structures of political power. The Rajbanshi experience thus provides an important case study for understanding the evolving relationship between caste identity and political mobilization in eastern India.

Rajbanshi Society in Colonial North Bengal

Various indigenous communities such as the Koch, Rajbanshi, Boro, Rabha, Mech, Pansi, Paliya, and Madhesia inhabited North Bengal. In the pre-colonial and colonial periods, the Rajbanshis were among the indigenous inhabitants of North Bengal and the lower Assam region. Among the different communities of North Bengal, the Rajbanshis constituted the largest population. Their presence was particularly prominent in the districts of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Dinajpur, and Darjeeling. During the colonial period, the Rajbanshis primarily lived in rural areas and were engaged in agriculture, with a majority of them being illiterate. Apart from North Bengal, they were also found residing in other districts of Bengal. According to Swaraj Basu, the Rajbanshis were one of the major Hindu communities of North Bengal. Numerically, they ranked third among the various indigenous communities of Bengal. Socially, they were considered to belong to a relatively homogeneous group.⁷ Their social status was ambiguous and contested, reflecting both their indigenous origins and the hierarchical framework imposed by Brahmanical caste ideology. This ambiguity became a key factor in the emergence of Rajbanshi social reform movements during the late nineteenth century.⁸

The origins of the Rajbanshi community have long been debated by scholars and colonial administrators. A key question has been whether the Rajbanshis were of Mongoloid origin or derived from Aryan lineage. In the 1870 census, the British colonial administration classified the Rajbanshis and the Koch as belonging to the same ethnic group. However, the Rajbanshis did not accept this classification from the very beginning. This was primarily because the Koch were regarded as part of a tribal community, associated with the Indo-Mongoloid group. According to Aryan cultural traditions, non-Aryans were often described by terms such as *dasa*, *kirata*, and *nishada*. These terms implied people who were considered to belong to the lowest strata of society. Such groups were viewed as socially inferior, lacking status and respect, and were accorded little importance within the Aryan social order.⁹ For example, colonial administrator

William Wilson Hunter suggested that the Koch and Rajbanshi communities were ethnically related. According to his interpretation, sections of the Koch population gradually adopted Hindu customs and began identifying themselves as Rajbanshis in order to claim a higher social status.¹⁰ Other scholars presented alternative interpretations. Linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterji argued that many Rajbanshis belonged to a Mongoloid ethnic stock and were historically associated with Tibeto-Burman linguistic traditions before gradually adopting Bengali language and culture.¹¹ Charu Chandra Sanyal stated that the Koch were non-Aryan in origin. Over time, many among them adopted Hinduism and gradually transformed into Rajbanshis. Subsequently, they began to identify themselves as Kshatriyas.¹² Swaraj Basu further argued that a significant feature of the Rajbanshi caste movement was their effort to distinguish themselves from the Koch and to present themselves as socially superior to them.¹³

One of the most important factors shaping Rajbanshi identity politics was the colonial census system introduced by the British administration in the late nineteenth century. The census attempted to classify the diverse population of India into rigid categories of caste, tribe, and religion. The census of 1871-72 classified the Koch and Rajbanshi communities together as belonging to the same social group. This classification provoked strong reactions among educated members of the Rajbanshi community who believed that such categorization lowered their social status within the Hindu hierarchy. The Rajbanshis strongly rejected the idea that they were identical to the Koch tribe. Instead, they began to argue that they belonged to the Kshatriya varna within the traditional Hindu social order. This claim formed the basis of what later became known as the Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement.¹⁴

The Rajbanshi Kshatriya Movement

The Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a social reform movement aimed at improving the status of the Rajbanshi community within the Hindu social hierarchy. The movement gained momentum under the leadership of Panchanan Barma, who played a central role in organizing Rajbanshi society and articulating its demands for social recognition. In 1910 he established the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samiti, an organization that aimed to promote education, social reform, and political awareness among the Rajbanshi population. Through public meetings, petitions, and community mobilization, the Samiti sought to convince colonial authorities that the Rajbanshis should be recognized as a Kshatriya caste. The movement also encouraged cultural reform within the community. Rajbanshi leaders promoted changes in social customs, dietary practices, marriage rituals, and educational practices in order to align the community more closely with upper-caste Hindu norms. This process reflected what sociologists later described as “Sanskritization,” in which lower-status groups attempted to improve their position within the caste hierarchy by adopting the cultural practices of higher castes.¹⁵

The efforts of the Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement achieved partial success. In the census of 1911, the British administration began to list the Rajbanshis separately from the Koch tribe, acknowledging them as a distinct community. Although this recognition did not grant them full Kshatriya status, it nevertheless represented an important symbolic victory. The movement also helped create a sense of collective identity among Rajbanshis across northern Bengal and neighbouring regions of Assam. For the first time, a dispersed agrarian population began to imagine itself as a unified social and political community.¹⁶

By the early twentieth century, Rajbanshi leaders had begun to participate more actively in electoral politics. The introduction of limited electoral institutions under colonial rule created new opportunities for

regional elites to represent their communities. One of the prominent political figures associated with the Rajbanshi movement was Upendranath Barman, who emerged as an important leader in northern Bengal. He contested elections and represented Rajbanshi interests in provincial politics.¹⁷ However, by the 1930s many Rajbanshi leaders began aligning themselves with broader nationalist movements. This shift reflected the growing influence of anti-colonial politics across India. Movements such as the Quit India Movement and the Tebhaga Movement mobilized peasants and rural communities across Bengal. These movements emphasized class-based struggles against colonial exploitation and landlordism, thereby overshadowing earlier caste-based mobilization. As a result, Rajbanshi identity politics gradually became intertwined with broader agrarian and nationalist struggles.¹⁸

Partition, Migration, and Left Hegemony in North Bengal

The Partition of India fundamentally reshaped the social, economic, and political landscape of North Bengal. One of its most significant consequences was the large-scale migration of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan into bordering districts such as Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, and Dinajpur. This influx led to major demographic transformations, as both upper-caste and lower-caste migrants settled in the region in search of land and livelihood. Simultaneously, the political integration of the princely state of Cooch Behar into the Indian Union in 1949 and its merger with West Bengal in 1950 reconfigured regional power structures. Sections of the Rajbanshi elite viewed this integration with scepticism, as some had aspired to a more autonomous political arrangement. Together, migration and administrative reorganization disrupted existing patterns of landholding, employment, and political representation, weakening the earlier relative dominance of Rajbanshi peasants and intensifying competition over scarce resources.¹⁹

The subsequent rise of left-wing politics further transformed the trajectory of social and political mobilization in the region. With the establishment of the Left Front government in 1977 under the leadership of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the political discourse in West Bengal became strongly oriented toward class-based mobilization. Agrarian reforms such as Operation Barga sought to redistribute land and secure the rights of sharecroppers, producing important socio-economic changes in rural society, including North Bengal. However, this emphasis on class struggle tended to marginalize caste as a category of political articulation. Rajbanshi peasants were mobilized primarily as part of the rural working class rather than as a distinct caste group. Consequently, caste-based politics remained relatively subdued during the decades of Left Front rule.

As noted by Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, this dominance of class discourse did not eliminate caste inequalities but rather obscured them. Beneath the surface of class-based mobilization, caste hierarchies continued to persist within rural society. Thus, the combined effects of Partition-induced migration and left hegemonic politics not only transformed the socio-economic structure of North Bengal but also redefined the forms through which caste identities were expressed—shifting them from explicit political mobilization to a more latent and mediated presence within broader class politics.²⁰

Rajbanshi–Kamtapur Movement and the Limits of Caste Politics in North Bengal

The intensification of the Kamtapur movement in the 1990s marked a significant phase in the political mobilization of the Rajbanshi community in North Bengal. Rooted in historical grievances, socio-

economic marginalization, and a perceived erosion of ethnic identity, the movement articulated demands for a separate state, variously conceptualized as Kamtapur or, more recently, Greater Cooch Behar. Political mobilization has not remained confined to grassroots activism; rather, it has increasingly intersected with electoral politics, as major parties seek to incorporate regional organizations such as the Greater Cooch Behar People's Association, the Kamtapur Progressive Party, and the Bhumiputra Aikya Manch into their support base, particularly in light of North Bengal's electoral significance.²¹ Demographically, the Rajbanshis constituted a substantial segment of the Scheduled Caste population in West Bengal—accounting for approximately 19 percent according to the 1981 Census—with a pronounced regional concentration, as over three-quarters resided in North Bengal.²² Despite historically enjoying certain localized socio-economic advantages, the post-independence influx of diverse populations, including Namasudras and Jaliya Kaibartas, intensified competition over land, employment, and state resources. This competition, compounded by the equalizing framework of Scheduled Caste entitlements, contributed to a sense of relative deprivation among Rajbanshis. Furthermore, the settlement of relatively affluent upper-caste refugees led to the dispossession of poorer Rajbanshi households, exacerbating their socio-economic decline. Over time, disparities in education, health, and economic opportunities widened, fostering perceptions of marginalization vis-à-vis 'outsiders' (bhatiyas) and contributing to an erosion of distinct ethnic identity within the broader Hindu social order.²³

These processes provided fertile ground for organized political articulation. Early efforts by groups such as the Hitasadhani Sabha, followed by the Uttarkhand Dal, sought to channel local grievances into demands for regional autonomy, envisioning a separate state that would transcend religious and caste divisions while foregrounding linguistic identity, particularly the Kamtapuri language. Although these movements remained relatively subdued until the 1970s, they gained renewed momentum in the 1990s, when the Kamtapur agitation assumed greater political visibility. In its contemporary phase, the movement has increasingly converged around the demand for a separate Greater Cooch Behar state. Simultaneously, broader political developments have shaped the trajectory of identity-based mobilization in the region. The large-scale influx of refugees into West Bengal following Partition and subsequent political developments created enduring complexities surrounding citizenship and belonging, further sharpened by the 2003 declaration of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government regarding the status of post-1971 migrants.²⁴ The decline of Left Front dominance after 2008 and the rise of the All India Trinamool Congress reconfigured the political landscape, particularly through its strategic engagement with marginalized communities such as the Matuas. The consolidation of ties between the Matua community and Mamata Banerjee played a crucial role in shaping electoral outcomes, as evidenced in the 2011 West Bengal Assembly elections. Taken together, the Rajbanshi–Kamtapur movement exemplifies the complex interplay of ethnicity, caste, migration, and electoral politics in shaping sub-regional assertions in contemporary eastern India.

Scholars such as Uday Chandra, Partha Chatterjee, Sarbani Bandyopadhyay, and Ranabir Samaddar argue that these lower-caste groups have always been significant in both social and political spheres. However, their caste identity did not become a decisive factor in electoral politics. Instead, these lower-caste communities consistently functioned as a broader vote bank for Left-oriented political parties.²⁵

If we examine the political developments in West Bengal from 2011 to 2019, it becomes evident that these lower-caste groups emerged as important at various moments. Nevertheless, due to internal divisions within these communities, they were never able to unite as a cohesive subaltern bloc (a feat that similar groups in other Indian states have achieved, at least since the 1980s).²⁶ A closer analysis of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections reveals that caste-based politics did not assume a central role. Instead, religious polarization, issues surrounding citizenship, and events such as the Pulwama attack and the Balakot airstrike contributed to the consolidation of a broader nationalist political discourse, which in turn weakened caste-based mobilization. As a result, in the 2019 general elections in West Bengal, the Bharatiya Janata Party secured most of the seats in lower-caste-dominated regions.²⁷

However, in the run-up to the 2021 West Bengal Assembly elections, these lower-caste communities—particularly the Namasudras and Rajbanshis—once again became politically significant. Prior to the elections, the incumbent Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee initiated several measures aimed at the development of the Rajbanshi community, including the establishment of a cultural board and a Rajbanshi Language Academy. These initiatives were, in part, a response to the electoral setback suffered by the All India Trinamool Congress in North Bengal during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, where the BJP had performed strongly. The ruling party also sought to consolidate support among other smaller lower-caste groups by commemorating notable figures from these communities through the declaration of public holidays. Additionally, it announced the establishment of 500 new schools in the Ol Chiki language and 100 new schools in Kamtapuri and Kurmali languages.²⁸

Despite these efforts, the sweeping electoral victory of the Trinamool Congress across the state demonstrates that the fragmented nature of caste-based politics—particularly the lack of minimum unity among lower-caste groups—continues to be a major obstacle to their political empowerment. This fragmentation has, in turn, benefited upper-caste-dominated political parties. Although Rajbanshis directly influence approximately 15 Assembly constituencies in North Bengal, their representation in the state cabinet and their broader political influence remain limited. Overall, it can be argued that caste-based politics once again failed to play a decisive role in the 2021 West Bengal Assembly elections. The possibilities for caste-based political empowerment that had emerged during the 2008–2011 period now appear significantly diminished. In the absence of collective organization, lower-caste communities and their leadership continue to be constrained by narrow interests and remain dependent on the patronage of upper-caste-led political parties. Consequently, the prospect of forging an autonomous political trajectory remains elusive.

3. Conclusion

The history of caste politics in Bengal, particularly among the Rajbanshis of North Bengal, demonstrates a trajectory that is both distinctive and revealing. Contrary to the notion of Bengal as an “exception,” caste has remained a persistent—if often reconfigured—axis of social and political mobilization. Rather than disappearing, it has adapted to shifting historical contexts, finding expression in social reform movements, regional assertions, and indirect forms of political engagement.

The Rajbanshi experience reflects this transformation clearly. From the caste-based mobilization of the colonial period, especially through the Kshatriya movement, to its relative subsumption under class politics in the post-independence era, caste has continually evolved in response to broader socio-economic and political changes. Yet it has endured in latent forms, embedded within regional inequalities and cultural identities, re-emerging in movements such as Kamtapur that foreground questions of recognition and autonomy.

At the same time, the limits of caste politics in contemporary West Bengal remain evident. Fragmentation within marginalized communities, weak organizational cohesion, and the dominance of party-driven and issue-based politics have constrained the formation of a unified caste-based political bloc. Consequently, communities like the Rajbanshis continue to face challenges of representation despite their historical legacy of mobilization.

Ultimately, caste in Bengal is neither absent nor static but dynamic and context-dependent. Recognizing this fluidity is essential for understanding both the historical evolution of regional politics and the continuing struggles over identity, representation, and social justice in eastern India.

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