

The Status of Rajbansi Women of North Bengal: Social, Economic and Political Perspectives

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Abstract: The Rajbansis of North Bengal are considered to be one of the most important groups of people dwelling in this region. The Rajbansis of North Bengal make interesting study because of their rich cultural and linguistic heritage. The women of the Rajbansi society played the important roles in the various fields of activities. Their roles in the social, economic and political spheres were very praiseworthy. Most interestingly with coming of the modern education the women of this community became educated and they came in contact with the issues related to the administering of domestic affairs as well as local panchayet administration. With the passage of time the women of the Rajbansi society of North Bengal began to change their position in the social, economic and political spheres. The paper intends to highlight the status of the Rajbansi women of North Bengal in social, economic and political perspectives.

Keywords: Rajbansi, education, North Bengal, society, community, political, economy.

Historically speaking, the Rajbansi community of North Bengal appears to be patrilineal and patrilocal.¹ It is not that the women are traditionally disregarded in this society. They enjoyed the respectable position in their society. In the family of the Rajbansi community the male member like father or grandfather or elder brother generally became the head of the family. The female member of the family became the head of the family in which there was no the male member. The women of the Rajbansi community played their roles in the domestic affairs as well as in the social, economic and political spheres also. They began to improve themselves in the society particularly following the modern education. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the status of the women of the Rajbansi women of North Bengal in the social, economic and political perspectives.

Many articles, writings, and books related to the various aspects and issues of the Rajbansi community of North Bengal have already published. These works have attempted to pick up the various aspects of the people of the Rajbansi society. Among these works 'The Rajbansis of North Bengal' written by Charu Chandra Sanyal is an important work in which he mentioned the social, economical and cultural condition of the Rajbansi people of North Bengal. Another important work is '*Dynamics of A Caste Movement- The Rajbansis of North Bengal (1910 -1947)*' written by Swaraj Basu. In this book he explained the colonial state and indigenous society, the socio-economic profile of the Rajbansis, the process of kshatriyaization among the Rajbansis and differential response to the Rajbanshi caste movement. Kamal Choudhury in his '*Uttarbanger Itihas O Sanskriti*' described the historical and cultural background of the Rajbansis of North Bengal. Besides these works there are many books about the various aspects of the Rajbanshi people of North Bengal. The present paper admits its debts to the previous works for the bulk of information they provide, yet this paper

seeks to sort a different side for the discussion of the status of the women of the Rajbansi community of North Bengal in the social, economic and political perspectives.

In respect of the family life, the Rajbansi girls had to lead their lives under the care of the head of the family before their marriage. The head of the family was most certainly the male member of the family. In some families the women became the heads of the families and earned respect from the other members of the family. They were not only respected by the own family members but also they were equally respected everybody in their villages. The women under the male member of the family occupied the dignified position in the family.² In a word, it is to be noted that the women of the Rajbansi society were the important and respectable members of the family.

The women of the Rajbansi community of North Bengal had their great contribution to the families. They had to manage almost all types of household activities. The women of the community used to start their works in very early morning or almost before sunrise. They cleaned their houses very carefully. They allowed themselves in the ground of the Thakurbari (religious place) only after bathing. The women were also habituated to do some hard works like extracting clean rice from paddy grain with the help of chum (a wooden mortar for removing chaff from grain) and gahen (wooden stick with an iron ring to lower end) They were very efficient to make different items of foods. The women of the Rajbansi community were proficient to make some foods from paddy grain like tasura (flattened rice) and muri (puffed rice) at home for their family members.³ It is true that the women of the Rajbansi community work hard for their families. With the development of the modern technology they gradually waived the traditional equipments and started using the modern equipments for their household activities.

The women of the Rajbansi community not only confined themselves in the household activities but also they were proficient in the field of the entertainments. The most popular song of this community is Bhawaiya song. The song represents the different aspects of life of the people. Some women of the community were found to sing Bhawaiya song.⁴ They were also found to sing Rabindra Sangit and Nazrul Giti.

Agriculture was the main occupation of the Rajbansi people of North Bengal. Swaraj Basu in his book *Dynamics of A Caste Movement: The Rajbansis of North Bengal, 1910—1947*, states 'Economically the Rajbansis were predominantly agriculturists.'⁵ The Rajbansi Women of North Bengal assisted the male members of the families in various works particularly in the field of agriculture. The agriculture was the main source of their income. The women did some agricultural activities for running their families smoothly and making the families economically sound. But the women of the community never tilled the land. They did some agriculture related works like uprooting the paddy seedlings from the seed bed for transplantation. The women also helped the male members to cut the ripe paddy plants. The paddy was the main crop. The Rajbansi people gained food and earned money from the paddy crop for the families. The women were the earning members of their families.⁶ It is noted that the women of the Rajbansi community of North Bengal had great contribution in the field of the economic sphere of their families.

The girls of the Rajbansi society were close to education. From the second half of the twentieth century the girls from the Rajbansi families took education increasingly.⁷ Gradually the girls of the Rajbansi society took their education not only in school level but also some of them reached college and university level for their higher education. The educated girls took up services in various sectors like schools, banks, offices in different places.

The right of property was important in the Rajbansi society. In the past the property right among the Rajbansis was handed over from father to sons but the daughter enjoyed the share of property if a father had bequeathed his daughter a share of property before his death.⁸ This uncertainty of inheritance of property changed in the society. Both son and daughter acquired equal entitlement to their deceased father's property. The married women got husband's property. The women of the Rajbansi society enjoyed the share of property.

In the Rajbansi society, the biggest land lord (Deunia or Giri) was the head of the traditional village. The heads of the families comprised the village panchayet. The head of the village called meeting if any problem arose in the village. The land lord acted as chairman of the village panchayet. Everybody of the village had to obey the order of the village panchayet.⁹ The women of the Rajbansi society generally were not found to participate in the village panchayet. The male members of the traditional village panchayet performed the important role in making the decision for the issues related to the village. It is to be mentioned that the male heads of the families were generally found to participate in the village panchayet. The women who were heads of the families were respected by everybody in the village as the men who were heads of the families. This situation began to change after the end of Jotedary system.¹⁰ The controlling power of the villages came to the hand of the representatives of the common people. On the other hand the women of the Rajbansi community gradually became educated. In such situation the women came to the political arena. Some of the women of the Rajbansi community were elected as the members of the panchayet in favor of the different political parties and they started enjoying the power of the village panchayet. Gradually the women of the Rajbanshi community are getting elected as the members of the panchayet as well as the members of Legislative Assembly of the state. It is mentioned that the women occupied the power in administering the villages and controlled the villages efficiently.

In conclusion, it may be said that the women of the Rajbansi community of North Bengal played their important roles in social, economic and political spheres. In the families the women were considered to be the important members. It also needs to be mentioned that the women of this society generally had to lead their lives under the care of the male members of the families as it is very common that the male members became heads of the families. But in some families the women of the society were also found to manage their families as heads as male members and they were respected equally. The Rajbansi women had to look after nearly all types of household activities. The women got involved in some agricultural activities to assist the male members of the families for making their families economically sound. It is also said that the women of the Rajbansi community generally did not participate in the traditional village panchayet but after the abolition of Jotedary system and the women's participation in education increasingly the women came to the political arena and showed their efficiency in administering the village. The women of the Rajbansi society also took up services in different sectors in different places. Therefore, the women of the Rajbansi society of North Bengal improved their condition in the changing society.

¹ Charu Chandra Sanyal, *The Rajbansis of North Bengal*, Calcutta, 1965, p. 124.

² Prof. Manadeb Roy and Prof Bipul Mandal, " A Probe into the Social Life of the Rajbansis of North Bengal (1947—2000AD.)" , International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention, Volume 2, Issue 41,(Aril 2013) PP. 16- 18.

³ Charu Chandra Sanyal, *op. cit.* p. 31..

⁴ Paulami Bhawal: 'Evolution of Rajbansi Society': *A Historical Assessment*, IOSR Journal of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS), Volume 20, Issue 10 (OCT. 2015) PP. 56-61.

⁵ Swaraj Basu, *'Dynamics of A Caste Movement- The Rajbansis of North Bengal (1910 -1947)* New Delhi, 2003, p. 47.

⁶ Charu Chandra Sanyal, *op. cit.* p. 32.

⁷ Prof. Manadeb Roy and Prof Bipul Mandal, *op. cit.* 16-18.

⁸ J.F. Gruning , *Eastern Bengal ND Assam District Gazetteers: Jalpaiguri*, Allahabad, 1911, p.45.

⁹ Charu Chandra Sanyal, *op. cit.* p. 124.

¹⁰ Prof. Manadeb Roy and Prof Bipul Mandal, *op. cit.* 16-18.

