

## **Discourse of Ethnic Identity Movements: A Study of Koch Rajbanshis in Assam**

Paresh Borah  
Ph.D. Research Scholar  
Department of Political Science  
North Eastern Hill University  
E-mail: [pareshpolsc@gmail.com](mailto:pareshpolsc@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

Assam is the most populous state amongst all the North-eastern states of India. Over a long period of time many tribal and non-tribal population have been living in Assam. The genesis of ethnic conflicts in the state lies in its colonial past and the British policy of ‘divide and rule’. In spite of divided many times on the basis of ethnic identity the demands such as constitutional safeguard, creation of separate statehood etc are still continued among many plain and hill tribes. Koch Rajbanshi is an ethnic community and earliest inhabitant of Assam having the Mongoloid feature pre-dominant. Assertion of identity and aspiration of the Koch Rajbanshis, in revolt against their perceived socio-economic and politico-cultural deprivation, had begun during the post independence period, particularly in the 1980s. Now in both the Indian states of West Bengal and Assam, the Koch Rajbanshis are fighting for a greater separate Kamatapur state. They also have a demand to include their language in the Eight Schedule of the Constitution of India along with ST status for those living in Assam and socio-economic development of this community. The aim of the present study is to understand the identity assertion and the socio-political movement led by the Koch Rajbanshis for the creation of a separate Kamatapur state in Assam.

**Keywords:** Ethnicity, Identity politics, Separate state, Koch-Rajbanshi, Kamatapur.

### **Introduction:**

The term ethnicity is derived from the Greek word ‘ethnos’ which means ‘heathen’ or ‘pagan’ (Eriksen, 2010: 4). In the United States of America, ‘ethnics’ as a polite term was used throughout the Second World War to mean Jews, Italians, Irish and other groups of people “inferior” to the dominant groups (Ibid: 2010: 4). Paul R Brass has defined ethnicity as, “any group of people dissimilar from other people in terms of objective cultural criteria and containing within its membership, either in principle or in practice, the elements for complete division of labour and of reproduction, forms an ethnic category” (Brass, 1999: 19). By objective cultural markers, Brass refers the language, distinctive dress, customs, religion, and race etc. The above definition talks about the cultural basis of ethnicity and differentiates

ethnic groups from other social groups based on class, gender and age groups. J. Hutchinson and A. D. Smith refer to six important features of an ethnic group. These are: a common proper name to identify and express the 'essence' of the community, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland which will create attachment to the ancestral land, and a sense of solidarity among the people of the community (Hutchinson & Smith, 2009: 6-7). The above mentioned features are very much essential for an ethnic group. E. Hunter and Phillip Whitten used the term ethnicity to mean "any group of people within larger cultural unit who identifies themselves as a distinct entity, separate from the rest of that culture. Today, most of the social scientists use the term to refer to "a social group which consciously shares some aspects of a common culture and is defined primarily by descent" (Pakem, 1990: 36-27). Thus ethnicity is a sense of ethnic identity and sense of belongingness to a particular group or community. It manifests the sentiments and emotions of a group which tries to preserve their distinct identity.

Ethnic identity politics starts with the process of identity construction, identity revives and identity protection by certain ethnic groups of the society, who consider them to be inferior, oppressed and marginalized. Such construction of self-identity begins on the basis of an ethnic consciousness of a group. Therefore, identity politics or politics of identity generally means the counter movement by the oppressed and marginalized groups or communities to protest against oppression and injustice that is met out to various communities on the basis of their racial, religious, cultural, and ethnic identity (Brass, 1999: 15). Identity movement occurs when the members of ethnic groups of the society find themselves as oppressed, marginalized, and discriminated and somewhat in a state under confusion that their uniqueness and features of their identity are under threat from the majority group. In such a situation, the groups try to collectively mobilize themselves with a view to secure and protect their distinct identity. Identity movement may be of different kinds, i.e. feminist, racial, linguistic, religious, environmental, gay, lesbian, ethnic etc. Ethnic identity movements generally occur with an aim to preserve, protect and secure ethnic identity. Different ethnic groups belonging to diverse countries may at times agitate for the revival and protection of their identity and rights. This kind of agitation had been seen arising in both the developing and developed countries from time to time.

India's diversity in terms of region, language, caste, class, religion, etc makes the issue of identity much more complex. From the colonial and post-colonial period India has

experienced many ethnic based identity conflicts. Despite the division of India resulting in the formation of Pakistan as a separate nation, the country is witnessing the formation of states since the 1950's revolving around the issue of identity. Assam is the most populous state amongst all the North-eastern states of India. Over a long period of time many tribal and non-tribal population have been living in Assam such as Assamese, Koch Rajbanshi, Bodo, Kachari, Sonowal, Mishing, Rava, Deuri, Barman, Chakma, Dimasa Kachari, Garo, Khasi, Hajong, Hojai, Kuki, Mech, Karbi and others. Society in Assam has historically been multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multi-caste, multi-class and multi-lingual in composition (Hussain, 1992). The genesis of ethnic conflicts and ethnic identity movements in the state lies in its colonial past and the British policy of 'divide and rule' (Kumar, 2007: 111-112). In spite of divided many times on the basis of ethnic identity the demands such as constitutional safeguard, creation of separate statehood etc are still continue among many plain and hill tribes. For instance, the Karbis of Karbi Anglong district and the Dimasa Kacharis of Dima Hasao Autonomous District have been agitating for granting of a separate state on the basis of their ethnic identities. From the 1980s onwards the Bodos have been demanding a separate Bodoland state on the basis of their linguistic and ethnic identities. Similarly, the Koch Rajbanshis are demanding 'Kamatapur' as a separate state for preserving their distinct identities and political entities etc.

### **Origin of Koch Rajbanshis:**

The origin of the Koch Rajbanshi continues to be a subject of controversy. Although there is a general agreement that the Koches include the Maches, Kacharies, Bodos, Rajvamsis, Garos etc. but still there is a difference of opinion about their racial origin (Nath 1989: 2). A. C. Choudhury, the renowned scholar who belongs to the Koch Rajbanshi community argues that the term 'Koch' is older than the Puranas and the Trantras, which were composed in India by the Aryans to malign their opponents. He states, "the word 'Koch' came down with these people when they came downwards from North China or Siberia region after struggling hard against natural odds and calamities in addition to the opposition from the rival groups in which most of the male members of Koches were killed in their way by fighting (Choudhury 1991: 61)."

Edward Gait the colonial scholar stated that the term Koch is ambiguous. According to him in Assam proper it has become the name of a Hindu caste, into which are received the converts to Hinduism from the ranks of the Kachari, Lalung, Mikir, and other tribes. He

further says that the Koches are frequently referred to as 'Kuvacha' in the Purans and Tantras. The historian of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji's invasion at the end of the twelfth century says that the features of 'the Koch, Mech and Tharu Tribes' resembled with those of a tribe of Southern Siberia (Gait 2011: 46). Based on the above contention A. J. Das states that thought majority of Koch Rajbanshis are not other converted tribe to Koch Rajbanshi rank, there is no doubt that a few Mongolian 'Tribes' especially the Kacharis had joined the ranks of Koch or Rajbanshi after being converted into Hinduism (Das 2009: 29). The colonial scholar Greirson provided the same kind of argument. He observed that the Koches and 'Kocheries'<sup>1</sup> are of the same ethnic groups and the true Koches are at any rate represented by the Kocheries who live in Nowgong, Goalpara, Koch Behar and neighbouring countries (Choudhury 1993: 60).

Nalini Ranjan Ray, a contemporary Koch Rajbanshi scholar argues that the ancestors of the Rajbanshi were settlers in the semi-hilly terrains and plains of present day North Bengal, Assam and their adjoining areas. They embraced Aryan culture and later took to Hinduism. Hinduism denoted the way of civilised life, following of Vedic procedures of rituals and adoption of 'Sanskritised' Maithili Apabhramsa languages, which Aryan culture brought along with its advent into this part of ancient India. He writes:

"the people of this community have the features mixed up with all four human streams i.e. Austral-Asiatic or 'Adivasi', Dravidian, Mongoloid and Aryan, where the Mongoloid features like short height, fare complexion and having flat nose are predominant. Some of them can be seen as tall, fare and having sharp nose like people of north or midland Indians, who trace their origin in Aryan culture; some of them can be seen as far as Aryan people and at the same time some are as dark complexion as Adivasis or Dravidians. This region was like a eastern gateway of India or a meeting place where all four human streams got amalgamated, which gave birth to new 'sanskritised' culture of the northeastern part of India" (Ray 2007: 9-10).

Here it is important to refer to some more arguments from other scholars about the racial origin of the Koches to make it clearer. According to Risley the Koches are unquestionably "non-Aryan and non-Hindu", were "a large Dravidian tribe of northeastern and eastern Bengal among whom there are grounds for suspecting some admixture of Mongolian blood" (Nath 1989: 2)<sup>2</sup>. Oldham also describes them as "the most conspicuously Dravidian race in Bengal" (Risley 1891:491)<sup>3</sup>. Dalton has stated that the Koches were all

---

<sup>1</sup>Instead of writing 'Kachari' Greirson commonly used the term as 'Kocheries' in his writings.

<sup>2</sup>Nath cited from H.H Risley, *Tribes and Caste of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1891,p. 491.

<sup>3</sup>Risley cited in D. Nath, *History of The Koch Kingdom, (1515-1615)*, Delhi,1989.

very dark and displayed “the thick protuberant lips and maxillaries of the Negro”, and therefore, he considered them as belonging to the Dravidian stock (Nath 1989: 2). E. A. Gait argues that the divergence of views seems to have arisen from the confusion caused by the use of the term ‘Rajbanshi’. He says that the Rajbanshi originally referred to an entirely distinct community of Dravidian affinities. But was after wards adopted by the Koches west of the Monas river, who, when they atoned to Hinduism, appropriated the caste name of the most numerous Hinduised community in their neighbourhood. Gait stated that Jalpaiguri, Koch Bihar and Goalpara, the persons now known as Rajbanshi are either pure Koches who, though dark, have a distinctly Mongoloid Physiognomy or else a mixed breed, in which the Mongoloid element usually preponderates (Gait 2011: 46-47).

To conclude, the controversies on the origin of the Koches D. Nath states that “the Koches are Mongoloid origin having their homeland in the Himalayan region, most probably in Tibet where from they poured into India following probably the courses of the Teesta and the Dharla. They settled first in north Bengal and then spread gradually towards the east as well as towards the south and west, where they mixed themselves up with the Dravidians (Nath 1989: 4).” Again he argues that “the Koches are of Mongoloid origin having close affinities with other Bodo tribes like Meches, Rabhas, Dhimals, Hajongs and Garos. But in course of time and in some limited areas, they inter-married with the Dravidians and gave birth to a mixed Mongolo-Dravidian race but having preponderant Mongoloid characters (Ibid 1989: 4). Keeping aside all the controversies about the origin of the Koch Rajbanshis identity it can be said that Koch Rajbanshi is a Mongoloid group having the features of all four human streams i.e. Austral-Asiatic or ‘Adivasi’, Dravidian, Mongoloid and Aryan, where the Mongoloid features are preponderant.

### **Historical Memory of Kamatapur and Koch Kingdom:**

It is believed that Sandhya Rai established the kingdom of Kamata also known as Kamrup Kamata comprising some parts of present day Assam, North Bengal, and Bangladesh. R. N. Ray says “the geographically contiguous areas of Barendra-Pundra-Kamta-Kamrup comprising of whole of present day North Bengal, northern district of Bihar, Jhapa-Biratnagar region of eastern Nepal, Rajshahi division of Bangladesh, Western Assam, lower parts of Bhutan and some parts of Meghalaya were parts of Kamrup” (Ray 2007: 13). In most of the writing Kamatapur has emerged as the capital of Kamata kingdom. Hiuen Tsang, the famous traveller and scholar from China visited the ancient Kamarupa kingdom of Bhashkar

Barma between 606 to 648 A. D. In his account the capital of Kamrupa was believed to be Kamatapur (Das 2009: 38).

It is believed that in the year 1260 Sandhya Rai shifted his capital from present day Guwahati to Kamatapur in present day Cooch Behar to avoid the frequent skirmishes with the neighbouring Kacharis and to facilitate the king to effectively engage the invading Muslim rulers from south-western states. After shifting the capital, it was named Kamta or Kamta-Kamrup and the king adopted the title of 'Kamoteswar' or 'Kameswar'. During this period Kamta-Kamrup kingdom extended its area of control and it consisted of Cooch Behar, entire Kamrup, Greater Goalpara district of Assam, districts of Mymensingh and Rangpur lying on the eastern side of river Brahmaputra (Ray 2007: 29).

Sandhya Rai's reign over Kamrup region came to an end with the rise of 'Bhuiyans'.<sup>4</sup> According to D. Nath the period beginning from A.D. 1200 to 1500, the Koches might have maintained their existence with certain amount of political influence and continued to be so until Biswa Singha firmly established their hegemony in the western Brahmaputra valley in the first quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Nath 1989: 15-16). Though Koch Kingdom was there from 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards it was only in 16<sup>th</sup> century that the Koches emerged as a strong and influential kingdom. Bishwa Singha a Koch Chieftain ruled over Kamata from 1515 to 1540 and made the Koch Kingdom politically very strong. According to historical account the region of Bishwa Singha's dynasty ruled was known as 'Koch Kingdom'. But most of the Koch Kings of Bishwa Singha's dynasty used to call it as the 'Kamata kingdom'. The kings never renamed the Kamata kingdom as 'Koch kingdom' or 'Koch Rajya', though in the course of time, this kingdom went through various names and lastly was named as Cooch Behar (Koch Bihar) in the colonial period (Das 2009: 41).

The second king of the Biswa Singha's dynasty was king Naranarayan. Naranarayan succeeded his father Biswa Singha and ascended the throne of Kamata. King Naranarayan ruled Kamata kingdom from A. D. 1540 for about 50 years whose reign could be considered as the most influential and golden period in the history of Koch Empire. Besides military glory, king Naranarayn was also interested in cultural development of the state. J. P. Rajkhowa says that the reign of Naranarayan is important from the point that both Naranarayn and his brother Chilarai were great patronage of learning. His court was delighted

---

<sup>4</sup>The Bhuiyans were large land lords. Among all the Bhuiyans twelve of them were most powerful in the Kamrup region and therefore, they also known as 'Baro Bhuiyan' (twelve Bhuiyans).

with the presence of scholars like Sankardev, Ram Saraswati, Annanta Kandali, Bakul Kayastha, and many more. Sankardev composed most of his major works including *Kirtana Ghosa*-sections 1, 17-28, 29, *Rukminir Prem Kalaha*, *Bhagavata*-Book I, II, IX, XIII, *Rukmini Haran Naat* and others including his last work *Rama Vijaya Naat* during his stay in the Koch Kingdom from 1543 to till his death (Rajkhowa 2001: 44, 45)<sup>5</sup>

Following the year 1581 the kingdom of Kamata got divided<sup>6</sup>. The Koch Hajo or Kamrup went to Koch king Raghudeb and after the death of king Naranarayan his only son Lakshminarayan ascended throne of western kingdom of Koch Bihar. In the later period the kingdom of Kamata was ascended by many new kings such as Parikshitnarayan, Birnarayan, Prannarayan, Modnarayan, Jay Narayan etc. Among them King Dharmendra Narayan was the last. During the tenure of King Dharmendra Narayan the attacks of the Bhutanese was increased in the internal politics of Kamata kingdom. They became the king maker in the internal political affairs of the Kamata kingdom. During the period from 1770 to 1776 the Bhutanese attacks was unbearable for the king Dharmendra Narayan. To get rid of the Bhutanese attacks King Dharmendra Narayan had to sign one treaty with East India Company (Das 2009: 52).<sup>7</sup> On 5<sup>th</sup> April 1773 an agreement was signed between King Dharmendra Narayan and the East India Company. This agreement provided East India Company with supremacy over Koch Kingdom. After this agreement in the meantime once again the Bhutanese attacked Koch kingdom and due to this again another confrontation was taking place. Dennis Morrisson was the captain of East India Company who arranged military help to the Koch kingdom and defeated the Bhutanese. In 1776 another treaty was signed between Koch kingdom and the East India Company. By this treaty Warren Hastings brought the Koch kingdom under complete control of the Company (Ray 2009: 56). As a result of this treaty the Koch-Kamata alias Cooch Behar kingdom became a native state of India. And as a native state of colonial India it was continued till the time of India got independence from colonial rule in 1947. But after the independence on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1950 Koch Bihar was transferred and merged with the Indian state of West Bengal by an order under section 290A

---

<sup>5</sup>A. J. Das cited Rajkhowa in his *Kamatapur and the Koch Rajbanshi Imagination*, 2009, Arunima Deka Publication.

<sup>6</sup>There is controversy regarding the date of the division of Koch kingdom. But considering all the facts, 1581 may be accepted as the exact time of the division of the kingdom. For more, see D. Nath. (1989). *The History of Koch Kingdom*. Delhi: Mittal Publication.

<sup>7</sup>Das cited from Dr. Ramendra Adhikari, *Satsho Bacaria Kaamata Koch Rajatwer Itihas (1250-1949)*, 1996, p. 24, (in Rajbanshi).

of Government of India Act of 1935. From that time onwards Koch Behar is being administered as a district of West Bengal (Das 2009: 56).<sup>8</sup>

### **Movement for a Separate Kamatapur State:**

The identity movements by the Koch Rajbanshis have a long history. The movement for a separate Kamatapur state is also not a recent one. The autonomy movement by the Koch Rajbanshis and the idea for a separate homeland is almost seventy years old and the aspiration for socio-cultural recognition is around hundred years old. The caste movement of early 20<sup>th</sup> century which is also known as 'Kshatriya Movement' by the Koch Rajbanshis under the leadership of Panchanan Barma was also part of the Koch Rajbanshi's identity movement.

There is a peculiar character and distinction of the demand for a separate state by the Koch Rajbanshis and also other ethnic communities of India. Most of the ethnic groups of India who are demanding separate state for their communities are using ethnic names for their proposed state. For example, Bodo's of Assam are demanding Bodoland, Gorkha's of West Bengal are demanding Gorkhaland to protect and preserved their separate distinct identity. But in case of Koch Rajbanshis, they are not using ethnic name for their proposed separate state. Koch Rajbanshis are demanding 'Kamatapur' as a separate state which is rooted in the historical memory of their erstwhile Kamatapur Kingdom.

It is believed that the genesis of Kamatapur movement or Koch Rajbanshis nationalism was emerged in the colonial period. Jogendranath Mondal a scholar from undivided Bengal had demanded a separate of 'Rajar-sthan' or abode of king for the Rajbanshis before independence of India (Hazarika 2004). The issue of Rajbanshi language and its consciousness also rose during the colonial period. In 1910 Panchanan Barma, a prominent leader of 'Khatriya Movement' had raised the issue of Rajbanshi language for its recognition and development in the third annual conference of 'Uttar Banga Sahitya Parisad' held at Rangpur now Bangladesh (Ray, 2007: 115).

---

<sup>8</sup>Das cited from Banshi Badan Barman (ed.), *Dangar Koch Bihar Basir Koyta Kotha* (Rajbanshi), Received on March 30, 2004 from Nabyendu Roy Pramanik.

After independence, identity assertion emerged amongst the Koch Rajbanshis due to merger of the kingdom of Koch Bihar with the Indian state of West Bengal against the will of the local peoples<sup>9</sup>. Many Koch Rajbanshi civil and political organizations believe that the merger of Koch Behar with West Bengal was a conspiracy of the government of West Bengal under the chief ministership of Dr. Bidhan Chandra Ray and the government of India. Two most important socio-political organizations which was born out immediately after the merger of Koch Behar were, 'Cooch Behar Congress', and 'Prajahit Sadhini Sabha'. These organizations felt that the merger was against the will of the local people. They were of the view that Cooch Behar should not be merged with either Bengal, or Assam, rather it should be a union territory under the control of central government (Das 2009: 60). All Koch Rajbanshi Students' Union' (AKRSU) an Assam based Koch Rajbanshi students union has demanded that the merger of Koch Behar was the beginning and main factor which disturbed the unity of the greater Koch Rajbanshi community.<sup>10</sup> Even today this is the main argument made by most of the Koch Rajbanshis socio-political organizations that are demanding and agitating for a separate Kamatapur state.

The autonomy movement by the Koch Rajbanshis seeks creation of a separate Kamatapur state comprising same areas of present North Bengal and Assam under the constitutional provision. The movement also looks for the recognition of Kamatapuri or Koch Rajbanshi language under the Eight Scheduled of the constitution of India along with the demands of cultural and socio-economic development of their community. In case of Assam, the movement also demands Scheduled Tribe status for the Koch Rajbanshis living in Assam. Presently, many organisations are spearheading the demand for the separate Kamatapur state. Two organisations are of considerable importance among those. The Kamatapur Peoples' Party (KPP) in North Bengal and All Koch Rajbanshi Students' Union (AKRSU) in Assam have been quite active since their inception. At the same time, Kamatapur Liberation Organization (KLO) a militant organization formed in 1995 is working in support of the demand for a sovereign Kamatapur state. Similarly, 'Koch-Rajbanshi Liberation Organization' (KRLO) is another militant organisation which was formed in 1995 by the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) as an accompanying militant group for the Koch

---

<sup>9</sup>*Sukiya Kamatapur Rajya Kiyo* (Why Separate Kamatapur state?) a booklet published by AKRSU (All Koch Rajbanshi Students' Union) opined that the merger of Koch Behar in West Bengal was a conspiracy of the government and against the will of the local peoples. For details see Bishwajit Rai, 'Sukiya Kamatapur Rajya Kiya' AKRSU (Assamese), April 25, 2002.

<sup>10</sup>For more see Bishwajit Rai, 'Sukiya Kamatapur Rajya Kiyo' (Why separate Kamatapur), (Assamese), April 25, 2002.

Rajbanshi community. The goal of the KRLO is also similar to that of KLO. They are demanding the establishment of a separate state for the Koch Rajbanshis living in the northern parts of Assam. All Kamatapur Students' Organization Association (AKSO), a new student organization, has joined recently in the movement for the separate Kamatapur state. Greater Koch Behar Peoples' Association is another North Bengal based organization agitating for the creation of a separate state of 'Greater Cooch Behar'.

Subsequently, there are some other non-governmental and literary organizations of Koch Rajbanshis which are working for the socio-cultural development of their community with sympathy to the demand of autonomy. The 'Koch Rajbanshi Sahitya Sabha' of Assam and 'Kamata Sahitya Parishad' in North Bengal are two literary organizations working on the area of language, culture and literary works of Koch Rajbanshis. Similarly, there are many literary organizations based in Assam, North Bengal, Bihar, Meghalaya, and Nepal that are working on the socio-cultural and literary issues of the Koch Rajbanshis. Recently, under the leadership of Vijoy Chandra Barman 'Rajbanshi Vasa Akademi' has started to work for the development of Rajbanshi language in North Bengal. 'Koch Rajbanshi Cultural Society' is another Assam based literary organization working for the development of Koch Rajbanshi's history, culture and literature along with the territorial demand.

**Table-01: Name of some major organizations which seek creation of Separate Kamatapur state**

Sl. No	Name of the Organization	Place of origin	Year of existence
1	Hit Sadhini Sabha	North Bengal	1949
2	Uttar Khanda Dal	North Bengal	1969
3	Kamata Rajya Dabee Parishad	Assam	1969
4	Kamatapur Gana Parishad	North Bengal	1985
5	Kamatapur Liberation Organization	North Bengal	1993
6	All Koch Rajbanshi Students Union	Assam	1993
7	Kamatapur Peoples Party	North Bengal	1995
8	Greater Cooch Behar Association	North Bengal	1998
9	All Kamatapur Students' Organization	Assam	2004
10	Kamatapur Association	Assam	2010

11	Chilarai Sena	Assam	2014
----	---------------	-------	------

Source: Most of the above sources of information are collected from “A Report on Kamatapur Movement of Koch Rajbanshi People” by A. J. Das and some informations are collected from different articles, books and journals on Koch Rajbanshis.

It is important to note that though the root of the historical origin of Kamatapur movement was in the colonial period but in case of Assam the movement got its momentum after the 1980s only. Instead of separate statehood demand, the demand for the inclusion of Koch Rajbanshis of Assam into the Schedule Tribe (ST) category was an old demand. The demand for ST Status is very much strong in Assam since 1966. A. C. Choudhury a prominent Koch Rajbanshi scholar and former president of All Koch Rajbanshi Sanmilani (AKRS) stated that the ‘All Koch Rajbanshi Sanmilani’ which has been agitating for the Schedule Tribe status for the Koch Rajbanshis living in Assam since 1966, once opposed the demand of Kamata Rajya (Kamatapur as a separate state) which was supported and demanded by the Kamata Rajya Sangram Parishad (KRSP) at around 1969 (Choudhury 1993: 21). Therefore, many scholars including many leaders of the Kamatapur movement observed and opined that the Kamatapur movement that became stronger in Assam after 1980s was actually the expression of the frustration of the peoples on the politics played by the government towards their demand for Schedule Tribe. Moreover, in 2003 the government of India created the Bodoland Territorial Councils (BTC) comprising four districts of Assam to address the long drawn demand of the Bodos for a separate state. Many areas of present BTC have a large Koch Rajbanshi population and historically most of the present area under BTC was actually the Koch Kingdom. Therefore, it is believed that the inclusion of the Koch Rajbanshi dominated areas into the BTC without taking the opinion of the Koch Rajbanshis has given the momentum and fuelled the demand for Kamatapur in Assam.

The present demand for Kamatapur state by the Koch Rajbanshis includes some parts of West Bengal (particularly North Bengal) and some parts of Assam (particularly lower parts of Assam). It includes six districts from West Bengal and 14 districts from Assam. In case of Koch Rajbanshis demand for separate statehood, the historical memory of their Koch Kingdom or Kamata kingdom is very much strong which is rooted in their history and therefore, the present demand of separate Kamatapur state includes all the areas which were historically under Koch Kingdom.

**Table-02: Area demanded for Kamatapur by the Koch Rajbanshis**

Sl. No	Name of the District	State of belongs
1	Darjeeling	West Bengal
2	South Dinajpur	West Bengal
3	North Dinajpur	West Bengal
4	Malda	West Bengal
5	Jalpaiguri	West Bengal
6	Cooch Behar	West Bengal
7	Dhubri	Assam
8	Kokrajhar	Assam (BTAD)
9	Bongaigaon	Assam
10	Chirang	Assam (BTAD)
11	Goalpara	Assam
12	Barpeta	Assam
13	Baksa	Assam (BTAD)
14	Nalbari	Assam
15	Kamrup	Assam
16	Udalguri	Assam (BTAD)
17	Darang	Assam
18	Morigaon	Assam
19	Sonitpur	Assam
20	Lakhimpur	Assam

Source: The above table is made on the basis of the proposed map of separate Kamatapur state retrieved from <http://www.kamatapur.com/>

The demand of the Koch Rajbanshis for a separate statehood is quite old in North Bengal than Assam. ‘Hitasadhini Sabha’, a North Bengal based organization, demanded for the first time a separate homeland for the Rajbanshi community of Cooch Behar (Debnath 2013: 129)<sup>11</sup>. Most of the members of the Hitasadhini Sabha came from the Rajbanshi Hindu, Muslim jotedars and some Kamrupi Brahmins. It was also evident from historical information that from the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Rajbanshis began to get united themselves socially to keep their ethnic and caste identities and with this view in mind they

<sup>11</sup>For detail see S. Ghos, ‘Revisiting the Uttarkhand Movement’ in S. Debnath, (2013). *Social and Political Tension in North Bengal (Since 1947)*. West Bengal: N. L. Publication.

set up a samiti called 'Kshatriya Samiti'. In the latter period 'Uttarkhand Party' a political organization was formed in the year 1969 with a demand for a separate state called 'Kamatapur' comprising the five districts of North Bengal- viz. Malda, Dinajpur, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, and Cooch Behar. Since then many socio-political organizations have come into being and given a fresh momentum to the movement for a separate state.

**Conclusion:**

Kamatapur movement by the Koch Rajbanshis is a long drawn battle. As stated above, various causes are responsible for it. The genesis of Koch Rajbanshi identity consciousness started due to the feeling of alienation, discrimination and deprivation. It is observed that the causes responsible for the emergence of Koch Rajbanshi identity consciousness in the early and middle part of 20<sup>th</sup> century were different as compared to present scenario. Many new issues have come up in recent times that has contributed and given a new shape to the Kamatapur movement. In the early part of 20<sup>th</sup> century particularly in North Bengal the immigration of upper caste Hindu Bengalis to the Koch Rajbanshi dominated areas created tension among the native Koch Rajbanshis. A. Das states, "the influx of immigration created many social as well as economic problems for the Koch Rajbanshis. The economic dislocation and culture distortion has damaged the prospect of the Koch Rajbanshis as an independent nation-building force along with other ethno-communities around them, and planted the seeds of permanent conflict in the area. Moreover, due to the feudalistic system of landholding, the society had very little scope for capital formation and commodity production. In spite of the fact that the resources have a large share in creating national wealth, the people of this region (North Bengal) are still alienated, exploited and discriminated" (Debnath 2013: 140). Moreover, the failure of the government to check the illegal migrants and failure to take an appropriate policy for the socio-economic and cultural development and protection of the community has further increased the intensity of Kamatapur movement in Assam. Today, the Kamatapur movement is trying to create an identity based on their culture and language which will help them to justify their claim of geographically demarcated land so that they can arrange the resources of this region for their own development. Similarly, they are also trying to mobilise people's consciousness towards their history, culture, and tradition to ensure their socio-cultural development.

**References:**

- Adhikari, R. (1996). *Satsho Bacharia Kamata-koch Rajatwer Itihash (700 years History of Kamata-koch Dynasty)*. Gouripur Assam: India Library. (in Rajbanshi)
- Allen, B. C. et al. (2012). *Gazetteer of Bengal and North-East India*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications.
- Allen, B. C. (2012). *Assam District Gazetteers. Goalpara*. Guwahati: DHAS, Government of Assam.
- Basu, S. (2003). *Dynamics of a Caste Movement: The Rajbanshis of North Bengal*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Brass, P. R. (1999). *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*. New Delhi: Sage Publication.
- Choudhury, A. C. (1991). *The Koches Around the World*. Bongaigaon: Ratnapeeth Prokashan.
- Choudhury, A. C. (1993). *Koch Rajbanshi Shanmilonir Shamikhatmak Itihas (Analytical History of Koch Rajbanshi Convention)*. Bongaigaon: Ratnapeeth Publication. (in Assamese)
- Choudhury, A.C. (2011). *Koch Rajbanshi Jatir Itihas Aaru Sanskriti (History and Culture of Koch Rajbanshi Peoples)*. Bongaigaon: Unique Printers. (in Assamese)
- Das, A.J. (2009). *Kamatapur and Koch Rajbanshi Imagination*. Guwahati: Arunima Deka Publication.
- Debnath, S. (Ed) (2007). *Social and Political Tension in North Bengal (Since 1947)*. Siliguri: N. L. Publishers.
- Dutta, D. (2013). 'King Nara Narayana's Military Campaigning in North-East India: An Analysis through Numismatics', *The NEHU Journal*, Vol. XI, No.1, PP. 35-43.
- Eriksen, T.H. (2010). *Ethnicity and Nationalism: An Anthropological Perspective*. New York: Pluto Publication.
- Gait, E. A. (2011). *A History of Assam*. Gauhati, Delhi: Spectrum Publication.
- Hutchinson, J., & Smith, A. D. (Eds.). (2009). *Ethnicity*. New York: Oxford University Press Publication.

Hussain, M. (1992). "The Tribal Question in Assam", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Nos. 20-21.

Kumar, B.B. (Ed.). (2007). *Problems of Ethnicity in the North-East India*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.

Nath, D. (1989). *History of Koch Kingdom*. New Delhi: Mittal Publication.

Nag, S. (2003). *Bichinatar Utso Sandhane Kamatapur Theke Uttarpurba Bharat (In search of Secessionism from Kamatapur to North East India)*. Kolkata: Saptarshi Publication. (in Bengali)

Pakem, B. (Ed.). (1990). *Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity*. New Delhi: Omson Publication.

Rai, Bishwajit. (2002). *Sukiya Kamatapur Rajya Kiyu (Why Separate Kamatapur)*. A booklet published by All Koch Rajbanshi Students' Union (AKRSU), April 25.

Risley, H. H. (1891). *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*. rpt, Calcutta, vol. I.

Roy, N.R. (2007). *Koch Rajbanshi and Kamatapur: The Truth Unveiled*. Guwahati: Vicky publication.