

# A Study on Folk Culture of the Rajbanshi Community of Cooch Behar: A Sociological Analysis

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**Abstract:** The word 'folk' is literally broad and covers a wide range of rural ideas. But the word 'folk' strongly associated with many ideas related to society. Humans are the social animal, each and every community has own certain culture. Human are different from other living being as compare to the culture. In reflect of culture, people have reached the advanced peak of civilization. This culture manifests in distinct images and folk culture among different communities. However, there are so many ethnic community exists in North Bengal, especially Rajbanshi community of Cooch Behar district. Rajbanshi community is one of the main predominant ethnic community still living since pre-independent era. That is, we can say that the overall expression of a particular community has folkways; mores etc are can be said as the folk culture. The customs, beliefs, worships, festivals etc. and they are known by their folk culture. In the folk culture we find the full identity of the folk cultural aspect of folk life. Folk culture is an amalgamation of social and cultural sources. In this paper researcher would like to denote what are Rajbanshi's basic traits beliefs, food habits, societal folkways, mores and life style etc.

**Key Words:** Folk Culture, Rajbanshi, Rituals, Customs, Worships.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Folk culture refers to the culture of a homogeneous small rural population. This community led lives in relative isolation from other communities. Basically Rajbanshi folk culture is closely related to regional consciousness. Various scholars have shown that, the way to discussed Cooch Behar district of which is riches in folk culture of the Rajbanshi community in the northern part of west Bengal. Among the districts of North-East India, the diversity of the folk cultural elements of the Cooch Behar district is so great. Regional consciousness plays a very important role in this culture. The ancient traditional folk culture is mixed with the own culture and the people from the surroundings regions. As a result, many different goddesses, rituals, dances, songs, folklore are seen in this district. The Rajbanshi community lives with a long cultural tradition in this remote district of Cooch Behar in North Bengal.<sup>(1)</sup> The characteristics of this culture are relatively distinct and diverse. However, this traditional cultural diversity s not only limited to the geographical area of Cooch Behar but extends to the whole of North Bengal as well as lower Assam and some parts of Bangladesh. The people formed in the cohesive population of a particular region can be called folk strata. In other words, folk culture originated from the folk level. So it can be said that, folk culture is the overall expression of the folk customs, life practices, worships etc. of a specific folk group. This folk cultural expression can be divided in to various ways, such as folk religion, folklore, folk art, folk festivals etc.<sup>(2)</sup> So it can be said that, the overall identity of a particular folk society with in the entire human society is found in folk culture. The folk culture of Cooch Behar is enriched with diverse treasures. Also various folk festivals, agricultural festivals as well as river based festivals retain the Rajbanshi community of Cooch Behar in traditional belief.<sup>(3)</sup> Basically folk culture has captured the Rajbanshi community of Cooch Behar from birth to death.

**2. Objectives of the study:** Folk Culture is a way of life style of a rural community. So, Culture covers all the external and internal aspects of a community. A communities thoughts, ideology, arts, festivals are examples of primitive culture. Incidentally, the Rajbanshi community of Cooch Behar has its own folk culture. Keeping that objective in mind, the researcher has tried to shown on Rajbanshi folk culture of Cooch Behar.

- Discuss the overall aspects of the folk culture of the Rajbanshi community of Cooch Behar.

- Have they retained the culture of the past?

**Area of the study:** The area of this study Rajbanshi community includes their rituals, festivals, beliefs, marriage, birth-death rituals of this community which are integral part of Rajbanshi folk culture.

**3. Methodology:** In this study for the collection of data. Researcher used both primary and secondary sources. Researcher used participant observation and secondary sources of materials which are available in the books, articles and other internet sources. The number of respondents from the sample of 25 households varies between 50 to 60 which means that one household does not have only one respondent. The field survey of the respondents was used for the former and key informant interviews, in-depth interviews, case studies; and focus group discussion (FGD) were used in qualitative analysis. Through the interview method their residence, daily life, manners, food habits, dress, entertainment and other matter should be observed very carefully.

**1).Folk Belief:** Various reformatory ceremonies were performed in the Rajbanshi community, basically based on the belief that if you can control nature and divine power, material activities will be fruitful. At the root of these rituals is the belief in animism. In animism, three types of belief exist, namely –

A. Belief in the worship of human soul, living or dead.

B. Belief in and worship of bodies or material objects unrelated to the world.

C. Belief in souls residing within matter, faith and its worship.

In the distant past, people of different communities settled in different regions according to their own convenience and took refuge in nature. As a result of the deep fear and devotion to nature, there was a trend of worshipping people in the Rajbanshi community and even today the social system of those worshipers has changed its social structure and it has become popular. Some rituals were being practiced during this worship. Among the worships of Rajbanshi folk society are – Bishohari, Masan, Subochoni, Madankam, Yatra puja etc. with strong faith of mind concentration of heart and devotion of heart, this public life worships many gods and goddesses for comfort and peace of life in personal life. The embodiment of all powerful gods and goddesses is seen in the 'Tulsi Path.'<sup>(4)</sup> The folk culture was influenced by certain principles and folk beliefs. It is possible to trace the origin of this folk culture to the social, cultural and practical life of the people of the past. The folk festivals are created by focusing on the folk life. That is all the festivals and events created by human. Birth-death-marriage is the center of family and social life with various types of folk festivals, customs, rituals and folk beliefs which have been going on for ages. Also cows are considered the main property of people in agricultural system of Rajbanshi community. In order to maintain the Rajbanshi societies respect for the cow and the cow was served as Laxmi in agricultural families.

So it can be said that, in the early days of human civilization, folk beliefs were gradually created in folk society. Over the time they have evolved into folk reforms. An analysis of folk beliefs may not yield scientific explanations. Also folk beliefs usually have religious or secular traditions behind them. Various types are folk beliefs are seen in Cooch Behar district among the Rajbanshi community. In the district can be divided into several categories, such as-

1.1. Folk beliefs regarding guest arrivals.

1.2. Prohibitive folk beliefs.

1.3. Folk beliefs related to agriculture.

1.4. Folk beliefs related to weeding rituals.

1.5. Birth-Death related rituals

**2).Folk Music:** Folk Music is very ancient in origin. Undoubtedly, the folk matter of folk music is primitive music. Music was an essential part of primitive man's life. The movements of the organs in the dancing postures of the hunter-gatherer primitives gave rise to speech and music. People have found through music the tool of self-confidence, the motivation of life struggle. Naturally, this music is inextricably linked with human labors and life. So, primitive music can be considered to have gradually taken the form of folk music. Folk songs are transmitted through oral tradition

which continues to live in the memory of the people through ages. These are created by individuals or group, but generally without the identity of the author, and are the products of a society or region.

Folk music is literally derived from folk life. This song is created with the aim of fulfilling various worldly expectations of life's happiness, sadness. Basically folk music is melody and language follows the tradition and depends on the rural culture. So it can be said that, folk music is one of the main genres of folk culture that has been created by human with love and affection in the open space of nature since time immemorial.

The famous song of the Rajbanshi as well as of the indigenous Muslims of North Bengal and lower Assam is 'Bhawaiya' which is written and sung in Rajbanshi language.<sup>(5)</sup> 'Bhawaiya' is one of the most significant and traditional music of Cooch Behar district. Also Bhawaiya is the main melody of Cooch Behar folk songs. The popularity and practice of Bhawaiya is spread throughout North Bengal also spread Assam, Bangladesh but the influence of this style of music is particularly strong in Cooch Behar district. For this reason many people say "Bhawaiya of Cooch Behar". Also it can be said that, the artists of these Bhawaiya songs are mostly from Cooch Behar district. Now we try to understand why these types of songs called 'Bhawaiya.'<sup>(6)</sup> Basically it is an emotional song. Other words, the melody and content of these songs that moves the heart. Someone said bhawaiya came from the word 'Bhawa'. Also some scholars said bhawaiya is derived from 'Baudia.'<sup>(7)</sup> The change in the dynamics of the river, the kashiya(kush) forest grew in the river side, such types of land called 'Bhawa'. This bhawa is a suitable grazing ground for buffaloes. The Moishals<sup>(8)</sup> used to play this song while grazing the buffaloes. This song to be heard from bhawa in the neighboring localities, hence the name of this song is Bhawaiya. According to Abbasuddin- Bhawaiya songs are the unique wealth of north Bengal and Cooch Behar. The movement of this tune is like a bored wind, hence its name bhawaiya.<sup>(9)</sup>

Now we discuss about types of Bhawaiya. Basically two main categories of Bhawaiya that is 'Chatka' and 'Dariya'. This song is mainly divided into 4 main tunes according to the variety of content, melody and rhythm.<sup>(10)</sup>

**2.1. Dariya Bhawaiya:** Dariya is a long drawn-out breathless melody like the sound of being carried away by the current. When a woman's heart broke by the pain of separation, she takes refuge in this song.

Example:

“Oki o bandhu kajol vhomra re  
Kon din asiben bandhu  
Koya jao koya jao re.”

[Free translation-That friend is Kajol Vomra (Male best friend). How long will the friend come? Say goes Say]

**2.2. Chitan Bhawaiya:** Some of the songs included in Dariya songs are regionally named Chitan Bhawaiya. This type of song is a breakup song. Some of the feelings created by lying down and singing loudly are assumed in this song.

Example:

“Torsa nodir uthal pathal kar ba chole nao  
Narir mon mor uthal pathal kar ba chole nao  
Sona bandhur bade re mor kemon kore gao.”

(Free translation-Torsa River is up and down, whose boat is moving. women's mind is my up and down, whose boat is moving. How is my body without a friend?)

**2.3. Garal Bhawaiya:** The condition of women rolling in the dust in yard. In other words, listening to the song, it is natural to realize that the pained woman is rolling in the dust and she takes refuge in this song.

Example:

“Kato pasan bandhaicho poti monote

Dukher dine railen potidhon baidese.”

[Free translation-How much are you tied to your husband’s mind. Husband stayed abroad on sad days.]

**2.4.Khirol Bhawaiya:** Khirol Bhawaiya is estrangement types of songs. There is a special method or style of plying ‘Ditora’ in these songs. This type is called ‘Khirol Dang.’(Stroke) Both male and female singers sing such types of songs.

Example:

Male singer..... “Konte thake konya tomar swami  
Konte dekha pabo ami  
Aji kou he konya se katha tumi amare.”

[Free translation- Where does your husband live? Where can I meet? Tell me that today]

Female singer..... “Ujan gaiche bandhu mor banijjer ase  
Alao tarot bandhur gamcha hase.”

[Free translation-My friend went upstream for trade. Still the friend’s towel laughs]

Differences of social customs also led to variations in Bhawaiya from region to region. Bhawaiya is basically songs of women’s life pains, but also it is sung in male voice. Originating from a matriarchal society, women’s pain is usually sung in male voices rather than female voices, but this general characteristic also varies from region to region. Although music cannot be confined to language and general constraints, it cannot be free from the influence of the singers of the respective region. In the same song, there is also a difference in tone in different districts. There is a lot of difference between the singers Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri districts. Not only that, but it going from village to village, one has to be surprised to see different versions of the same song.

**3).Folk God-Goddesses:** In the folk culture of Cooch Behar, various festivals are held in the folk life of Rajbanshi community. All the societies in the world celebrate various festivals at different points in the year. But the festivals may not be celebrated at the same time which is significant for a society may not be significant for others. Festivals are recurring moments of special significance. The Rajbanshi community of Cooch Behar celebrates various festivals in the year. They are discussed below.

### 3.1.Bishari:

“Aisek mao mor saraswati,rothe koriya vor  
aji aisek mata saraswati hay  
joi jogare namek ma tui,mor savar vitor he  
aji aisek mata saraswati hay.”

In Cooch Behar district, the snake goddess is known as Manasa (Bishari).Her name is bishari because she steals poison. Therefore, it can be said that the goddess bishari takes away poison-pain. Rajbanshi community belief that, snake venom increases on sankranti (end day of the month) and Nagpanchami in the month of Bhadra(5<sup>th</sup> month of the Bengali

calendar). W.W hunter said about the wide prevalence of snake goddesses bishari festivals in the local Rajbanshi community despite the lack of snake bite in Cooch Behar. Also he said that-the snake goddesses bishari(poison destroyer) is also very largely worshiped by the people.<sup>(11)</sup> Basically bishari is worshiped in two forms in Cooch Behar district as well as North Bengal one is 'Kani bishari' and other is 'Gidali bishari'. Kani bishari is the worship of the goddess for the overall improvement of the household. There is no specific day for these festivals. These festivals can be done on any day and month. Bishari is worshiped for various reasons such as children are being started by the sight of snakes, family calamities and diseases etc. every Rajbanshi's has a temple of bishari in the north or east. If there is no temple, the festival is done in 'Tulsi path.'

If bishari is present, Gidali bishari is worshiped at the time of marriage. Singer in Rajbashi language is called Gidal. So the name gidali can be applied as female singer. Milk,banana,betel nut etc. are used as ingredients of worship. If the householder has the ability, he also arranges this type of festivals. However, due to the rising cost of festivals most households do not organize this type of festivals. According to Charu Chandra Sanyal –"formerly an adhikary but now a kamrupi Brahmin is engaged for the worship."<sup>(12)</sup>

### 3.2.Bhandani:

"O bhandani mao tok vakti bare bar  
Dhanso korek kolir asur sajjo hoy na r  
Bhandani ma"

Another part of sharadiya festivals in the district is bhandani. Goddess bhandani is also known as bhandarani or bhandali somewhere. There are various hearsay about this goddess. The hearsay are follows-

**3.2.1.** Once upon a time, a king named nahush, after completing the duga puja in the royal palace, went out hunting and forgets about durga puja in the joy of hunting. Meanwhile, after the usual puja in the royal palace, the idol of the goddess is sacrificed on Vijaya Dasami, but the goddess does not went to leave the world without receiving a garland from the hands of the king. Then he mounted on the back of a tiger in a quadruped form and prayed the king's garland in the forest. On that day, ekadashi tithi,<sup>(13)</sup> the king offered flowers to the goddess in the forest. This festival is known as bhandani puja and thus the worship of goddess bhandani came into vogue.

**3.2.2.** After the durga puja at the Cooch Behar palace on vijaya dasami, when goddess durga was on her way to kailash, bhandani, who was in charge of her luggage. Suddenly fell ill on the way, the goddess had to stay in mortuary for three more days and for this reason, she was worshiped again for three days. Since then this festival is called 'Bhandani puja.'<sup>(14)</sup>

However, valuable the statements of the said hearsay may be considered in the standard of social and religious judgment, there can be no room for doubt that they are relatively late additions and therefore bear no final and infallible truth.

**3.3.Masan:** There is lot of folklore related to Masan, the dreaded folk god of Cooch Behar. Among the 18 children of this kali, Masan is the eldest child. Another folk belief of Rajbanshi community of Cooch Behar is that Masan. Monstrous celestial deity Masan is worship revered and believed by the rural Rajbanshi community of Cooch Behar as the child of 'kali'.The popular story and folklore about the birth of Masan in North Bengal.According to Charu Chandra sanyal-"once mother kali went alone to bathe in the river suddenly a deity (Dharma thakur) appeared there. After the union of two, then Masan was born. In all the villages of this district ojha,kabiraj describe the presence ,location and greatness of Masan. It is these ojhas who worship masan to calm him down when a person is frightened by a sudden vision. Dr.Girija Sankal Ray in his book "Uttarbange Rajbanshi Kshatriya Jatir Puja-Parvana" mentions 18 types of Masan. According to Dilip Kumar Dey in his thesis "Cooch Beharer Lok Sanskriti" he mentions 24 types of Masan."<sup>(15)</sup>

**3.4.Yatra Puja:** Durga devi is known as devi thakurani in the Rajbanshi society of north Bengal i.e. Jalpaiguri.Durga puja is divided into two phases for the Rajbanshi in this district. The worship offered to the goddess at home on dashami is known as Yatra puja. Apart from yatra puja, the Rajbanshi people participate in the sharadiya durga puja. On this day,

the Rajbanshi Kshatriya farmers start field cultivation for the production of crops. On the day of Yatra puja, the women in every Rajbanshi's house clean and sweep the house and sprinkle dung water from the yard to the outside. Basically, the male members of the house do this worship.

**3.5.Subochani:** Goddess subochani is worshiped everywhere in the district. Goddess subochani is worshiped no idol. Generally the idol of subochani is the image of a woman with a child in her lap. This worshiped is organized on 'Tulsi path' of the house. There is no specific day for subochani worshiped. When wedding receptions are usually held at home before that subochani is worshiped. Banana, milk, raw betel nut, ghee, honey etc. are used as worshiped materials. The worshiped is conducted entirely by unmarried girl and Brahmins are not required for worship.

**3.5.Dharma Thakur:**Boishakh month is religious month according to secular belief. Dharma thakur is worshiped on any Sunday of this month. Rajbanshi house wife do not eat non-vegetarian food until the puja is performed. This worshiped is completely controlled by women. Dharma thakur of Cooch Behar district is basically the sun god. Dr.Girija Sankar Ray says- Dharma thakur together in both the Rajbanshi Kshatriya and Tantubaya community it may not be impossible for the worship to remain in practice.<sup>(16)</sup>

**4.Folk Dances:** Dance is a special step in the history of human culture. Culture is changeable and has evolved over time. The main categories of culture are literature, music, painting and dance. Almost everywhere in the world there are striking similarities in the dances, songs and lifestyles of primitive people. Dance is a part of celebration and ritual in life. Humans evolved from hunters to herdsmen and from herdsmen to agriculturists, folk dance was born in that agrarian social system. When people came out of the forest life and started living by farming and creating localities, then it can be said that people have entered the stage.<sup>(17)</sup> So, folk dance practiced by the rural agrarian society. Various styles and types of folk dances have emerged in Cooch Behar district. Rajbanshi folk dances of Cooch Behar district can be divided as follows-

**4.1.** Dance with religious context (Mecheni,Hudum)

**4.2.** Dance with social festivals (Boirati)

**4.3.**War dance,muharram (Stick dance)

**4.4.** Palatiya,kushan

**4.5.** Other (Ghorakhela,Bhandikhela)

**5). Food Habits:**Food habits are a very important element of culture. The role of food habits is very important in the Rajbanshi society and culture of Cooch Behar. The culture of the Rajbanshi community is reflected in their food habits. "As a Rajbanshi people become Hindus religion, so they eat everything in accordance with the Hindu religion , but some special food or items are eaten by the Rajbanshi of which 'Chheka Shak' is one of the delicious food of the Rajbanshi which is cooked with different types of vegetables specially mixing with one kind of soda.<sup>(18)</sup>

Another delicious vegetable of the Rajbanshi Lepha Shak. Another delicious food is eaten by the Rajbanshi people locally known as Sidal-Sukta. Sukta means dry fishes and sidal is made by crashing of small dry fishes, spices, turmeric and chilly, all these are crushed in a husk locally called Chham and gain. There is an also a tendency to eat Yoghurt and Chira [beaten rice] in the food of Rajbanshi society. This yoghurt and Chira was kept on the menu when any ceremonies were held at home. Pan-Supari was a custom of entering the relatives of the Rajbanshi society. Almost every Rajbanshi house has a container of this betel nut. Not to mention that that since Cooch Behar is a peripheral area, many Bangladeshi (Bhatia) people come to this region during the partition of India and as a result a mixed culture can be observed. In many cases it is seen that the people of Rajbanshi have adopted the food habits of the Bangladeshi's (Bhatia) people.

**6).Folk Treatment:** Folk medicinal methods of treatments were introduced in this country from primitive era. However, it is not known precisely from the time this medical practice was introduced. Only when people were sick in the way of life, they would have taken this treatment procedure to cure diseases. From the origin of human society, people have composed a medicine with their experience to cure various diseases by their physical disorders. The medical system has been practiced for ages from generation to generation. This medicine lasted for years for the family traditions or folk traditions. In this way, the folk medicine has decreased gradually. Nobody accepts folk medicine as a profession. This medical person is coming to the secure of his own family or neighbour. Those who are associated with this profession

are known as hakim, baidya, kabiraj, ojha etc. many people of Rajbanshi community are taking this treatment as a profession.

The concept of the disease among the Rajbanshi community has been deeply rooted in the religious faith, witchcraft and belief in magic and super natural power. According to them the disease is said to be a state in which the body is unable to carry out normal activities of daily life. There are several types of disease and treatment method is found in the Rajbanshi community. The major types of disease among the Rajbanshi's are Nagani disease caused by any one through the help of Gunin (a person who chanting), Bhut dhora disease (caused by ghost), Masan dhora disease (caused by masan), Howa laga disease and Jagani disease (caused by super natural power) <sup>(19)</sup>

**4. Conclusion:** The rural Rajbanshi people of Cooch Behar, the time has yet come for such regrets. Rural life here is still backward, largely due to medieval ideas. In this backward mental background the folk culture of Cooch Behar is still an ongoing life companion. After studying various aspects of the folk culture of the Rajbanshi community, these people are aware of their identities. Therefore, despite various challenges, they have kept their own culture. The uniqueness and variety of the culture of the Rajbanshi community becomes a centre of attraction for many domestic and foreign tourists. Also through the social media platform like Face book, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube etc. This culture spread over the Cooch Behar district.

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