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SACRED BAMBOO GROVES OF THE RAJBANSHI OF NORTH BENGAL

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Abstract

The Rajbanshi of the northern districts of West Bengal repudiated their tribal ancestry and Sanskritized many of their social customs to conform to their professed Hindu caste identity. Nevertheless, certain cultural traits, including their Sacred Groves and associated non-Brahminical rituals seem to link to their tribal past. The Rajbanshi Sacred Groves are distinctive in their exclusive composition of the yellow bamboo (*Bambusa vulgaris* var. *straiata*), whose distribution appears to be currently restricted to the Rajbanshi hamlets of Jalpaiguri district. The Kamtapuri movement, which demands constitutional recognition of their language and cultures, and a separate Statehood for the Rajbanshi, seeks to redefine their ethnic identity and cultural-political rights. Yet, this movement fails to take in its fold the cultural significance of the distinctive bamboo Sacred Groves which are now disappearing from the Rajbanshi villages of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts.

Key words

Conservation, Rajbanshi, Sacred grove, Sanskritization, West Bengal

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SACRED BAMBOO GROVES OF THE RAJBANSHI OF NORTH BENGAL

This article attempts to locate the cultural meaning and ecological significance of the Sacred Groves of the Rajbanshi (or Rajbongshi) of northern West Bengal, India. The Rajbanshi pose a typical example of the process of Sanskritization/ Hinduisation of indigenous societies in South Asia. In the nineteenth century, the group was identified by many ethnographers as belonging to the same tribe as Koch and Paliya of northern Bengal (Baverly 1872; Hunter 1876; Risley 1891; Baines 1912). Subsequently, they came into the pale of Hinduism by the turn of the century and identified themselves as a Hindu caste. However, their tribal roots seem to be expressed in numerous distinctive cultural traits. One such trait is the maintenance of sacred bamboo groves which is a unique feature among the Sacred Groves of the country.

Sacred Groves are thus an important cultural institution of indigenous societies in India, ranging in size from a small grove with a few trees to a large forest stand spanning several hundred acres. These groves are consecrated in the name of local deities or ancestral spirits, and are culturally protected sanctuaries of a wide range of flora and fauna (Deb and Malhotra 2001; Malhotra et al. 2007; Deb 2007). Removal of any living things from the Sacred Groves is usually forbidden, although dead logs and leaves are sometimes removed from some Sacred Groves. This institution is perhaps the best example of indigenous traditional resource use practices promoting conservation of biodiversity (Deb 2007; 2008). The Rajbanshi Sacred Groves are no exception. However, a unique feature of the Rajbanshi sacred grove is that these groves consist of clumps of a particular variety of bamboo (*Bambusa vulgaris* var. *straiata*), but no other trees. This distinctive feature warrants a close study of the community's social and cultural history which this

paper sets out to outline. Sacred Groves are distinct patches of vegetation.

The methodology followed for this study is based on the premise that ethnographic literature was the primary means of collating information about the history and culture of the Rajbanshi. Information about the sanctity of bamboos in Rajbanshi culture was obtained from Dr. J. J. Roy Burman of the the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai (*personal communication*) and from Sanyal (1965). Primary data were collected from a survey conducted in the districts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar in March 1999, October 2000, and March 2009. We visited a total of 41 Rajbanshi Sacred Groves in the Rajbanshi hamlets and villages in Mal block of Jalpaiguri district, and 13 groves in Mathabhanga block of Cooch Behar district. In Jalpaiguri district, we witnessed the performance of rituals at 5 Sacred Groves and interviewed the heads of 16 Rajbanshi households and 3 priests.

Proselytization, faith and fiction

The Rajbanshis trace their origin to King Hajo who founded the Koch kingdom in North Bengal and Assam in ancient times. Hajo's grandson, Bisva (=Bisu) Singha became a Hindu, and renounced the name Koch to adopt that of Rajbanshi (Baines 1912; Sanyal 1965). Thereafter, the Rajbanshis began to identify themselves as Bhanga-Kshatriyas, or a sub-caste of Kshatriya, the warrior caste. As Kulke (1976) has explained, Sanskritization of many tribal groups was facilitated by 'Kshatriyaisation' by its valorising association of warriors while accepting a relatively inferior status in the Brahminical hierarchy. With this re-identification, the Rajbanshis sought to renounce their tribal origin. Thus, numerous myths were fabricated to buttress their claim to Kshatriya-hood. One such

myth is recorded in *Yogini Tantra*, an early nineteenth century text, which mentions that Bisu, the ancestor of the Rajbanshis, was the son of Reboti, a Koch yogini, sired by Lord Siva. Reboti is depicted as a Kshatriya woman who was cursed to become a Sudra. Another myth relating to the *Mahabharata*, describes that the Rajbanshis are descendants of the Kshatriyas who took shelter in North Bengal when Parashuram had been eliminating all Kshatriyas from the earth (Sanyal 1965).

The expanding pale of Sanskritization

The Rajbanshi are one of the earliest ethnic groups to come under the influence of Hinduism. Like many other Sanskritized tribal groups, the Rajbanshis have adopted Hindu deities and customs and observe all the Hindu religious rites. They have also adopted the Hindu Brahminical system of *gotra* (clan), and all of them belong to the same *gotra*, namely, Kasyapa. Risley (1891) found in their marriage custom a curious state of transition from tribal identity to Hindu clan identity. While there is strict prohibition of Hindu marriage within the same *gotra* (clan), the Rajbanshis do not follow this prohibition. The marriages with Koch and Mech was stopped in the early 20th century in a bid to strengthen their Hindu identity.

In the 19th century, Rajbanshi were identified as Pundra Kshatriya or Bratya Kshatriya – implying a satellite Hindu status of the community on the margin of Brahminical Hinduism. Since 1911, Rajbangshis adopted the caste hierarchy of the Brahminical Hindu order and declared themselves as pure Kshatriyas. Since 1912, mass sacred thread wearing (*paita grahan*) ceremonies were organized by the Kshatriya Samiti at many places in the northern part of the then undivided Bengal where the Rajbanshis took part *en*

masse. They also fashioned a priest caste who use the surname was 'Adhikari', and consider themselves as Brahmins. Most of the Rajbangshis of North Bengal, Bihar, Nepal and lower Assam claim to be Kshatriyas, standing one rung below the Brahmins in the caste ladder. The third social caste is the Kayastha, who include all converters from the Koch or Mech tribes, Kaibartyas and Rajbangshis from South Bengal (Ray, 2007).

In order to create a pure, unalloyed past and to trace their caste ancestry to the high texts of Brahminical Hinduism, the Rajbanshis sought to repudiate all historical reference to their tribal past. Moreover, in a bid to approximate the Hindu upper caste ideal of women's chastity, the Rajbanshi leaders in the early 1900s enforced monogamy for women, and "passed strictures against their women from visiting the market, as well as against widow remarriage" (Dutta 1998: 45-46).

Sanyal (1965) reported that the married women of the Rajbanshis, unlike the Bengali Hindu women, did not put the vermilion mark on their foreheads, nor did they wear iron bangles. However, he noticed that "at present the rite of dabbing a little vermilion at the parting of hair is gradually growing", and in our survey in 1999, and further in 2009, we found many of the Rajbanshi women with a vermilion mark on the parting of the hair. Sanyal further noted in his study that conch-shell bangles (*shankha kharu*) were in common amongst the Rajbanshi women, and 8 to 12 pieces of conch bangles, fixed together are usually worn, "covering nearly the whole of the left hand." In our survey in 1999 and in 2009, we found that the number of the conch bangles was rarely more than one. Some women also wear iron bangles, so that it is difficult to distinguish these women from any other Hindu women in the region. Obviously, the process of Hinduisation of the community is continuing, and their attempt at identifying with the Bengali Hindus has intensified over the past three decades.

The vestiges of tribal heritage

Numerous tribes were drawn within the pale of mainstream Hindu society (Risley 1891; Staal 1963), and in the process, numerous tribal cultural elements are lost. However, the Sanskritic tradition is not a monolithic entity but is involved in symbiotic interplay with many local traditions, so that Sanskritization is a complex bi-directional process, drawing from, as well as feeding into, non-Sanskritic culture (Chakrabarti 1992), leading to the incorporation of numerous tribal mythological elements, deities and rituals into the Brahminical pantheon (Staal, 1963; Nath 2001).

The Rajbanshis, like all ethnic communities in Bengal, worship the snake goddess Manasa. It is not known if this is a transformation of some snake deity previously worshipped by the Rajbanshi community prior to the its proselytization. However, this folk goddess, like Shitalà, the goddess of epidemics (Stewart 1995), is non-Sanskritic in origin, whose cult arose in Bengal between 13th and 18th centuries CE. Worshipped by numerous Hindu ‘lower castes’ (*Sudras*) and tribals, these deities represent a subaltern stream of Hindu pantheon requiring neither Sanskrit scripture nor a Brahmin priest for worshipping. Subsequently, the same non-Sanskritic deities have been enveloped by the mainstream the Hindu pantheon, and are now worshipped by all Bengali Hindus (McDaniel 2004). Today, Brahmin priests are also employed in some places for performing the rituals, although the Rajbanshi do not employ Brahmin priests.

There are further cultural-religious elements that seem plausibly to be distinctly inherited from the tribal past of the Rajbanshi. One such element is the Rajbanshi hunting festival, *Bisoba*, which is held

on the last day of Chaitra (mid-April), and is participated in by all adult male members of the Rajbanshi community of Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and Assam. The summer hunting ritual, requiring obligatory participation of adult males, is characteristic of all the tribals of Assam, Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Orissa.

Worship of different elements of nature is traditional. The river goddess Tista Bari, and the forest goddess Saleswari are worshipped by the Rajbanshi (Sanyal 1965). Since these deities are not worshipped by any other Hindu community in the region, they seem to be characteristically inherited from the early tribal culture of the Rajbanshi.

Another characteristic feature of the Rajbanshi culture is the worship of the yellow bamboo (*Bambusa vulgaris* var. *straiata*). The maintenance of Sacred Groves of bamboo in every Rajbanshi hamlet is a unique cultural feature, which has not so far been mentioned in any published literature. Sanyal (1965) in his monograph on the Rajbanshi has, however, mentioned the worship of a bamboo pole as the household deity. The yellow bamboo is worshipped as a deity, and its grove is held sacred as the abode of the village god (Gram Deo), which is often identified with Shiva.

The yellow bamboo worship: an old custom and a new myth

In a typical Rajbanshi house, a hut (usually situated on the northern side of the compound) is reserved for the household deity Bastu Thakur. A pole of yellow bamboo (*Bambusa vulgaris* var. *straiata*) is vertically erected on the mud floor in the room. The pole is worshipped with bael (*Aegle marmelos*) leaves, various flowers, incense sticks and an earthen lamp that is lit every evening. We

found that as a rule, the pole is cut from a yellow bamboo clump. A platform is elevated ca 3 cm around the base, and the entire floor is plastered every week with cow dung and mud mixture. Sanyal (1965) reported that a piece of red cloth is wrapped round the pole, but cloth wrapping seemed to be neither ubiquitous nor essential in the groves under our survey. The cloth, where used, were also not necessarily red: any 'hot colour' seemed to suffice.

The yellow bamboo groves, like most of the country's tribal Sacred Groves, contain no idols. However, unlike the tribal Sacred Groves of West Bengal and the adjoining States, the bamboo groves contain no terracotta votive figures. Votive offerings in the Rajbanshi groves consist of flowers, incense sticks, and sometimes fruits, which are shared among the devotees as *Prasad* (sacred food). There are two kinds of sacred bamboo groves in a Rajbanshi hamlet:

- (a) A small bamboo clump (about 110 m²) is grown in the Rajbanshi homestead, where an earthen lamp is lighted every evening. A small number of terracotta and brass articles (*e.g.* platters to hold flowers and fruits, a pitcher to hold holy water) are placed at the base of the clump during a special worship and then withdrawn inside the house until the next occasion. The worship of Shiva is commonly held at the base of the grove. One or short two bamboo sticks are driven vertically into the floor of the grove which reportedly represent their pride of the glory of their past occupation (see below).
- (b) A bigger grove is maintained on the outskirts of the hamlet, where the village deity Gram Deo is believed to reside. Community worship are performed at this grove.

The village menfolk usually gather at this grove before setting out on the *Bisoba* hunting expedition. We recorded a few clumps

of *Bambusa arundinacea* in addition to the yellow bamboo; and in some villages, the yellow bamboo was missing from the clumps. The village elders reported that with the advent of urbanisation, the bamboo groves have disappeared from the villages, and that the groves were destroyed by non-Rajbanshi people, who extracted the bamboo for construction. During our survey in 1999, we recorded yellow bamboo groves in most of the Rajbanshi villages, but in 2009, we noticed that a large number of yellow bamboo groves had disappeared from the study villages of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri.

The yellow bamboo seems to be of paramount significance in Rajbanshi culture. Bamboo is the 'poor people's timber' throughout India, but the Rajbanshi's esteem for the yellow bamboo cannot be explained without its recognition as an icon of Rajbanshi cultural identity. The bamboo in general seems to have been a part of the metaphorical corridor of the Rajbanshi cultural ethos as instanced by various omens and auguries involving the bamboo. On auspicious social occasions, it is a bad omen to see a cut bamboo pole lying on the road, or a man cutting a bamboo from the clump (Sanyal 1965). Seeing a bamboo sucker sprouting is a good omen, and carrying a bamboo stick portends social prestige.

Aware of the uniqueness of their bamboo worship, the Rajbanshis have forged an extra-religious rationalisation for the origin of the custom. They report that the bamboo is a symbol of their past means of occupation as royal *lathiyal* (hitmen). Their skill in stick fight was highly esteemed in *zamindari* estates, and the Rajbanshi men served the local *zamnidars* as *lathials* and *paiks* for generations until the abolition of the *zamindari* system in the 1950s. Since the bamboo stick was their only means of livelihood, the bamboo is held as an icon of their social prestige and glory. However, this rationalisation still begs the questions as to why only the yellow

bamboo variety occupies this special position in their religion, and why it is only the bamboo groves where their village deities are worshipped. The latter question in particular is not answered by the “past glory” conjecture, as there is no dearth of floral species in the moist deciduous and semi-evergreen vegetation of northern Bengal.

Is it likely that the original Sacred Groves of the Rajbanshi were composed of other floral species which were eventually replaced with the bamboo in the process of their Hinduisation? Neither any historical nor folkloristic evidence exists to support this conjecture. The Rajbanshi seem to have forgotten their religious myths regarding the bamboo deity. The identity of the bamboo thus seems to have been transformed from its religious semiotics to a new fictionalised social iconic value, in conformity with the changing identity of the community itself.

Conservation implications

The institution of Sacred Groves may have multiple origins. It might in some places (like the arid tracts of Rajasthan) have originated from the need to conserve a vital resource like water (Spadoni and Deb 2005; Malhotra, et. al., 2007). In some other places, it might have taken shape from a religious urge to protect a habitat as prey refugium in order to ensure a sustained availability of the prey base (Gadgil and Guha 1992; Spadoni and Deb 2005). In yet other places, an inchoate awe of some spirits or deities might have inspired the local people to consecrate a grove for observing propitiatory rites. If the Rajbanshi legend of the glorious legacy of bamboos is correct, then a purely social reason accounts for the preservation of the bamboo Sacred Groves. In that case, the urge to commemorate the community’s own past has assumed a religious

form of paying homage to the ancestral glory symbolised in the bamboos – regardless of the instrumental value of either the species or the habitat. Indeed, cultural semiotics has its own dynamics and may have only marginal and incidental relevance to biodiversity conservation.

From the conservation biology perspective, however, Sacred Groves as an institution have important conservation consequences to a varying extent. Of importance is the fact that

“all the cultural practices with any conservation implications – incidental or otherwise

— seem to depict a reverential attitude toward nature, an attitude that is likely to prevent exhaustive extraction and use of vital resources. Thus, the assigning of the ‘sacred’ status to a multitude of plants and animals ... seem to reveal the respect for nature inherent in [indigenous] cultures.” (Deb and Malhotra 2001: 722).

Thus, regardless of whether the Rajbanshis had any conservationist intention behind consecrating the bamboo groves to Gram Deo, their Sacred Groves serve to prohibit exhaustion of the local stock of the yellow bamboo. It appears that the populations of the yellow bamboo survive mainly in the Rajbanshi Sacred Groves. Many other indigenous communities also maintain Sacred Groves in their villages, but no other Sacred Groves contain the yellow bamboo. Our search for yellow bamboo clumps outside the Rajbanshi settlements in the entire Malbazar block of Jalpaiguri district proved futile. The Rajbanshi sacred grove, therefore, seems to have a profound, albeit incidental, conservation consequence.

The population status of the yellow bamboo variety in India is not known. From our preliminary survey, *Bambusa vulgaris* var. *straiata* appears to have become rare in north Bengal. Owing to

unrestricted extraction of this bamboo variety from the remnant clumps, it may even become locally extinct from the area in the near future unless some intervention programs (like plantation and awareness campaign) are presently undertaken. The institution of bamboo seems to facilitate conservation of the species. To incorporate the Rajbanshi cultural ethos, including the institution of Sacred Groves, into a scientific conservation program to save the yellow bamboo from possible local extinction will be a worthwhile task ahead of the State policy makers and administrators.

Reasserting Indigenous Heritage

In contrast to the past efforts of the Rajbanshi people to identify themselves as a Kshatriya caste, a significant part of the Rajbanshi people have, from the 1960s onwards, joined the Kamtapuri revivalist movement. Since 1969, a series of organisations arose with the demand for a separate State for the Rajbanshis in the name of Uttar Khanda in northern Bengal and Kamta State in lower Assam. Since 1996, the Kamtapur People's Party (KPP) has been the leading political outfit of the Koch- Rajbanshi movement with demands for constitutional recognition of Kamtapuri, their language, and a separate Kamtapur or Kamata-Greater Koch Behar State, spanning across Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts of West Bengal extending to lower Assam (Ray 2007). A faction of KPP formed the Kamtapur Pragatishil Party which participated in the Assembly elections of 2000.

In contrast to their past cultural repudiation of a tribal heritage and linkage to the Koch of northern Bengal and Assam, the Rajbanshi of today, aligning with the Kamtapuri movement are rediscovering their ethno-linguistic identity. While their myth of Kshatriya origin, linking to a warrior prince from western India is

still retained, their primary demand consists of one for the recognition of their language and cultural distinctiveness, as the basis of a separate statehood. As one of their leaders, Nalini Ranjan Ray put it:

“They identify themselves as Kshatriyas in North Bengal and its adjoining areas but got them denigrated socially by accepting lower social status constitutionally. Their learned and well established lot or the elite group of people are in quandary and to keep away from [the] vortex of identity crisis they always found [an] easier way out just to get absorbed in the mainstream populace of their respective state wherein they reside to hide their distorted identity. However, a sizable group of the community raises their voice for the grant of a separate statehood to greater ‘Koch Behar’ to the bitter dislike of many” (Ray 2007: 6).

In particular, the Kamtapuri movement refers to the civil and political rights of the ST people, as enshrined in Part X, ‘The Scheduled and Tribal Areas’, Article 244 in the Constitution of India. The Kamtapuri people demand that they are endowed with the ST status, based on which they hope to obtain a separate Kamtapuri State. The movement seeks to reinstate the ethnic pride of the Koch-Rajbanshi people as the original inhabitants of the entire northern Bengal and demand commemoration of the Koch-Rajbanshi heroes, - such as by naming of the Bagdogra airport after Bishwabbeer Chilarai, the younger brother of the Koch king Naranarayan and the commander of the Koch army during the 1562-1572 campaign to unify the Koch kingdoms of the north eastern States and northern Bengal.

However, the Kamtapuri movement has not incorporated the bamboo Sacred Groves as a marker of their ethnic identity, nor are

many of the young generation aware of the cultural significance of the Sacred Groves. In our survey in 2009, we have seldom encountered a youth in the entire Mathabhanga Block of Cooch Behar district and much of Jalpaiguri district who is either aware of the bamboo groves or its cultural distinctiveness. It seems that in the rush of political demands of the movement, and in the concomitant process of restructuring of class-caste positions between the Rajbanshi and other ethno-political communities, the cultural importance of the cultural linkages to certain elements of biodiversity have taken a back seat. Like most political movements in history, the Kamtapuri movement prioritizes its political objectives – that of constitutionalizing a separate State based on a redefined ethnic identity of its citizens – where the heritage of biodiversity, of the bamboo Sacred Groves in particular, is not of crucial instrumental value. Alongside, the process of economic modernization and of education of the Rajbanshi community serves to marginalize the place of bamboo Sacred Groves in the Rajbanshi social polity, leading to the erosion of the cultural value of the Sacred Groves.

An *ex situ* conservation effort

Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalay organised in January 2000 a Sacred Grove Festival on its campus in Bhopal where indigenous people from 11 States of India gathered and planted trees to create live replicas of Sacred Groves from the respective States of origin. To create a simulation of the Rajbanshi sacred grove, we had collected in September 1999 a few bamboo suckers from Lataguri village of Jalpaiguri district and transplanted them on the IGRMS campus prior to the festival. This transplanted bamboo grove was the only representative from West Bengal. Similar simulations of Sacred Groves were created by transplanting seedlings collected from 11 States. The objective of this transcreation

of Sacred Groves was to spread awareness about the diversity, typology and the ecological and cultural importance of the institution (Malhotra *et. al.* 2007).

We took along a team of Rajbanshi men, including a Rajbanshi priest, to IGRMS on the occasion of the festival. We planted 10 yellow bamboo saplings on the museum campus in order to create a simulation of a bamboo grove, where Rajbanshi priests performed all the required ceremonies on campus, which ritualised the establishment of the grove. The team lived in a house they had built, in Rajbanshi style, close to the grove. For the next few days, these Rajbanshi men recited songs related to the sacred grove and evinced their cultural and religious attachment to the newly created grove.

During the festival period (20-23rd January, 2000), the Rajbanshi men exchanged information and views with their counterparts from different parts of the country and came to learn about the significance of their cultural heritage. When anthropologists, historians, sociologists, biologists and ecologists explained how the Sacred Groves have conserved local biodiversity and shaped the local cultures over the centuries, the Rajbanshi men asserted that they felt proud of their identity. They further expressed concern that the young generation was ignorant of the importance of their cultural institutions, and that the advent of market-oriented economy was eroding their traditional values and customs.

The story did not end there. Upon returning home, these men enthusiastically carried out a campaign in Mal Block of Jalpaiguri district about the uniqueness of their sacred grove, the value of the vanishing flora in the area, and the importance of their traditional institutions in asserting their cultural and political identity. These

men seemed especially inspired to persuade a small group of young boys in the Rajbanshi villages to protect their Sacred Groves.

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