In the Lineage of the King: Conversion, Identity and Why the Rajbanshi in Bangladesh Claim to be Kshatriya

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ABSTRACT

Claims to Kshatriya status by lower caste or tribal groups are by no means restricted in time and place to the Rajbanshi. Nevertheless, Rajbanshi claims provide a characteristic example of the colonial, caste and academic dialogues about conversion, elite emulation, ethnicity, and identity development which surround the processes defined as Hinduization and Sanskritization by Weber and Srinivas. This paper relies on ethnographic research in a Rajbanshi community in northwest Bangladesh to augment and illustrate discussion points from that literature.

Introduction

This paper uses ethnographic data from fieldwork among the Rajbanshi[1] of northwest Bangladesh to discuss the acculturation and identity development among minority groups in South Asia. Claims of royal descent from the Barman kings of Kamrupa, combined with Brahmanical justifications found in stories of warrior caste persecution in ancient texts, provide the basis for Rajbanshi claims to Kshatriya status. These claims characterize the acculturative processes of Sanskritization and Hinduization as defined by M. N. Srinivas (1952) and Max Weber (1958). These models emerge in the colonial and immediately post-colonial era, but are less prominent in academic discussion of late. The Rajbanshi of Bangladesh are largely unknown in the anthropological literature and although they follow the strictures of Hinduism, they are routinely discounted as "tribals" by people in other parts of the country.

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[1] Also spelled Rajbangshi, Rajbonshi and Rajbansi,

Sanskritization and Hinduization

Sanskritization and Hinduization are sophisticated and complex advancement strategies that, nevertheless, have been largely unsuccessful for most lower caste, tribal, aboriginal (adivasi) and Dalit people in South Asia. Even after converting to Hinduism and assimilating into the mainstream of South Asian society, these groups rarely find their social, economic or political circumstances improved, and continue to find themselves ranked many rungs below other Hindus in society (Jivha, 2003). Further, while they may be reluctantly recognized as Hindu, these groups are often treated with overt hostility and repression, and have been targeted by the majority community (Clarke 2004, 1, see also Basu 1995).

Gooptu (1993) contends that ancient South Asian kingdoms were ruled by Dravidian (indigenous/Dalit) people prior to the arrival of the Aryans. As the autothonous inhabitants of Hindustan (India) these rulers were, by definition, the "original" Hindus, having *bhakti* as their religion. Archaeological and linguistic work on the Indus Valley civilization, also known as Harappan, supports claims for "a unique culture which owes its uniqueness to indigenous influences" (Fairservis 1989, 215). Phule (1991) takes this argument further yet. Characterizing Aryans as invaders who subjugated the indigenous inhabitants of India, he claims lower ranked castes as descendants of these "original" inhabitants and upper castes as descendants of foreigners. Thus, caste represents a mind-set of belief system predicated on an internalized hierarchical pattern, relying on the degree of ritual purity,…[that is] alien to India's original people" (Jaffrelott 2003, 2, 11). Weber (1958:4) similarly views caste as the "fundamental institution of Hinduism…a system of particularly rigid and exclusive hereditary estates…social rank as determined by one's social distance from the Brahman caste which holds the central position" (quoted in Pearce 2003). In this sense, caste constitutes a "sacralised social order" (Gould 1987) for which Brahmans provide "universal references" or role models in contrast to which all other castes are ranked in terms of their relative purity (Dumont 1970, cited in Kolenda 1978).

M. N. Srinivas (1952) has defined Sanskritization as the process by which a lower ranked Hindu caste, tribal or other group changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a higher ranked, and frequently, "twice-born" caste – what Lynch (1969) has called elite emulation.[2] Weber (1958) used the term Hinduization to describe the specific process by which groups outside the caste

[2]Xaxa (1999: 1521) also uses the terms Kshatriyisation and Rajputisation

system convert to Hinduism and, depending on their occupation and wealth, negotiate social ranking within the system. More recently, Hinduization, sometimes called Saffronization (Jamanadas 2003), has been equated with the concept of *Hindutva* (a term coined by V. D. Sarvarkar in 1969) in advocating for the consolidation of religious, ethnic and cultural minorities into a "Brahmanic construction of an Indian nation" (Clarke 2004 1-3); a construction that in Clarke's opinion "manifests a propensity to eradicate all forms of variant plurality [and] threatens all minorities." Jamanadas (2003, 1-4) further argues that this process should more properly be termed Brahminization as it reflects the maintenance of Brahmin supremacy.[3]

Sanskritization provides not only an avenue for challenging and possibly improving one's position within the system but a mechanism by which upper castes can consolidate their own position while simultaneously undermining the solidarity among the lower castes. Emulation of Brahman elites reinforces the existing hierarchy and the privilege of the Brahman caste, creates tension between lower ranked castes, and provides coherence in a system that does not display any real cohesion (Jaffrelot 2003, see also Kolenda 1978, Tylor 1972). In this regard, Srinivas (1967:92) argues that although a caste may struggle for a higher position for itself in the local hierarchy, it simultaneously resents the efforts of other castes (particularly lower ones), to move up in the system. Furthermore, the struggle to move up frequently results in dissention among closely related castes or division within single castes with successfully Sanskritized segments "pulling rank" on other segments of the same caste through actions such as refusing to give their daughters in marriage or to accept food and drink. The final effect is to increase the number of existing *jatis* and prevent solidarity by creating divisions and dissent among them (Kolenda 1978). Gould (1988, 146) argues that, "one of the prime forces behind Sanskritization is…repressed hostility which manifests itself not in the form of rejecting the caste system [*in toto*] but in the form of its victims trying to seize control of it" (quoted in Jaffrelot 2003); what Ambedkar (1989, 101-102) has called "graded inequality."

Thus, there is no real challenge to the authority of the caste hierarchy. Rather, it is self-reinforcing and the primary focus of Sanskritization becomes maneuvering for position within the system rather than overthrowing or opting out of it. Furthermore, although this strategy is sometimes successful for some segments of

[3]Throughout the rest of this paper, I use the term Sanskritization to refer to conversion and/or elite emulation as a means to engage the caste system at a higher rank

society, that success is never sufficient to allow caste members to achieve true equality with the higher castes. Kolenda (1978,100) has argued that "Sanskritization is…at best a very slow method for a *jati* to raise its status. It is likely to be successful only if reinforced by economic or political power." Nevertheless, from Vedic times, Sanskitization has theoretically offered a way by which high status is conferred on groups both inside and outside of the caste system. Indeed the broad appeal of this strategy is evidenced by the pervasive spread of Hinduism throughout South Asia (Jivha 2003), where even today communities attempt to raise their status through conversion to Hinduism and/or emulation of high caste behaviours and beliefs, such as wearing the sacred thread, becoming vegetarian and hypergamy (marrying their daughters into higher caste groups).

In the context of this paper, Sanskritization among the Rajbanshi of northwest Bangladesh provides an example of an unsuccessful attempt to improve the status of one group and achieve social, political and economic advancement through conversion and elite emulation. I begin the discussion that follows with an explanation of how I became interested in these issues and a description of the historical sequence of the Rajbanshi. This is followed by an examination of Sanskritization as a change strategy and its less than successful outcomes for Rajbanshi people. I've struggled to find a middle ground between colonial interpretations of caste and Sanskitization on the one hand and indigenous scholars' critiques of those interpretations on the other. I've also tried to contextualize my research in the ongoing debate about identity politics.[4]

Chuchuli and the Rajbanshi

I had never heard the word Rajbanshi before the middle of July 1989, although I had already spent some 10½ months in Bangladesh working in the capital and conducting research in the rural areas. I was riding in a jeep with the District Chairman to attend a tree planting ceremony when he looked out the window and seeing a group of people walking along the side of the road remarked, "Do you

[4]"Identity politics" has come to signify a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups. Rather than organizing solely around belief systems, programmatic manifestos, or party affiliation, identity political formations typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

know these people?" I said that I had noticed people like them before in other parts of northern Bangladesh, people whose faces are different from the people of the south.[5] He said: "These are Rajbanshi people. They have two castes: the Rajbanshi and the Shujabanshi" A literal translation of the term Rajbanshi is "lineage (or family) of the king," or "Royal Race" (Hunter 1876, Basu 1995) and the Chairman translated Shujabanshi as "lineage of the sun or priest." He was a kind man and supportive of my research: indeed, when I expressed an interest in knowing more about the Rajbanshi people, he suggested I live in his household and conduct research in a neighbouring Rajbanshi village. In the end for a number of reasons, I was not able to accept his offer and in the midst of finding another village in which to do my research, I put the Rajbanshi out of my mind. Indeed, I forgot the word entirely and later had to retrieve it in conversation with the villagers of Chuchuli, where I finally conducted my research.

Following a series of discussions about the different ways in which people identify and define themselves in Bangladesh generally and in Chuchuli in particular, about religious divisions, economic differences, gender roles, political affiliations and citizenship (*Bangalees* vs Bangladeshis vs *bideshis*, i.e. foreigners), my landlord said: "And of course, we are Rajbanshi." Shortly thereafter, my friend and research collaborator who had lived his whole life in Chuchuli came to my house and quietly said, "How can we claim to be in the lineage of the king? We are only poor rural people with nothing to support this claim. What we really are is *poliya*."[6] Now this was another word that I had heard but had not used because I had been warned it was derogatory and insulting to rural people—a word, I had been told, that roughly translates into English as "rustic" or "country bumpkin." Nevertheless, it is a word that appears regularly in the colonial literature as a descriptor for certain groups who live in this part of Bangladesh and in neighbouring West Bengal.

These two conversations piqued my interest in the Rajbanshi but in contextualizing my research, I found a relatively small amount of information about them and even less about the Shujabangshi, who are sometimes called Sivabangshi or Surajbanshi (cf. Dalton 1872, Risley 1891). In the seminary library in Dhaka, I located a single monograph written in English and published by the

[5]Risley (1891) has described the Rajbanshi as Mongolo-Dravidian people living in lower Bengal and Orissa, as broad headed, dark complexioned and medium in stature, the offspring of Tibeto-Burman people invading from the east and the autochthonous Dravidians (cited in Tylor 1973, 14-15)

[6]Also spelled paliya – I'll return to this point later

Asiatic Society in Calcutta (Sanyal 1965). Aside from this and a few more recent references in academic articles primarily focused on other issues (cf. Bandyopadhyay 2009, Chatterjee 2008, Sengupta 1990, Toulmin 2006), much of the published material on the Rajbanshi comes from the British colonial literature and administrative accounts, and more recently from the internet. Some exceptions include Basu's (2003) and Mukherjee's (1994) discussions of caste movements and associations, and Das Gupta's (2010) discussion of festivals among the Rajbanshi.[7] Much of the internet material focuses on political activism by the Kamatapuri People's Party, establishment of self-governance, the expansion of opportunities for economic development by Rajbanshi people in India (cf. www.revolutionarydemocracy.org, 2003), and agitation for the preservation of a distinct Rajbanshi cultural and linguistic identity – a claim supported by Toulmin's (2006) linguistic research (see also Chatterjee 2008, Mukherjee 1994). The demand for a separate Rajbanshi state called Kamatapur is undoubtedly a response to the relatively recent creation of the new "tribal" states of Chhattisgar, Jharkhand and Uttaranchal/Uttarkhand in India in November 2000 (Hazarika 2004).

Historical Sequence for Northwest Bangladesh

The majority of Rajbanshi people in Bangladesh live in Dinajpur, Rangpur and Mymensingh districts, which comprise the northwestern portion of Bangladesh, bordering the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal where Rajbanshi groups are also found. Rajbanshi groups also live in Nepal. The historical experience of this part of Bangladesh has been distinct from that of southern portions of the country (cf. Bahadur 1966, Bessaignet 1964, Gait 1963). In fact, until the establishment of the Moghul Empire in 1566, this area along with present-day Assam, was part of a series of kingdoms known variously as Pragjyotisha, Kamarupa, Kamrup, Kamata and Cooch Bihar.

References are made to Pragjyotisha in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and there is little doubt that the Kings recorded in the Mahabharata were indeed historic figures who ruled over Pragjyotisha (Bahadur 1966). Greek accounts of the area from 400 BC indicate that the southern boundary of Pragjyotisha was the Lohitya Sagara, a sea that covered most of what is now southern Bangladesh. By 200 A.D. when Ptolemy described the Gangetic coast, the southern islands in the Lohitya Sagara had coalesced and formed a landmass, which subsequently

[7]See also Mukherjee (1994. footnote 1) for a list of studies on the Rajbanshi up to 1994

became known as Samatata. A Chinese pilgrim, Hsiuen Tsang visited Pragjyotisha in approximately 640 A.D., describing the country and the people in some detail, and reporting that the area is now known as Kamarupa. Reputed to be a land of magic and incantation, the Tantric form of Hinduism is said to have developed here. Indeed, the name Pragjyotisha derives from prag meaning "eastern" and *jyotisha* meaning "star," "astrology," or "shining"; hence, the land of eastern mysticism. The capital city (currently Guwahati) was known as Pragjyotishpur (Bahadur 1966, Gait 1963).

The earliest inhabitants of Pragjyotisha are believed to have been Austric people who were replaced by Dravidians who came from the west, probably from the Indus Valley (Harappan) civilization. Indeed some villagers in Chuchuli claimed that they are descendants of people who came from “Sindhudesh” (most probably a reference to the Indus Valley region). Aryan influence began to reach Pragjyotisha by approximately 100 A.D. bringing with it rudiments of the caste system. Divided into two major divisions – Aryans and non-Aryans, Aryan society was further divided into four sub-categories or *varnas* (for an extensive treatment of caste see Mandelbaum 1970, Dumont 1970, Kolenda 1978). More recent discussions of the impact of caste on tribal groups can be found in Mukherjee (1994), Chatterjee (2008) and Xaxa (1999). The assimilative nature of Aryan culture and religious belief allowed the incorporation of deities and beliefs not manifest in the original Vedas and many customs, including *linga* and *yoni* cults (which play such a large part in Hindu religious practice), are now ascribed to pre-Aryan Dravidian (indigenous) belief. Indeed, Gooptu (1993), Jivha (2003) and Tylor (1973) (among others) argue that it is indigenous belief that forms the basis of present-day Indian society, culture and religion. Thus, it was the syncretic nature of indigenous (Dravidian) belief (or *bhakti*) that permitted the incorporation of imported (Aryan or Vedic) custom and belief.

Tibeto-Burman people from the Indo-Chinese group were also present in large numbers in Pragjyotisha, having entered the area through the Himalayan passes to the north and northeast. Although Aryans were present in Kamarupa from a very early period, the majority of the population was, and still remains, non-Aryan in origin and "even now the people of Dravidian and Mongoloid origin largely predominate" (Bahadur 1966, 15, see also Tylor 1973.) Bhadra (2004), Chatterjee (2008) and Mukherjee (1994) have discussed the ways in which Rajbanshi and Koch (tribal) groups are related, and the impact of the Kshatriya Movement in northern Bengal, Bangladesh and Assam.

The earliest rulers of Kamarupa belonged to the Danava dynasty founded by Mahiranga prior to the 4th century BC. He was succeeded in a direct line by a series of 25 rulers about whom little is known (Assam Homepage 2003, 1), however, Gait (1963, 16) suggests that "the appellations *Danab* [Danava] and *Asur* suggest that they were non-Aryans." Certainly the mythical Danava and *Asura* referenced in early Hindu texts (see the *Asura* myth in the Rig *Veda* in particular) are believed to be pre-Harappan in origin (see Tylor 1973, see also Frawley 2002). Kumar (1999) disputes these interpretations arguing that terms such as Aryan, *Asura*, *Danava* and *Mlechchha* have behavioural rather than "racial" connotations. Misinterpreted by colonial researchers, these terms are properly applied to any person (regardless of their ethnic origin) who assumes a particular behaviour, occupational role or position vis-à-vis the caste system.

A popular and colourful figure in legend and a direct descendent of Mahiranga, King Narakasura is reputed to have been of "the Mongoloid race" and was the first king of Kamarupa to convert to Hinduism. He constructed a temple at Kamakhya (near present-day Guwahati) and established Pragjyotishpur as the capital of his kingdom, which the Kalika Purana and Vishnu Purana confirm extended for 450 miles in all directions (Social History of Assam 2003, 1-2, see also Bahadur 1966, Gait 1963). Despite (or perhaps because of) his ability to unify the kingdom of Pragjyotisha, Narakasura is routinely characterized as a demon and his death anniversary is commemorated as Naraka Chaturdashi, the first day of Diwali. It was Narakasura's son, Bhagadatta, who distinguished himself in the Mahabharata war.

By the time the Chinese visitor, Hsiuen Tsang, arrived in the court of Bhaskar Barman in 640 A.D., a long line of Hindu dynasties had been documented by stone and copper inscriptions. Nevertheless, it is unclear to what extent the general population had apostatized to Hinduism (Assam Homepage 2003, 1). Indeed, Kumar (2003) argues that, for people of the northwest, converting to Hinduism is a complete misconception – a colonial lie; already Hindu and Kshatriya, Kings actually converted to Brahmanism (see Jamandas 2003 for a similar argument). Although Buddhism is not in evidence in Kamarupa at the time of Hsiuen Tsang's visit, nevertheless, he described Ashokan stupas in the village of Dhamrai (near present-day Dhaka) in the kingdom of Samatata immediately to the south. Between 730–1197 A.D., the ruling family of Gaur (present-day Dinajpur) patronized Buddhism, which flourished under their tutelage (Belitz, 2001).

Kamarupa eventually became a centre of Vajrayana[8] Buddhism and Bahadur (1966, 9-10) has argued that although there is no obvious connection between the name Pragjyotishpur and the reputation of Kamarupa as the birthplace of Tantric Hinduism, the widespread practice of Vajrayana Buddhism and the presence of the Kamakhya temple may have contributed to the area's reputation as a land of magic and sorcery.

Viswa Singha and the Rajbanshi

By the end of the fifteenth century, Kamarupa no longer enjoyed any form of centralized government and the area was ruled by a number of tribal chiefs. One chief, reputedly the grandson of Haju, a Koch warlord, rose to a position of power through military strength and ability. Amassing support, Hajo conquered the southern portion of Kamarupa and proclaimed himself king in 1515. He apostatized to Hinduism, changed his name to Viswa Singha, and was integrated into the caste system at the level of Kshatriya (Bahadur 1966, Bessaignet 1964, Gait 1963).

All kings, if they are Hindu, must demonstrate their right to claim Kshatriya status—what is sometimes called the Kshatriya movement (Hazarika 2004, see also Xaxa 1999, Chatterjee 2008). Accordingly, the Brahman courtiers of Viswa Singha created an origin myth for him based on the persecution of Kshatriya warriors at the hands of Parasurama, an incarnation of the god Vishnu. The story follows that Parasurama's father had been insulted and badly treated (perhaps even killed) by a group of Kshatriya warriors. In retaliation, Parasurama vowed to rid the world of all Kshatriya. One group of warriors are said to have saved themselves by running away and hiding in the jungles of Kamrup, adopting the customs of the indigenes and accepting tribal women as wives. By arguing that he was a descendant of these runaway warriors now reclaiming his rightful heritage, a legitimate claim to Kshatriya status was established for Viswa Singha. This story also provides substantiation for present-day claims to higher status by the Rajbanshi. Jamanadas (2003) recognizes this as a common strategy recently adopted by the *Hindutva* movement to support assimilation policies.

[8]Also known as the Thunderbolt Vehicle, in contrast to Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism, Vajrayana Buddhism was established in Tibet in the 11th Century. Founded on a doctrine of reversal, "instead of denigrating the phenomenal world,…[it] insists that the phenomenal world can be used as a means of attaining salvation" (Tylor 1973,62-65).

A divine origin was devised for Viswa Singha in another story, which accredits his conception to the god Siva, who seeing the great beauty of Hira (the daughter of Haju and mother of Viswa Singha), assumed her husband's form and had sexual intercourse with her. This divine justification not only supports present-day Rajbanshi claims for high status in the caste system but also provides the basis for the title Sivabangshi. Members of the royal family who expressed concern regarding their own position in the caste system are reputed to have been reassured that since they were "*rajbanshi*", literally "of the king's lineage," they were assured a high place in the caste system. Other members of the community were not accorded such high status and many subsequently converted to other religions (Bahadur 1966, Bessaignet 1964, Giri 1950, Mukherjee 1963, Sattar 1971).

After the death of Viswa Singha in 1540, his son Narnarayan took control of the kingdom, extending the borders, consolidating his power and repulsing attacks of Ahoms from the east and of Muslims from the south. It is also during this time that a *Vaishnava* reformation took place under the tutelage of Sankar Deb who preached salvation through faith and prayer rather than the ritual sacrifice demanded by Saktism (Bahadur 1966; Gait 1963). Narnarayan's brother, Sukladhvaj, was also known as Chilarai or the "Kite King" because of his great agility in battle.[9] Between the two brothers, they extended the kingdom into parts of Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri and Rangpur in present-day Bangladesh (Bahadur 1966, Gait 1963). In the late 1500s, however, the kingdom was divided into east and west portions under warring factions of the royal family. The western portion, (where Chuchuli is located) continued to be known as Kamarupa, but also took the name Koch Hajo after one of its kings. Allied with Muslim forces securely established immediately to the south, the western portion shortly thereafter became no more than a satellite of Bengal. The eastern half of the kingdom fell under the control of the Ahoms and became known as Kamata Koch and later Cooch Behar. It continued to exist until under the Cooch Bihar Merger Agreement of August 1948 when it became part of the Indian union.

Conversion and the Hindus of Chuchuli

Whether the Kshatriya origins of Viswa Singha are legitimate or contrived, the term Rajbanshi has remained in popular use and conversion of tribal groups to Hinduism is common and ongoing throughout northern Bangladesh, northern

[9] A kite is a bird of prey of the Falconidae family

West Bengal, and Assam (Bahadur 1966, see also Mukherjee 1994, Chatterjee 2008, Xaxa 1999). Conversion to Hinduism has also been documented among a number of plains groups (Basu 1995, Hazarika 2004, Risley 1891, Sattar 1971) and today, large numbers wear the sacred thread (lugun) and claim Kshatriya status (Bahadur 1966, Giri 1950). Mukherjee describes Rajbanshis in north Bengal who "follow the occupation of *Vaisya*, in the absence of the occupation of the *Kshatriya*, and because they became fallen in the past" (1963, 208-9). Jaffrelot (2003) similarly asserts that "myths of origin of the low castes are always centred around the idea of an initial decline…they have fallen from this rank."

These claims take caste as a given; they recognize and reinforce the superiority and power of the Brahmins. For the most part, however, Hindus from other parts of the country do not accept the Rajbanshis' claim and designate them instead as Scheduled Castes or tribal people (Basu 1995, Chatterjee 2008, Hazarika 2004). Nevertheless the Hindus of Chuchuli wear the sacred *lugun*, follow Hindu precepts, and claim the caste title of Barman – a title derived from the dynasty of early kings of Pragjyotisha. Harikishore Adhikari, who wrote the 1st history of the Rajbanshi in Bengali in1907 (cited in Basu 1995), supports Rajbanshi claims of direct descent from King Bhaskar Barman, the last and reputedly most powerful of the Barman kings of Kamarupa (594-650 AD). As indicated in the introduction, the Rajbanshi of Chuchuli do not claim the "*rajbanshi*" descriptor outright as a general rule, although the term is appropriate and is used by outsiders to describe them. It was only after considerable discussion that the claim was made by my landlord: then immediately was discounted by my friend and research companion, who in claiming "*poliya*" to be a more appropriate term raised another interesting correspondence. Since the word *poliya* derives from the verb "*paliya jan*", meaning "to run away" or "to throw off", the reference to the Kshatriya of the Parasurama myth who ran away from persecution seems evident.[10]

A number of indigenous Rajbanshi scholars (cf. Adhikari 1907, cited in Basu 1995, see also Barman 1928, Roy 1902) have asserted distinct cultural and status differences between the Koch and Rajbanshi groups based on reinterpretations of the same "racial" and scriptural evidence used by colonial scholars (Basu 1995, 48). Roy (1902) argues for a long-standing distinction between Rajbanshi and Koch people in Rangpur district of Bangladesh; based on the claim that the Rajbanshi are not Hinduized or "converted" Koch but rather a separate and

[10]I did not make this connection until after I had left Bangladesh and was able to research this connection in the literature (see Basu 1995, Chatterjee 2008, Dalton 1872, Gruning 1912, Mukherjee 1994, Risley 1891)

distinct group of long duration (cited in Basu 1995). Adhikari (1907 cited in Basu 1995) similarly claims that Rajbanshi Hindus claiming Kshatriya status long before the Sanskritization of Viswa Singha were recognized as *Bhanga Kshatriyas* (see also Barman 1941, Karlsson 1997). Basu (1995, 60-61) citing Roy-Barma (1988) claims the Rajbanshi as a branch of the Kamboj royal dynasty who originated in north-western Kashmir and established themselves as rulers in north Bengal in the 10th century AD. Similarly, popular belief in north Bengal holds the Rajbanshi to be descendents of the Cooch Behar royal family (Karlsson 1997). "The common thread that bind all of [these explanations] together," claims Basu, "is the effort to create a convincing myth to prove the Kshatriya status of the Rajbanshis" – a mythical justification which Phule (1991), Ambedkar (1989) and Kumar (1999) would argue (if for different reasons) is unjustified and unnecessary.

According to Jaffrelot (2000, 3), Phule (1991) created a "pre-Aryan pedigree for the Shudras" based on historical accounts of protest against the Brahman caste. His aim was to engender unity among lower ranked castes by rejecting the caste system altogether, along with Brahmans as role models. In this way, the vain struggle for acceptance implicit in the Sanskritization process is evaded (Jaffrelot 2003, 14). Similarly, Ambedkar (1989) writing specifically about Dalit groups rejected "racialized" myths that justify the caste system, arguing instead that indigenous (i.e. Buddhist) kings had been subjugated by Aryan invaders. Ambedkar's appeal intent was for Dalit people to develop a strong ideological basis for questioning their subordinate rank and for them to opt out by (re)embracing the egalitarian doctrines of Buddhism (Jaffrelot 2000, 3). Kumar (1999, 9), by contrast, places the responsibility for caste prejudice firmly, if more recently, at the door of the British colonial administration, their inability to comprehend the intricacies of the system and their willingness to capitalize on the inherently hierarchical social structure.

In the end regardless of how one explains the situation, the message from all of these scholars remains the same: Adivasi, Dalit and lower caste communities are descended from the original inhabitants of India. As such, they should be free to reject racist interpretations of caste as "alien" to South Asia, a system imposed by force by outsiders. Accordingly, there is no justification for elite emulation or continuing to negotiate for a higher position within the system. Rather, opting for a more egalitarian alternative provides the only viable course of action.

Conclusion

Hinduization and Sanskitization are processes that characterize the Rajbanshi movement and from a purely theoretical perspective, these processes should confer higher status and all of the benefits that accompany this. Nevertheless, the Rajbanshi in Bangladesh continue to live in poverty, unemployment and underemployment, landlessness and political marginalization (Hazarika 2004). Accordingly, the strategies of conversion to Hinduism and elite emulation have not benefited the Rajbanshi in terms of social, economic and political advancement. Indeed, it would seem that these strategies only reinforce pre-existing social, political and economic structures and prejudices. Today there are no kings and Sanskritization among the Rajbanshi of Bangladesh has proven to be an interesting, albeit not particularly successful, study in indigenous development.

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