

# Rangpur Sahitya Parishad and Rajbanshi Community: An Introduction by Panchanan Barma

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## **Abstract:**

This paper explores Panchanan Barma's involvement in the 'Rangpur Sahitya Parishad,' an engagement that provided him with the platform to carve out a unique identity and lay the groundwork for the Rajbanshi archive, which served as a cornerstone for the establishment of the 'Kshatriya Samity.' This endeavor contributes to an assessment of the nature of Bengali nationalism propagated by the 'Sahitya Parishad.' The analysis seeks to illuminate the dynamics of the relationship between the Sahitya Parishad and the Rajbanshi community, as well as the influence of Bengali nationalism on this interaction. Within this context, the paper delves into Panchanan Barma's identification of the Rajbanshi as a distinct caste separate from the broader Bengali identity, a pivotal aspect of inquiry within the study.

**Keywords:** Rajbanshi, Rangpur Sahitya Parishad, Kshatriya Samity, Caste, Identity

The inception of Bengali literature owes much to European influence, shaping its trajectory and style. Even elements of English literature, including sentence structures, contributed to the development of written Bengali<sup>1</sup>. The establishment of the Asiatic Society aimed not only to foster vernacular literature and language for Indian interests but also for European engagement. It sought to understand Indian culture and language, ultimately serving British colonial ambitions. This period catalyzed Indian national consciousness, prompting a departure from European literary norms towards the creation of indigenous narratives. The emergence of nationalism<sup>2</sup> intertwined with the development of national history writing, initially inspired by European models but eventually tailored to local contexts. Print media played a pivotal role in spreading nationalist ideas, facilitated by advancements in modern printing technology.<sup>3</sup> Partha Chatterjee, in "Nation and its Fragments,"<sup>4</sup> emphasizes the significance of local environments and experiences, particularly language, in shaping notions of nationhood. He argues for a departure from universal concepts towards recognizing the unique ethnic unity and perceptions of different locales. Language, particularly Bengali, played a central role in fostering cultural unity among Bengali-speaking people. The Bangiya Sahitya Parishad contributed to formal language debates while championing the purity of the Bengali language, albeit at the expense of other regional languages within

<sup>1</sup> Apurba Kumar Ray, *Unish shatoker bangle goddo sahitya: Ingraji Provab*, Kolkata: Jiggasa, 1367, B.S. p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Gautam Bhadra, *Ninmoberger Itihas*, (Eds. Gautam Bhadra and Parth Chattopadhyay), Kolkata: Ananda, 1998, pp. 133-134.

<sup>3</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the origin and the spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, revised edition, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments, Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Bengal. This resulted in a perceived universality of Bengali, overshadowing the linguistic diversity of the region. Initiatives like the Rangpur Sahitya Parishad aimed to preserve oral narratives from marginalized areas, yet a division emerged concerning history and language representation. Literary judgments often prioritized Bengali universality, marginalizing the languages and cultures of other regions within Bengal. Panchanan Barma's work exemplifies this tension, as he highlighted the linguistic and cultural richness of local languages in opposition to dominant Bengali hegemony.<sup>5</sup> By incorporating the oral language of the Rajbanshis into written form, Barma underscored the unity and diversity inherent in Bengal's linguistic landscape.

The discussed article delves into the presence of the Rajbanshis, inhabitants of the northern region of present-day West Bengal, including Rangpur and Dinajpur of undivided Bengal. Within Rajbanshi society, Panchanan Barma held a prominent position as a 'Thakur'.<sup>6</sup> In 1910, he established the 'Kshatriya Samiti' in present-day Rangpur, Bangladesh, with the aim of fostering caste consciousness among a segment of the Rajbanshi community. The primary objective of forming the 'Kshatriya Samiti' was to acquaint the Rajbanshis with global events and cultivate unity consciousness among them, drawing inspiration from the ideals of the Renaissance. The initial phase of this endeavor was initiated through the Rangpur Sahitya Parishad, where Panchanan Barma commenced the exploration of the Rajbanshis' historical and contemporary social structures through practical experiences, narratives, and anecdotes. This exploration eventually paved the way for the establishment of the 'Kshatriya Samiti'. In the discussed article, the focus lies on contextualizing Panchanan Barma's ideas within the milieu of the Rangpur Sahitya Parishad, rather than delving extensively into the broader activities associated with the establishment of the 'Kshatriya Samiti'. The emphasis is on elucidating Barma's significant contributions to the intellectual landscape of the region.

On the 11th of Baishakh in the year 1312 of the Bengali calendar, a Monday, the Rangpur Sahitya Parishad was inaugurated at the Rangpur Town Hall with 28 founding members.<sup>7</sup> The initial editorship of this esteemed institution was entrusted to Zamindar Surendranath Ray Chaudhuri, with Mahimaranjan Ray Chaudhuri assuming the presidency.<sup>8</sup> Panchanan Barma's name notably graced the editorial board of the society's journal.<sup>9</sup> Although Panchanan Barma hailed from Cooch Bihar, he relocated to Rangpur to pursue a career in law during this period. A decade prior, under the leadership of Zamindar Harimohan Roy (Khajangji), the Rajbanshis of Rangpur had begun asserting a distinct identity in public discourse. Upon his arrival in Rangpur, Barma became acquainted with the caste movement initiated by Harimohan Roy under the banner of 'Brata Kshatriya Jatir Unnaynani Bidhayani Shaba'<sup>10</sup> (Brotherhood Kshatriya Nation Development Council). In a parallel fashion to his involvement with the Rangpur Sahitya Parishad's formation in 1905, Barma assumed the role of editorship for its publication.

Another objective of this institution was to explore North Bengal through research projects, and the literary society played a pioneering role in this endeavor. It marked the first systematic effort to think

<sup>5</sup> Gautam Bhadra and Dipa De, *chintar chalchitra: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad (1300-1330), sahitya parishad Patrika, 1401-1402, B.S. Joint Issue*, (Ed. Satyajit Chowdhury), Kolkata: Bangiya sahitya Parishad, 1997, p. 52.

<sup>6</sup> Sukhbilas Barma, *Indomitable Panchanon – an objective study on Rai Sahib Panchanan Barma*, New Delhi, Global Vision Publishing House, 2017, p. 1

<sup>7</sup> Dipak Kumar Ray, *manishi Panchanan er kshatra andolon- onalochito ordhay*, Malda: Kalyani Publications, 2013, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* pp 29-30.

<sup>9</sup> Kshitish Chandra Barman, (Ed.), *Thakur Panchanan swarak*, Kolkata: Binapani Press, 2001, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Bimal Chandra Barman, *Uttar Upaneshik kale Rajbanshi sampraday obosthan O sonkot: pochim Bonger Uttar bongo ebong bangladesher Uttarrangsher ekti tulongamulak alochona*, Jadavpur University, Kolkata: Unpublished M.Phil. Dissertation, International Relations Department, 2011, pp. 66-67.

about and analyze North Bengal. Panchanan Barma was actively engaged in this pursuit. However, a prevailing prejudice within Bengali society created a distance between Bengalis and the Rajbanshis, acting as a barrier to understanding and collaboration. In the biography of Upendranath Barman,<sup>11</sup> experiences shed light on this divide. He harbored resentment towards the higher-caste individuals for appropriating Rajbanshi belongings, a sentiment that likely influenced Panchanan Barma's decision to establish the 'Kshatriya Samiti'. Nevertheless, from the Research Circle of the literary society, Barma transitioned into his political journey, delving into the historical world of the Rajbanshis. Years before the formation of the 'Kshatriya Samiti', the earlier-established 'Rangpur Sahitya Parishad' provided Barma with the platform to explore North Bengal. The council facilitated research discussions on diverse topics such as Kamrup-Kamatapura, Pundra-Varendra, Gaud-Banga history, archaeology, literature-culture, and language.<sup>12</sup> Eminent writers like Akshay Kumar Mitra, Nagendranath Basu, and others contributed significantly to these discussions, establishing Rangpur as a hub of literary and intellectual activity. The Research Circle of the council attracted educated Bengalis proficient in English, inspired by the intellectual discourse of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta. This discourse spurred the formation of new organizations initiated by Bengalis, reflecting a growing interest in historical research. The origin of the 'Rangpur Sahitya Parishad' can be traced back to the desire to establish a district-based organization for national history research akin to the 'Bangiya Sahitya Parishad' in Kolkata. While the primary objective of the latter was to promote Bengali language and literature, there was a tendency to consider the Rajbanshis' spoken language as a Bengali dialect,<sup>13</sup> consequently categorizing them as 'Bengalis'.

The Rangpur Sahitya Parishad has primarily been engaged in the exploration of the historical background of Pundra country<sup>14</sup>, ancient Pragjyotishpur<sup>15</sup>, or Maldah<sup>16</sup>, albeit it's largely mythical nature. The past, a source of pride, has been prominently featured in such inquiries. A significant portion of the publication expresses a keen interest in reviving ancient traditions while also commemorating past glories. For example, the acknowledgment of Bankimchandra's expression of indignation in "There is no history of Bengal" has been notable. At the seventh annual convention, the President of Rangpur Sahitya Parishad, Sharat Kumar Ray, emphasized this theme extensively in his address. He articulated, "There is no history of Bengalis," echoing a sentiment that has persisted for centuries. Noted educationist Binay Kumar also underscored this notion in his historical essay of 1912, which highlighted the valor of Rajput, Sikh, and Maratha communities in the Indian arena, while suggesting that the dynamism and character strength of Bengalis, their unity, and intellect are yet to be distinctly acknowledged. However,

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<sup>11</sup> Upendranath Barman, Thakur Panchanan Barman Jibon Charit, Sixth Edition, Rayganj: 1416 B.S., p. 13; Upendranath Barman, Uttar Banglar Sekal O Jibon Smiti, Jalpaiguri: Shree Durga Press, 1392, B.S. pp. 43-45.

<sup>12</sup> Kshitish Chandra Barman, (Ed.), Thakur Panchanan swarak, Kolkata: Binapani Press, 2001, p. 18. .

<sup>13</sup> At the University of Calcutta, Professor Ashutosh Bhattacharya from the Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literature writes in 1380, "Their spoken language characteristics can be observed in the Kamrupi dialect. Among the Rajbanshi community, the dialect of Bengali that is prevalent is known as Rajbanshi dialect." Harishchandra Pal (Ed.), Folk Songs of North Bengal, Bhawaiya Section, Kolkata: Sen & Co., 1380, p. XI.

<sup>14</sup> Prohash Chandra Sen, Pundra Desh Nirnoy, Rangpur Sahitya Parishad Patrika, Volume Four (Quarterly), Edited by Panchanan Sarkar (Ed.), Kolkata: Metcalf Press, 1316 B.S., pp. 111-121.

<sup>15</sup> Padmanath Bhattacharyya Bidyabinod, President's Speech at the Third Conference of North Bengal Literary Convention, Rangpur Sahitya Parishad Patrika, Volume Four (Quarterly), Edited by Panchanan Sarkar (Ed.), Kolkata: Metcalf Press, 1316 B.S., pp. 137-149.

<sup>16</sup> Radhesh Chandra Seth, Malad and Maldah, Rangpur Sahitya Parishad Patrika, Volume Four (Quarterly), Edited by Panchanan Sarkar (Ed.), Kolkata: Metcalf Press, 1316 B.S., pp. 105-110.

the question arises: Why is this so? Is it indeed accurate to claim that there is no history of Bengalis?<sup>17</sup> In response, it was suggested that diligent efforts in the region, particularly in North Bengal, could uncover many traces of ancient Bengal's grandeur. A similar sentiment is echoed in the activities report of the Rangpur branch for the fifth year, stating, "Intellectuals and members of the Rangpur branch from Kolkata and Rangpur Sahitya Parishad have been collaborating, uniting efforts in one place."<sup>18</sup>

In the address delivered by the President on the 11th of Ashadh, 1316 Bangabda, it was stated, "North Bengal has long been renowned for its literary discourse. Here, luminaries such as Vhatta DibakarAtmaj, Mahamahopadhyay Holayuth, Aniruddha Vhatta, Navya Nyayatava Vikasakara Gadaadhara Bhattacharya, Udyichi Chattopadhyaya Ramakrishna, the author of Ratnamala Grammar, a distinguished linguist, Mahamahopadhyay Udayanacharya, Bhaktacharamani Narottamadas, Gobinda Mishra, have etched their names in the annals of literary discourse. Presently, figures like Shibchandra Siddhanta, Harishchandra Goswami... continue to devote their lives to literary pursuits. Furthermore, Mahamahopadhyay Panditaraj Shriyukt Yadaveshwar Tarkaratna, Pandit Shriyukt Kokileshwar Bhattacharya Bidyaratna, Pandit Haranchandra Chakraborty Kabiraj... persistently contribute to literary discussions for the betterment of society. All of these luminaries hail from North Bengal. Moreover, it is within North Bengal that the Rangpur branch of the Sahitya Parishad has swiftly attained success in literary discourse and activities."<sup>19</sup>

In the discourse delivered by the President of the Fourth Assembly of the Rangpur Literary Society, it is remarked: "Wherever Bengalis have tread, they have unearthed extraordinary talents. In contemporary times, the rapid expansion and potent influence of Bengali literature raise doubts whether any other nation can rival it. These assertions can be made without hesitation. Yet, we must not overlook the courage and political aspirations of Bengalis, particularly those of North Bengal. It is within North Bengal that great cities have flourished, encompassing the lands of Gauda and Varendra, the former capitals of the Palas, and the location of Cooch Bihar. The historical narrative surrounding the rise and fall of these regions remains largely unexplored in the realm of human sciences, thus presenting an opportunity for a captivating new chapter in Bengali literature. A substantial number of inscriptions and pillars discovered in Bengal originate from North Bengal, underscoring its ancient heritage. The region's elevated terrain, contiguous mountain ranges, and diverse population including various human and non-human species have bestowed upon it a unique significance across various domains. Since ancient times, Aryans have coexisted here alongside the 'Mongoloid' branch of humanity, while the mountainous populace may have roots in the 'Negroid' and possibly Dravidian lineage. Amidst periods of conflict and cooperation, the exchange of knowledge among these diverse human groups has fostered the development of various martial arts for both aggression and self-defense, instilling North Bengal with enthusiasm, resilience, and a remarkable aptitude for craftsmanship. Through mutual learning and proximity, they have enriched each other's wisdom, fortified their valor in conflicts, and collectively propelled the region to prominence in art, commerce, literature, and various crafts. In my estimation, this

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<sup>17</sup> Sarat Kumar Ray, Presidential Address at the Seventh Conference of Rangpur Sahitya Parishad, Rangpur Sahitya Parishad Patrika, Volume Four (Quarterly), Edited by Panchanan Sarkar (Ed.), Kolkata: Metcalf Press, 1316 B.S., pp. 1-2.

<sup>18</sup> Activities Report of the Fifth Year of Rangpur Sahitya Parishad, Fourth Annual General Meeting, Dharmo Sabha Hall, Rangpur, 11/12 Ashar, 1316, B.S. pp. 4-5.

<sup>19</sup> Sarat Kumar Ray, Presidential Address at the Seventh Conference of Rangpur, Rangpur Sahitya Parishad Patrika, Volume Four (Quarterly), Edited by Panchanan Sarkar (Ed.), Kolkata: Metcalf Press, 1316 B.S., pp. 7-8.

interplay of cultures and knowledge exchange serves as the primary catalyst for the advancement of North Bengal." <sup>20</sup>

From the aforementioned sentiment, it becomes evident that North Bengal serves as the focal point for delving into the ancient history of Bengal. A considerable segment of North Bengal's populace traces its lineage back to royal ancestries. Particularly in regions such as Rangpur, Dinajpur, Cooch Bihar, and Jalpaiguri, these areas are predominantly inhabited by royal families, thereby imbuing the region with a distinct cultural ambiance. Should this distinctive notion, primarily nurtured by Bengalis, persist without altering the exclusive mindset regarding its custodianship, Panchanan Barma's departure from this narrative paradigm stands noteworthy. Venturing beyond this conventional framework, Barma embarked on crafting an alternative historical discourse centered on North Bengal. The focal point of this historical narrative revolved around the quotidian lives of these royal families, elucidated through articles or stories published in various literary magazines.

He extracted some examples from the lives of the royal families and incorporated them into his writing. Although the prevalent topic was storytelling, his primary focus was on discussion. While Bengali language and Bengali nationalism were subjects of his discourse, he independently mentioned the language of the first royal families or the locals of North Bengal. He was keen to point out that the words used in our society are akin to the incomplete Sanskrit words of 'Panini Dhatu'. In presenting a story called 'Nadim Paramaniker Patha',<sup>21</sup> he attempted to discuss the intelligence of the ancestors of this society, namely their political acumen, statecraft, and governance.<sup>22</sup> In other words, prevalent stories in society and their narratives had emerged as the ideal of social governance. He believed that 'Kamatabihari' had always given Bengal a separate identity in all respects. The Rangpur Sahitya Parishad was established to serve this idea.<sup>23</sup> To avoid making the lives of the royal families a singular narrative in the consciousness of Bengali nationalism, he went beyond the role of the editor of the Rangpur Literary Council and formed the 'Kshatriya Committee'. Thus, among various projects of the Kshatriya Committee, one was the proposal for the creation of 'National Knowledge Repository and History'.<sup>24</sup> He has taken a clear plan for collecting ingredients for the style of writing national history. The outline of how to write the national history of the royal lineage was:

- A. Traditional oral tales
- B. Form tales
- C. Legendary tales
- D. Tales and legends
- E. Description of the ancient glory of the country and mutual communication on the subject.
- F. Collection of indicators of past events and Eastern symbols.

<sup>20</sup> Shashodhar Ray, President's Speech at the Fourth Annual General Meeting of Rangpur Literary Society, Rangpur Sahitya Parishad Patrika, Volume Four (Quarterly), (Ed. Panchanan Sarkar), Kolkata: Metcalf Press, 1316 B.S., p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> Ananda Gopal Ghosh, Girindra Nath Barman, Nilanshu Sekhar Ray, and Nirmal Chandra Ray (Eds.), Kshatriya Samitir Ekadosh Barshik Odhibeshan, Birtto- Biboroni, Kshatriya Samitir Odhibeshan Biboron, 1910-1935, B.S.. Kolkata: Vibhuti Printing Works, 2019, p. 572.

<sup>22</sup> Panchanan Barma, Nadim Paramaniker Patha, Rangpur Rupkatha, Edited by Thakur Panchanan, Compiled by Kshitish Chandra Barman, Thakur Panchanan swarak Kolkata: 2001, pp. 91-95.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid p. 126.

<sup>24</sup> Ananda Gopal Ghosh, Girindra Nath Barman, Nilanshu Sekhar Ray, and Nirmal Chandra Ray (Eds.), Kshatriya Samitir Ekadosh Barshik Odhibeshan, Birtto- Biboroni, Kshatriya Samitir Odhibeshan Biboron, 1910-1935, B.S.. Kolkata: Vibhuti Printing Works, 2019, pp. 570-572.



In the proposed discussion, it was mentioned that the data is scattered here and there. If collected and compiled, it can lead to a systematic description, forming a repository of knowledge. Panchanan Barma attempted to explain the importance of this task in the proposed context of the committee's surroundings. Here, he tried to present the methodological concept of historical understanding combining the present with the past. He aimed to reveal the latent meanings hidden amidst the discourse of past and present, transcending the prevalent symbols of contemporary society. From there, he brought forth the prevalent verses of the royal society. By expressing their meanings and philosophical ideals, he revived the ancient glory. As the rightful inheritors of that past, their current position creates a sense of wonder in his mind. He wrote: "We are now devoid of glory, impoverished. We have nothing of the present glory of our country. However, we have countless thoughts, ideas, and words. They seem not to belong to this era or this condition. Throughout the land, we see extensive remnants of ancient brilliance amidst widespread devastation. Speaking of the grandeur of ancient times, invoking the glory of ancient greatness, and comparing the conditions of past and present without taking a long breath, arouses deep emotion. When we discuss the words 'Kupi' and 'Chandri Khawa' commonly used in our society, it becomes apparent that our society has been protecting its own from ancient and prehistoric times. These words are not used in other societies, nor are they seen in recent Sanskrit or poetic language; however, these words resemble the incomplete Sanskrit words 'Pis Gatou' and 'Chadir Mage' as taught in the Panini Dhatus." <sup>25</sup>

Panchanan wrote:

"Jāra jeknā jāter kṣōyū.

Āgune nā chōbē jalē nā dhōyū."<sup>26</sup>

Meaning: The characteristics of a caste do not perish in any way. Even fire or water cannot destroy them. According to him:

"The word 'chōbē' contained in this verse belongs to the 'chubh' root, and the word 'kṣōyū' is derived from the 'kṣi' root; these words are unused in other societies but are used in our society, indicating the extremely ancient aspect of the Aryan society of our society."<sup>27</sup>

Panchanan wrote:

"Āśā sē parama dukhū.

Ni āśā parama sukha'."<sup>28</sup>

("Hope is the ultimate sorrow.

No hope is the ultimate happiness.")

Meaning, expecting something implies bearing sorrow, while working without expectations leads to finding happiness in the endeavor.

The philosophical expression helps elevate the status of the royal society. Panchanan Barma writes... This determination is the result of deep research by the natural scholars and the ultimate achievement of profound scholars. He believes this analogy directs towards the direction of national ancient knowledge and glory. Again, he writes: "Offering homage in times of need to sons and others, maternal blessings - 'May your father be well; as many hairs on your head, so be your life span. Let your hopes be in every way, you are not born to be someone else's hope' - the patriarchs instill in the hearts of the ambitious, the desire and attitude of the great high-minded heads of the noble warrior class. May the sons and others

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pp. 570-572.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p 572.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.572.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p 572.

have a long life, but that long life should not be devoid of heroism. Rather, may they become imbued with abundant glory, may the protectors be unapproachable to others, and may they possess an imperishable, unstoppable spirit in their own glory." <sup>29</sup>

In his sociological research book "Rajbanshis in North Bengal," Charuchandra Sanyal discusses the social relationships of the Rajbanshis, likening each Rajbanshi village to a cooperative. They work together in family rituals, agriculture, and other tasks. They maintain social unity in a very simple and ancient tradition.<sup>30</sup> Sanyal mentions that the language and customs of the Rajbanshis are often different from those of Bengal. He writes that in North Bengal, Rajbanshis use names and salutations that are not similar to the Bengali language. For example, while Bengalis call their mother "মা" (ma), Rajbanshis call her "আঁদি" (aai). In Bengali, a mother's mother is called "দিদা" (dida), while in Rajbanshi, she is called "আবো" (abo). A wife is called "বউ" (bou) in Bengali, but in Rajbanshi, she is called "মাইয়া" (maiya).<sup>31</sup> There are many such examples. This linguistic independence creates a path for a collective life that is ubiquitous in society. This practice was started by the Rajbanshis. The following discussion delves into this.

The exploration of the past through the creation of Rajbanshi culture serves to awaken the ethnic consciousness. The Rajbanshis initiated the foundational phase of the Rajbanshi movement within the Kshatriya community. By delving into the significance of the oral language within Rajbanshi society, it aids scholars in comprehension, thereby underscoring the pivotal role of Rajbanshi autonomy in shaping the nation's framework.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p 572.

<sup>30</sup> Charuchandra Senal, *Rajbanshi of North Bengal*, translated by Tripti Santra, Ananda, Kolkata, 2017, pp. 244-245.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, pp 251-252.