

ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION THROUGH ETHNIC TABOO: A CASE STUDY OF RAJBANSHI COMMUNITY IN NORTH BENGAL

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Abstract

Taboo was one of the cultural beliefs and practices among the Rajbanshi community to control human behaviour in order to save environment. Rajbanshi culture, religion and their environmental philosophy showed a strong harmony with nature. But recently western or modern approach ignored this indigenous relationship between nature and human beings to maximize the human satisfaction which in turn led to serious environmental damage. The environmental degradation was caused due to the displacement of indigenous culture, habits and practices. Rapid growth of modernization, industrialization and urbanization were gradually diminishing their environmental taboos and so on. As a result a massive climatic change and natural calamities had been noticed in their region.

The Rajbanshi community believed that since there was no cultural control of environment protection, there was no ecological balance between social environment and natural environment. They believed that social environment was made up of in accordance with natural settings and not vice versa, otherwise natural calamities were inevitable. However the Rajbanshi community followed protective taboos in order to carry out the blessings of nature and the following paper intended to explore how the taboos were practiced as environmental safeguard.

Keywords: Environment protection; Ethnic; Rajbanshi community; Taboo.

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Introduction

Rajbanshi Community of Northern part of West Bengal follows a lot of customs in their daily way of life. Some customs are general while some are gender related. Taboo is one of the social and cultural practices for environment protection. Here taboo means forbidden practice. It means control of human behavior with the use of natural ingredients. It is one kind of verbal law in primitive society. If somebody does not obey the taboo, he or she is not punished but it is believed that he or she may fall in severe attack both from physical and psychological disorders or violation of taboo may result in disaster. They believe that the violation of the social and environmental taboo is the primary cause of the ill health and misery. So traditionally they have developed their own protective customs and taboos for the maintenance of healthy life and environment.

Rajbanshi community is large and indigenous community of northern part of India. It is highly concentrated in northern part of West Bengal, Assam and Rangpur district of Bangladesh. Being an ancient community they have their own environmental custom to save nature for the maintenance of their dwelling ecology. They are a peasant community by profession. The religious beliefs, values, eating, drinking, food habits and rituals are profoundly influenced by the environmental taboo.

In early period the men were aware of the influence of nature and constitute the social environment by making intimate relationship constantly surrounded by natural environment. Hence various community customs and taboos have been evolved for the control of natural ingredients in order to survival of human beings. Folk culture, religion and their philosophy shows a strong harmony with nature. But recently western or modern approach ignored the indigenous relationship between nature and human beings to maximize the human satisfaction which in turn leads to serious environmental damage. The environmental degradation is caused due to the displacement of indigenous culture, habits and practices.

Rajbanshi taboo is one of the cultural believes and practices to control human behaviour in order to save environment. Rapid growth of industrialization and urbanization are gradually shaking their environmental taboos and so on. As a result a massive climatic change has been noticed in

their region. Not only in that region but also all other regions in India as well as world where indigenous belief systems have been unsettled, the massive natural calamities have occurred. The Rajbanshi community believes that since there is no cultural control of environment protection, there is no ecological balance between social environment and natural environment. They believe that social environment is shaped by natural settings and not vice versa. If so, then natural disaster is inevitable. However the Rajbanshi community follows protective traditional taboos and practices in order to carry out the blessings of nature and the following paper intends to explore how the taboos are followed to save the environment by the Rajbanshi community.

1. Objective

The following paper is based on to explore-

- i. What types of environmental taboos are found among the Rajbanshi community?
- ii. How do ethnic taboos help to protect the environment?

3. Methodology

The Present paper is based on data from both primary and secondary sources collected through field survey and participant observation method. The primary data were collected with the help of specially prepared interview schedule. The schedule included the questions related to the general information about the socio-cultural and religious beliefs and practices and environmental knowledge. Some secondary data have been collected from forest office, meteorological department, books, journals and newspapers. Various reports, records and documents prepared by the Government have been studied and used as sources of secondary data.

The study has been conducted in the entire North Bengal and special attention has been given where the Rajbanshi Community dominant presence in this geographical boundary. The survey cum field work for the present study has been conducted in Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Darjeeling, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakhin Dinajpur and Maldah as part of North Bengal. All the districts are socio-economically backward and different Castes and Tribes have been living here with their ethnic identity. From this point of view, the present study intends to do an analytical and exploratory type of research work of ethnic taboo of Rajbanshi Community.

4. Types of Taboo

Sociologist and Anthropologist classified the Taboos into three categories e.g. Productive Taboo i.e. directly related with the agricultural production in agrarian society, Restrictive Taboo that restrains somebody from doing wrong things and Prohibitive Taboo which forbid someone not to keep touch with polluted or contaminated objects (Sarkar).

Rajbanshi Community follows a lot of taboos in their daily way of life. Some taboos are general while some are gender specific. Taboo is one of the cultural and environmental safeguards for the Rajbanshi community. Here taboo means some social restrictions. The taboo survives on the belief that if somebody does not obey the taboo, he or she may confront sever onslaught both from physical and psychological disorder and leads a pathetic life and face sever natural calamities. These taboos are of following types.

4.1. Taboo for Environmental Protection

i. Do not dig up the earth in the *Amabashya* (new moon) and *Purnima* (full moon)

Digging up in the *Amabashya* (new moon) and *Purnima* (full moon) is strictly prohibited. It is not only a custom but also to protect the surrounding environment of habitation by prohibiting soil erosion. Besides, earth is called *Basumata* (Mother goddess) who fosters everybody. Hence the Rajbanshi Community believes that hurt the earth means hurt the mother that brings curse to the family as well as society.

ii. Do not cut bamboo tree in the *Amabashya* (new moon) and *Purnima* (full moon)

Bamboo tree is so much essential that is used in every aspect in life from birth to death of human being. Nobody deny its usefulness. From hut making to pyres bamboo is inevitable to them. So, bamboo tree protection is attached to social custom and taboo. Otherwise the culprits who breach the taboo will be suffered.

iii. Do not plow in the *Amabashya* (new moon) and *Purnima* (full moon)

Plowing taboo is resembled to digging up the earth. Plowing is strictly prohibited for the same reason. If anybody does not obey this taboo, he would be faced different types of crisis and suffered for life long.

iv. Do not discharge stool or urine in water

Defecate or urinate in water is strictly forbidden among the Rajbanshi Community. It is not only a custom among them but also scientifically true for protection of environmental pollution.

- v. Do not keep cow with goat at a single place called (*goyal ghar*)

Rajbanshi is a peasant community by profession. So, domestication of animal is a part of agriculture. There are certain taboos regarding domestication of animals. Though cow and goat are reared simultaneously, but the rearing of cow is strictly separated from the touching of goat. Cow is thought to be mother goddess while goat's breathing is thought to be poisonous. So, its rearing is strictly restricted in the farmer's house.

Now these types of taboos are on the way to extinction. Modern elite class people level these taboos as superstitious believes and underestimate the believers. Rapid diminishing of plow and harrow causes serious soil erosion. Invention of tractor replaces the plow and harrow. Hence the plowing taboo wipe out and no man bother of it. When this transformation takes place, the original ecological balance is shocked and this in turn leads to social degradation. The people run towards maximize their profit by indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources.

Earlier every Rajbanshi household posses plow, harrow and bull for cultivation their land. Now these are replaced by modern technology. Harrowing culture by bull shows a strong harmony with nature. Today farming is done commercially by using modern technology. But the bull not only is used for plowing, but its cowdung is used for natural manuring and enrich it. Every Rajbanshi household had a cowdung heap termed "*Gobor Bhira*" for manuring their land. Now bull domestication significantly lessens that brings many fold impact on environment. Cowdung is replaced by chemical fertilizers which seriously affect the micronutrients of soil that in turn affect adversely human health also. Large number of insects, animal have been wiping out day by day by this modern technology and chemicals that causes serious land erosion and environmental degradation.

Soil erosion also takes place due to disappearance of large scale forest and natural vegetation that have been use for grazing field. Indiscriminate felling down of trees causes serious affect on environment and soil erosion. Earlier the Rajbanshi people follow some taboos against indiscriminate cutting down the trees and using land. But these practices are almost diminished totally. Hence indiscriminate felling down of trees is rampant now. They worship the bamboo and sal tress that shows a harmony between nature and human being. Now indiscriminate cutting

down the natural vegetation and trees causes rapid diminution of cattle populations. Cowdung is not only used for natural manuring but also used for fuel for domestic health and hygiene. So, fall in of cattle population causes serious shortage of fuel that brings multiple impacts on forest, social and natural environment.

Besides, the restricted taboo regarding domestication of cow and goat has been diminishing today. Rearing of goats dramatically increased faster than any other livestock in the farmer's house as there are hardly any other cattle like cow. S. C. Naik and T. N. Tiwari mention that goats are highly destructive to the environment by destroying the vegetation cover. Hence while rearing of cows has been declining due to rapid spread of modern technology, the rearing of goat has been increasing significantly in order to get financial support. Increasing population of goat has serious impact on forest and natural vegetation that in turn causes soil erosion and environment degradation, loss of crop harvest.

4.2. Taboo of Dwelling Ecology

Rajbanshi Community is a peasant community by profession. Their habitation, culture and daily way of life are based on nature. So, they try to control the human behavior by ecological caring. In this regard they take necessary steps for prevention of the environmental degradation. They believe that dwelling ecological set up prevent disease and protect them from natural calamities. Later on these traditional practices generally have been evolved as intuitional taboo to keep them away from different types of ailments and disasters.

The Rajbanshi Community believes in *Bastu Tantra* (*Bastu* Theory) which is based on highly scientific theory that provides healthy and hygienic life. The poem is cited here to describe their harmony with nature.

"Pube haas,

Paschime baas.

Uttare guya,

Dakshine dhuya." (Sanyal)

(English Version)

There is duck in the East,
In West the bamboo tree is the Best.
In north the betel nuts is there,
The South is bare.

The poem explains, dwelling should be made in the way so that it get proper sunlight and comfortable fresh air that makes the man stronger and healthy both mentally and physically that also helps to keep them disease free and it will protect them from natural calamities. The poem shows, the East side of the dwelling should have the ponds that indicates the open space from where direct sunlight fall on the dwelling. In this way the direct sunlight protects the home from being damp and being germ free and keeps its inhabitants in vivacious state of health. The South side of the home will be open to let fresh air. The betel-nut in the North and the bamboo tree in the West side would protect the home and its inhabitants from cold wind, storm and heat in different seasons throughout the year. It is not only a general practice during building of a house, but also a perfect scientific basis of socio-environmental ecology.

Ecological factors keep them in a state of positive health. For this they have to ensure all the ecological factors during preparation of the dwelling for the maintenance of the healthy life. In this regard they are managed by balanced ecological factors and for this reason they have institutionalized some taboos, beliefs and practices deeply rooted in their culture. Earlier they were self sufficient in all spheres of life and free from the curse of distorted modernization adverse effects of which triggers ecological imbalance and environmental degradation.

Conclusions:

Rajbanshi is the dominant ethnic community in North Bengal. They are a self sufficient peasant community practicing environmental customs since the ancient times. They are afraid of nature and reluctant to adopt modernized procedures that affect balance of nature. They have a strong respect for nature, traditional customs and taboos. They believe that modernization is harmful to human beings and comes with its harmful side effects. They maintain themselves within ethnic practices. So they prefer to avoid modern lifestyles. As a result they have developed their own customary taboos and practices for the wellbeing of human beings and for the smooth running of

civilization and sustainable development. They have experienced the merits of different aspects of nature and establish a healthy interdependent relationship among them. Now their culture, beliefs and practices are highly at stake in the face of rampant inroads lopsided modernity. So, it is urgently necessary to preserve their immense knowledge of ethno- environmental protection for the coming generation.

Eco-friendly culture and technologies of ethnic communities still carries a message to save the world through conservation of nature. Ethnic taboos and technologies have evolved in order to protect the environment. Modern culture and traditional technologies jeopardize the human existence by displacing these taboos and technologies. In this regard the government should take a role in supporting research for the indigenous wisdom for environment protection.

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