

Ray Saheb Panchanan Barma who Struggled to Empower Deprived People of Northeastern India Through Education

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Introduction

In the late nineteenth century, there emerged a great towering personality in Northeastern India, a saviour of the suffering people- named Panchanan Sarkar (later Barma). He was born in *Rajbanshi* community, a race of rulers; those are predominantly the habitants of eastern and north eastern India. He struggled during his whole life to establish equality and justice in the society. He has largely succeeded in his mission and paved the way for establishment of democratic principle in independent India. He was a source of solace and succour for the common people and due to which the people of his time as well as the people of present generation consider him to be a guiding force for free thinking. He is a source of constant inspiration for the people of Northeastern India in general and the *Rajbanshis* in particular. The people of *Rajbanshi* race regard him as the *Father of Rajbanshis Nation* – a *Messiah*. In recognition to his unparalleled service to the society, he was conferred with the rare and prestigious titles -to have ever been bestowed on any Indian -‘*Ray Sahib*’ and ‘*MBE* (Member of British Empire)’ by the British Crown. His mission was to attain *Shiksha* (education), *Samridhi* (economic prosperity) and *Shashan* (role in governance) for the people of his community, as well as the other indigenous people of India, by bringing them to the fold of education, which was denied to them by the Indian privileged caste people through the institution of caste.

Panchanan's Childhood

Panchanan was born in the year 1865 in Khalisamari village, under the jurisdiction of Mathabhanga sub-division of Cooch Behar Princely State, which is now a district of West Bengal of India. His father was Khosal Sarkar, a respectable *Jotdar* (land holding middle class). *Sarkar* was his acquired title. By virtue of education and respectable social position Khoshal was respectfully endowed with the surname *Sarkar*. Panchanan was brought up in his remote village under the care of his parents which was about 35 kilometers away from (west) Cooch Behar town. He was an extraordinary intelligent and outstandingly meritorious student. He took his primary education from his village school and was later admitted to the middle school at the nearest Sub-Divisional town Mathabhanga, six kilometers away from his village; where boy Panchanan had to stay in the school hostel. The bitter experience of the hostel, which he gathered in his childhood, made him understand the reality of the society. He encountered the ugly face of caste hatred which he considered to be the tool of disempowerment of a very large number of *Moolnivasis* of India.

Panchanan's Education

It was a painful and frustrating experience for Panchanan to stay away from home for his education fighting against all odds as there was hardly anyone in the hostel from a village and from farmers' and artisans' families to offer him the necessary warmth, friendship and company. The education, those days, was the privilege of the dominant caste and affluent class – in case of Bengal – the *Brahmins*, *Baidyas* and *Kayasthas*. But he withstood all difficulties

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due to his firm believe that it was only education which would empower him and help him to succeed in life. He fared extremely well in his School Board Examination in which was reflected in *The Cooch Behar Gazette*, the royal news bulletin, by ShriKalidasBagchi, the Education Superintendent, "PanchananSircar, a native of Cooch Behar, who passed in ME Examination in the first division from Mathabhanga School succeeded to secure the first place in the general list of the Rajshahi Division."

After passing out from the middle school, Panchanan took admission in the Jenkins High School (established in 1859) of the Cooch Behar capital town, which was the only high school in the whole princely state of Cooch Behar. On successful completion of his school education, he joined the Victoria College (now AcharyaBrajendraNathShil College), the only college of Cooch Behar. Having completed his Bachelor's degree, he obtained the Master's degree in Sanskrit Literature and the degree of Law from the Calcutta University. It needs a mention that he was the first postgraduate and the first law graduate among the Rajbanshis as well as the *MoolNiwas* of India.

Panchanan's Ethnic Background

PanchananBarma belonged to the *Rajbanshi* ethnic group. The *Rajbanshis* had the overwhelmingly large percentage of people in the Northeastern India, particularly in undivided Bengal of his time. *Rajbanshis* are the inhabitants of several adjoining countries too. As per the census of India of 1901, the population of *Rajbanshis* in India was 18,98,241. The *Rajbanshis* were the aboriginal Indians and their ethnic history is as glorious as that of the *Shakya* clan, the race of Gautam Buddha. Gautam Buddha belongs to *Shakya* clan from his father's side and to the *Kouliya* clan from his mother's side. The *Rajbanshi* clan is also one of such glorious ruling races of northeastern India.

Panchanan's Professional Life

In due course of time, the child Panchanan grew into a bubbling young man. Though he obtained the highest degree from the University, but was not greeted by the native state Emperor of Cooch Behar. He was not offered a befitting post in his native state. Rather on a silly pretext he was expelled from the kingdom in 1901. He took an exile to Rangpur, the nearby district, and started his career there as a law practitioner and simultaneously pursued his social reformation movement, the prime mission in his life. Perhaps his destiny drew him out of his birth place to provide him a large canvas to work on.

Panchanan's Concept of Education

Panchanan believed that education was the key to all-round progress of an individual, a society and a nation. During Panchanan's time, the British rulers opened education to

all, going against all restrictions created in India by the Ayans through the Hindu religious scripts. As per that only the *Brahmins* and *Kshatriyas* were privileged to go in for education – the master-key of all prosperity and human dignity. Though, as per the provisions of the British rule in India, the people of all classes were supposed to have come in the ambit of education, but economic and social barriers hindered them. Moreover, adequate opportunities were not created due to the disinterestedness of the officials of educational set-up who belonged to the higher strata of the society. Noticeably, due to the prohibitory provisions incorporated in the Hindu religious scripts, about a century ago, the common people started believing that they should keep themselves away from education and live the life of 'Devine Slaves' and enjoy slavery devoid of education. Thus, it became the Herculean task for Panchanan to create adequate infrastructures and simultaneously inspire the people to come in for education.

State of the Society During Panchanan's Time

In the nineteenth century, during PanchananBarma's time, the whole of Northeastern India was Hindu dominated. As a natural Hindu social phenomenon, the society was divided in caste structures. Some communities of Hindus used to hate the people of other communities as a matter of their duty, according to the caste laws of the *Vedas* and the *Manusmriti*. The people of disadvantageous communities used to be socially persecuted and deprived of their human dignity. Their occupation used to be determined by their caste. The vocations like farming, fishing, weaving, carpentry, oil extraction, pottery, animal rearing, scavenging, wood cutting, hair cutting, leather tanning, washing clothes, chariot and palanquin carrying and cremation work etc. were considered socially lowly occupations. The jobs assigned to them were made less remunerative and thereby they become economically weak and socially downgraded. The privileged caste people started considering the *Rajbanshi* too as one of the low caste group, as most of the *Rajbanshis* in his time started living on cultivation. Panchanan believed that it was education which would regain their past glory and therefore, he undertook the mammoth journey of empowering the common people of the country through enabling them to go in for education.

Panchanan's Observation on the State of the Society

The state of *Rajbanshis* during Panchanan's time was somewhat peculiar. The originally non-Hindu *Rajbanshi* emperors, by then, became the ardent followers of the Hinduism. Though the *Rajbanshi* kings were still the rulers of Cooch Behar Princely State and they formed the single largest population, but still no higher posts in the estate were under the occupation of the *Rajbanshi* people.

Virtually, the rule of the land was held by the caste Hindus. Though a king's race, other than the members of the royal family the *Rajbanshi* people had no much social esteem on their own land. The *Rajbanshis* gradually became powerless in the hands of the Hindu caste leaders.

Panchanan's Literary and Cultural Work

Immediately after his arrival at Rangpur, Panchanan joined *The Rangpur Sahitya Parishad* and took the responsibility of editing *The Rangpur Sahitya Parishad's* journal as its founding editor. He subsequently established *The Uttarbanga Sahitya Parishad* and started writing researched articles in and about *Rajbanshi* language and culture. *Rajbanshi* language was the official language of Kamatapur Dynasty (the preceding dynasty of the land), and one of the ancient languages of India. It was Panchanan's mother tongue, which was having a large speaker-base and rich literature. *Rajbanshi* language was the custodian of the great *Rajbanshi* culture which was gradually losing its place to newly born Bengali language. Panchanan's vigorous efforts of revival of the language and its literature yielded results. The *Rajbanshi* language is now recognized by the Government as an independent language; and the *Rajbanshi* literature in being regenerated these days by the *Moolnivasis* of Northeastern Indians at an accelerating speed. One of the renowned contemporary scholars of Bengal Sri Nagendera Nath Bose, while appreciating Panchanan's work remarked, "Panchanan Barma's scholarly pursuit is like a bright flame and his work on language provided me with more of research materials."

Panchanan's Socio-Political Movement

During the period of Panchanan Barma, the practice of untouchability was so severe that the life of the people of lower strata of caste hierarchy was miserable. The *Rajbanshis* too had no escape from the clutch of the inhuman suppression. To find its solution, he joined the association called *The Rangpur Bratya Khatriya Jatir Unnati Bidhayani Sabha* after he reached Rangpur. He then formed *The Kshatriya Samiti* in the year 1910. In the year 1913, he secured the recognition of the *Rajbanshi* community as the *Kshatriyas* – the second highest caste in the caste structure. He and his followers wore the holy thread and adopted the *Khatriya* surname – *Barma*. Presumably, it provided some social upliftment to his people. It became an added feather on his cap that he could break the invincible barriers of the caste structure. He held that the people of his community would gain social esteem by acquisition of the *Khatriya Upanayana* and that would help his community people to go in for education, have employment and create an upward mobilization; and it worked. Beginning with this, he launched a massive movement to educate his people to achieve the other goals – economic, political, social and cultural.

Panchanan's Educational Movement

Panchanan Barma was the visionary who could foresee that only through dependence on agriculture, a community like his would not prosper. He, thus, made efforts to encourage education in the *Rajbanshi* community and endeavoured to make them eligible for government job. He put education on the top of his agenda. To create interest for education among his people he addressed rallies, delivered lectures in annual conferences which used to be held in different places and used to have thousands of delegates, wrote verses and launched door to door campaigns. He tasked the leaders for *Mandalisto* to spread the message of education across the length and breadth of Northeastern India. He used to inspire the people in one hand and work for creation of infrastructures on the other. He convinced the *Jotdar* to start schools in their houses – including the night schools for illiterate adults – both men and women. He gradually got innumerable educational institutions established all over Northeastern India and took initiatives to establish hostels. He emphasized in his speech that, "Many people have the wrong notion that those who have land and property need not concern more on education of their children. They think that since looking after the property would be enough for their livelihood, why should they waste money on education? They are of the wrong notion that since there is no urge to go for job, why at all should they go in for higher education?" He emphasized for education for all.

Panchanan's Focus in Education

In course of his social work, Panchanan Barma undertook various tasks such as formed *Nari Raksha Sebak Dal* – nicknamed *Sebak Dal* – provided protection to women, organized arms training to women, provided rescue services to women in distress etc. He converted his *Kshatriya Samiti* into a political party and fielded his candidates for election for the Provincial Council. He also contested the election himself four times (got elected three times), served as the Commissioner of Rangpur Municipality, remained a Member of the Rangpur District Board, formed *Rajbanshi* Army and sent those recruits to join the Allied Force in the First World War, associated himself with the enactment process of The Bengal Tenancy Act, formed the Co-operative Banks etc.; but enhancement of education among the people remained his prime focus.

The Legacy that Panchanan has Left

Panchanan Barma established himself as the model for Social, Political, Cultural and Economic Movements in India. The foundation of the social growth that Panchanan Barma has provided by launching educational movement has created a model for the overall growth of the people of India. Several great social workers of India such as Phuley, Periyar, Ambedkar, Guru Chand, Jogen Mandal etc.,

who have later come forward to uplift the common people, have not done anything new but have taken the caravan of Panchanan Barma forward. The concepts of forming a political party, fighting peaceful intellectual battles against the powerful Hindu forces were Panchanan's innovations. Bringing the downtrodden Indians to the fold of education at a large scale was the brain child of Panchanan by which he made the difference in Indian society.

Conclusion

Panchanan had a sudden death on 29th September 1935 during his active life. We find these days universities, colleges, memorial institutions, statues, roads, bridges and mansions are being named after him as a testimony of the regards of the people towards him. Several Khatiya Samities have been established by his followers in the towns and villages to spread the ideals of Panchanan Barma. The University of North Bengal in West Bengal has instituted a Gold Medal for the topper of Philosophy Department of the Post Graduation Course. A portrait of Panchanan has been installed in the Legislative Assembly of West Bengal. The Government of West Bengal has been sponsoring several programmes to spread the message of Panchanan. In most of the towns and villages of Northeastern India his *jayantis* are being celebrated. Had Panchanan been available during the period of Indian independence and transition from British India to democratic India - while the constitution of India was being written - the country would have gained enormously from his progressive thinking and India would have been, by now, a country of educated people and country of equals.

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