BEYOND THE 'CIVILIZING MISSION': RAJBONGSHI RESISTANCE AND CULTURAL RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF COLONIAL MODERNITY

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Abstract

This paper will discuss how the Rajbongshi people of North Bengal and lower Assam countered the ideological, administrative, and cultural onslaught of British colonialism, particularly the so-called civilizing mission, and how they continue to do so in the postcolonial world. Rather than viewing indigenous peoples as mere subjects of change, this paper highlights Rajbongshi agency by focusing on their active processes of adaptation, resistance, and cultural resilience. The analysis is based on extensive qualitative data, including census reports, historical documents, oral traditions, local literature, and narratives that were produced within the community during the colonial period. The paper is methodologically critical-interpretive and interdisciplinary, as it combines a knowledge of post-colonial theory, subaltern studies, and cultural anthropology. It uses the notions of mimicry, Sanskritisation, and surveillance to understand how the community resisted imposed identities and navigated the system of domination. The Rajbongshis responded through social reform movements, such as the one for the assertion of Kshatriya identity, and direct involvement in agrarian movements, such as the Tebhaga movement. Women made quite a remarkable contribution to these struggles, particularly in the fight against economic exploitation and social patriarchy. Cultural preservation emerged as a crucial mode of resistance alongside the maintenance of folk rituals, indigenous medicine, religious syncretism, and linguistic activism,

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exemplified by the Kamtapuri language movement. These practices are indicative of a long-standing struggle not only for recognition, but also for reintegration into historical and national discourses. The central argument of this study is that colonial modernity, instead of wholly transforming the Rajbongshi people, triggered new identity politics and cultural assertion, which persist to this day. In doing so, this paper provides a historically contextualised, culturally aware explanation of how marginalised groups reimagine themselves when faced with erasure, marginalization, and systemic inequality.

Keywords: Rajbongshi community, civilizing mission, cultural resilience, colonial modernity, Sanskritization, indigenous identity, Tebhaga movement, post-colonial resistance

Introduction

A common justification for the British colonial project in India was an ideological construct known as the civilizing mission. This ideology was based on the idea of British cultural superiority, and colonialism was presented as a moral obligation to enlighten so-called backward societies and introduce them to European culture, education, law, and governance (Mill, 1861; Macaulay, 1835; see also The British Civilizing Mission, 2025). But the so called "civilizing mission" was more of an imperial-control mechanism than genuine social uplift. Even the reforms that were carried out in Indian society, like the laws of private property, English-based education, and western legal codes, were not introduced to modernize Indian society but rather to facilitate administrative convenience and economic exploitation (Chakrabarty, 2000; Dirks, 2001).

Although colonial modernity was extensive, it was not without resistance. Different communities in India strongly reacted to the upheavals it brought. This paper focuses on one such group, namely, the Rajbongshi of northern part of West Bengal and lower part of Assam. The Rajbongshis, who were once a numerically and culturally dominant population in Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur, and former princely state of Cooch Behar, were greatly impacted by the British administrative categorisation, land policy, and socio-cultural intervention (Roy, 2020; Nandi, 2014).

The argument presented in this paper is that the Rajbongshis did not simply accept colonial modernity; rather, they interacted with it in a complex and strategic manner. The Rajbongshis demonstrated their own agency in response to colonial power through Kshatriyaisation (reassertion of higher-caste identity) movement, their involvement in

agrarian unrest, such as the Tebhaga movement, and their efforts to maintain their native language and rituals. These activities challenge the dominant discourse that portray colonised peoples as the passive subjects of change.

This paper begins with a brief description of ideological and administrative frameworks of the civilizing mission and its consequences to India as a whole. It then examines the identity transformations of the Rajbongshis during the pre-colonial and colonial periods, followed by an elaboration on their methods of resistance and cultural assertion. This study aims to contribute to existing scholarly debates by situating these scholarly discussions within the broader context of post-colonial and subaltern studies, particularly regarding Rajbongshi responses to colonial and post-colonial state formation.

In doing so, this work not only revisits a regionally rooted history but also addresses some fundamental questions in the humanities and social sciences: How do subjugated communities rewrite forced identities? What forms of cultural resistance emerge in response to the state homogenisation? And what can local conflicts teach us about larger processes of colonial imposition and decolonial potential?

Methodology

This is a qualitative, interdisciplinary research study grounded in post-colonial theory, historical sociology, and cultural studies, which aims to examine the resistance and cultural resilience of the Rajbongshi community in colonial and post-colonial India. The article adopts a critical-interpretive approach, rather than a linear history, through the use of a wide range of both primary and secondary sources, including colonial ethnographies, census reports, oral traditions, folk performances, community-led publications, and archival materials.

Through a historical-analytical approach, this study traces the evolution of the Rajbongshi identity by covering a comprehensive timeline from the pre-colonial era to colonial transformations and post-colonial mobilisations. The conceptual tools used to examine the community's responses include key theoretical terms, such as Sanskritisation (M.N. Srinivas), mimicry and hybridity (Homi Bhabha), subaltern resistance (Ranajit Guha; James Scott), and cultural survivance (Gerald Vizenor).

This paper lacks original ethnographic fieldwork due to practical limitations. However, it incorporates digitally archived oral histories

and regional scholarly literature as well as NGO reports, language movement manifestos, and digital forums to reproduce the changing community discourses. In this sense, the methodology will comprise documentary analysis, discourse analysis and thematic interpretation to comprehend how the Rajbongshis discoursed their resistance in social, political and cultural registers.

This strategy of situating the Rajbongshi experience in the broader framework of colonial authority and native initiative allows for a more nuanced and context-specific understanding of the nature of identity, marginality, and cultural survival in South Asia.

The British "Civilizing Mission": Ideology, Implementation, and Limits of Hegemony

The British Empire in India was not just a political and economic endeavor; it was rooted in the ideological belief that British civilization was superior to other civilizations. British colonialism was based on the idea of a so-called "civilizing mission" that implies a benevolent entity trying to improve allegedly uncivilized communities (Scott, 1985; Abu-Lughod, 1990). This philosophy was heavily influenced by Enlightenment ideas of progress, race, and cultural superiority. Intellectuals like John Stuart Mill viewed British rule as a means to accelerate the moral and material advancement of Indian society through the introduction of rational institutions, including private property, codified law, and modern education (Mill, 1861; Dirks, 2001). This vision to replace native ways of life with the universal reason of Western modernity was a direct result of these Enlightenment ideas.

However, beyond this moralistic rhetoric, there was a more practical reason: control and economic benefit. For example, new laws about private property enabled the British to transform the land ownership, thus forming a new layer of loyal intermediaries between them and the land, namely zamindars and jotedars, who would effectively extract revenue (Roy, 2020; Karmakar, 2015). On the same note, the educational reforms advocated by Thomas Macaulay, in his most well-known formulation, in 1835 "Minute on Indian Education," were designed to create a group of Indians who were "English in taste and intellect" to staff the colonial bureaucracy (Macaulay, 1835). Therefore, colonial modernity was not created to empower the colonised but to ensure administrative convenience, strengthen social stratifications, and grow the colonial economy.

The civilizing mission also worked on a more symbolic level. It was

not only British sports, legal procedures, or the English language that were employed as a means of spreading the values of discipline, hierarchy, and British superiority (Kipling, 1899; Chakrabarty, 2000). Ironically, some of these tools also served as platforms for resistance. For instance, Indian involvement in British sports opened up arenas in which native Indians contested colonial assumptions of racial inferiority, and victories in these games were occasionally considered as symbolic resistance (Chatterjee, 1993).

Despite the widespread implementation of colonial modernity, the civilizing mission lacked significant ideological support. The 1857 Indian Rebellion seriously shook British confidence and led to policy changes. The Queen Victoria Proclamation, issued after 1857, made it clear that the Crown did not plan to impose British religious or moral values on its Indian subjects ((Kaye, 1874; Stoler, 2002). This declaration represented a shift away from more ambitious social reforms and recognized Indian resistance to cultural assimilation.

Moreover, the colonial rule tended to be contradictory. Although British officials encouraged the notion of a standard legal system applicable universally and founded on liberal principles, in reality, they maintained distinct substantive legal codes for India, but applied British procedures. This dualist legal system allowed the colonial state to maintain its power while simultaneously establishing cultural boundaries that kept the colonised subjects at a safe distance (Cohn, 1996; Dirks, 2001). The outcome was not actual assimilation, but instead controlled change that strategically maintained differences as justification for continued British dominance.

The Rajbongshi Community: Pre-Colonial Roots and Colonial Reconfigurations of Identity

The Rajbongshi people, who are primarily found in North Bengal and lower Assam, have a very rich and complex social history. Their unique identity is a blend of various influences, as most researchers traced their ancestry to the Koch people, an Indo-Mongoloid community. However, the Rajbongshis themselves have long claimed a Kshatriya (warrior) status, with an Aryan origin and identity as 'Bratyo Kshatriyas', or fallen warriors who arrived in the area after being driven out by Parashurama (Barma, 1914; Roy, 2020; Nandi, 2014). These stories show a constant mediation between ethnic heritage and caste identity, reflecting the unique and diverse nature of the Rajbongshi community.

The Rajbongshi society, with its primarily agrarian and socially

unified structure, had a unique cultural life characterized by unusual eating habits, customs, and non-conservative marriage rules. These included the acceptance of widow remarriage and polygamy, which are not commonly found in orthodox Hindu communities. Their syncretic religion, which merged indigenous gods such as 'Bisto Thakur' and 'Bishahari' with Hindu deities, was another fascinating aspect of their culture (Barman, 2022; Sen, 2015). These religious practices were frequently performed by local brahmans, adding another layer of uniqueness to their cultural identity.

However, colonial rule significantly altered the definition and perception of the Rajbongshi identity. British census activities, particularly those of the late 19th century, attempted to categorize Indian societies into rigid ethnographic and racial classifications. The Rajbongshis in this case were often grouped together with the Koches, which they believed lowered their social status and led to them being labeled as having a tribal origin (Risley, 1891; O'Malley, 1911). This classification directly gave rise to the Kshatriya Movement, a mass movement of Rajbongshi elites demanding a higher social status within the colonial caste order.

The movement, led by individuals such as Thakur Panchanan Barma, involved massive Sanskritisation, or the intentional emulation of upper-caste Hindu traditions. Rajbongshis began using the sacred thread, changed their surnames to Brahmanical names (e.g., Roy, Barman), and altered their rituals to conform to those of caste Hindus. They managed to lobby through organized groups, known as the 'Kshatriya Samiti', to be recognized as 'Kshatriyas' in the 1911 census (Barma, 1914; Sarkar, 2008). This reformist tactic, however, was dominated by land-holding elites and did not resonate much with the rural poor, exposing sharp class divisions within the community (Sheell, 2010).

These changes show that the Rajbongshi identity was not fixed but formed through interactions with colonial institutions. The British classification aimed to control and simplify India's social structure. However, it unintentionally caused communities like the Rajbongshis to redefine themselves in strategic ways. Their Sanskritisation was not just about fitting in. It was a deliberate response to being pushed to the margins within the colonial social system. This also demonstrates the relationship between colonial authority and native agency, in which local players utilised the cultural resources at their disposal to resist the imposed identities and reclaim their independence.

The internal division of classes within the community grew during colonial rule. Rajbongshi elites, known as jotedars, became wealthy,

and many others became landless or fell into debt due to new land revenue policies, which widened economic gaps (Karmakar, 2015). Thus, identity politics were not just about culture or caste. They were also closely tied to land ownership and economic survival.

Manifestations of Rajbongshi Resistance: From Social Upliftment to Political Assertion

The opposition of the Rajbongshi community to colonial and post-colonial marginalization took various forms, initially as social reform, then as an agrarian struggle, and finally as a quest for political autonomy. Such different reactions were an indicator of the material circumstances that the colonial regime dictated, as well as the active response of the community in finding ways to maneuver within structural oppression.

1. Caste Reassertion and Social Resistance

The Kshatriya Movement played a crucial role of the resistance in response to the British ethnographic categorisation, followed by social denigration. The Rajbongshis, who were initially classified with the Koch tribal communities in colonial census records responded by adopting a Kshatriya identity through Sanskritisation—a process of adopting Brahmanical rituals, such as names, and social practices (Barma, 1914; Roy, 2020). This movement opposed the colonial hierarchies imposed upon the community and sought to restore the community to its place within the larger Hindu social order.

Notably, this resistance was not symbolic. It was the basis of political mobilisation since caste identity was used as a point of collective action. Groups like the Kshatriya Samiti helped create a sense of unity and purpose, which eventually extended into electoral politics. However, the benefits of this movement were uneven. The educated Rajbongshi elites were able to capitalise on these changes to enhance their social standing, whereas the rural poor, primarily landless sharecroppers, were overlooked (Sheell, 2010). This division among classes limited the broader appeal of caste-based resistance and highlighted the need for larger economic struggles.

2. Agrarian Resistance: The Tebhaga Movement

A turning point in Rajbongshi resistance was the Tebhaga movement (1946-47). Being sharecroppers under oppressive zamindari and jotedari systems, a significant number of Rajbongshi peasants had been demanding two-thirds of the produce, rather than half, from

the landlords (Sarkar, 1983; Dhanagare, 1976)). This demand was a result of decades of land alienation and indebtedness, both of which were created by colonial revenue policies and the commodification of land.

What gave the movement additional momentum was the fact that it was driven not only by economic desperation but also by its mass character, particularly among those who had been marginalised. Led by Rajbongshi and Adivasi women, they protested, formed self-defense units such as the 'Nari Bahini', and openly fought against both colonial rule and patriarchal society (Das, 2023; Rahaman, 2023). Their participation marked a significant convergence of gender, class, and caste-based struggles, making Tebhaga a revolutionary social movement.

This agricultural revolt also revealed a more fundamental fact: that land was not just an economic commodity, but a source of identity, security, and cultural continuity. The land struggle was, in some sense, a struggle of dignity and survival in a world that was increasingly becoming exploitative (Karmakar, 2015; Barman, 2022).

3. Political Claim and Self-Determination Demand

Although the initial Rajbongshi resistance was socially mobile, agrarian-based, and justice-oriented, it mutated into political separatism in the mid-20th century. The failure of both colonial and post-independence governments to address the structural exclusion led to growing calls for autonomy. Such political organizations as the 'Hitasadhani Sabha' and subsequently the 'Kamtapur People's Party' made demands of a separate Rajbongshi homeland, initially as "Rajar-sthan" and then as Kamtapur, which was to consist of parts of Bengal, Bihar and Assam (Debnath, 2016; Nag, 2015).

These movements arose due to frustrations stemming from linguistic suppression, land alienation, and the dominance of Bengali elites in the region's politics. Specifically, the disregard for the Kamtapuri language emerged as a potent symbol of cultural marginalisation, serving to unite the various segments of the community (Dasgupta, 2025; Toulmin, 2009). Although more radical outfits, such as the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO), have momentarily appeared, the mainstream movement has remained democratic and cultural.

This period of caste reassertion, peasant revolt, and secessionist politics highlights the evolving nature of Rajbongshi resistance. It also reflects a broader trend in South Asia, where the historical challenges of state integration, inadequate representation, and

socio-economic marginalisation have influenced identity-based movements.

Cultural Resilience: Preserving Heritage in the Face of Colonial Modernity

Along with the systematic political and agrarian unrest, the Rajbongshi community has demonstrated a strong culture of resistance in the form of cultural continuity. The Rajbongshis have been maintaining their language, religious customs, oral literature, and indigenous knowledge system in the backdrop of colonial and post-colonial forces of assimilation and marginalisation. These cultural strategies not only constituted a passive mode of survival but also an active mode of self-expression and agency.

1. Kamtapuri Movement and language

The Rajbongshi community has considered language as a critical area of resistance. A unique Indo-Aryan language with probable Tibeto-Burman affinities, the Kamtapuri or 'Rangpuri' language has been alienated in the state institutions and educational policies (Dasgupta, 2025; Chakraborty & Sarkar, 2025). The supremacy of the Bengali and English languages, stemming from colonial education structures, helped to eliminate native languages. The Rajbongshi community has retaliated by initiating the Kamtapuri language movement, which seeks official status and its inclusion in education and public life.

The trend is an indication of a wider fight against cultural homogenisation. A push to include Koch-Rajbongshi epistemology in teacher education (Singha et al, 2025) and to record oral traditions are aspects of a broader attempt to establish linguistic and cultural distinctiveness. The Kamtapuri recognition movement, therefore, is more than just a language demand; it is an ethnic, autonomous, and historical demand.

2. Oral Heritage and Folk Traditions

The Rajbongshis have managed to maintain a rich oral tradition, which includes folk songs and ritual performances, despite outside influences. Bhawaaiya, Kushan Gaan, and Dotaradanga Gaan are examples of songs that still express themes of love, work, loss, and cultural pride (Sen, 2015). These songs are not just artistic expressions; they also serve as a way to remember and show resistance, offering an alternative to mainstream history.

Similarly, rituals such as Hudum Khela (a women-led rain-invoking dance) and Benger Biyo (a frog marriage ritual for rainfall) have persisted, showcasing the community's intimate relationship with nature and their spiritual frameworks, which are distinct from Vedic orthodoxy. Such cultural forms do not persist in a vacuum and are instead dynamic, changing practices that indicate continual adaptation.

3. Syncretic Religious Practices

Religious syncretism was a pillar of Rajbongshi culture. Although a large number of the Rajbongshis converted to Hindu customs in the Sanskritisation movement, they continued to worship local gods and goddesses like Bisto Thakur, Mahakal, and Bishahari. Even religious rituals are performed in local languages by non-Brahmin priests, namely Adhikary, Ojha, or Mareya, pointing to the persistence of local forms of rituals in conjunction with the accepted Hindu standards (Barman, 2022; Sen, 2015).

Such bilateral religious orientation depicts a kind of cultural negotiation in which the community had to strike a balance between upward social mobility and maintenance of spiritual autonomy. The Rajbongshi religious life has not been absorbed into the mainstream Hindu orthodoxy, and they have preserved some unique features of cosmology, particularly environmental worship and Tantric-Shaivite imprints.

4. Indigenous Knowledge and Environmental Identity

An essential aspect of cultural resilience is the ongoing utilisation of ethnobotanical knowledge and folk medicine. Ojhas, or traditional healers, persist in treating illnesses using medicinal plants and rituals that are integral to local belief systems (Barman, 2022; Mallick & Ojah, 2022). These medicine systems constitute a holistic perception of the world, where the body, community, and nature are interconnected, which is frequently disregarded by biomedical paradigms.

More importantly, this is the knowledge connected to land and ecological heritage. Historically, Rajbongshis have been residing very close to rivers, forests, and wetlands. Their cultural and economic activities are fishing, rice cultivation, and rain ceremonies, which portray an ecological identity that was disrupted by colonial land policies (Singha & Singha, 2020). The invasion of settlers and climate change have also threatened these landscapes further, such that land alienation poses a direct threat to cultural survival in a post-independence period.

It is in this vein that the protection of land is not merely an economic necessity, but a right to cultural perpetuation, pride, and spiritual identity. Land, as several scholars have observed, is livelihood and identity to many indigenous communities.

Conclusion

The case of the Rajbongshi community presents a strong argument as to how colonised societies in South Asia went through, negotiated, and opposed the extensive effects of colonial modernity. The Rajbongshis were not passive subjects of the British cultural and administrative interference. However, they showed multidimensional resistance to it through social reform and agrarian movements, cultural conservation, and political demands.

This paper has shown that the so-called civilizing mission was not a genuinely humanitarian endeavor; rather, it was a shrewd strategy used to centralize imperial control and facilitate economic exploitation. The British employed tools such as land reform, census classification, and Western education to reorganise Indian society along hierarchical lines that benefited their interests while disadvantaging the local population. However, as illustrated by the Rajbongshi case, these same instruments often became points of indigenous resistance and innovation.

The Rajbongshi community's strategies were diverse and evolving. The Kshatriya movement was a rebellion against colonial and caste-based classification, which reaffirmed a reconstructed identity based on cultural pride and social mobility. Their involvement in the Tebhaga movement demonstrated their critical interaction with material realities and concern over agrarian justice, especially on the side of women who became important actors. More recently, the campaign to create a Kamtapur state and to have the language recognised highlights a long-standing battle to defend dignity, self-determination, and a place in history.

In conjunction with political resistance, the Rajbongshis have maintained an impressive record of cultural resistance. By sustaining the Kamtapuri language, playing folk music and performing rituals, as well as maintaining local systems of healing, the community has been able to assert itself amid cultural homogenisation and ecological displacement. These activities demonstrate how culture, land, and language are closely intertwined foundations of indigenous survivance.

The case study fits into the larger academic discussions by

pointing out the boundaries of the colonial hegemony and the critical importance of indigenous agency. It stresses the necessity to comprehend identity not as a category, but as a process that is influenced by the historical, political, and ecological powers. Besides, it underlines the fact that the post-colonial nation-building has, in many cases, reproduced the colonial patterns of exclusion, which gave rise to the new demands of recognition and compensation.

Future Research Directions

This study suggests several directions for future research. Firstly, the impact of climate change and environmental degradation on indigenous cultures, such as the Rajbongshis, requires further investigation, as ecological loss will affect both livelihoods and intangible heritage.

Second, the inter-community solidarities and tensions, such as between Rajbongshis, Adivasis, and Bengali settlers, could be explored in the future in the context of a larger contest over land, language, and representation.

Third, the increasing prominence of digital activism and online identity politics among the Rajbongshi youth provides a novel area of research to examine how cultural heritage is being re-packaged in the 21st century.

To sum up, the Rajbongshi experience teaches us that, even in the circumstances of structural domination, communities can still remember, struggle, and re-imagine. Their lives complicate the colonial history and validate the necessity of broader, pluralistic, and historically aware policy, research, and belonging to the nation.

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