

SEPARATISM IN NORTH BENGAL

Adding to Tribal Woes

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The very concept of liberalization means the end of diversity of regions, communities and culture. It is one reason North Bengal is witnessing different types of ethnic and cultural upsurge against the centralised state and for retaining the cultural identity of different ethnic groups.

Although North Bengal is rich in natural resources but six Districts—Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar, Malda, North and South Dinajpur are industrially most backward. Other than tea there is no big industry. At present tea industry of North Bengal is also facing severe crisis. In spite of implementation of the land reforms the number of landless agricultural labourers has increased by 59.34%. In West Bengal average literacy rate is 70%. Whereas the literacy rate of North Bengal is only 59%. The dropout rate of North Bengal is next to Rajasthan. Irrigation facility of North Bengal is very poor in comparison to South Bengal. The Teesta Project which started in the 70's has not yet been completed. On the other hand Teesta Project has created a large number of 'development' oustees. WBIDC spends 87% for the growth of small scale sector in South Bengal. But North Bengal gets only 13% for the growth of small scale industries. Most of which are sick industries. As a result regional disparities are increasing day by day. Due to lack of industry and paucity of job a large number of young people are migrating to different parts of North India. Above all the influx of refugees from East Bengal has totally changed the demographic pattern of North Bengal. And different indigenous ethnic groups have been marginalised due to the huge refugee influx. Political and economic activities are guided by the immigrants. This marginalisation had helped to create commotion among the indigenous people.

For these disparities and uneven development North Bengal has become a hot bed of two separate statehood movements viz Kamtapuri and Gorkhaland movements. Step-motherly attitude towards North Bengal coupled with the dominance of immigrants in every sphere of social and economic life is the main cause for the rise of Kamtapur People's Party and Greater Coochbehar People's Association whose aim is to establish separate state comprising six districts of North Bengal. In order to preserve their language, cultural heritage and ethnic identity of the Bodo group of people KPP is clamouring for statehood. The main reason behind the Gorkhaland movement is to establish Gorkha identity and establishment of a separate state for the Nepali speaking people of India. In a nutshell it will not be improper to comment that exploitation of South Bengal and hegemony of the immigrant Bengalees in economic and political spheres was the root cause of the ongoing separate statehood movement in North Bengal.

Along with the Gorkhaland and Kamtapuri movements the tribals who belong to Indo-Austrian group are clamouring for the introduction of the sixth schedule in the tribal dominated Terai-Duars area under the banner of Akhil Bharatiya Adibasi Bikash Parishad. To counter Gorkha Jana-mukti Morcha's claim over Terai-Duars *Adibasi Bikash Parishad* was formed. The demand for the introduction of sixth Schedule has given a new dimension to the ongoing separatist movement in North Bengal. In the plains of North Bengal Santali, Oraon and Mundas are the major tribal groups. According to the 1991 census about 33 percent of West Bengal tribal population live in North Bengal. As per 1991 census the total population of North Bengal is 12,036,292. Out of total population 10.47 percent belongs to the tribal community. The tribals of North Bengal are Socio-Economically most backward, oppressed and easy vulnerable community.

The process of immigration of the tribal people in North Bengal began in the 19th century. Immediately after the suppression of Santal rebellion, the Santals in order to avoid police harassment began to pour in North Bengal crossing Ganges across Rajmahal. Two groups of Santals arrived in North Bengal. One group settled in Pakuahat under Bamongola police station in Malda and the other group settled at Hili in Dinajpur district. Thence from the Zamindars of these two districts began to employ the Santals for reclaiming their waste land on very liberal terms. The Santals of Malda, South and North Dinajpur took agriculture as their means of living. But in Terai-Duars tribals from Chotonagpur were employed as tea garden labourers. From 1880 Tea garden had began to be established in the Terai-Deuars region. With the establishment of tea gardens Oraon, Mundas and Santals were brought to serve as tea garden labourers.

Alienation of land is the main cause for their poverty. A survey was conducted by the Cultural Research Institute to assess the nature of alienation of tribal land all over West Bengal in 1960-61, 1960-65 and in 1972-73. It was revealed from above three surveys that land transferred to non-tribals was enormous. A survey was also conducted by the Cultural Research Institute under the scheduled caste and tribal welfare department over 407 mouzas in twelve Blocks under then West Dinajpur District. The survey was conducted over 15,148 people. It was found that 31.4% were landless agricultural labourers and there were also marginal farmers who had their own land and also used to work as agricultural labourers.

In the year 1977 Left Front Government came to power in West Bengal. With the coming of the Left Front Government Land Reforms Act of 1955 was implemented. Vest land was distributed among the landless labourers. Adhiyars' right was established due to the Barga record. 9.5 lakh landless agricultural labourers belonging to scheduled caste and more than 5 lakh landless scheduled tribe people got allotment of vested land. There are 6.25 lakh scheduled caste and scheduled tribe recorded Bargadars in West Bengal.

Implementation of land reforms could not check the alienation of SC and tribal land. Practically most of the tribal land has already been illegally transferred to non-tribal people. A huge amount of agricultural tribal and patta land in Siliguri, Jalpaiguri, Uttar Dinajpur and in some areas of Coochbehar is under the possession of the tea planters. The special officer of Backward Class wrote to District Magistrate and Sabhadhipati of different districts of North Bengal,

"I would like to inform you that the Committee on Petition, West Bengal Legislative Assembly is currently examining a petition on the subject of illegal conversion of land into tea garden in North Bengal region. It appears to the Committee that vast areas of SC/ST land have been encroached upon by the tea gardens in violation of existing rules regarding the transfer of such land". One example is sufficient to prove that here tribals are regularly evicted from their land. Kachugach village is situated in Kuorgaon mouza under Islampur police station. Immediately after the partition about one hundred tribals named Dhanesh Kisku, Rengta Hembram, Thakur Hasda, Subal Hasda, Lio Kisku etc. came from East Bengal, occupied about 60/70 acres of vest land and some retained land (JL No 29, Khata No 79, 579, 144, 796, 140, 529 etc). But during the survey settlement their names were not mentioned neither in 13 nor 23 column. On the contrary names of Samir-ud-din, Jabbar Ali, Sk. Muhammad, Hazrat Ali etc were mentioned. On receiving complaint the tribal welfare Department tried to reach an amicable settlement on 01.12.88 at Kachugach Primary School. In presence of the JLRO and KGO it was decided other than retained land, vested land should be distributed to the tribals. But the decision was not carried out. Ultimately Samir-ud-din, Jabbar Ali with the tacit support of the pradhan of Govindapur Panchayat sold the land to a tea planter. In this way the tribals were evicted. It is learned from *Adibasi Krisi Jami Raksha Committee* that near about 4,500 acres of tribal land in North Dinajpur have

been illegally occupied by the Tea Planters. In Malda district a vast amount of tribal land has been illegally transferred to non-tribals. Also, in Malda district 'Adibasi Samajik Siksha along Sanskriti Sangathan and Adibasi O Anunnata Jiban Jibika Rakshya Committee' has taken initiative to identify those tribal land which had been illegally transferred to non-tribals. They had already surveyed 126 Adibasi villages and it has been found that in every Adibasi tola 2/3 tribal peasants' land is in the possession of non-tribals. Already they had restored thirty Bighas of tribal land from non-tribals in Dharma Danga and Chhota Patwari village under Bamongola Police Station. Samukhtala of Alipurduar sub-division of Jalpaiguri district is a Santal dominated area. They came here from Dumka. A survey was conducted by Krishnapriya Bhattacharya on the illegal transfer of tribal land to non-tribals. It was found that about 45,000 acres of tribal land have been illegally transferred to non-tribals.

Educationally the tribals are the most backward community. Even they are more backward than the SC community. Till today many posts reserved for the ST candidates in educational institutions are lying vacant. Although Left Front Government has recognised OLCHIKI as language of the Santal community, till today it has not been introduced as a medium of instruction in educational institutions. Adivasi Samaj Siksha O Sanskriti Sanstha (ASSIKA) is continuously demanding for the introduction of OLCHIKI in educational institutions. Primary schools in tribal areas have no tribal teacher. 'Adibasi Gaon Sudhrao Samity' has complained that the Santal students do not receive good behaviour in government aided School. In the Terai-Duars area tribals are clamouring for establishment of more Hindi Medium Schools. Demand has also been raised for the introduction of the Sadari language as medium of instruction in Terai-Duars. Even the scheduled tribe certificates are not properly distributed among the scheduled tribe students. So a large number of Santal students do not get any stipend from the Tribal Welfare Department. In Malda again it has become a practice to distribute SC and ST stipend from the Panchayat office. There is every opportunity for corruption in this system. It is alleged that tribal students get less amount of money than the Scheduled Caste students. On 26.03.10 Tribal Students of Habibpur Block ransacked Government offices in Akvai Panchayat area in protest against this discrimination. At the initiative of BDO stipend was distributed properly among the tribal students. The list of beneficiaries is never displayed neither by Panchayat nor by tribal welfare department.

Lamp (Large Sized multi-purpose Co-operative Limited) in all areas of North Bengal has almost become Loan disbursement institution. Lamps are not immune from corruption. Several times members of Karandighi Lamp like Ram Baskey, Dhuku Hansda, Khela Murmu have raised voices against corruption of Lamp. In Chopra Block not a single tribal has received BPL card, widow pension and old age pension. Till today electricity has not reached tribal villages namely Majhialy, Bensen line, Bandraline, Shyamgachch etc. As the Panchayats are guided by the mainstream political party of the area so the interest of marginal people is generally neglected. The tribal pradhan of Bazargaon-I Panchayat under Karandighi Police Station, confessed that in spite of her best efforts she could not prevent the alienation of tribal land in that area. It appears that in PANISAL village (under Raiganj PS) where 120 tribal families reside, they are so poor that all of them have surrendered their BPL cards to the local Ration dealer.

In Terai-Duars area tribals are mainly tea gardens workers. Closure and lock-out of tea gardens had become everyday news. At present there are nearly twenty closed tea gardens. And about 95,000 workers are suffering from starvation. They are deprived of their provident fund, gratuity benefit and medical facilities. They have no BPL cards, as they receive ration from tea gardens. Role of trade union leaders is dubious. Often they passively helped the tea gardens owners to declare lock-out in lieu of financial benefit.

In Terai-Duars region malnutrition, starvation deaths, diseases, joblessness, child trafficking have become a regular feature. Government financial assistance to the workers of

closed tea garden workers is not regularly paid. As a result the workers are forced to work elsewhere as daily wage labourers. In some cases the nature of work offered is unsuitable to the tea garden labourers, specially the women workers of the tea gardens are not accustomed to hard laborious work. There is also legal complication to distribute financial assistance to all workers of the closed tea gardens. As per existing rules those who have no PF account are not entitled to get allowance. So a huge number of workers of closed tea gardens are yet to receive allowance.

Besides closure and lock-out, tea garden workers are afraid of another danger. In 1997 West Bengal Government gave permission to establish Housing Complex on the 406.64 acre plot of Chandmoni Tea estates land. As a result plantation workers were evicted and they were employed under the construction company. The Workers of Sikarpur, Dagapur and Matigara tea estates which are situated on the outskirts of Siliguri are afraid of eviction anytime soon. Already the owner of Matigara Tea Estate is following the path shown by the Chandmoni Tea Estate. Matigara Tea Estate has already uprooted tea plantation on huge area. Naturally the workers of these gardens are afraid of losing their jobs.

Faced with deprivation in every sphere and due to their economic backwardness tribals of North Bengal are alienating themselves from the mainstream political parties. Throughout North Bengal numerous tribal organisations have already been formed to fulfil their aspiration. In North Dinajpur, 'Adibasi Samajik Sikshya Abong Sanskriti Sangathan' and 'Chas Abad O Gaon Sudhrao Samity' is spearheading movements for the introduction of Santali languages in educational institutions and restoration of those parcels of tribal land which have been illegally transferred to non-tribals. In Malda district Adibasi Samajik Sikshya Abong Sanskriti Sangathan and Adibasi O Anunnata Jiban Jibika Sangathan have begun to identify those tribal lands which have been illegally transferred to non-tribals. Apparently it appears that in order to counter the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha's claim for the inclusion of Terai-Duars within their proposed Gorkhaland Akhil Bharatiya Adibasi Bikash Parishad is demanding for the introduction of sixth schedule for Terai-Duars area where a major portion of people belong to the Indo-Astroloid group.

Several clashes had been taken place between the supporters of ABVP and GJMM. But more deep rooted cause for the rise of ABVP is unbearable exploitation of the tribals by the tea planters and trade unions affiliated to different mainstream political parties. Already ABVP has opened trade union under its banner. There occurred several clashes between the supporters of Left trade unions and ABVP affiliated unions. In the memorandum submitted to the district magistrate of Jalpaiguri ABVP raised their objections against the inclusion of areas of Jalpaiguri district and plain Terai areas of Darjeeling district of West Bengal into so-called Gorkhaland. If certain measures are not taken there will arise another organised ethnic movement along with Kamtapur and Gorkhaland movement. □□□