

KAMTAPUR MOVEMENT

## Life Behind Bamboo Doors

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Since independence North Bengal is witnessing continuous sub-regional movements. The demand for a separate Gorkhaland State comprising Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong was first raised in 1907, and later in 1917, 1929, 1934 and 1939. In the post-independence period the movement for Gorkhaland is still going on. Although the Gorkhaland movement is basically an ethnic movement, yet the Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha has expressed their grievances against the exploitation of the Hills by the Calcutta based rulers. Recently the Government of West Bengal, the Central Government and the GJMM have signed a tripartite agreement by which a Gorkha Territorial Administration will be formed and thereby the Hill people will get greater autonomy. To counter the GJMM's demand for the inclusion of certain areas of Terai Duars the tribals of the Terai Duars area are demanding the introduction of the sixth Schedule in the Terai Duars area. As the newly emerged middle class tribals will not be able to compete with the Nepali middle and affluent classes, so they are against the inclusion of Terai Duars in Gorkhaland. The Nepali middle classes are the most advanced in education.

The demand for a separate Kamtapur state comprising the six districts of North Bengal (Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur and Malda) for the sons of the soil is not a new one. The seeds of the demand for a separate Kamtapur state were laid during the merger of the princely state Coochbehar with the Indian Dominion. The Kamata Kochbihar state was established by the Koch kings in the 16th century. During the reign of Nara Narayan (1533-1587) the Kamata Koch kingdom occupied a vast area of North Bengal and North East India. In the year 1773 by the Anglo-Koch treaty Kochbihar became a tributary state.

Since its foundation the Koch kingdom witnessed struggle between indigenous people and the immigrants. Immediately after the accession to the throne the Koch kings accepted Hinduism as their religion and Brahmanas were brought by successive Koch rulers from Kanauj, Kasi and other places. But Brahmanism was not accepted by indigenous people. As a result the Koch king had to allow the tribal forms of worship prevalent among the Koch, Mech and Kachari people. Taking advantage of the Anglo-Koch treaty, John company began to reorganize the administration of the state according to its own interest and Bengali bureaucrats from South Bengal were appointed as high officials. This policy was disliked and opposed by the native officials. The process of modernization in Coochbehar, culminated after the marriage of Nripendra Narayan with Suniti Devi, daughter of Keshabchandra Sen in 1878. Henceforth Koch Bihar established direct links with Calcutta and almost all higher administrative posts were

occupied by the upper caste Bengalis from lower Bengal. The dominance of the immigrant Bengalis in the administration of the state created commotion among the indigenous people.

There were other socio-economic causes for the growth of a sense of alienation among the local Rajbansi community of Coochbehar state. There was no caste system among the Rajbansi community in Coochbehar. It was the immigrant Bengalis who introduced the practice of the caste system in Coochbehar. Both jotedars and adhiyars belonged to the same community. Jotedars were at the same time cultivators. With the establishment of British rule the Rajbansi community were not only alienated from land and administrative posts but they were treated as sudras by the immigrant Bengalis. The commotion of the indigenous people culminated against the Bhatias (immigrants from Lower Bengal) with the formation of the Hitasadhani Sabha in 1946. Hitasadhani Sabha was a organization of influential people from among the Rajbanshis (Hindus and Muslims) and other indigenous people. As in other princely states elections were held in Coochbehar state. The Hitasadhani Sabha contested the elections and won almost all the seats of the legislative council. Satis Chandra Singha and Amanatullah Choudhury became two important members of the council of ministers. In the elections of 1949 the candidates of Hitasadhani Sabha again won almost all the seats. The Hitasadhani Sabha received patronage from the influential members of the Coochbehar Royal family. Most probably Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan wanted to retain the princely state status of Coochbehar within the Indian dominion as per recommendation of the cabinet mission people. So the Raja patronized Hitasadhani Sabha and also encouraged the fomentation of ethnic sentiments in his own interest.

But the dominance of the indigenous people did not last long. Coochbehar was merged with the dominion of India in September 1949. After merger Coochbehar became a chief commissioner's province. In the mean time the members of the Hitasadhani Sabha became divided on the question of the fate of Coochbehar, one section was in favour of merger of Coochbehar with Assam, Muslim members of Hitasadhani Sabha wanted that the state should merge with Pakistan and another opinion was that Coochbehar should remain as a province within the dominion of India. In spite of Nehru's declaration, no plebiscite was held for determining the status of Coochbehar. It was due to the pressure of Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy that Coochbehar was ultimately merged with West Bengal. The Calcutta based middle classes and Bengali intellectuals were desirous to be compensated for the loss of East Bengal due to partition.

The merger with West Bengal did not satisfy the sons of the soil of Coochbehar. Rather the merger with West Bengal intensified the anti-Bhatia feeling. After the partition a huge number of refugees crossed the border and settled in Coochbehar and North Bengal. The influx of refugees not only changed the demographic pattern of North Bengal but economically affected the indigenous people. Due to superior skill of cultivation and government financial support the refugees began to flourish economically and the process of pushing the local people to backward areas began. Though Rajvanshis were notified as a scheduled caste, in Coochbehar there were other scheduled caste Bangalis like Nama Sudras, Kaibarta, Malo etc. These

Bangali scheduled caste people were more advanced in education, intellect and agriculture. As a result the Rajvansi youth could not compete with them in the Job market. Teesta project which was undertaken for the irrigation of North Bengal is yet to be completed. Due to the implementation of the land reforms by the left front government 1,44,184 scheduled caste landless people had received *khas land*. Altogether 1,35,472 scheduled caste adhiyars were recorded as bargadars. But a majority of the refugees belonging to the SC community were benefited due to the implementation of the land reforms. The implementation of the land reforms not only shattered the age-old ethnic relation between the jotedars and adhiyars, but from the decade of the 80's a huge number of pattadars and bargadars hailing from the scheduled caste and scheduled tribes were illegally evicted by the tea planters.

Though a three-tier panchayat systems has been introduced by the government, it is well known to everybody that panchayats were practically run by the local CPM offices. Pradhan and Upa-pradhan had to depend on party bosses for every decision. In the name of democratic centralization CPM became a centralized party. The party bosses are mostly immigrant Bengalis. Although left front came to power in 1977, prior to 1987 there was no Rajvansi minister from Coochbehar. In spite of all his abilities Dinesh Chandra Dakua had to wait up to 1987 to become a minister. The Kamtapuri language which is the dialect of the Coochbehari people was not introduced at the primary level of education although the Kothari Commission suggested that at the lower primary stage medium of education should be mother tongue.

Being deprived socio-economically the indigenous people became marginalised in North Bengal and were losing their identity, culture and language in their homeland where once the rulers and the ruled belonged to the same ethnic group. Out of such grievances the Uttar Khand Dal was formed on 21.6.1969. Initially they put forward a 18-point-charter of demands to redress the grievances of the people of Uttar Banga. Having failed to get a response from the West Bengal government the Uttar Khand Dal demanded a separate Kamtapur state comprising five districts of North Bengal in 1979. In support of its demand the Uttar Khand Dal publicly distributed leaflets and pamphlets and organised public meetings. UKD also participated in the general elections held on 10.3.1971. To extend its mass base Uttar Khand Dal clearly stated that it was not a party of any one ethnic group but was a party of all those who lived in North Bengal. Immediately after the formation of Uttar Khand Dal a new student organisation named Uttar Banga Tapshilee Jatio Adivasi Student Organisation was formed in 1977 to look after the interest of the subaltern students. It was due to the movements of this student organisation that North Bengal University was compelled to introduce reservation system for SC/ST students in 1977. The UKD failed to extend its mass base because the poor, indigenous people were not as yet disillusioned with the Left Front Government and were specially affected by its pro-people slogan.

Afterwards the Kamtapur People's Party was formed in 1996 under the leadership of Atul Roy. Apart from the demand of separate statehood and recognition of the Kamtapuri language the KPP demanded expulsion of illegal foreigners from North Bengal as per Indira-Mujib accord

of 1971. In support of their ten-point-demand KPP organised a cycle rally, blocked the National Highway and on 6th June 1998 called a 24-hour North Bengal Bandh . However due to internal dissention KPP was divided into two fractions led by Nikhil Roy and Atul Roy. This division weakened the KPP movement. During this period emerged the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation, an extremist outfit . KLO had links with ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam).

Recently the greater Coochbehar movement has emerged which has raised a legal question on the merger of Coochbehar with West Bengal. The main demand of the greater Coochbehar movement is that Coochbehar be declared a 'C' category state and placed under a chief commissioner's administration. The movement claims Coochbehar was merged with West Bengal without taking the consent of the people. The greater Coochbehar people's association submitted a memorandum to the president of India, the prime minister and the home minister on 26th December 2000 for declaring Coochbehar a 'C' category state and forming a caretaker ministry for Coochbehar. In support of their demand the movement organised mass gatherings, hunger strike etc. Later on due to internal squabbles the Association was divided into two groups, namely the greater Coochbehar people's association and the Greater Coochbehar democratic party. In a bid to strengthen their movement for a separate state, the greater Coochbehar democratic party, Kamtapur progressive party and Assam's All Koch Rajvansi Students' Union formed a greater Kamta joint forum at Dinhata demanding the formation of a bigger Coochbehar state. Their demand is to form a state with 11 districts of Assam, 6 districts of North Bengal and two districts of Bihar. Their demand is for an area almost same as it was in the hey day of the Kamta-Koch Kingdom in the 16th century.

In spite of taking into consideration demand of regional organisations the Left Front regime attempted to suppress the movement by state terrorism. The ex-state urban development minister Mr Asok Bhattacharjee commented, "It is the agitation of the despondency men, it is an unreasonable and not a historical demand so far. The late Chief Minister Jyoti Basu had declared that disruptive forces were financing the KPP and its outfits and the government would firmly deal with them. To tackle the law and order problem West Bengal Government formed a special task force battalion for North Bengal in early 2001, under the inspector general of police. In November 2001, Operation Kamtapuri-I was launched by the state police. On 3rd November, 2001 police arrested Kalidas Roy, an aged KPP supporter and he was kept in Mekhliganj sub-divisional jail. On 31st January 2002, the dead-body of Kalidas Roy was found. After post mortem the jail authority declared that he was murdered by other KPP supporters due to squabbles among them. But circumstantial evidence did not support this statement. Even the then SDO of Mekhliganj described the death of Kalidas Roy as a foul game of the jail authority.

It was complained by the Haldibari villagers that police used to raid villages at midnight and during the time of these house to house raids the police destroyed all house-hold furniture and goods. In Sal Kumar Hat of Alipurduar subdivision the combat force targeted only the Rajvansi community. They were arrested and tortured and harassed. Even CPM and BJP supporters of Sal Kumar Hat were not spared. Local BJP leader Nripendra Roy Pramanik complained that

upper level BJP leaders are indifferent towards the prevalence of police torture. It can be presumed that Bengal level leaders of various political parties gave tacit support to police repression. On November 27, 2000 the police arrested 2000 KPP supporters in the name of Operation Kamtapur 33. Many villages were devoid of male members due to heavy police repression. On 28th August 2002, APDR's central committee member Abhi Ranjan Bhaduri reported that in the name of suppressing Kamtapuri movement the police was violating human rights with impunity. It matters little which political party a person belongs to. His Rajvansi identity is enough for the police to harass him. A huge number of Rajvansi women participated in the separate statehood movement. Women were not spared by the police. They, too, were harassed and arrested by the police. At present there are 51 greater Coochbehar supporters in various jails of North Bengal.

Whether separate Kamtapur state is feasible or not is a separate question. But the demand for a separate state within the Indian Union is not unconstitutional. The CPM dominated left front government had labelled the supporters of the Kamtapuri movement as separatist forces and suppressed the movements through state terrorism. In order to consolidate the Bengalee vote the then ruling party also indirectly propagated the canard that the establishment of a Kamtapur state will harm the interest of the Bengalees of North Bengal. This sort of vote bank policy ultimately will create a permanent cleavage between the sons of the soil and the immigrant people.

By signing GTA pact with Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha, the new W B Government has given a good gesture to bring peace in the Hills. The new government should also negotiate with the leaders of the Kamtapur movement and try to resolve their grievances. Already the government has decided to release all the prisoners who were detained as supporters of KPP, KLO and greater Coochbehar people's association. This is a good gesture towards restoration of normalcy in the plains area of North Bengal. □□□