

The Uttar Khanda-Kamtapur Movement : A Historical Perspective

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I

In this paper an attempt has been made to trace the growth of the demand for a separate state (province or Rajya) viz. the Kamtapur State by a section of the Rajbansi people, the single largest scheduled caste community of the Northern region of West Bengal. The Uttarkhanda Dal is now the chief exponent of this demand which was founded a few years back in 1967. It is true that the Uttarkhanda Dal formally demanded a separate state the Kamtapur State. But even before the formation of the Uttarkhanda Dal, different groups or organisations have been pursued the idea of a separate state in different ways and manners in different times. There is a broad difference between the boundaries of the Uttarkhanda Dal's Kamtapur State and the former group's separate State. In this question, even the Uttarkhanda Dal had frequently changed their ideas. For example sometimes they included Purnea and Goalpara in their proposed Uttarkhanda State in addition to the five districts of North Bengal viz. Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, West Dinajpur and Malda. Now they dropped the hill areas of the Darjeeling from the proposed Kamtapur State. Let us examine the different stages of the growth of the concept of a separate state among the Rajbanshi's of the Northern Region of Bengal.

II

The Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samity (1910), a central organisation of the Rajbanshi community - was essentially a social organisation. But from the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century they began to change their outlook and decided to take part in National politics also. As a result of this change, the Kshatriya Samity had fielded candidates in the Council Elections between 1920 and 1929 and the Assembly Elections of 1937 and 1946. The

Samiti fielded candidates against the national organisation - the All India National Congress and the Communist Party. Even after the election they formed their own group or party in the Assembly viz. Independent Scheduled Caste Party. They considered the Congress Party of Bengal as the organisation of the caste Hindus. So a kind of separate feeling was operating behind this attitude of the Samiti towards the caste Hindus of Bengal. They maintained separate political identity in the Assembly and already had exhibited their separate social identity by forming the Kshatriya Samity. Thus both theoretically and practically, the social vis-a-vis the political separation is completed before the independence.

III

Historically, in the modern period the first demand for the formation of a separate state for the scheduled caste people of the Northern region of Bengal was made by Jogendra Nath Mandal, the leader of the East Bengal scheduled caste community, in a public meeting at Khoribari in the Darjeeling District on 4th May, 1947. He strongly denounced the proposed partition of Bengal and stated that if it is being implemented at all, then we demand a separate state viz. "Rajasthan" in the name of the Rajbanshi people. The proposed "Rajasthan State" (province) will consist of Jalpaiguri and Dinajpur Districts and certain portions of Rangpur and Darjeeling districts as well as Purnea district in Bihar and Goalpara district in Assam.¹ The areas mentioned by Mr. Mandal was largely inhabited by the Rajbanshi people.

But what was interesting is that in the proposed Rajasthan province of Mr. Mandal, the native state of Cooch Behar was not included, though it was considered as the citadel of the Rajbanshi community. Besides, the reaction of the Rajbanshi people is not known. It is to be mentioned here that Mandal was an outsider and belonged to non-Rajbanshi scheduled caste community of the Eastern Bengal.

IV

The first demand of the local people i.e. Rajbanshi for a separate State was raised by a Section of the Rajbanshi Community of the Cooch Behar Native States. The demand was raised by the Cooch Behar Hitasadhani Sabha, a local group or party controlled and dominated by the Hindu and Muslim Rajbanshi jotedars (Landlords).

The origin of the Hitasadhani Sabha is shrouded in obscurity. The exact date of its foundation is not known. It is alleged that the British Resident of the Cooch Behar State and the private secretary of Maharani Indira Devi, Nawab Khasru Jung, a scion of the Nizam of Hyderabad encouraged the formation of the Hitasadhani Sabha. However, the ethnological composition of the Hitasadhani Sabha was peculiar. Besides the Rajabanshi Hindu and Muslims, the Kamrupiya Brahmins (Maithli and Sylheti) and some other lower caste people supported the formation of the Hitasadhani Sabha. In fact, it was a party of the local people. The party had started movement against the outsiders i.e. "Bhatia" (as they called) particularly against the upper caste people of the Eastern and Southern Bengal who dominated the administrative structure and cultural scene of the urban areas of the Cooch Behar State.²

The Hitasadhani Sabha's concept of separate state was totally different from that of the present day Uttarkhanda Dal. In fact, the Hitasadhani Sabha was concerned only about the Cooch Behar Native State. In the different stages they have changed their demands. In the first stage they demanded a separate state, in the second stage they demanded that Cooch Behar should be a centrally administered territory; in the third stage they demanded that Cooch Behar should be merged with Assam and not with West Bengal. It is to be noted here that the pro-Muslim League sympathisers of the Hitasadhani Sabha even wanted the merger of the Cooch Behar State with East Pakistan.³

V

The founder-president of the Hitasadhani Sabha was Satish Chandra Singha Roy Sarkar, an advocate of the Dinhat Bar Association and a Jotedar of the region. He was the Education Minister of the Cooch Behar State. He skillfully mobilised the local people against the outsiders i.e. Upper caste Hindus.

Another prominent leader of the Hitasadhani Sabha was Khe-Choudhury Amanat-ulla - Ahmed, a landholder and Revenue Minister of the Cooch Behar State.

In fact the Hitasadhani Sabha controlled and dominated the Legislative Assembly and Ministry of the Cooch Behar State. The only caste Hindu Minister of the state was Ray Choudhury Sushil Chandra Chakravorty, a nominated member of the Legislative Assembly. He was a big Zamindar. He was in charge of the Ministry of Finance and Civil Supplies.

In order to resist the nefarious designs of the Hitasadhani Sabha, the Cooch Behar State Praja Mandal was formed under the leadership of Umesh Chandra Mandal, another Rajbanshi leader of Dinhatata town, Cooch Behar. He was also an advocate of the Dinhatata Bar. He was a Gandhite.

Simultaneously, the Cooch Behar people's Association was formed at Calcutta to highlight the problems of the Cooch Behar State. Pulakesh De Sarkar, Tarapada Chakravorty, Sailen Roy were the chief organisers of the Cooch Behar people's Association. Both this progressive and secular organisations started a crusade against the Hitasadhani Sabha.

The Hitasadhani Sabha's demand for a separate state was not accepted by the Central Government. But their demand to make Cooch Behar a centrally administered territory was partially conceded by declaring the Cooch Behar State a Chief Commissioner's province after its merger with India on 28th August, 1949. In addition to this Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime-Minister of India in a public meeting at Calcutta in July 1949 states that the Cooch Behar State could not be merged with West Bengal without a plebiscite because "there was division among the people of that State regarding its future". This speech and declaration of the Prime-Minister and the Central Government was bitterly criticised by the different organisations of West Bengal and the Cooch Behar State. But it was welcomed by the Hitasadhani Sabha and Assam Pradesh Congress Committee. It is to be mentioned here that the the A.P.C.C. had already demanded the merger of the Cooch Behar State with Assam. They argued that historically, ethnically and culturally, the people of the Cooch Behar State are closely connected with the people of Assam.⁴ A tug of war had started between Assam and West Bengal regarding the merger of the Cooch Behar State. However, ultimately the Central Government announced the merger of the Cooch Behar State with West Bengal in December, 1949.⁵

VI

The Hitasadhani Sabha's activities greatly influenced the people of the Dooars area of the Jalpaiguri District. A section of the Rajbanshi people of both the Hindu and Muslim Community, demanded the inclusion of the western Dooars with the Cooch Behar State. They argued that before the conquest of Bhutan and British-Indian Government, Western Dooars was a part of the Cooch Behar State. It is known from a leaflet of the contemporary

times that Maharaja also claimed his authority over the Dooars area. However, this demand was not conceded.⁶

VII

The situation took a new shape after the independence. The representatives of the different parties of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Sikkim and Darjeeling met at Darjeeling on 30th October, 1949 to discuss the question of a separate state for this region.⁷ About this meeting, Mr. Nanjappa, the Chief Commissioner of Cooch Behar State wrote to the Joint Secretary, Government of India on 22nd November, 1949, "It is interesting to note that the Hitasadhani party is willing to merge Cooch Behar with Gurkha District of Darjeeling or with Assam. Their real intention appears to be to try to maintain their political influence in this area."⁸ However, they demanded the formation of a separate State comprising the above-mentioned areas. In order to materialise their dream, a Committee was formed viz. Uttara Khanada Pradesh Sangha.⁹ This Committee submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister. But it was not conceded.¹⁰

In 1952, when Jawharlal Nehru visited Darjeeling, the Gorkha League renewed the old demand for the formation of a Uttarkhanda state. The Prime Minister did not pay any heed to the demand.¹¹

In 1955, when the State Reorganisation Committee visited Darjeeling, "Sarba Sampradaya Zella Sangathan" (All Communities Districts Organisation) demanded the formation of a separate State consisting of Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Darjeeling and Sikkim.¹² At that time the Gorkha League separately also placed the same demand. Both the demands was thoroughly rejected by the State Reorganisation Committee.

VIII

The question of a separate State again came into limelight in 1969, though in a different way. The demand raised by a new party called the Uttarkhanda Dal.¹³ It came into existence in July 1969 on the pattern of the Jharkhanda Dal and the D.M.K. party. It was founded in the Jalpesh Temple complex, in the Maynaguri police Station of the Jalpaiguri District. It was initiated by the priest of the Jalpesh Temple, Jogendra Nath Bhattacharya, a Kamrupiya Brahmin. Though the official headquarter of the Uttarkhanda Dal was located at Kantivita of Darjeeling District, the centre of gravity of the movement was concentrated in the Jalpesh Temple Complex.¹⁴

In order to win over the masses, the Uttarkhanda Dal had contested in the different general elections of 1972, 1977 and 1982. They have fielded candidates both in the parliamentary and Assembly seats of the North Bengal Districts. Each time the nominee of the Uttarkhanda Dal had lost their security deposits. It is to be mentioned here that they had contested generally from the reserved constituency.

To understand the mass support of the U.K.D., we can analyse the Assembly election results of 1982 as an example. In this election, the U.K.D. had contested in eight seats, five in Jalpaiguri, one in Darjeeling and two in Cooch Behar. The President of the U.K.D. - Mr. Panchanan Mullick had contested from two seats - Maynaguri and Dhupguri. He secured 2,150 and 2,959 votes respectively from Maynaguri and Dhupguri.¹⁵ The General Secretary Mr. Rukmini Kanta Roy had contested from the Jalpaiguri General Constituency and secured only 899 votes. However, it is to be noted here that in the Panchayet election, in some areas of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar, the U.K.D. candidates had elected.

If we carefully analyse the composition of the U.K.D., we will find that most of the leaders belonged to Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar. The President, the General Secretary and other senior and powerful leaders belonged to Jalpaiguri District. In Darjeeling, we find only one stalwart - Mr. Sampad Roy an ex-socialist cadre. We do not find any important leader in the U.K.D. who hailed from Malda and West Dinajpur. Even they did not field any candidates in the Assembly Constituency election of that Districts.

The Uttarkhanda Movement is essentially a rural-based and not an urban-based. They failed to draw the attention of the educated middle-class of the Rajbanshi community. It has been proved by their failure to field any candidates in election of the Municipalities. In fact, the leaders, supporters and sympathisers of the Uttarkhanda Dal mostly came from the landed class.¹⁶ The jotedars had been deprived from their land due to the land reforms of the Left Government. The peasants, marginal cultivators also supported the Uttarkhanda Movement. But they are supporting it for other reason. The Rajbanshi Community are basically Land-dependent people. Their only occupation is cultivation. Naturally their livelihood is entirely depended upon

the land.¹⁷ They felt that the refugees of the erstwhile East Pakistan and present Bangladesh had grabbed their land illegally. The Uttarkhanda Dal is agitating for the restoration of their land which was occupied by the refugees. This programme of restoration land of the U.K.D. had attracted the large number of Rajbanshi landless labourers.¹⁸

The U.K.D. had received a rude shock in 1987. The Dal was formally divided in that year and the Kamtapur Gana Parishad was formed in the pattern of the Asom Gana Parishad.¹⁹

Besides the U.K.D., large number of active and passive and sign-board and paper-type organisations have been flourished amongst the Rajbanshis. The most powerful and active organisation is Uttar Banga Tapasili Jati and Adivasi Sangathan, popularly known as U.T.J.A.S. It is a middle-class based youth organisation. Though it fiercely opposed the separate State demand but in some cases their demands are identical with the U.K.D.²⁰

The Koch Rajbanshi International Centre was founded for the same purpose. Though its headquarter is located at Tejpur, the Centre of action is established at Burinhat near Dinhat town of the Cooch Behar District. At the time of inauguration of this Centre, Maharani Gayatri Debi of Jaipur, a scion of Cooch Behar Royal family, was presented.

The Kamtapur Gana Parishad formed the All Kamtapur Students' Union in the pattern of the All Assam Students' Union.

The youth wing of the U.K.D. was formed. It is called the Kendriya Yuba Samiti.

In order to create literary consciousness among the Rajbanshi people, the Kamtapur Sahitya Parishad was formed. It is publishing a Journal called 'Ratan Pith', the historical name of this region.²¹ The U.K.D. is also publishing a Journal called 'Northern Express'.²² They are advocating the use of Kamtapuri language. Besides these Journals, Jagaran, Pubali, Kamta Katha etc. have been published.

In the village level many yatra parties were formed and they staged the most popular drama "Mayner Chokher Jal" in the Kamptaguri language. The contents of the 'Mayner Chokher Jal' was widely appreciated by the Rajbanshi people.

X

We have stated earlier that if we consider the election result as a barometer for gauging the support of the U.K.D., we can say without reservation that it has no solid support in any level.

There are several causes for this situation. Firstly, the presence of strong Left and Nationalist party in this area could not provide an opportunity for the U.K.D. for expanding its organisation. Secondly, the neo-middle class of the Rajbanshi community is more interested in getting facilities of the reservation system than any direct confrontation with the Government. Above all, the population strength of the Rajbanshis is not favourable for the creation of a separate State. According to the census of 1971, the Rajbanshis are only 13.88 per cent of the total population of North Bengal. Besides, their highest concentration is only in Cooch Behar i.e. about 1/3 of the total population.²³ Naturally, the demand for a seaprte state is not getting wide support from the different corners including the intellectuals.

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