

The Greater Cooch Behar Movement in North Bengal: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract: *North Bengal had been experienced several socio-political as well as identity movements since Independence. The Greater Cooch Behar Movement is one the identity as well as ethnic movement. The Greater Cooch Behar movement was an outcome of the Rajbanshi community's claim to regional identity and sovereignty based on the historical heritage of the erstwhile Cooch Behar state which merged into the India in 1949. Since the post-independence period, it demanded for a separate state or autonomy in the Indian Union. The movement transforms Rajbanshi people's caste-based subordination to ethnic and political assertion that led to ethno-nationalist movement. The paper does not deal with the contemporary context of Greater Cooch Behar movement but tries to explore in a historical perspective.*

Keywords: *Identity Movement. Greater Cooch Behar movement, ethnic polarization, deprivation*

Introduction

In Northern part of West Bengal majority of the population comprises of Rajbanshi and Kamtapuri community. Since the incorporation of erstwhile princely Cooch Behar to West Bengal as a district, the socio-economic deprivation of the Rajbanshi community people never ended. After the Independence, India had followed a massive development programme by establishing infrastructural as well as industrial development. For this, land was needed for the purpose. In most cases, compensations for land acquisition had lower the market values. Beside this, immigration issues after the post -independence period generated a sense of insecurity among the Rajbanshi community. As a result, there was a huge number of displacements among the Rajbanshi communities. Displacement of these marginal communities not only led to deprivation but also depletion of their source of livelihood. Displacement of the marginalized community gave a sense cultural solidarity and growth of ethnic nationalism.

The Greater Cooch Behar Movement was an out outcome of discontent among the Rajbanshi communities of losing their and livelihood. It is outcome of the struggle for power and privileges of their communities. It reveals the resistance against their gradual socio-economic marginalization and erosion of cultural and linguistic identity in the name of development.

Historical Background of the Greater Cooch Behar Movement

Cooch Behar is predominantly inhabited by the Rajbanshi community. As per census report of 2011, Cooch Behar has recorded a 50.17% concentration of Schedule Castes category. Ethnicity wise the most dominant population group in Cooch Behar are the Rajbanshis. A large section pf Rajbanshi people started Greater Cooch Behar Peoples' Association movement in Cooch. The Greater Coochbehar People's

Association (GCPA) was formed on 9th September 1998 (23rd Bhadra 1405 AD) at Karki house in Block 2 of Coochbehar at Kakribari region). The association was formed to press for the appointment of Kumar Anilendra Narayan as the successor of the Coochbehar Dynasty as the President of the Coochbehar Devottara Trust Board, to preserve the culture and historical monuments of Coochbehar and to include the history of the Coochbehar state in the curriculum of all educational levels. Kumar Anilendra Narayan was the president of this organization and Arun Kumar Roy was the secretary and the other members of the 7-member committee were Bipen Ishore (Kakribari) Madhav Das (Dodeir Hat), Durga Charan Roy (Basantir Hat) Harish Barman (Jarabari, Dinhata) and from Mathabhanga one person during the formation of the association, attended by Paresh Burman (former MP, Lok Sabha), Ambika Charan Roy (Advocate), Anandjyoti Majumder (Advocate), others notable member were Mohit Chakraborty (Advocate) Dharmanarayan Varma, Vivek Singh Sarkar, Kumar Anilendra Narayan and Kumar Narayan Trikulendra Narayan. It should be noted that during the formation of this association, there was no proposal or decision that Cooch Behar should be restored as a Centrally Administered 'C' category state or that the state should be claimed in future. However, the main leaders of this association had such latent desires, even if not openly. So as a first step to achieve this objective, their plan was to project Kumar Anilendra Narayan as the successor of the Coochbehar dynasty, who would be the President of the Coochbehar Devottara Trust Board.

The main objectives of the Greater Cooch Behar Peoples Association (GCPA) are:

- (i) Government should take initiatives to revive the cultural heritage of Cooch Behar.
- (ii) To take appropriate steps to solve the problem of Cooch Behar.
- (iii) To take safeguard the interest of the Cooch Behar people.
- (iv) To improve the living and socio-economic conditions of the people of Cooch Behar.
- (v) To promote the unity, fraternity and cooperation among the Cooch Behar people.
- (vi) To take steps for maintaining the clause of the merger agreement made between Maharaja of Cooch Behar and the Union government of India.
- (vii) To give the status of Cooch Behar as class “C” state as was mentioned at the time of merger of Cooch Behar state with the Union of India.

Another issue is found that a fund of more than 1.50 crore left by the Royal Family for the development of Cooch Behar. The fund was fixed deposit in banks generating interest spent by MLAs from the district for developmental work (Ghosh,2018)

After claiming language and culture and history in Cooch Behar since 1998, the association first claimed statehood demand on 26 December 2000. Then on April 6, 2001. According to the Treaty of Accession of India, the central rule of Class 'C' states began in Cooch Behar. The Greater Cooch Behar People's Association, in its memorandum sent to the President of India on the said two dates, demanded

the restoration of the regime as per the agreement. On November 21, 2001, he again presented a memorandum to the District Governor and demanded the traditional Ras mela Udyan of Cooch Behar to the then senior member of the dynasty. In early 2002, a report circulated that Kumar Anilendra Narayan, the successor of the Coochbehar dynasty, had advanced his demand for a separate state of Kamtapur. In this regard, he said, the demand of our organization is to bring Cooch Behar district back under the central rule as a 'C' category state as per the Indian Constitution; Kamtapur is not a state".

When The Greater Cooch Behar People's Association (GCPA) was first formed, the organization continued to grow in silence even though Bongshi Badan Barman was not on the committee. Because they did not want to come into the limelight at first. But gradually the conflict started. After that two groups were formed that one side was Bangsibadan Badan, on the other side, the association's founder president, secretary Kumar Anilendra Narayan and Arun Kumar Roy etc. respectively. Bangsibadan's group focused on bringing the organization to the grassroots level of the district one by one under their leadership. On the other hand, Arun Babu held two seminars on socio-economic development of the people of Cooch Behar at large on 10th October, 2002 at Dinjata Maharaja Nripendra Narayan Memorial Hall and 30th November at Shitalkhuchi Community Hall. Various officials of the state government were also present in these two seminars. Kumar Anilendra Narayan died on 21st December 2004. But the organizational work of Bangsibadan Barman did not stop. On August 26, 2004, at Jantar Mantar in Delhi, they demanded to the Home Minister Shri Shivraj Patil to bring Cooch Behar under central rule. Bangsibadan's group led the first rally of lakhs of people (40 thousand according to the police) on 18th July, 2005 at Shahid Bagh in Cooch Behar. On that day, in the absence of the District Magistrate, they sent memorandums through the Additional District Magistrate to the President, Prime Minister, Home Minister and Chief Election Commissioner of the country.

After this, the Greater Cooch Behar People's Association (GCPA) wanted to hold talks with the central government within a specific time frame on demands such as reinstatement of Cooch Behar as a 'C' state, suspension of West Bengal Assembly polls on Cooch Behar, etc. But the Union Ministry of Home Affairs did not give any importance to this matter. There is no discussion with the claimants of the state of Greater Cooch Behar, the Union Ministry of Home Affairs informed the state government. As a result, the Greater Cooch Behar People's Association (GCPA) called for a hunger strike with twenty-five thousand supporters from the morning of 20th September, 2005 in the District Governor's office premises. Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharya held a public meeting in Cooch Behar on September 24 against anti-Left Front and separatist forces. Just four days before the Chief Minister's visit to Cooch Behar, the GCPA agitators' call for this amaran program put the district police-administration in trouble. Therefore, fearing law and order disturbance in the district, the district administration finally issued Section 144 for 24 hours in Cooch Behar city and important places at the entrance of the city from the evening of September 19 to stop this hunger strike. To prevent this movement from the side of the administration, the city of Cooch Behar was wrapped in a seamless security net with about twelve police personnel and Rapid Action Force jawans along with some police officers. Also, a large number of police and RAF have been deployed in areas where Section 144 has been issued. A newspaper wrote about this, 'Just like a fort, the sound of heavy

police boots. Due to the fear of unrest, only police patrols have started in Cooch Behar.' But despite of that, what happened with the hunger strike program of the Greater Cooch Behar claimants was very sad and caused the Greater Cooch Behar movement to stir across the state. Three policemen, including an officer, and two agitators, supporters of GCPA, were killed.

Since section 144 has been imposed in Cooch Behar city, including the District Collector's office premises, the hunger strike program will be implemented anywhere outside those areas, the Greater Leaders announced. A section of GCPA supporters practically reached a few places adjacent to Cooch Behar city on 19th September. Many people from different parts of the district left for the city from the morning of 20th September. But the police halted them places like Bhetaguri, Dewanhat, Ghughumari, Maruganj, Chakchaka, Khagrabari, Pundibari etc. In the meantime, a group of Greta supporters reached the road near South Khagrabari Club and bus terminus in Cooch Behar city after breaking the police barriers. The protesters went on a hunger strike after being blocked by the police at the entrance of Cooch Behar city. The excitement was highest in the glittering at Khagrabari. Faced with heavy police barrage, the agitators beat up two policemen named Yogesh Chandra Sarkar (Haldibari) and Gaur Chandra Dhar (Cooch Behar) drowned them in water. Meanwhile, after noon, a fight broke out between police and GCPA supporters in Khagrabari. Unable to control the agitators, the police fired 8 rounds. This resulted in the death of two Greater supporters namely Chitta Roy and Vishadu Barman. Additional Superintendent of Police Mushtaq Ahmed was seriously injured in the flash incident and died on his way from Cooch Behar to Siliguri. To control the situation, the district administration extended the period of Section 144. On that day, the police arrested 4,000 GCPA supporters.

At the end of the day on 20th September, 2005, around 20,000 Greater Agitators had withdrawn from all places, but sat on hunger strike at various places on the Coochbehar-Dinhata road at night. Bhetaguri is one of them. Around 10,000 GCPA supporters blocked the road and went on hunger strike until 5pm on 23rd September. A day after the Chief Minister's meeting in Cooch Behar, the general public and the administration were worried about what the situation would be. Finally, on 23rd September 2005, the leaders of the GCPA called off their four-day hunger strike. They withdrew their hunger strike after receiving assurances from the administration that their demands would be considered. On that afternoon, in a meeting with the top leaders of the GCPA agitators, the district magistrate told them that their demands had already been sent to the central government and they would be informed on October 15 about the progress of considering the demands. After receiving this assurance, the top leaders of GCPA withdrew their hunger strike and the district administration was normalized and survived. But even though the hunger strike has been called off for the time being, if the central government does not meet their demands, a larger movement will be launched in the coming days, the top leadership of Greater told reporters.

As a result, 51 Rajbanshi community people of the GCPA, including Bangsibadan Barman, were jailed in Cooch Behar on charges of killing two police personnel, including a police officer, during the hunger strike.

At present, the Association has been fractured between two groups namely -Greater Cooch Behar Democratic party under the leadership of Bangsibadan Barman and the Greater Cooch Behar People's Association under the leadership of Anata Roy.

Conclusion

The Greater Cooch Behar Movement is mainly related to the protection of their separate identity as well their native rights. Gradually the movement had been transformed regional autonomy movement to sovereign statehood demand. The Greater Cooch Behar Movement is the result of several issues such as revival of their culture, glorification of the traditional lost history, lack of development, socio-economic deprivation, Kolkata-centric development, lack of political representation in the legislative process. It is very essential for taking appropriate development -oriented programme for the upliftment of the Rabanshi and Kamtapuri people of North Bengal.

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