

CHAPTER IV

SOCIAL TENSION IN THE RURAL NORTH BENGAL AND THE ORIGIN OF
PROTEST MOVEMENTS IN NORTH BENGAL

The North Bengal region was not free from the protest movements during the Colonial period; although it must be admitted that the intensity and depth of the protest movements in the Southern Bengal received much attention than the movements of North Bengal. All the significant movements in North Bengal occurred in the 20th century were mixed in character; *Khshatriya* movement organised by the Rajbansi community of North Bengal was basically a caste mobility movement and the *Tebhaga* movement, originated from the demands of the sharecroppers.

The impact of the Sepoy Mutiny and of the indigo revolt was also felt in the North Bengal region.¹ The Sannyasi uprising, in fact, first movement against the colonial authority in India, originated in the Malda, Dinajpur and neighbouring district of Rangpur of Bangladesh. The employment of the Sannyasi mercenaries during the time of Anglo-Bhutan War of 1773 on the Cooch Behar succession question and later in the movement of the Baikunthapur Estate were observed by the contemporary British officials. Jalpaiguri district too was not spared, though the Sannyasi and Fakir activities in the Jalpaiguri district were different in nature than those which were noted in other areas. After the annexation of the Western Duars from Bhutan in 1865 the Colonial authorities started in the Western Duars land revenue reforms and as a result of those reforms some serious socio-economic tensions arose.

The economic forces released by the Colonial authorities created a conducive atmosphere for migration; particularly war, depression and famine in Bengal seriously affected the existing pattern of land-ownership in the different district of North Bengal.

After the Great depression the cultivators' plight became serious and their hardship was doubled by the traditional mahajan's refusal to advance

the rural credit. So the cultivators particularly the small *jotedars* and middle peasants were forced to sell off their lands. The rise in prices of food grains and other necessary items following the Second World War also seriously enhanced the deteriorating material conditions of life of middle and poor peasants and these culminated in the great Bengal famine. The beneficiaries from this crisis were the merchants, moneylenders and the speculators who were also investors of capital in land. Further, migration of a large number of outsiders to the Jalpaiguri district from different districts of Bengal and from outside the Bengal presidency also created a conducive atmosphere for land transfer to the non-Rajbansis. The attractions of this region were the abundance of land, low rate of rent, prospects of doing good business; job opportunities in government offices as the local people were not in a position to compete. Further, with the establishment of tea gardens, a huge labour market was created.²

Migration in the Jalpaiguri district in the mid nineteenth century had been triggered by a number of economic factors. With colonial intrusion this area was exposed to the potentiality of both plantation industry and revenue farming almost simultaneously. A great part of the west-land of this area was leased out to enterprising tea planters at a very nominal rate of rent and exemptions. Vast of quasi-forest, quasi-wet waste land area had been leased out with complete revenue exemption for the initial half a decade and later a rate of rent to the tune of Rs. 1.50 to Rs. 2.00 per acre per annum was assessed on the reclaimed plantation area. As a result, the tea gardens secured lease deeds for large acreage of land varying from two thousand hectares to five thousand hectares, while the actual land used for plantation did never exceed 40% of total leased area, the remaining land came to be used by the planters without any rent. For waste land reclamation and later for plantation a vast number of labour was needed. Migration of labour to this area on this account was a notable demographic feature in the second half of the nineteenth century. New and enhanced revenue demands also had suggested conversion of agricultural waste land into arable land in enhanced quantity. The urgency

of the colonial government to finalise land settlement from the time of Becket induced a good number of fortune-seekers from the neighbouring districts to venture into this otherwise held to be *terra incognita* by the Bengalis in general. The singular factor which induced a new class of revenue farmers to come to this region was the fascinating rent per acreage. It was found to be Rs. 5.5 to Rs. 6 in the adjacent Cooch Behar State and was as high as Rs. 8.5 to Rs. 9.00 in the districts of Rangpore, Dinajpore, Mymensingh and Dhaka. But for the Jalpaiguri Duars the bent cultivable land *i.e.*, *Rupit* could be secured on a nominal rate of Rs. 4.00 per acre. Besides, it was rent free during the initial three/four years of reclamation. Interestingly enough, the revenue and settlement policy of the British attracted only the revenue farmer class instead of the cultivators.

One of the reasons why the incidence of the revenue farmers was noticed amongst the Bengali migrants was that the majority of them were either involved in legal profession or were officials in the government service sector establishments and clerks in the tea gardens. The migrants from outside Bengal and other than those needed by the tea gardens were from Bihar, U.P. and Rajasthan. Many of the migrants from the north and eastern districts of Bihar came with the railways in the 1880's and thereafter. Some of them had diversified into small shop keeping. Though a minority group, but the economically dominant migrant community was Rajasthanis. Broadly classified as *Marwari* in local parlance the scions of the different *marwari* houses initially launched wholesale business in grain, jute, tobacco and later according to convenience they diversified into revenue farming and in the tea plantation industry. All these factors appear to be important demographic and social data inputs to examine the social structure determination function in the Jalpaiguri district. While this ethnic and cultural mix influenced the course of social development in North Bengal they had also added different shades to the protest movements in the district.

At the initial phase the major labour force in the tea gardens of the Western Duars region was composed of the people of Nepali origin. The local Rajbansis were not found of working in tea plantation, nor the members of the local tribal communities. But with the growth of the tea gardens a greater demand for tea garden labourers was felt. The Nepalis had already had some exposure to tea cultivation in Darjeeling. Besides, being migrants from Eastern Nepal they had no professional preference unlike the Rajbansis. The problem was aggravated by the reluctance of the local people to work in the tea gardens. Under the circumstances, the planters had to look elsewhere for securing labour force and the experience of the Assam plantations indicated the areas from where the labour force could be obtained. Within seven years after the establishment of the first tea garden in the Duars, a moderate number of labourers begun to come from the Chotanagar area. The 1881 census recorded 210 Oraons and smaller numbers of other immigrant tribal groups. The number slowly increased and by 1901 a significant labour force was built up. Although the tea gardens situated in hilly areas of the Western Duars region the Nepali immigrants from the Darjeeling district constituted a fairly large number of the labour force; but the overwhelming portion was recruited from the distant Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas of Bihar.

According to the 1901 Census Report there were 188,223 immigrants in the district as a whole. The bulk of them were enumerated in the Duars and 'about half of the immigrants were tea garden coolies from Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas'.³

The migration statement indicated the number of immigrants from Ranchi district 80,436 and 10,562 from Santhal Parganas.⁴ Besides, the 1911 census showed that the number of persons born in Ranchi and enumerated in Jalpaiguri district was no less than 126,214.⁵ This large influx of people influenced also the growing demand for land and consequently there was a sharp rise in land prices.

Table IV: 1

Land Price (per acre in Rs.) in Western Duars from 1883 to 1894

Year	Tehsil				
	Mainaguri	Alipur	Bhalka	Siliguri	Falakata
1883	3.7	3.0	—	4.2	6.3
1884	5.7	1.5	—	2.1	4.9
1885	6.8	2.0	1.2	8.9	5.3
1886	7.1	0.8	1.0	7.8	4.1
1887	13.0	1.6	2.7	3.2	5.8
1888	12.7	2.0	1.9	6.0	7.2
1889	15.2	4.5	2.6	6.8	7.8
1890	10.2	6.1	3.9	4.8	4.7
1891	12.7	2.3	4.8	4.1	8.2
1892	14.5	4.7	4.4	2.4	11.1
1893	12.2	2.9	2.2	7.1	8.3
1894	14.9	4.3	1.5	3.5	7.8

Source: D.H.E. Sunder, *Survey and Settlement of the Western Duars in the district of Jalpaiguri 1889-95*, pp. 139-61.

Among the above mentioned areas the land prices in the Mainaguri areas being the most fertile areas fetched the highest land prices.

The local people, tempted by the increasing land prices, begun selling their lands to the outsiders. Thus, there was a great transformation of the local small and middle *jotedars* who became under-tenants, subservient to a new class of immigrant landed class. In Rangpur and Dinajpur the big *jotedars* and non-agriculturalists were the owner of the maximum number of *jotes*.⁷ In the Jalpaiguri district while the Rajbansi owner of land decreased, on the contrary those held by Marwaris, the upper caste Bengali middle class people and others increased.⁷ The professional classes like lawyers, doctors, Government officials and tea garden owners also purchased the *jotes*.

In the Cooch Behar district too the people connected with the administration of the State occupied a large number of *jotes*. In fact, this process of land transfer was not only a phenomenon of a particular district

but a general picture of the whole North Bengal itself and the Rajbansi community was the worst sufferer in this whole process.

This change in the land-controlling aspect made an impact on various fields. It has been rightly argued that the nature of economy of North Bengal till about the last quarter of the 19th century resembled the famous Asiatic mode of production type with every village producing for their own consumption.⁸ In the absence of a proper market economy and a moderate transport communication system peasants were forced to consume their own produce. The problem was aggravated by the peasants' bondage to landlords who found no way out to start any new venture. The famous autobiographical narrative of Shri Upendranath Barman depicts a similar dismal picture of North Bengal village economy where cash nexus procedure was yet to mature and barter system was in vogue.⁹ But this type of economy slowly begun to change with the beginning of commercialisation of agriculture, particularly tea plantation enterprise and the introduction of railways in the Jalpaiguri district. The gradual intrusion of different classes of outsiders and the money economy changed the entire picture and this change took place in the existing agrarian social structure. But this transformation did not generate any subsequent improvement in the material condition of the Rajbansi community. Most of the people of the Rajbansi community belonged to the *adhikar* class. They were the worst sufferers and this particular class was directly hit by the whole process.

Apart from losing their ownership of lands there was not any significant place of the Rajbansi community on the existing occupational structure of the North Bengal region despite the introduction of western education in the North Bengal region. The following table will suffice to show the placement of the Rajbansis in respect of occupations.

Table IV: 2
Occupational pattern of the Rajbansis

Income from Labourers, Rent of land Cutters		Cultivators of all kinds		Agents and Managers of landed estates, planters, Rent Collectors etc.		Field wood etc.			
<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>		
3,767	537	414,812	9,110	482	1	23,230	385		
Public Administration									
Trader		Gazetted Officer		Others		Lawyers, Doctors, Teachers		Religious	
<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>
3,009	1,863	18	(no F)	116	2	497	2	610	39

Note: Rajbansis of Darjeeling, Cooch Behar, Faridpur, and North Bengal are included here.

Source: *Census of India, 1911, Vol. V., pt. II, Bengal, Table XVI, pp. 374-7.*

But there are certain drawbacks in the above mentioned table. Although in the table 537 women have been shown who have been drawing income from rent, but their exact status is not known. Further, 640 male and female people have been branded as 'religious', but the available data do not indicate the existence of a priestly class who lived exclusively on religious profession. But despite these drawbacks it is quite clear that a minor section of the Rajbansi community were rent receivers and their presence in other subsidiary occupations was marginal. Majority of them belonged to the cultivator class and most of these cultivators were *adhiars* and field labourers. This event points that whatever be the magnitude, a vertical division along the economic lines within the Rajbansi community took place.¹⁰

So both in the agricultural and service sector the son of the soil, *i.e.*, the Rajbansis felt alienated and this sense of alienation solidified their ethnic demands. In later stages they began to clamour for their *Kshatriya* identities.

II

The demand for *Kshatriya* identity by a section of the Rajbansis was not purely a 20th century phenomenon; in fact, there are several references to the

Rajbansis' speaking of their royal lineage and claiming *Kshatriya* status as early as in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹¹ This demand for *Kshatriya* status was repeatedly stressed towards the closure of the 19th century and finally the resentment was transformed into a vigorous organised movement from the early years of the twentieth century.

The basic ground for the movement was provided by the socio-political and economic changes that took place during the Colonial rule. In the social hierarchy of Bengal, the Rajbansis along with the Namasudras, the pods and other depressed classes were placed at the bottom of the structure. Two reasons can be cited for their demand for higher status in society. With the coming of the Colonial rule the traditional economic basis of the Indian caste system begun to collapse. With the spread of urbanisation and the opening of new career opportunities and the impact of modern Western education the traditional village societies failed to retain their traditional insularity. So, a section of the lower castes influenced by these tendencies aspired for horizontal mobility. But with dismay they found their existing lower caste status proving to be a stumbling block for their social upliftment. This motivated them to look for fresh avenue to rectify the existing social anomaly. Further, the caste policy devised by the Colonial authority helped them to find a way out, while remaining within the caste system itself.

From the early years of the 20th century the Colonial authorities decided to provide protection to the underprivileged groups. Whatever may be the design of the Colonial rulers it is undoubtedly true that this Colonial policy reinforced caste identities and indirectly sponsored caste mobilisations. The Colonial policy towards education stated that the Government would assist those who "belong(ed) to the very lowest classes of the Hindu social system, or...(were) outside the pale of caste altogether. Special schools were opened in the backward areas and education for them was made highly subsidised".¹² For public employment the Government prepared a list of the depressed classes and made job reservations for the members of these classes. All these protective measures infused a new spirit among the lower castes to work for caste solidarity in order to affirm their own separate identities. This

led to social segregation and generated tensions between the upper and the lower castes.

The local situations also helped to provide a sufficient ground for the Rajbansis' assertion of a *Kshatriya* identity. The immigration of the 'Bhadralok' class in the traditional Rajbansi society altered the erstwhile socio-economic pattern of the society. Apart from holding a large number of lands, on account of their proximity to the local administration and their control over administration they became a dominant group in the local society, economy and politics. Guided by the traditional Brahminical cultural values they despised the Rajbansis whom they branded as 'backward, uncultured and even antyaj'.¹³ These upper class *bhadralok* called the Rajbansi community as *bahe*; implying their cultural inferiority. The word *bahe* was a distortion of the word *babahe* by which the Rajbansis generally addressed a person.¹⁴ The locals, of course, used to call the outsiders as *Bhatias*. This social and cultural hiatus between immigrant upper caste Western educated Hindus and the Rajbansis produced a sense of alienation perhaps solidified caste solidarity among the Rajbansis.

The chronicles left by Upendranath Barman and Panchanan Barma have stated that even elite section of the Rajbansi community had to suffer the brunt of the Hindu upper caste arrogance.¹⁵ This points out that the elite section of the Rajbansi community were seriously conscious about caste discrimination and this factor hindered their social upliftment despite their material and cultural progress. The Rajbansi elite community was also aspiring for a place in Government services and in various self-governing bodies. But they were not able to find a place because of the dominance of the upper-class Hindus in Government offices and in various self-governing bodies. Being sidelined by the upper-caste gentry in the race for power, the Rajbansi elites used the caste sentiments to voice their grievances. Thus, the ambition for higher social status and political power motivated the Rajbansi elites to develop among the poorer section of the Rajbansi community an articulate caste consciousness in order to launch a well-organised movement for social justice.

About the *Kshatriya* status of the Rajbansis, Report of Hamilton Buchanan was ambiguous, "In this district by far the most important and numerous of these tribes, by the Assamese, Nepalise and by all such Bengalis as are not under the influence of their chief, is called indiscriminately Koch and Rajbansi, and the subdivision and distinctions which they themselves have introduced are considered as effusions of vanity and of no importance, the whole being thought low and impure".¹⁶ He categorically asserted that 'I have no doubt however that all the Koch are sprung from the same stock and that most of the Rajbansis are Koch'.¹⁷ Writing in 1891 H.H. Risley stated "Koch, Koch-mandai, Rajbansi, Paliya, Desi constituted a large Dravidian tribe of North-Eastern or Eastern Bengal, among whom there are ground for suspecting some admixture of Mongoloid blood".¹⁸

Suniti Kumar Chatterjee's statement indicates that Rajbansis and Kochs were alike. He said that the Rajbansis "...now mainly be described as Koch, *i.e.*, Hinduised or semi-Hinduised Bodo who had abandoned their original Tibeto-Burman speech and have adopted the Northern-dialect of Bengali... they are proud to call themselves Rajbansis and to claim to be called *Kshatriyas*".¹⁹ Charu Chandra Sanyal, the noted anthropologist of Jalpaiguri also stated, 'Kochs are non-Aryan in origin. Some of them adopted Hinduism and became Rajbansis'.²⁰

It should be noted that in the nineteenth century the Rajbansi chiefs taking a cue from the Hindu scriptures and Epics claimed themselves to be *Kshatriyas*. Their arguments were tendered in the form that in certain areas (c2550-2350 BC) they were known as *Haihaya Kshatriyas* who being attacked by Parasuram and Sagar of the Bhrigu dynasty fled from Aryan territories and took shelter among the non-Aryans and in the course of time lost their *Kshatriya* identities and characteristics.²¹ By basing on this argument the *Kshatriya* movement gained momentum. This *Kshatriya* claim by the Rajbansis was transformed into a movement at the time of the Census of 1891.²² By this Census Report Rajbansis and the Kochs were treated on equal footing.²³ Several elite segments of the Rajbansi community protested against

this identity specially Harmohan Khajanchi to articulate the protest formed 'Rangpur Bratya Kshatriya Jatir Unnati Bidhayani Sabha'. It was impressed upon F.M. Skrine, then District Magistrate of Rangpur, to recognise Rajbansis as a separate from the Koch and to allow them to be identified as Kshatriyas in the Census. Skrine in turn sought the opinion of the Rangpur Dharma Sabha, an association of the Brahmin Pandits. The Dharma Sabha after various consultations with the various schools of Pandit Samaj gave the judgement in favour of the Kshatriya status of the Rajbansis and categorically stated that the Rajbansis and the Kochs were separate castes. It was also stated that the Rajbansis were the Bratya Kshatriyas, *i.e.*, the members of the warrior caste who had temporarily fallen from their higher caste status for the non-performance of rituals which were expected from the Kshatriyas. The District Magistrate then recommended to the Census Superintendent to allow the Rajbansis to be enrolled as *Bratya Kshatriyas* and a general circular was effected stating that the Rajbansis might write their caste as *Bratya Kshatriya* in official correspondence. After this declaration the Rajbansis were pacified and for the time being the movement was subsided.²⁴

But again the demand for *Kshatriya* identity gained momentum during the Census of 1901. Following the recommendation of Skrine the Rajbansis hoped that their *Kshatriya* status would be recorded in the Census Report and they would be treated separately from the Kochs. It was learnt by them that in the census operations of 1901 they were going to be branded as Rajbansis only not as Rajbansi Kshatriyas. Further, in the said census of 1901 the Rajbansis once more was bracketed with the Koch.²⁵ It is not unlikely, though evidences are scant, that the opposition from the higher Hindu castes played a significant role in the official denial of *Kshatriya* status to the Rajbansis.

Nevertheless, the official approach sparked of a Rajbansi Kshatriya movement led by Panchanan Barma in the whole of North Bengal and particularly in Jalpaiguri.²⁶ Panchanan Barma, a lawyer by profession had to suffer humiliations at the hands of higher castes. He was well-supported by Rajbansi scholars and pandits who compiled materials from history, folk tales

and folk songs proverbs and sayings to support the Kshatriya status of the Rajbansis.²⁷ At this time the leaders of the Rajbansi Kshatriya movement prescribed social reforms and they advocated were the wearing of the sacred thread, reduction of the days of mourning on the death of either parent from thirty days to twelve days which was the mourning period for high caste Hindus, and change of surname from Das to Barman, Singha and Roy.

The Rajbansi communities situated in Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Goalpara and Purnea districts played to their respective District Magistrates to enlist them in the Census Report as *Kshatriyas* and to allow them to use the titles like Singha, Barma etc.²⁸ For his role in the awakening the Rajbansis Panchanan Barman emerged as the most respected and popular leader of the community. It was under his leadership that the movement gained a significant pace prior to the publication of the Census Report of 1911. In May 1910 a conference was held at Rangpur town in which mostly landlords, jotedars and affluent peasants from different district of North Bengal, assembled and in that conference, the Kshatriya Samiti was formed with Madhusudan Roy, a lawyer from Jalpaiguri, as President and Panchanan Barman as Secretary. They demanded that the Rajbansis and the Kochs should be treated separately and they should be given the status of Kshatriyas.

The then District Magistrate of Rangpur C. Tindal I.C.S., in 16th December 1910 wrote vide letter no. J-3738 to the Census Superintendent of East Bengal and Assam that he had no objection in treating the Rajbansis as Kshatriyas.²⁹

Besides, on 21.1.1911 the Census Officer of Purnea district wrote to the Sub-divisional Officer of Kishenganj that in the Census Report Rajbansi and Koch communities should be treated separately.³⁰ The demands grew so persistently that O'Malley L.S.S., the Superintendent of the 1911 census operations in Bengal commented that 'a most persistent agitation was carried on by the Rajbansis'.³¹ At last the demand for separation of Rajbansis from the Kochs was granted.

In the year 1913 the Census Superintendent O'Malley L.S.S. commented in his Census Report "The former request was granted without hesitation as there is no doubt that as the present day, irrespective of any question of origin, the Rajbansis and Koch are separate castes".³² But their prayer for Kshatriya status was not granted.

The movement linked the ritual of *Upanayan Sanskara* or the wearing of the sacred thread to the readmission of *Kshatriya* status. In February 1912 several Rajbansis from different districts of North Bengal assembled at Debiganj on the bank of Karatoya and took sacred thread.³³

The Kshatriya Samiti also took several steps for the spread of education among the Rajbansi people and raised community funds for providing loans to the Rajbansi agriculturists, urged the later to improve their standard of agricultural practices and called upon them to organise cooperative credit societies.³⁴ It condemned the Hindu caste system and the dowry system. Through its monthly journal *Kshatriya*, several socio-economic problems of the Rajbansis were highlighted. In order to attain national recognition this movement made a contact with the Bharatiya Kshatriya Mahasabha, an association of Rajput Thakurs in northern and western India.³⁵

During the First World War in order to exhibit the martial abilities, the Rajbansi youths were encouraged by their Samiti leaders to join the British army and the Samiti leaders requested the British Government to raise two battalions composed exclusively of the Rajbansis. Responding to the call, several hundred Rajbansi youth from Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Dinajpur and Goalpara joined the British army and got involved in the First World War. In recognition of his service to the Colonial Government in the war effort, the title of Raisaheb was conferred and M.B.E. (Member of the British Empire) on Panchanan Barman in 1919.³⁶

In spite of its declared non-political stance practically the Samiti voiced many concerns which clearly showed their political inclination. For example, in the fourth annual conference held at Debiganj in Jalpaiguri in June 1913 the Samiti declared that the Rajbansi Kshatriyas were 'loyal subjects'.³⁷ The tenth

conference held in 1919 rejoiced at the British victory in the war. During the nationalist agitation and activities around constitutional reforms in the war years and in the immediate post-war years, in a representation to the Bengal Government in November 1917 the Samiti expressed its 'apprehensions of tendencies...of discontent and even disrespect for law and order';³⁸ and urged the Colonial Government for separate representation in future constitutional reforms.³⁹

It is presumable that the Kshatriya movement was not welcomed by the upper caste Hindu gentry and the Bhatias or Bengali immigrants into North Bengal. Though they were accused of having tried to put block in the way of the movement⁴⁰ in one of the Annual Reports of the Samiti, the evidences of accredited caste Hindus opposition to the Rajbansi movement are very infrequent. On the whole this *Kshatriya* movement was an important step to find upward social mobility and status for the Rajbansi Hindus within a sphere of traditional conservative upper caste Hindu domination. It is noteworthy that even in the Cooch Behar State the Rajbansis faced stiff opposition from the state administration which did not approve of their *Kshatriya* identity. Panchanan Barman was expelled from Cooch Behar by the ruler Jitendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur. The administration being run by the upper caste Hindu gentry, the local backward Rajbansi people could not match with them for positions of power.⁴¹

In spite of the Rajbansi Kshatriya movement being disliked by the conservative sections of the upper-caste Hindu gentry, the Rajbansis did not try to break away from the four-fold structure of caste system. On the contrary, it tried to emulate the practices, norms and superstitions of the traditional Hindu society. Following the Hindu system it even advocated *purdah* system for their women.⁴² The complexity of the movement may be realised by the fact that on the one hand they sought for the upper-caste status mobility on the other they tried to disassociate themselves from the ethnic identity of the Kochs or the Rabhas. Interestingly enough, the Rajbansis also disapproved the Rabha community's movement for an identical upward social mobility.⁴³

In spite of the social tensions that tended to originate from the caste mobility movement Rajbansi participation in the nationalist movement and also in the *Tebhaga* movement was not inconsiderable. It is true that there was an underlying current of cooperation with the British at some level for some official favours. But involvement of the Rajbansi men and women in both the movements constitute an important chapter in the history of North Bengal. Recent researches have disclosed the range of Rajbansi participation almost on secular line. Initially there were some reservations observed among the Rajbansis particularly where the Rajbansis themselves were the targets of complaint. For strong Keenship bearings the Rajbansi peasant participation in the *Tebhaga* movement, which understandably involved some Rajbansi *jotedars* was scarce in the Jalpaiguri district. This incident had baffled the social theoreticians when they started examining the causes and the ...in the *Tebhaga* movement. The quick tribal *adhikar* response to the movement in the Mal thana area of the Jalpaiguri district posited the problem in a brighter light.

Later researches however have exposed the unknown episodes overlooked by the early enquiries. Association of Jagadindradev Raikat, the zamindar of Baikunthapur with the Congress politics and with him the participation of other national-minded Rajbansi freedom fighters was one episode of the story. Incidence of Rajbansi participation in the leftist movement of the Jalpaiguri district too became frequent. But what was particularly significant was the participation of Rajbansi women in the freedom struggle. Purneswari Barman, who was popularly known as *burima*, was undoubtedly a significant female leader in the annals of freedom struggle in the Jalpaiguri district. Her participation in the movement was in fact luminal; transcending the traditional kinship affiliation she did succeed in motivating people in favour of the 'no-rent' movement. Though not institutionally align to either the Indian National Congress, or the Communist Party of India, Purneswari Barman succeeded to collect around her a band of dedicated women workers which included both left and non-left minded

people. One such lady was the wife of the later CPML leader Charu Majumdar. So, even if the catalogue of events occasioned by Rajbansi participation and by Rajbansi leadership may not be furnished here the fact remain that whatever success was achieved by the nationalist movement in North Bengal might be partly attributed with certainly to the active participation of the Rajbansis of the Jalpaiguri district.

The Kshatriya movement however in a sense reactionary, as this movement remained confined among the large land holders, jotedars and better off peasants; the issues regarding improvement of the plight of the *adhiars* and poor peasants who constituted the bulk of the Rajbansi community were not very specific in their agendas. This limitation apart it would not be wrong to view it as 'a distorted but important'⁴⁴ manifestation of the socio-economic tensions and conflicts in the Jalpaiguri district.

III

With the growth of tea plantation enterprise, the condition of tea-garden labourers too had deteriorated; consequently, a ground for labour movement was laid in the district.

The immigration from Chotanagpur, Ranchi, Santhal Parganas created a huge labour force in the Duars tea-gardens, but the method of recruitment adopted by the Duars garden differed from that adopted by the tea planters in Assam. The Duars labourers were 'free' in the sense that they were not indentured labourers subject to penal measures. The reason behind this special status to the Duars tea garden labourers was that "by the time the tea industry came to be started in the Jalpaiguri district, because of certain inconveniences of the indentured system experienced by the Assam planters and increasing labour protests in diverse forms, even the latter had given up their exclusive dependence on that system and had been introducing non-indentured recruitment through garden sardars".⁴⁵ Further as "the Duars was much nearer than Assam to its principal recruiting grounds", so the planters did not resort to such overt acts of coercion which was found in Assam.⁴⁶

But it would be wrong to assume that tea plantation labourers were free from all types of coercion. The planters as well as their agents well-utilised illegal methods, in (i) getting labour, (ii) putting labourers to work and (iii) keeping them under control. Despite the handicap of inadequate primary source materials for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and somewhat detailed account of conditions of labour as late as the early 1940s⁴⁷ make it clear that the Duars plantation labour was wage labour under various types of non-economic constraints. And such type of constraints severely restricted the mobility of labour and it turned out as 'labour held in bondage in a free market'.⁴⁸

All sorts of unethical, coercive methods were employed in methods of recruitment of labour. At the time of recruitment the labourers were given an advance, partly refundable and partly non-refundable. This advance was given to the recruits to pay off debts in their respective countries and to enable them to meet road and sundry expenses.⁴⁹ This practice helped to create an impression on the labourers that they were not free to move. After their, *i.e.*, the labourers' arrival in the gardens they were put under various forms of oppression both physical and mental. This labour system – the labourers being separated from their countries and put under a alien geographical, ethnic, social, cultural atmosphere and various forms of explicit or implicit methods employed to them – all these process made their working places vulnerable to violence and coercion. Further as the Duars region was within a non-regulated area so the planters felt no obligation in obeying the ordinary laws and regulations.

Further, in order to seclude the labourers from the outside world the planters introduced the 'universal Sunday Hat'.⁵⁰ If there was any move to create an extra Hat-day the planters unanimously were able to prevent such move.⁵¹

The Labour Rules were devised in a way to control the labourers. In 1905 the Duars Planters Association set up a series of Labour rules by which it was decided that the gardens enticing labourers from other gardens would have to compensate the losing gardens the expense it had incurred on

bringing a worker to the Duars and the money it had advanced to him. So although theoretically the labourers were free to go anywhere but a set of labour rules restricted their freedom.

Further, the labourers were forced to work in an unhealthy climate and so high incidence of sickness resulting in absenteeism and heavy death toll among the workers were a natural consequence. The planters too were affected with various diseases and thought for some remedial measures.⁵² In 1912 the Duars Labour Act was passed to see the matters relating to sanitation and public health. But there is no proof that there was any marked improvement on their living standards. The labourers were workers of all seasons and as stated by Sunder in the cold weather and rains plucking work was done from 7 a.m. till about 6 p.m. with two hours' leave.⁵³

In addition to it under various supervisory staffs like *sardar*, *dafadar*, *chaprasi*, *head dafadars* they had to do many arduous tasks.

As far as the wage structure in the plantation area is concerned, the labourers were put under an unfavourable position. In the early 1890s the tea garden male workers got on an average Rs. 6 a month while their female counterparts got Rs. 4.8 to Rs. 5 and Rs. 2.8 to Rs. 3 was fixed for children.⁵⁴ The Deputy Commissioner in a report commented that in 1900 that the average earnings of the most hardworking labourer was not more than Rs. 60 a year.

Despite the sharp rise of 66% in the price of rice and wheat between the years 1893 to 1908, the staple food of the tea garden labourers, there was no change in the wage structure of the labourers.⁵⁵ Naturally with a paltry wages they soon became indebted to their *Sardars* and in some cases to the tea garden management.⁵⁶

The tea-garden labourers were poorly paid, extremely controlled, illiterate, undernourished and infected with various types of diseases. So, a seed of protest movement was sown in the tea plantation area. Prior to mid-1946 there was no well-organised trade union among the plantation labourers in the Duars and they were unaffected by the nationalist movement. But the

economic grievances prompted them to start labour movements in the Duars region. The sort of exploitation and bondage under which the Duars labourers were subjected have been discussed previously. During the war years the extent of exploitation was greatly increased. In 1946 an official enquiry was conducted; which exposed that between 1939 and 1945 the cost of living in Duars plantation area increased by 200% while in comparison with this the labourers' total income including concessions had only doubled.

The workers suffered from irregular supply of essential commodities like rice, mustard oil, kerosene oil and sugar.⁵⁷ Besides, standard of commodities which were supplied to them were of sub-standard qualities. The war years however created a new awareness among the labourers about the new demands and new standard of living.⁵⁸ The acute shortage of labour during the second world war period also strengthened labourers' bargaining power.

There were reports about labour uprisings in Assam and Darjeeling labourers and now the Duars labourers joined in the movement. In the Duars region the labour protests took shape in the forms of petitions, representations, gheroas, sudden stoppage from works, physical attack on plantation officials both white and Indian. The frequent incidents of high prices, adulteration, short weight etc. made the labourers believe that the *Kayas* or Marwari shopkeepers were responsible for these and so there were attacks on the latter by the labourers. In the second half of July two strikes 'in one of which labour made an organised attempt to cut off the garden from the outside world and to sabotage the factory arrangement' took place.⁵⁹

The Duars Planters' Association in a Committee meeting held on 30 July considered labour problem at Dumchipara, Banarhat, Naya Sylee and Jiti tea gardens. The immediate reason behind protest movements in Salbari, Dima, Kalchini, Gangutia, Raimatang, Chinchula and in some other tea estates was cut in the rice part of the ration. No only the workers even the peasants of the area also joined the revolt.

The active involvement of Communists in the labour movement was acknowledged by the Colonial Officials. But most of the Communist leaders the officials opined were outsiders. Among the notable communist leaders Ratanlal Brahmin, Parimal Mitra, Domohani Branch Secretary Bimal Das Gupta, Jadhunath Singh took part in organising tea-garden labourers. Apart from the Communists some Congress workers also took initiative in mobilising the plantation workers. But the Gurkha League proved to be a divisive force and backed by the European planters, it formed a separate regional political unit comprising Darjeeling, Duars, Koch Bihar and Assam.⁶⁰

The British officials and the planters tried to counter the labour movements by (1) redressing some grievances of the labourers, (2) by tackling the labourers and the communists in a firm way, (3) by evacuating particularly the European planters from the tea plantation areas and (4) by the formation of alliance between European-Indian planters. In this alliance it is alleged that the Congress leadership was also involved and such participation of Congress party exposed the limitations of the nationalist movement.

IV

On the agrarian issues various movements were organised; and these movements were specifically organised by the leftist parties. The Krishak Samiti was formed on the single point agenda of sustained propaganda and patient explanatory campaign around issues of peasant grievances. The movement against economic exploitation and oppression on the peasantry and *adhiars* in particular became a regular feature of Krishak Samiti activity.

Two movements, *i.e.*, the *Hat-tola* movement and the *adhiar* movement may be called the precursors of the *Tebhaga* uprising. The *Hat-tola* movement was organised by the exploited peasants on the issue of *hat tola* or tolls collected by those who owned or leased in and controlled the *hats* (weekly markets).

There were numerous *hats* in the Jalpaiguri district. It was estimated that in the year 1940 there were 6,000 *hats* in the Bengal province which were mostly owned by local zamindars who either managed these *hats* through their subordinate staffs or leased out them to *Ijaradars*. In Boda, Debiganj and Pachagar thana areas of the Jalpaiguri district the *hats* were either directly owned or controlled by the Koch Behar Raj Estate and Baikunthapur estate. Further, these *hats* were leased out to big *jotedars* of the area. As elsewhere in Bengal the *hat* owners or the *ijaradars* exacted levy from the stall owners and the peasants who came here as buyers at exorbitant rates. The levy was exacted both in kind and in cash and in the case of cash exaction was both a fixed and high rate. In the case of collection in kind the amount was determined without any fixed norm. Not only the peasantry but various other sections of rural population such as teachers, village doctors, small shopkeepers were hard-hit to such kind of exaction.

Against such kind of illegal exaction the District Krishak Samiti Conference organised a movement in the year 1939 whose main agenda was to induce the peasants not to pay *tola*. This movement first started at Maidan Dighi *hat* under Boda Police Station. The police administration took the side of the *ijaradars*. After a meeting with Subdivisional Officer a compromise settlement was done.

This event showed that even the illiterate peasants could argue their case with powerful *jotedars*, *ijaradars* and Government Officials and the achievement of a settlement in their favour gave new confidence to the peasants.⁶¹ Particularly the peasants in Boda, Debiganj, Pachagar thana areas were enthused at the success achieved at Maidan hat and slowly the movement spread into other *hats*.

In order to pressurise the Koch Behar administration the peasants under the active guidance from the Krishak Samiti boycotted the *Boda hat* and set up an alternative *hat* named '*dasher hat*' or the peoples' *hat* outside the jurisdiction of the Koch Behar estate. Thus, toll collection in *Boda hat* came to a standstill.⁶²

Tola collection in *Lakshmir hat* too stopped. After the closure of *Pachagar hat* one of the largest *hats* in the area the District Board was compelled to fix *toll* rates and directed the *hat ijaradars* to collect *toll* at rate which was specified by the District Board.

The successful movement against the arbitrary *toll* collection proved to be a great stimulus to the peasant movement. This movement was based on a broad peasant unity and was able to offer a challenge to the established feudal order and the local administration. This movement received support even from a section of *jotedars*, particularly the lower ones and the middle strata of rural population.

This movement was immediately followed by the *adhiar* movement. The *adhiar* movement was a natural reaction to the economic exploitation of the *jotedars*. The *adhiars* stood at the bottom of the agrarian structure of the North Bengal society. Apart from taking a half share or *adhibhag*, *jotedars* also exacted various forms of *abwabs* or additional levies from the *adhiars*. The Settlement officer Milligan in his *Settlement Report* gave a hint about the possibility of imposition of some fresh exactions on the *adhiars*. It seems that particularly in the inter war years new levies were imposed and by 1939 this became most perverse.

In addition to it the *adhiars'* obligation to the *jotedar* also involved repayment of consumption of paddy and seed loan. Such borrowings were made mainly under three systems: (a) *Dera bari*, (b) *Duno bari* and (c) *Dar Kata*. Under *Dera bari* and *Duno bari*, the *bargadars* were compelled to repay the paddy borrowed at the rate of 50% (*dera*) or 100% (*duno*) interest for a loan incurred for a period of five or six months. Under the *Dar Kata* system a certain quantity of paddy was lent during the lean season in terms of prevailing high market price, and the loan was calculated in terms of money value of the paddy borrowed. Repayment had to be made after harvesting of the crop in the form of whatever amount of paddy was available at that amount of money. The price of paddy being low at the time of repayment naturally the *adhiars* had to pay more in terms of paddy than he had

borrowed. Further the practice of stacking all paddy by the *adhiars* at the *jotedars Kholan* or threshing place indicated *jotedar* or *Giri* farmers hold on the *adhiars*.

All these created resentment among the *adhiars*. The success of 'no-tola' movement encouraged the *adhiars* further agitations. The Krishak Samiti came forward to highlight the demands of the *adhiars*. The slogan 'nij kholane dhan tolo' was put forward to solidify *adhiars'* right in the choice of the threshing place and protect their interests from the various illegal exactions made by the *jotedars* and their hirelings.

The *adhiars* in Boda, Debiganj and Pachagar thanas and parts of Sadar thana spontaneously joined in the movement. Further, the movement also spread to the Thakurgaon subdivision of the Dinajpur district and Domar thana area of the Rangpur district. With the help of Krishak Samiti's workers the *adhiars* collectively harvested the paddy and stacked it in their own places or *Khamars*.⁶³

The *jotedars* with the help of police used all kinds to threats against the *adhiars*. Being unable to control the movement the officials of Jalpaiguri and Dinajpur District were forced in January 1940 to call the joint meeting of *jotedars* and *adhiars* to settle the disputes. In the meetings although the officials agreed on the stoppage of illegal exactions and about fixation of maximum rate of interest on paddy loan; but they also ordered that the paddy had to be stacked in the *jotedars Kholan*. The *adhiars* of Jalpaiguri refused to agree to such a settlement and continued their movement.

So far the local and district administration was not averse to the demands of the *adhiars*. But soon the whole picture changed with the involvement of Musharruff Hossain who was a minister in the Fazlul Haque ministry and who himself had a large *jotedari* interest. In Jalpaiguri he held a meeting with the *jotedars* and under his guidance the police started to take repressive measures. Sometime in the mid-1940s Gurudas Roy, Madhab Datta and Monoranjan Das Gupta, Krishak Samiti organisers were arrested and

they were sentenced to prison. So the police repression caused a setback to the movement.

It is true that the *adhiar* movement was ultimately suspended but its contributions in various aspects could not be overlooked. It succeeded in forcing the *jotedars* to agree to a reduction in the interest rate in consumption loan and in mid-1942 the district administration was compelled by the pressure created by the *adhiars* to announce the limits on interest rate on such loans. For the first time in the history of peasant movement in Bengal, the cause of the *adhiars* or *bargadars* came into prominence.

But the agrarian agitation did not come to standstill. Again in the autumn of 1946 when paddy in North Bengal fetched a higher price than the *Tebhaga* propaganda was launched. As in 1939 the initiative was taken by the bigger *adhiars* who were willing to benefit from the high post-war level of agricultural prices. Some of them who had more land in *adhi* than in *jote* right conceded *tebhaga* to their *adhiars* in respect of their *jote* lands. The two-thirds formula of dividing the crop attracted the *adhiars*, especially in such a good year as 1946. In 1946 the Bengal provincial Kisan Sabha called the demand for *tebhaga*, i.e., two-thirds of the harvests in favour of the *adhiars*.⁶⁴ This demand was previously recommended by the Floud Commission in 1940. During November several *baithaks* (group discussion) and meetings were held in rural interior. The chief slogans were *tebhaga chai* – a demand for two-thirds share – and *nij Kholane dhan tolo* – urging the *adhiars* to take their own paddies to their own houses instead of *jotedars'* houses.⁶⁵ Removal of paddy from the fields by the *adhiars* and other Communist volunteers began their activities in the first week of December 1946. The first incidents took place in Atwari and Baliadangi thanas of Thakurgaon subdivision in Dinajpur. Slowly the movement spread into other regions. In Jalpaiguri, the Debiganj-Pachagar-Boda areas provided a favourable ground for *tebhaga* movement. Specially the first report on enforcement of *tebhaga* in Jalpaiguri district came from the village under Pachagar *thana* (Police Station, i.e., P.S.) in late November. The success achieved in Sundardighi Union under Debiganj P.S. roused the

morale of the poor peasants and the *adhiars* and the movement spread quickly from village to village under Debiganj, Boda and parts of Kotwali and Rajganj thanas. After harvesting the paddy it was stacked in *adhiars'* place and *jotedars* were asked to take his one-third share of the crop. But neither the *jotedars* nor the police dared to turn up.⁶⁶ The active participation of Rajbansi peasant and *adhiar* women activists like Sagari Barman, Buri Ma (Purnyeswari) showed the broad based structure of the peasant movement. For several weeks the peasants and the *adhiars* in particular continued their struggles and refused to bow down to the Colonial administration and to the *jotedars*.

In the face of unity many *jotedars* were compelled to come to compromise. Further the notification of a Bargadars Temporary Regulation Bill popularly known as Tebhaga Bill was published in the Calcutta Gazette on 22 January 1947. The main provisions of the Tebhaga Bill were as follows: where the *jotedars* supplied plough-cattle, plough and other agricultural implements and manure, the *bargadar* would get only half share of the produce; but if the *jotedar* did not supply these inputs, the *bargadars* would be entitled to two-thirds share. Seed would be shared according to who supplied it. The *jotedar* could evict *bargadars* if he wanted to cultivate the land himself or with the help of his family and if 'there has been any misuse of the land' or if 'he (the *bargadar*) has failed to deliver to the owner such share of the produce as he is bound, subject to the provisions of the Act'.⁶⁷

Such announcement gave a tremendous fillip to the *tebhaga* movement in North Bengal. The *adhiars* in the unorganised sectors such as parts of Kharija Berubari union under Sadar P.S. and certain areas under Debiganj, Pachagar and Boda P.S. although previously untouched by the movement now on their own initiative without any directive from the Kishan Sabha leadership started the so-called *Kholan bhanga andolan*. This was second phase of the movement in the Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur and Rangpur districts. The peasants and *adhiars* began to seize paddy in the *jotedars'* stacks and removed them to their own places for their share.

But such acts of peasants prompted the *jotedars* to lodge F.I.R. to the police stations and a severe police repression started. In the face of such

repressions the gains attained in organised sectors could not always be defended. However, between late January-early February and April 1947 a peasant agitation around the issue of *tebhaga* flared up in the Oodlabari-Dam Dim-Mal-Chalsa-Barodighi areas. Although it is not known clearly that how the tribal peasants and *adhiars* of the area came to know about the *tebhaga* agitation but there is denying the fact that an elements of autonomy always existed behind the peasants' outbursts.

This struggle could not be sustained on account of police repression which had been stated previously and was intensified in later years.⁶⁸ Further the urban middle classes were not enthusiastic about the movement; although some of them reacted strongly against police atrocities. Nevertheless, despite its failure the *tebhaga* struggle had the most powerful lines of continuity to radical agrarian campaigns in post-independent West Bengal.

V

Apart from the agrarian issues nationalist politics also affected the Jalpaiguri district. Before the non-cooperation movement was launched in 1921-22, nationalist organisation in the district as well as in the town was not in proper shape. Perhaps the intensity of the *Kshatriya* movement in the Jalpaiguri district in the pre-non-cooperation era overshadowed all national issues. Nevertheless, the entry of Mahatma Gandhi in the national politics changed the entire picture and a large number of people of Jalpaiguri came to be involved in the Non-Cooperation-Khilafat movements inspired by the message and teachings of Gandhi.

To launch the Non-Cooperation movement a special Calcutta Congress session was held in September 1920. In that session a Non-Cooperation programme was drawn up in which Khagendra Nath Das Gupta (1898-1985), a noted Congress leader from Jalpaiguri, participated. In November 1920 he went back to Jalpaiguri and several of his former revolutionary associates extended support to him.⁶⁹ By mid-April a District Congress Committee was

formed in Jalpaiguri town with Jagadindra Dev Raikat as the first president. Jagadindra was the adopted son of the Baikunthapur Zamindar, the late Jogindra Deb Raikat and was highly respected by both immigrant Bengalees and the Rajbansis. After the Jalianwalabagh Massacre he refused the honorary magistrate post conferred by the British Government as a mark of protest.⁷⁰

A district Khilafat Committee was formed and in that said committee Md. Sonallah, a rich jotedar of Jalpaiguri took a leading part. In various parts of the Duars too the local Khilafat Committees were formed and the participation of local Muslims in the Non-Cooperation-Khilafat movements was quite inspiring. To enlist the support of the rural masses Congress workers began to go to the village markers and distributing centres, locally known as *bandars*, like Boda, Patgram, Falakata, Madarihat and Mainaguri. The prominent Congress leader like Khagendranath Das Gupta and Congress workers like Byomkesh Majumdar, Makhan Sanyal worked in the rural areas. They propogated the message of 'Swaraj within a year' and built up an organisational network in the remote rural areas. However the small town petty bourgeoisie of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar, the traders, pleaders, students and unemployed youths participated in the movement. The Congress Party assigned the BPCC for collection of Rs. 1 crore for Tilak Swaraj fund, for enrolling 1 crore Congress members and for introduction of 20 lakh *charkhas* in villages and homes. As part of this programme Jalpaiguri quota was fixed at Rs. 30,000 for the Tilak Swaraj Fund, 30 thousand Congress members and 6 thousand *charkhas*. It was stipulated that the said quota would have to be fulfilled by 30 June 1921.⁷¹ At the outset Congress workers' efforts in getting the support of *jotedars* and substantial peasants in favour of the movement was not successful. The influence of Baikunthapur Zamindar Sri Prassanna Dev Raikat who was himself a staunch pro-loyalist proved to be major hindrance in getting the support of this substantial section of the agrarian society. But slowly both Rajbansi Hindu and Rajbansi Muslim communities enrolled themselves as Congress members and offered all sorts of help to the

Congress Volunteers. In Debiganj Nagendra Roy, in Pachagarh thana Debananda Roy, Shibkanta Roy, Nagendra Roy, in Amguri Mahendra Basunia, in Ratherhat Tarini Basunia actively participated in the movement.⁷² A section of Muslim *jotedars* and masses participated in the non-cooperation movement on account of its proximity with the Khilafat issue. The village leaders mainly stressed on the Government repression on tea garden coolies at Chandpur and in other areas, economic grievances (*e.g.*, imposition of fines enhancement of rent, court fee and road cess extortions etc.) harmful effects of liquor and the revenue earned by Government.⁷³ Further, as law courts were viewed by the peasants as centres of oppression and harassment there was a call of boycott of British courts. Along with these programmes some constructive works were done. Two weaving schools, one in Jalpaiguri town and another one at Patgram bazaar were established.

However, in one aspect the Congress Organisation failed to make any impression, *i.e.*, in the plantation area. The fact that the tea-gardens were within an insulated areas and the said areas fell within the non-regulated areas proved to be the reasons for the failure of the Congress Workers in enlisting the support of the tea-garden coolies. Besides, many Congress leaders had affinity with the tea-garden planters; consequently, this relationship played a restraining effect on the former.⁷⁴ Despite this some sorts of disturbances among the tea-garden coolies could be heard. Defying Gandhian diktat and the congress agenda, the local Congress supporters resorted to non-payment of rent and Government revenue in February 1922. Thus the percentage of total land revenue demand actually collected declined from 97.31 in 1921-22 to 86.72 in 1922-23.⁷⁵

In another form of movement boycott of tea garden *hats* and setting up of rival *hats* took place. Such step was taken in view of various exactions and oppression in tea-garden *hats*. Magha Roy, popularly known as Magha Dewania, became popular on account of his involvement in the closure of Kulkuli hat near Kumargram in March.⁷⁶ But it is interesting to note that only after the Non-Cooperation movement was finally called off the incidents of *hat* boycott took place.

The character of Non-Cooperation movement reflected two tendencies – one characterised by leaning to Gandhian ideology and another to popular mentality. These two tendencies ran side by side. Interestingly all sorts of people irrespective of their religions and castes joined whole-heartedly in the movement and this inspiring factor proved to be a moral booster for the Congress workers for further movements.

During the course of civil disobedience movement Jalpaiguri district was again affected. On 28th March a civil disobedience council was formed with Khagendranath Das Gupta as President and a definite programme was planned for launching the Civil disobedience movement in the Jalpaiguri district.⁷⁷ The Civil Disobedience movement in the district took shape in the form of violation of Government orders and demonstrations. The reaction of the Colonial Government to these activities was predictable. They resorted to repressive activities and the entire Duars region was brought under section 144. Several Congress workers were arrested for violation of Government orders and their attempts to organise *hat hartals* at different market places spread throughout the district. Most of the urban middle classes and rural gentry families of Rajbansi Hindu origin participated in the movement. Among the noted Congress leaders arrested included Khagendranth Das Gupta, Charu Chandra Sanyal, Sasadhar Kar. As a result of severe police repression the venue of *Daukimari hat* was changed to Bhandani. Despite this transfer the police action continued and the Rajbansi youths protested against police repression.⁷⁸

In Alipurduar along with the wives of Bhabanath Barman and Ganada Barman several Rajbansi women participated in the movement. Following the Gandhi-Irwin Pact of 1931 the Civil Disobedience movement was suspended. During the truce period, *i.e.*, from 5th March 1931 to December 1931 several attempts were made for carrying the message of nationalist politics to the rural areas. For example some meetings were held at Tetulia, Rajganj, Bhajanpur, Berubari, Pandapara, Debiganj and Pachagar in which several Rajbansi Hindu land-holders and peasants attended.

With the re-launching of the Civil Disobedience movement in January 1932 again the Jalpaiguri district had plunged into the movement. Again *hat hartals* started in many rural markets and there were reports of violation of Governments' prohibitory orders in Bhitargarh, Barnesh, Patgram, Boda, Debiganj, Changrabandha, Mainaguri, Dhupguri.⁷⁹ On twenty first January 1932 several Rajbansi Congress workers like Shibkanta Das, Chandradeb Das, Niran Roy, Binoy Das, Kedden Das, Hari Das, Kaichalu Das, Brojonath Das and Bhodo Das were arrested in Rajganj Hat for violation of Governments' order.⁸⁰ During the course of the movement Keshab Datta of Changrabandha and Debananda Roy of Bhitargar proved to be the two significant leaders of the movement.

To counter the movement the police administration started propaganda and publicity works through leaflets, coloured posters, distorted articles, news bulletins etc. Further the Meerut Conspiracy case, the teachings of Dr. Bhupendranath Dutta influenced the minds of Bengal youths as well as the Jalpaiguri district youths to communist ideas. The most significant event in this respect was that on 4th and 5th February of the year 1939 during the course of Congress Conference in Jalpaiguri town several Rajbansi Hindu and as well as Muslim peasants under the banner of Congress Socialist Party came to participate in the movement.⁸¹ Although at the outset they were prevented by the Congress leaders and workers to participate in the Conference but at the intervention of Subhas Chandra Bose who was then President of the conference they were allowed to participate.

The movement grew in favour of non-payment of rent and revenue. The Depression and the consequent agrarian distress forced the peasants, small land-holders to such acts.⁸² As a result there was a sharp fall in the collection of land revenue. The total percentage of land revenue demand collected fell from 90.28% in 1929-30 to 78.38% in 1930-31 and 62.26% in 1931-32, 57.6% in 1932-33 and 55.69% in 1933-34.⁸³

However, there were some drawbacks in organisation of the Civil Disobedience movement in the Jalpaiguri district. In comparison with the 1920-22 movement, the number of participation in the Civil Disobedience

movement in the district was much lower. Although Rajbansi youths joined in the movement but in terms of participation of rural areas the picture was not at all encouraging. Muslim participation was non-existent. But the most surprising thing was that despite the impact of Depression, the tea plantation workers remained submissive, and the Congress workers too did not intervene in the tea-garden areas. The Congress leadership showed their concern only towards the interests of *jotedars*, *chukanidars* and on the issue of jute prices.⁸⁴ During 1942 Quit India movement the Jalpaiguri district too was involved. In the Forty-two movement Khagendranath Das Gupta, Sashadhar Kar, Rabindranath Sikdar, Satish Lahiri were arrested.

In short the nationalist movement launched by the Congress despite its moderate success at the Jalpaiguri district could not overcome its class limitations. On several occasions the Congress party compromised on agrarian issues concerning the lower strata of the peasantry and such compromises created disillusionment among the people and thus paved the entry of the Communists who became vocal about the plight of the peasant and working class.

VI

After having scrutinised the different movements from the seventies of the eighteenth century till India's independence it can be reasonably held that most of the protest movements originated from some serious economic and social dislocations in the area under investigation. North Bengal protest movements in general and those of them which surfaced in the Jalpaiguri district were *sui generis* having very little to do with metropolitan movements in a broader sense. The Sannyasi and Fakir movements, as they are generally identified, had very much to do with the (a) cotton textile and silk textile and raw silk production, (b) imposition of the Five Year Settlement uprooting traditional zamindars and exposing the farmers to exorbitant rent demand of the interloper revenue farmers, (c) disturbance of the trading activities of the Indian peddlers imposing them inconvenient road tax by the British

administration, and (d) interference in economic and religious activities of the mendicants. The Jalpaiguri region having remained outside the pale of colonial rule consequently was not affected by the early colonial predatoriness.

The situation certainly did change after the annexation of the Western Duars in 1865. The settlement activities discussed previously addressed colonial economic interest more than that of the locals. In the process of economic colonisation, cultural colonisation by the subversion of the traditional authority and legitimacy was also brought into operation. So, almost reckless commercialisation of crops, imposition of central market, indifference towards the question of feasible relationship between wage and price and the marginalisation of the local communities by the immigrants gave rise to some serious problems specific to the region. Therefore, those protest movements which were focussed on the issues enumerated above could elicit more agreeable response than others. Nationalist movements in the district too had assumed a complex character. The immigrant caste Hindu/Muslim leadership be it in the Congress or in the C.P.I. or Muslim League, or later in the Forward Block, was more interested to remain within the framework of the institutional decisions at the provincial and national levels than tailoring those decisions suitably to local needs. Interestingly enough, none of the local political leaders of the category mentioned above had ever mobilised sufficient political weight to advance local issues as inputs to influence decisions of the parties, even at the provincial level till independence.

Consequently, another stream of movements is found to have flown through the countryside venting the local grievances. The Rajbansi Kshatriya movement was the one to address caste disabilities, while the others were rooted in the economic exploitation of the peasants, labourers and of the middle peasants. The leadership, remarkably enough, came from the sufferers themselves furnishing qualified evidences of 'organic leadership'. The caste disability against which the Kshatriya movement was held to be an effective answer was not specific to the late nineteenth century social situation. The

problem was there, though at a dormant state. The awareness of caste discrimination was activated by the facts that (a) similar movements have been already started by the Parayars in the Tamil region by Jati Rao Phule in Maharashtra, Eurunarayan Swami in the Kerala area and also by the *namasudras* of East Bengal at earlier date, (b) the immigrant high-caste Hindus having formed an influential economic and social coterie and (c) severe attack launched on the traditional land control system, traditional authority and legitimacy. The social structuring process also assumed a new character by the intrusion of a class of professionals as a product of the British educational system and of the requirement of the emerging bureaucracy. Therefore, the movement suffered the limitations being very local, sectoral and non-secular. The Koch identity established by the Census Reports acted only as a catalyst in the movement. Right from the first census in 1872 the Koch-Rajbansi equation came into operation, though the protests surfaced twenty years later from the 1891 Census.

It stands to reason how the local economy and the relative geographical isolation of the district operated at different levels to prevent linkage with the nationalist movements at the early stage. The *Swadeshi* movement of 1905 was in fact of no consequence in the urban/rural sectors of the district. For some vested interests the Bengali elite of Jalpaiguri quietly suffered the constitutional disability in the management of the Jalpaiguri Municipality. It took almost thirty years after it was set up in 1885 to get a Bengali as the Chairman. It is true that the National Congress came to the district only at the time of the Non-Cooperation Movement (1921); however the only political awakening that took place in the district in the pre-Congress era was ushered in by some revolutionary organisations which surfaced during the Bengal Partition movement of 1905. Interestingly enough, the revolutionary cadre recruited from Jalpaiguri acted outside the district more frequently than within it, and in none of the movements like *Toll* boycott they could be held on reliable evidence to have had any role to play. Associations with the tea gardens either as shareholders or as proprietors, considerable

landed interest and also in the service sector subdued the urgency to rise against the colonial exploitations in an organised way till the Non-Cooperation movement attend the political scenario.

It certainly requires deeper research to explore the morphology of the protests and the composition of the revolutionary awareness in the district. One notable feature in the district was that it was almost free from any sense of communalism along religious lines until the Muslim League transplanted it. And even if the Muslim League politics of Nawab Musharaf Hussain was tinged with Muslim communalism, communalism did never triumph; district remained somewhat free from the type of social antagonism that was observed in many other districts of Bengal.

The ethnic and cultural identities of the Rajbansis were considerably confused by the colonial anthropology. A number of questions arise in the context of what has been paraphrased from the arguments tendered in the contemporary debate. Were the Rajbansis tribal indeed? In the earliest reference of the tribes of this region the Rajbansis were not mentioned; Minhaj-uddin-Shiraj, a thirteenth historian mentioned only the *Kochs*, *Tharus* and *mechs* in his *Jabaqt-i-Nasiri*. And the status of the three tribes of Minhaj appeared to be retained by the colonial government. Regarding the antiquity of the Rajbansis nothing is certain as historical evidence, the stories of *kalika Puran*, *Yogoni Tantra* and of some of the *Buranjis* from Assam were both a historical and certain cases apocryphal too. The confusion was further deepened by the rise of Koch Behar kingdom and the policy of sanskritisation pursued by the rulers. While the tribal identity of Koch Hajo, the founder of the Koch dynasty in their sanskritisation process released some important social dynamics to result in significant social homeostasis basically within the framework of the Hindu caste structure. Obviously, some people were over-enthusiastic to identify the Rajbansis with the sanskritised Kochs keeping in view the ethnological similarities. Dalton of course was wise enough not to include the Rajbansis in his *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*.

Now some important archaeological evidences being secured by controlled digging of the mounds of Gosanimari a review of the ethnic and cultural background of the Kamtapur State may be undertaken. The Kamtapur State preceded the Koch State by a century or so. It might have petered out after the aggression of Hussain Shah, the Bengal ruler, nevertheless its cultural character being noted by the Hindu cultural markers suggest a strong sanskritic foundation. Hinduism having spread into this region and beyond Kamrupa right from the pre-Christian era augmented evidences of sanskritisation. It is yet uncertain whether the Guptas were in effective occupation of this region at all in spite of the claims of Hari Sena, nor is it clear that the Palas and the Senas could ever spread their hegemony over this region. What is somewhat well evidenced is the march of sanskritic culture. Those who founded the Kamtapur dynasty had already had a sanskritic cultural background. The founder of the Koch Bihar kingdom imbibed this culture later. Though the ethnic background of Kamtapur dynasty was not explored presumably for lack of evidences it would not be too improbable now to held that the Rajbansis founded the Kingdom and therefore they do not have to be necessarily related to the *Kochs*. Interestingly enough, the term *Rajbansi* was coined almost simultaneously with the Kamtapur dynasty in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century.

The Hindu caste paradox influenced the course of activities of the *sudras* having assumed political authority for social identity. The legitimate social authority to rule being attributed to the *Kshatriyas* as caste functioned the non-*Kshatriya* assumption of political powers was always viewed a arrogation of caste function and therefore it was socially illegitimate.

This predicament was found to be suffered by whichever dynasty not originating from *Kshatriya* caste background had come to political power in India. Consequently, either they assumed Buddhism to thwart Hindu caste infections or to explore somehow their *Kshatriya* ancestry. The Mauryas, the Bardhans, the Palas being non-*Kshatriyas* embraced Buddhism to legitimise political hegemony in a Hindu society. The Kushanas were the Central Asian immigrants and therefore, *yavanas* in Hindu parlance; so, they could not have

any other means to make a Kushana rule socially approved in India except seeking to remain outside the caste structure by being Buddhist and so Indianised and sanskritised. Sivaji did not embrace Buddhism, but he certainly sought for his *Kshatriya* ancestry to secure Brahmanic approval of his coronation. Therefore, the *Rajbansi* posture in all appearances was an earnest endeavour of the founders of the Kamtapur Kingdom to elicit social legitimacy for their rule. The cultural evidences suggest a strong sanskritised background of the Kamtapur rulers. Confusing them with the Kochs was certainly a product of colonial anthropology. Panchanan Barma was somewhat true having referred to accept this identity. But his advocacy for securing tribal status for the Rajbansi at a later stage in the Bengal Assembly undoubtedly deepened the crisis. His approach might be pragmatic in the sense that a tribal status could attract more economic benefit than a scheduled caste status. Besides, a scheduled caste status too did not go in well for the argument furnished by him in the early phase of the movement for a *Kshatriya* caste status. Even the *bratya Kshatriya* status, which was granted to them by some traditional classical interpreters of the Hindu society, was not in consonance with the social position of the *antajas*. The economic backwardness of the Rajbansis in general may suggest appropriate measures for economic entitlement, but not certainly the denigration of the caste status which the colonial policy of scheduling some professional classes would imply. The colonial administration confused *barna* with *jati* indicated by the *People of India* of Risley, as the former indicated 'caste', while the latter noted 'profession'. Megasthenes too was plagued by this confusion. It remains to be explained why Panchanan Barma conceded to the scheduled caste classification while protested against tribal equation and sought for caste and therefore status mobility. Understandably, he was not very sure about his answer to the question raised by himself. The Koch Bihar royal family also, however, sanskritised, anglicised and brahmonised they were, did never renounce their Koch affiliation, which was reiterated by King Nripendra Narayan by his proclamation. The *Kshatriya* movement consequently did not secure either explicit or even tacit support from the Koch Bihar royal family.

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*"Bhat dim, Pani Dim, Khajna Dim na
 Jan Dim, Pan Dim, Taxo dim na,
 Ingrezer Khajna Dim na.
 Bilaiti karma parum na,
 Hat bandho Kulkuli.
 Bandemataram Hamal Buli."*
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