

**EMERGENCE OF ETHNIC, LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL  
IDENTITY QUESTION**

8.1. INTRODUCTION

The Identity question today, has become a very pertaining question in our socio-cultural life in respect of caste, creed, race, ethnicity and language. Even geo-historical identity questions have also got some importance today in the course of study of the social science. Identity has indeed become a crucial point of socio-political and historical research. In our last chapter (chapter 7), we have discussed on some aspects of North Bengal identity question which was to some extent an expression of historical background. In our present chapter we will attempt to make study on the emergence of ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity question, though it is not the main theme of our research. While studying about the role of the press and association in the context of socio-cultural and political movements it is found that some questions have been raised in this region which are quite related with some ethnic group and their language and culture. Quite naturally we have to focus some light on the issue as it is a bi-product of our study. So as an aftermath of our topic of research without any detail theoretical explanation, we will discuss the problem looking into its historical background. This is not simply a question of our area of study, but of our nationalist frame. Professor Sumit Sarkar in his book 'Beyond Nationalist Frames' have very categorically explained the problem. Sekhar Bandyopadhaya and Rajat Kanta Ray also provided us with much information on this issue. Professor Sarkar pointed out that the really new and crucial developments were linked, rather with the coming of print, and the associated rise of vernacular prose.<sup>1</sup> Through multiplying and cheapening the physical availability of printed texts, these enabled, over time the emergence of elements of a literary public sphere that was potentially open to groups previously excluded from scribal culture.<sup>2</sup>

## 8.2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The most important and revolutionary element of identity is the demand that oppressed groups be recognized not in spite of their differences but specifically because of their differences. Identity politics is an important, and perhaps necessary, precursor to the current emphasis on multiculturalism and diversity in national politics. When we are to deal with our present problem, we see that since the early twentieth century some movements made identity politics so visible and a vast academic literature has sprang up. Thus it was barely as intellectuals started to systematically outline and defend the philosophical underpinnings of identity politics. Whatever may be the theoretical framework of identity question, it is a general perception that the thinkers agree that the notion of identity has become indispensable to contemporary socio-political and historical discourse. In this context there appears some widening gap between North and South of Bengal and working to further marginalize linguistic, cultural, ethnic or indigenous minorities. This differences and contradictions helps to explain one move that almost all intellectuals agree on identity politics must adopt a local focus.

The period taken for the present study is largely colonial and a significant portion being post-colonial. It is evident that this period has hardly anything similar to western notion of liberal ideology except the marginal introduction of western education system with rational ideological orientation. This leaves us to a dilemma in adhering to a specific theoretical plane on the question of identity and its formation. Apart from the liberal communitarian debate on the question of identity, we also have a host of culture centric approaches. Hence, prioritising a particular theoretical perspective in the analysis of the question cannot be amicably and convincingly settled. However, the triadic framework as developed by Dipankar Gupta, where he has tried to understand the primordial identities being determined significantly by state intervention.<sup>3</sup> However in our present context we shall explore the emergence and development of cultural, linguistic and ethnic identities in North Bengal with

special reference to the Gorkha identity in Darjeeling Hills and the Koch and Rajbansi identities in the terai region of North Bengal.

In the question of ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity of a particular region one thing is evident that as being socially constructed in itself conveys the fact that it uses a number of social conceptual variables in such constructions. Generally, among many others, social categories like culture, language and ethnicity are used as bases of such constructions of identity. This in turn leads to the fact that the identity itself therefore may manifest in multiple forms like the cultural identity, linguistic-ethnic identity and so on. Some forms of identity that we come across frequently in the Indian contexts include the cultural, linguistic and ethnic identities, which have been conceptually elaborated below.

In our Social structure in present day North Bengal we find so many inner currents and cross currents among different groups of people for which so many reasons may be there. General backwardness, underdevelopment or disproportionate development, discriminating measures adopted by both the government and other higher social groups got some responsibility for the identity consciousness among some social groups or community of North Bengal. In this connection ethno-lingual and cultural identity questions came into being with some particular demands which were in course of time received mass response. The regional vernacular press (literature) and some associations performed a significant role to highlight this ethno-lingual and cultural identity question of this region.

### 8.3 LINGUISTIC IDENTITY

The preservation and promotion of linguistic diversity is important for the society as a whole and for the individual. Language is an essential part of what defines a culture or civilization. The identity of an individual person is defined by its social affiliation. The language used in his social environment, transmitted to him by social and linguistic interactions, forms his linguistic identity. Linguistic identity means the identification with a language and its

speakers as well as the identification with linguistic varieties such as dialects or sociolects and their speakers.

#### 8.4 CULTURAL IDENTITY

Cultural identity is the identity of a group or culture, or of an individual as far as she or he is influenced by her/ his belonging to a group or culture. Cultural identity is a form of *Identity politics*. *Cultural identity* remarks upon place, gender, race, history, nationality and ethnicity. Some critics of cultural identity argue that the preservation of cultural identity, being based upon difference, is a divisive force in society, and that cosmopolitanism gives individuals a greater sense of shared citizenship. That is not to say that cultural identity must always be divisive. When considering practical association in international society, states may share an inherent part of their *make up* that gives common ground, and alternate means of identifying with each other.

#### 8.5 ETHNIC IDENTITY

The concept of ethnicity is a nebulous one due to various, if not contradictory, interpretations put forwarded by scholars from varied perspectives. Though the concept still lacks a standard definition, it is almost taken for granted that the process always involves in it the issue of identity as its core. Studies on ethnicity analysing the issue of group/community identity as their focal point can be broadly summarized under three headings: that the question of identity is a given phenomenon; that identity metaphor is a construction; and that the issue of identity can be discovered, if not imagined. Thus, in simple terms, Ethnic Identity refers to the extent to which one identifies with a particular ethnic group. It refers to one's sense of belonging to an ethnic group and the part of one's thinking, perceptions, feelings, and behaviour that is due to ethnic group membership. The ethnic group tends to be one in which the individual claims heritage.<sup>4</sup> Ethnic identity is separate from one's personal identity as an individual, although the two may reciprocally influence each other. We may locate at least four major components of ethnic identity. They are, ethnic awareness, ethnic self-identification, ethnic attitudes

and ethnic behaviours. Hence, ethnic identity is the amalgam of conceptual and behavioural characteristics that are found in a group of people that set it apart from any other.

However, the ethnic identity itself is based on linguistic and cultural bonds that unify ethnic groups. Moreover, the question of identity as being socially constructed on differences moves and transforms because of the mutual interplay of differences and exclusions, even leading to their inclusion within differences. This has also been pointed out by Connolly as,

*"An identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized. These differences are essential to its being. If they did not coexist as differences, it would not exist in its distinctness and solidity."*<sup>5</sup>

The point is that, there are different maps and different procedures of identifying oneself. Thus, we argue that, a person can simultaneously have the identity of being say, an Indian, a Hillman, a Nepali, a Hindu, a member of a specific caste or tribe, or a Gorkha or a Rajbanshi. The possibility of such multiple identities is obvious enough but what is worth analysing is their varying context-dependence relevance.<sup>6</sup> This is what we experience in the question of identity in the area of our present study of North Bengal. This position will be further elucidated in course of our discussion on the emergence of identity question in Darjeeling Hills and the terai region of North Bengal in the upcoming sections.

## 8.6 EMERGENCE OF IDENTITY QUESTION IN DARJEELING HILLS

The basic object of the present endeavour is to analyse the emergence of the identity question in Darjeeling, more specifically the Gorkha identity transcending the multiple cultural identities prevailing in the Hills of Darjeeling, and ultimately (in a period beyond the scope of the present study) the mobilization, which successfully made the demand for a separate statehood, (that is, Gorkhaland). What is interesting to note is the fact that the very term 'Gorkha' is basically the name of a district in present day Nepal, and later the

term acquired a special meaning in British martial discourses. The crucial thing is that the term 'Gorkha' has got a community appellation in Darjeeling Hills transforming its culture- historical underpinnings into an ethno-political one.

The term cultural identity has been used in this essay to designate a social identity, which is based on a specific cultural configuration of a conscious nature. Construction of such an identity depended upon some socially constructed realities like history, language, dress and the like. The thrust of the present paper is to develop into the process of construction of cultural identity on the one hand and to locate the bases in the process of construction, on the other. For that purpose, the issue of the construction of Gorkha identity in Darjeeling hills has been viewed from two points view, that is, culture-historical and ethno-political. But it was a later phenomenon. Before 1980s the Gorkha identity question did not assert the Gorkha community as a whole.

A brief overview of the history of Darjeeling seems imperative before we dwell on the emergence (rather construction) of Gorkha identity in Darjeeling Hills. Darjeeling is a word derived from a combination of two Tibetan terms 'Dorje' meaning the mystic thunderbolt of the Lamaist religion and 'Ling', equivalent to land or place.<sup>7</sup> Darjeeling is the northernmost district of present day West Bengal. It has four sub-divisions -three in the hills, that is, Darjeeling Sadar, Kurseong, and Kalimpong, and one in the plains i.e., Siliguri. Today, Darjeeling occupies a strategic location with its borders touching Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal.

Darjeeling was ceded to British India after the Anglo-Nepal war in 1816 and was finally ceded to the British by the Maharaja of Sikkim in 1835. Kalimpong subdivision was under the control of Bhutan but it became a part of Darjeeling district in 1835. Darjeeling became a general district of Bengal in 1947. The region was initially inhabited by the lepchas. Darjeeling soon grew in to a summer resort and with the growth of tea gardens and tea business; it witnessed a huge inflow of people from different neighbouring areas,

especially the people of Nepali ethnic origin. The commercial activities in the Hill also attracted a large number of plainsmen like the Biharis and Marwaris. Bengalis, with their legendary intelligence and superior culture soon occupied upper echelons of administration under the Raj. The plainsmen although settled in the hills hardly felt any necessity to mix up culturally with the hill folk. Culturally they were more tied up with the plains. Even during late 19th and early 20th century it was found that they were the regular subscribers of newspapers and magazines published from Calcutta like *The Englishman*, *The Statesman*, *The Hindu Patriot*, *Sanjivani*, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *Bangabasi* etc.<sup>8</sup> The point is that despite living in the hills they well maintained their plainsman identity and virtually a separation from the hill people and also from their society and culture. In effect, there developed an ethnocentric notion in the minds of the plainsmen, especially the Bengalis, towards the society and culture of the hill men. The hill people, especially the educated well off urban Nepalese started branding the plainsmen as 'Madeshia'.<sup>9</sup> Thus the foundation stone of construction of identity has been laid down through the brandization and/or identification of the 'other', (the plainsmen, especially the Bengalis in this case). Moreover, the economic upward mobility of the plainsmen naturally infused in the hill people's sense of deprivation. The hills-men were united by the Nepali language, which became the lingua franca of the hill population and too acted as a symbol of hill peoples' (ethnic) consciousness.

However, it is also not to suggest that the emergence of Gorkha identity was an exclusive development, and that no other identity question emerged in the Hill areas of Darjeeling. As revealed from our assessment of the press and media on the one hand, and the associations on the other, it has been also revealed that there had been the emergences of miniscule identity questions within the smaller ethnic and linguistic communities. For instance, initially one could sense the resentment of the Lepchas and Bhutias against the Nepali migrants. Sometimes in 1941 a tripartite understanding was formed between the *Lhopas* (Bhutias), *Monpas* (Lepchas) and the *Tsongs* (Limbus) called the *Lo-Men Tsongzumt*<sup>10</sup> recognizing themselves as belonging to one

ethnic conglomerate, and hence, forming a distinct community as distinct from the other communities.<sup>11</sup> The association of the three communities pledged to fight the enemies who attempted to disturb the peace of the *Lo-Men-Tsong-Sum*. The treaty declared,

*"Lho-Men-Tsong-sum will have one destiny and one government. They will fight together with their foes and they will feast together with their friends. They will bring in the intelligence of others but they will never take out the secret of inside<sup>12</sup>."*

Thus a sense of fear was apparent in the leaders of the *Lho-Men-Tsong-Sum* that their culture, identity and peace may be at threat. However, in course of time, they knew they had to stay together and fight the exploitators from the South. Hence, such miniscule ideas of ethnic identities gave way to a pan-ethnic identity called the Gorkha identity.

Moreover, religious minorities like the Mohammedans also felt that their socio-cultural and religious identity needed to be kept out of the threat of assimilation and disappearance. Hence, as revealed from the previous section on associations, Anjuma-I-Islamia, an association to safeguard the interests of the Mohammedan community in the Hills, was formed in 1909.<sup>13</sup> Similar such associations came up in course of time to safeguard the identity and interest of smaller yet different religious, cultural, ethnic and linguistic groups in the entire of North Bengal, including the district of Darjeeling (see the section/chapter on Associations for details). Ultimately, however, all smaller identity claims came to be assimilated within the broader Gorkha identity as has been outlined in the sections that follow.

The identity movement in Darjeeling Hills, namely the Gorkhaland Movement has been harping on one single identity, that is Gorkha ethnic identity. Though in the 1980s the movement reached its zenith, the First urge to set up a separate administrative arrangement for the district of Darjeeling was placed before the colonial government by the 'leaders of the Hill people'-

in the form of a memorandum by the Hillmen's Association on the 8th of November in 1917. The distinct identity of Darjeeling as different from the rest of Bengal was cited by the Hillmen's Association in its 1917 memorandum addressed to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal as the basis for the creation of a separate unit of Government was based on historical, geographical, racial, cultural and linguistic arguments. The memorandum reads,

*"We live in an absolutely different world from the rest of the people of Bengal. Geographically no greater contrast is possible than that between the Mountainous Darjeeling District and the plains of Bengal. Racially there is an equal dissimilarity for the great mass of our population is Mongolian and akin to the peoples beyond the Himalayas rather than to those of India. Historically we have until recent years lived a life entirely a part...Linguistically we have no alliance with the rest of Bengal. Even the lingua franca of our course and schools is Hindi and not Bengali."*<sup>14</sup>

Yet at the other part, the memorandum stresses that the region also demands recognition of its identity as a separate administrative unit under health and educational considerations. The memorandum says that,

*"A further argument is favour of as separate Eastern Himalayan unit of government is based on health considerations. The plains are entirely unsuited to the hill people who are unwilling to go to the plains to live. This makes it essential for the future welfare of the district that it should be as far as possible self-contained. In the matter of education, to give one important illustration, we look forward to having our own colleges and other institutions for professional training. At present those are in the plains and this has acted as a great barrier to the higher education of our peoples."*<sup>15</sup>

This was followed by a series of such other developments like the memoranda of 1930 and 1934. The 1930 memorandum addressed to Honourable sir Samuel Hoare contained ten points programme for the social solidarity, welfare and identity of the Gorkhas. Similar contents are found in the memorandum of 1934 of the association. Hence, by 1947, the term Gorkha seemed to have represented the hill people as a homogeneous category. This becomes clear when we see that the Communist Party of India had submitted a memorandum on 6th April 1947 to the Constituent Assembly raising the demand for the establishment of a Gorkhastan.<sup>16</sup> The memorandum reads,

*"In the opinion of the Communist Party of India, the District of Darjeeling belongs to the Gorkhas and it is their homeland. Further it is the considered opinion of the Communist Party of India that the Gorkhas living in Darjeeling District... constitute a distinct nationality having a common language, a common culture and common historical tradition that date back to the days of Buddha and Ashoka.....Thus they are important minority whose legitimate interests must be safeguarded in the new constitution of India..."<sup>17</sup>*

Throughout the memorandum the term Gorkha has been used as an ethnic category to represent all hill communities.<sup>18</sup> With India's independence, Darjeeling became a district of West Bengal and *its* earlier status of 'partially excluded area' was declared null and void. Memoranda of All India Gorkha League in 1952 and the memoranda of the District Shramik Sangha in 1955, reveals that during this time, the Gorkha League was the sole platform in Darjeeling hills championing the cause of the Gorkhas. The Gorkha League, formed in 1943 initially demanded that district of Darjeeling and the Dooars section of Jalpaiguri be merged to the Province of Assam through a memorandum addressed to Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Ballavbhai Patel, the Congress High Command, the Cabinet Mission and the Constituent Assembly. Further, the Gorkha League, in a memorandum addressed to B. V. Keskar,

Honourable Deputy Foreign Minister suggested the creation of a separate Province comprising of the district of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri and the states of Sikkim and Cooch Behar, which would form a viable unit of administration within the Indian Union. Finally in its 1952 memorandum the League demanded that the district be a separate administrative unit directly administered by the centre; or that a separate province be set up comprising of the district of Darjeeling and the neighbouring areas.

Next in the series was the memorandum of the District Shramick Sangha dated 21 May 1955, addressed to the Chairman of the States reorganization Commission, Government of India. The Sangha claimed that since the Kochayas, Maches, Lepchas, Bhutias, Nepalis and Rajbanshis are the origins of the district, whose customs, systems and traditions fundamentally differ from that of the rest of West Bengal; and since that originally North Bengal was separate from Bengal before its partition, a separate Part C state of North Bengal, inclusive of the district of Darjeeling, Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri with a name of 'Shanker Pradesh' or 'Shanker State' was needed to be created under Part I Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution. In 1968, the District Congress Committee Darjeeling demanded through a Resolution dated 25 August 1968 the creation of an Autonomous Administrative Setup for the Hill Areas of the district of Darjeeling within the state of West Bengal.

These developments reveal the fact that the Hill region of West Bengal had felt a sense of socio-economic, political, cultural, linguistic and ethnic deprivation under the state of Bengal, leading to the emergence of the consciousness that it forms a separate nationality linguistically, culturally and racially, finally culminating in the emergence of a consolidated Gorkha identity, which is an amalgam of cultural, linguistic and racial identity of a people distinct from the ones in the plains. However, it also needs to be taken to stock that the identity of the people was sometimes claimed in terms of cultural distinctiveness, sometimes on ethnic differences and at other times on linguistic peculiarity, keeping aside the sense of economic deprivation that

catalysed the constructions of such identities. The nature of the constructions of identities has changed often as responses to the trends at different stages, finally reaching to the domain of the ethnic construction of Gorkha identity as an all-embracing category.

The consolidation of the term Gorkha as an ethnic category especially in Darjeeling Hills was possible due to several factors. The institutional form in the shape of a recruiting depot has been established there in the vicinity of the town. Moreover the British anthropo-administrative writers have eulogized reified Gorkha prowess, and thereby constructed the martial race theory that had deep seeded effect upon the Nepalese of Darjeeling Hills.

The movement became active as an identity movement based on distinctiveness of culture, language and ethnicity, although the sense of relative deprivation of the hill men vis-à-vis the plainsmen acted as a strong undercurrent catalysing its emergence in the form of an autonomy movement demanding separate statehood in the 1980s, which, however, is beyond the scope of the present study.

From the above reading of the emergence of the Gorkha identity it is revealed that the evolution, development and transformation of the identity have owed to several forces and factors but the role of the print media and the associations have been significant. Different Resolutions and memoranda presented to different offices in ascertaining the uniqueness of the identity of the people of Darjeeling speak of the role of print media in the process. Moreover the newspapers and periodicals published during this period highlight the fact that they have contributed to the development of the identity consciousness of the people (see for example the chapter on the growth and development of non-Bengali press and associations in the non-Bengali dominated areas of North Bengal). However, all these were taken up by different organizations and associations like the political parties, and non-party political formations like the Hillmen's Association, Shramick Sangha etc.

Hence the argument as outlined in Hypothesis 1, 2 and 3 stands tested partially through these findings.

## 8.7 EMERGENCE OF IDENTITY QUESTION IN THE PLAINS OF NORTH BENGAL

In this section we would like to trace the genesis of some identity based mass movements in some districts of North Bengal both in the pre-partition and post-partition period. During the pre-partition period there emerged a social reform movement among the Rajbansi community led by one Rajbansi intellectual, Panchanan Barman.<sup>19</sup> But after 1947, some political tension started in North Bengal with the issue of the merger of Cooch Behar State with the Indian Union. At that time a mild protest movement was started by 'HITASADHANI SABHA' (H. S.), an organization of local people specially the Rajbansi and the local Muslim (Nashya Seikh) and it was led by Satish Singh Roy and Amanatulla Khan Chowdhury, Gajen Basunia and others.<sup>20</sup> With the activities of H.S. (Hitasadhani Sabha) and merger issue of Cooch Behar State with India union, there emerged a sharp difference between local people (DESHEES) and the migrated people or outsiders (BHATIAS) in Cooch Behar.<sup>21</sup> In the course of the activities of Hitasadhani Sabha the identity of a certain group of people come into prominence which in the subsequent period took another shape of some other movements like UTTARKHANDA DAL (UD).<sup>22</sup> However, there are two limitations under which we would like to address the question of the emergence of the identity in the region. First, that the movements only and exclusively between 1869 to 1969 (this is the period taken for the present study as has been justified in the introductory chapter); and secondly, since the movements were very significant in the region namely the 'Kshatriya Social Reform Movement' which have made significant changes in the nature of the North Bengal society and politics by way of development of identity community consciousness and bringing about transformations in the nature of identity of the people of the region have been taken for study. However other smaller movements scattered sporadically in the region within

the justified period of study have also been addressed although only by way of passing reference while dealing with these movements, we shall take stock of the developments in the field of press and media and their contributions to the emergence, rise and developments of the question of identity on the one hand and the corresponding associations that have been formed with similar impact on the question of identity formation and consciousness, on the other.

Some of the most important movements that have taken place in North Bengal which have focused on the question of identity include the 'Kshatriya Movement' (starting 1910),<sup>23</sup> the movement of the HITASADHAN SABHA, 1946, with the issue of the merger of Cooch Behar State,<sup>24</sup> with the Indian union. The UTTARKHANDA movement (1960s) was another one which in course of time emerged as a political party and contested the Assembly election of 1967.<sup>25</sup> As our study is confined up to the year 1969, we don't have any scope to deal with the other movements based on ethnicity, language and culture of this region. However, we shall deal with the Kshatriya Movements and some other movements in some detail in the present context as exemplary cases.

## 8.8 KSHATRIYA MOVEMENT

When one deals with the identity related stirrings in North Bengal, it is important to take in to cognizance the social reform movement called the Kshatriya Movement among the Rajbanshis in North Bengal.<sup>26</sup> This is because, as a result of the movement, a series of making and unmaking of the identities of the Rajbanshi community has taken place over the span of the movement. The primary reason for the emergence of the movement was the impact of the census operations (especially 1891) by the colonial administration placing each community belonging to the Hindu fold in to caste based social hierarchy.<sup>27</sup> The movement, which emerged initially in Rangpur (present day Bangladesh) centred on the question of the social identity of the Rajbanshis.<sup>28</sup>

The central claim of the Kshatriya Movement was that the Rajbanshi Hindus were the Kshatriyas of Aryan origin.<sup>29</sup> This claim of the Rajbanshis

began to get consolidated with the Census of 1891 as discussed above. The census "also claimed that the Koch and the Rajbanshi communities are one and the same."<sup>30</sup> It is interesting to note that the then District Magistrate of Rangpur F. A. Skyne called for the opinion of the intellectuals on the identity of the Rajbanshis. There was a consensus of opinion among the invited intellectuals that the Rajbanshis constituted the Brata Kshatriyas of the Hindu Aryan racial stock.<sup>31</sup>

However, the identity of the Rajbanshi Hindus conspicuously changed in the Census of 1901. They were regarded not as Bratya Kshatriyas as recognized earlier. To quote the then Magistrate of Rangpur,

*"On a recent reference to the superintendent of Census Operation, he has ordered that the man are to be classed Rajbanshis and not Bratya Kshatriyas. I therefore decline to reopen the matter"*<sup>32</sup>

It should be stated here that the movement had to face some opposition from certain sections within the community.<sup>33</sup> This insensitivity of the upper strata of Bengali intelligentsia antagonized this community and gave rise to a need for social regeneration among them under the leadership of Rai Saheb Panchanan Barman.<sup>34</sup> Panchanon Barman, a lawyer by profession from Rangpur district came out with a distinct vision for the upliftment of the Rajbanshi community.<sup>35</sup> With the help of the relevant clues from the Vedic Shastras and support of Brahmin Pandits from Kashi, Nabadwip, Methila, Kamrup he cited the different code of laws which reinforced their Kshatriya origin and legitimised the elevation of their ritual status into "Kshatriyas".<sup>36</sup>

But in the 1901 census, the Rajbanshis were enumerated as belonging to the lower *caste*.<sup>37</sup> They were mentioned as Rajbanshis and not as Bratya Kshatriyas unlike in the previous census report. The Rajbanshis were socially degraded in their position, which led to their frustration.<sup>38</sup> They were an aggrieved lot and, to exonerate them of their grievances pertaining to their social degradation one Rajbanshi intellectual Panchanan Barman, who was the

then advocate of the Rangpur Court, took the leadership of the Rajbanshi community in pursuit of their social identity in the upcoming census of 1911. Hence, an association was formed named Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samiti in 1910; attended by around 400 delegates from Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Rangpur, Dinajpur and Assam and presided over by Madhusudan Ray, an advocate of Jalpaiguri.<sup>39</sup> The Samiti placed its charter of demands for the resolution of their identity and social position. The period in the aftermath of the 1911 census saw the publication of a report by the then superintendent of Census O' Mally in 1913 which said that the Koch and the Rajbanshis were separate communities. According to O' Mally,

*"The former request was granted without hesitation, as there is no doubt that at the present day, irrespective of any question of origin, the Rajbanshis and the Koch are separate Castes."*<sup>40</sup>

Sanskritisation, or the assimilation of tribal people into Hindu fold was not smooth. In terms of 'cultural approximation', the Koch-Rajbanshis being people of "little tradition" frame of reference as formulated by Robert Redfield had no access to cultural forms and styles of Great Hindu tradition, and so initially they took the risk of becoming Hindus even if it was only to accept a "barth" in the disadvantageous inferior rank of caste hierarchy. It is through Kshatriya movement that we find the Rajbanshis challenging the lower status assigned to them. While in 1891 the Rajbanshi's described themselves as Vratya Kshatriya, from 1911 they began to claim pure Kshatriya status legitimised by priests, genealogists and pundits. In order to gratify their ritual rank aspiration they began to imitate the values, practices and cultural styles of "twice born" castes who formed a part of Hindu Great tradition. Since 1912, a number of mass thread wearing ceremonies (Milan Kshetra) were organized in different districts by the "Kshatriya Samiti" where lakhs of Rajbanshi's donned the sacred thread as a mark of Kshatriya status. The immediate objective of the

"Kshatriya samiti" was to regain the lost social status of the Rajbanshi community in the Hindu social system.<sup>41</sup>

The Kshatriya samiti also had some other objectives to fulfil. It intended first, to separate the Koch and the Rajbanshi identity emphasizing the superior status of the *latter*. Second, to legitimise the demand to include the Rajbanshi's within the Kshatriya caste.<sup>42</sup> Third, to inculcate brahmanical values and practices among the Rajbanshis.

The positive aspect of the social upliftment movement organized by the Rangpur Kshatriya Samiti was the creation, of the apparent caste solidarity, among the Rajbanshi's in general and an identity consciousness among the educated and well to do section of the community in particular.

The Rajbanshi attempted to eliminate the alienation of the community and emphasize the identity of the Rajbanshi's within the Hindu caste fold. They tried to elevate their status staying within the caste hierarchy but the nature of social relationship between the Rajbanshis and the other "higher castes" and, the rules specifying this relationship remained more or less unaltered despite the Rajbanshis attempt to persistently change their own identity.<sup>43</sup>

It is a fact that mere placing to a higher Varna category did not serve the Rajbanshis to elevate their status in social hierarchy at the local level because there were enormous hindrances to implement their ideas of social upliftment and the acid test was experienced when the general Hindu community showed their attitude to this effect.<sup>44</sup> The caste Hindu opinion was in general against any upliftment of the Rajbanshis in terms of social hierarchy.<sup>45</sup> For example, the caste Hindu zamindars and professionals protested strongly against the demand placed by the Rangpur Vratya Kshatriya Jatir Unnati Vidhayani Sabha to write Vratya Kshatriya as the caste before the Rajbanshis.<sup>46</sup> In fact they put forward this protest to Mr. F. A. Skyne, the then District Magistrate of Rangpur. All the more when the community donned sacred thread on Feb 10, 1912 at Perolbani, Mr. J. S. Milligan, the then D.M. of Rangpur remained present with a group of armed constables lest caste Hindu people might attempt to create disturbance

and frustrate the ceremony. In the given circumstances, it may be presumed that the Rajbansis were not treated at par with the respectable caste groups in spite of their attempt to Kshatriya mobility.<sup>47</sup> This may also be the background for a deliberate attempt to establish separate student hostels to board and lodge the Rajbansi students who were even victims of humiliation and social discrimination from their caste Hindu contemporaries.<sup>48</sup> At the same time donning of sacred thread, the symbolic justification of Kshatriya caste group, did not help them to be at par with the Brahmins who were to serve the upper caste Hindus. Thus social emulation only increased their distance from the social groups with whom they co-habited or lived for centuries.<sup>49</sup>

In course of time, the Kshatriyas, to assert their Kshatriyahood, decided to train the Rajbansi youths in their martial ability, which was successfully rendered during the First World War.<sup>50</sup> However, the assertion of the Rajbansis as the Kshatriyas which was opposed by the Bhatiyas (immigrant Bengalis) were I oppose to the Rajbansis obtaining the Kshatriya identity. Similarly the upper caste Bengalis in the Koch Behar Sate officialdom also opposed the movement of the Kshatriyas aimed at their recognition as Kshatriyas. On the whole, as pointed out by Das Gupta (1992) the Rajbansi quest for social identity was opposed by the upper caste Bengali Hindus who dominated over the Rajbansis in the region.<sup>51</sup> Thus the Kshatriya Movement, which aimed at providing the Hindu Rajbansi community its social status and identity was not an unrugged terrain, despite which the Rajbansis endeavoured to assert its identity in the region amidst domination by the upper caste Bengali Hindus.

#### 8.9. SOME DIFFERENCES OF IDENTITY QUESTION

##### BETWEEN DARJEELING HILL AREAS AND PLAINS OF NORTH BENGAL

In the course of our discussion we have already mentioned the major areas to which our investigation are concerned in respect of ethno-lingual and cultural identity question. In this connection, there is a basic difference between the identity question in Darjeeling Hill areas and the plains of present

North Bengal. In the case of Darjeeling it was found that, apart from ethnicity and culture, language was an issue of the identity question of the hill people. But in the plains of North Bengal we find it as a later phenomenon which started during 1990s and quite naturally it is beyond the scope of our study. In the course of Rajbansi Kshatriya Movement, language was never used as an issue of identity movement. The Hitasadhani Sabha, Uttarkhanda Dal, even UTJUS (Uttarbanga Tapshili Jati Upajati Samiti), though involved in separatist political activities, did not use the language issue for identity movement.<sup>52</sup> However, there were some other dimensions of identity question in the plains of North Bengal and it got some root from the issue of the merger of Cooch Behar princely state with the Indian union.<sup>53</sup>

#### 8.10. HITASADHANI SABHA

Regarding identity question, we can mention something about Hitasadhani Sabha of Cooch Behar princely state which was founded in the year 1946.<sup>54</sup> It was an organization/Association of the local people of Cooch Behar comprising the Rajbansis and the local Muslims (Nasya Sheikh). The question of power politics in the state administration was the crucial factor for the emergence of the Hitasadhani Sabha. In the activities of Hitasadhani Sabha, it is evident that the sharing of political power was becoming the most important issue in their movement. Consequently it was found that in the state council election of 1946, the Hitasadhani Sabha got sweeping majority.<sup>55</sup> In this connection one thing may be mentioned that so long the migrant Bengalis (BHATIAS) enjoyed the power and position in the state administrative structure. But the Council Election of 1946 has changed the situation by which the Hitasadhani Sabha captured all power in the administrative structure of Cooch Behar. As the Hitasadhani Sabha was an organization of the local people (Deshees), they got very much encouraged with this victory and became united against the Bhatias (immigrant Bengalis). Not only the Deshees of Cooch Behar State, the local people of other districts of undivided North Bengal like Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur and Rangpur also got encouraged with this

incident and to some extent became united against the immigrant Bengalis. Quite naturally polarization of Deshees and Bhatias began to be started at Cooch Behar.<sup>56</sup>

It is quit natural that as the Hitasadhani Sabha was the platform of the Deshees, they extended their support to this organization. H.S (Hitasadhani Sabha) also utilize this sentiment and as a reaction a psychological cold war came into being between the Deshees and the Bhatias in some parts of North Bengal. But this situation could not survive for long due to the new political situations i.e., Indian independence, partition, merger of Cooch Behar with Indian union etc. With the merger issue so many questions were raised by H.S. which are not the subject of our study. But when Cooch Behar was included with present West Bengal State, H. S. got frustrated, Khan Choudhury Amanatalla, a front ranking leader of H. S. could not admit it and he left Cooch Behar. Satish Singha Roy with some of his associates joined the Congress Party and became a State Minister in the Bidhan Roy Ministry. But Gojen Basunia was not prepared to change his stand and continued his activities of provocation towards anti Bhatia sentiment. Incidentally during 1951 an agitation against the Bhatias occurred at Baishguri of Mathabhanga in Cooch Behar for which Gajen Basunia and some other were arrested.<sup>57</sup> From these developments one thing is evident that an ethno-cultural movement was initiated by the H.S. in Cooch Behar which had some impact on the adjacent districts of North Bengal.<sup>58</sup>

#### 8.11. BACKGROUND FOR THE FORMATION OF UTTARKHANDA DAL

When the question of merger of Cooch Behar state was settled and Cooch Behar became a district West Bengal on and from 1st January, 1950, the H.S. got frustrated and for the time being the Deshee-Bhatia cold war became passive to some extent. At that time, the H. S. had no important political agenda and they involved themselves with Congress party. But when the Communist organization in North Bengal as well as at Cooch Behar were

getting popularity to some extent, the land reform movement started which was alarming to the Deshee jotedars. For their vested interest they were active to raise some issues so that a conflict between the Deshees and Bhatias can come into being. But the reality was that the poor people could not remain aloof from this land movement which was supposed to be their struggle for existence. Quite naturally it was found that the local people involved themselves with this land reform movement. During 1967, when the first Juktafront government was formed the Deshee jotedars of North Bengal became worried due to the new political situation. 'The Deshee-Bhatia conflict which was initiated by H.S., was utilized by the deshee jotedars and considering their future prospects in respect of power and property a new political dimension began to be stated in North Bengal.<sup>59</sup> In this situation, due to so many factors (which is beyond the scope of our study) a new regional political party namely 'UTTAR KHANDA DAL' was formed on 5th July, 1969, by some local people of North Bengal.<sup>60</sup> With the emergence of the Jukta front government in 1967 the left party activities, specially the land reform movement got a significant response. Quite naturally for their vested interest the jotedars of North Bengal got themselves involved in the formation of this regional political party (U. D.) and they became involved in separatist activities. Later on, it was found that the Uttarkhanda Dal became very much active in separatist politics. But as our period of study is confined up to to1969, we don't have any scope to find out the later developments.

Considering all these developments within the framework of our study it is found that some ethno-linguistic and cultural identity movements emerged in North Bengal. It has already been mentioned that along with ethnicity and culture, language was also an issue for the emergence of identity question in Darjeeling hill areas. But in the plains of North Bengal the picture was to some extent different. The Rajbansi Kshatriya movement was started as a caste reform and caste identity movement. But later on, starting from the movement of Hitasadhani Sabha, the identity movements in North Bengal have got a different shape. Though it did not directly use the language issue in the course

of movement, but Deshee-Bhatia stratification have indirectly tied up the language question which insisted the later developments which ultimately gave birth of regional political party KPP (Kamtapur People's Party). Whatever may be the background, it is evident that the later developments have made a sharp difference between the local people (Deshees) and the outsiders or Bhatias (immigrant Bengalis). In the subsequent period it was further evident that these identity questions have given the birth of separatist political attitude which require to be studied by further research.

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On the whole, the Rajbansi Kshatriya Movement represented and endeavour to find Social identity and status for fee Rajbansi Hindus in a situation of considerable flux and contained significant elements of dissent and opposition to upper caste domination.

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<sup>49</sup> Dasgupta, Ranjit. – Op. cit. P.91

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. PP. 90-91.

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The exact date of its foundation is debatable. Dr. Charu Chandra Sanyal, an eminent political personality and editor of the Janamat Partika (a well circulated Bengali weekly), Jalpaiguri, has mentioned in one issue of the Patrika that the Hitasadhani Sabha was founded on 18th May, 1947. On the other hand Sree Parbananda Das, retired Headmaster and member of the Hitasadhani Sabha has stated that the Hitasahdani Sabha was founded on 19th May, 1946. The statement of Parbananda Das is more authentic one. Barring, there were certain other events which helped us to believe that the Hitasadhani Sabha was founded in 1946.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. P. 73.

Dakua, Dinesh. – Hitasadhani Theke Kamtapuri P. 3.

<sup>56</sup> Dakua, Dinesh. – Ibid, P.4

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

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