

CHAPTER 4

THE KAMTAPUR MOVEMENT

1. INTRODUCTION

The Kamtapur movement is a protest movement of the Koch-Rajbanshis in North Bengal¹. Since the later half of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, the Kamtapur movement has become visible in the North Bengal region of West Bengal. It has a long history since the formation of the Uttarkhanda Dal in 1969. The North Bengal region is a home for several protest movements across history –including the movements like the Tebhaga², Naxalbari³, Gorkhaland⁴ and the Greater Cooch Behar⁵

¹ In the initial stage, immediately after the great partition of 1947, the term 'North Bengal' was a vague one. From that time this term 'North Bengal' took the shape of a verbal geographical area which had no official recognition. But its socio-political and cultural character remained something different which did not come to be highlighted. Though North Bengal is a particular geographical area in the northern part of West Bengal comprising five districts (presently six districts) of the northern part of West Bengal, still its remarkable Socio-cultural feature, and identity cannot be denied. During recent times so many Scholars of different fields are trying their best to explore and highlight the issues of North Bengal. Even some measures have already been taken from the part of administration (Government) considering its importance. But the root of this issues and problems are yet to be investigated and emphasis should be given properly on the particular points which are related with socio-cultural practices and identity question.

² The Tebhaga movement was one of the proudest moments in the history of the farmers' movement in undivided Bengal. Tebhaga, simply put, mean that 2/3rds of the crops tilled by the Baradyas and Adhiyars would have to go to the farmers. The idea was to enact a law to give recognition to this demand. 41% of the farmers, according to the Land & Revenue Commission in 1940 were Baradyas and Adhiyars.

³ Naxalbari is the stretch of land on the Terai region at the base of the Himalayas. To the west of Naxalbari, across the border river Mechi lies Nepal. Naxalbari became famous for being the site of a left-wing poor peasants uprising called the Naxalbari Movement in 1967, which began with the "land to tiller" slogan. The "Naxalbari" incident was triggered on 25 May 1967 at Bengai Jote village in Naxalbari when the police opened fire on a group of villagers who were demanding their right to the crops at a particular piece of land. The firing killed 9 adults and 2 unknown children.

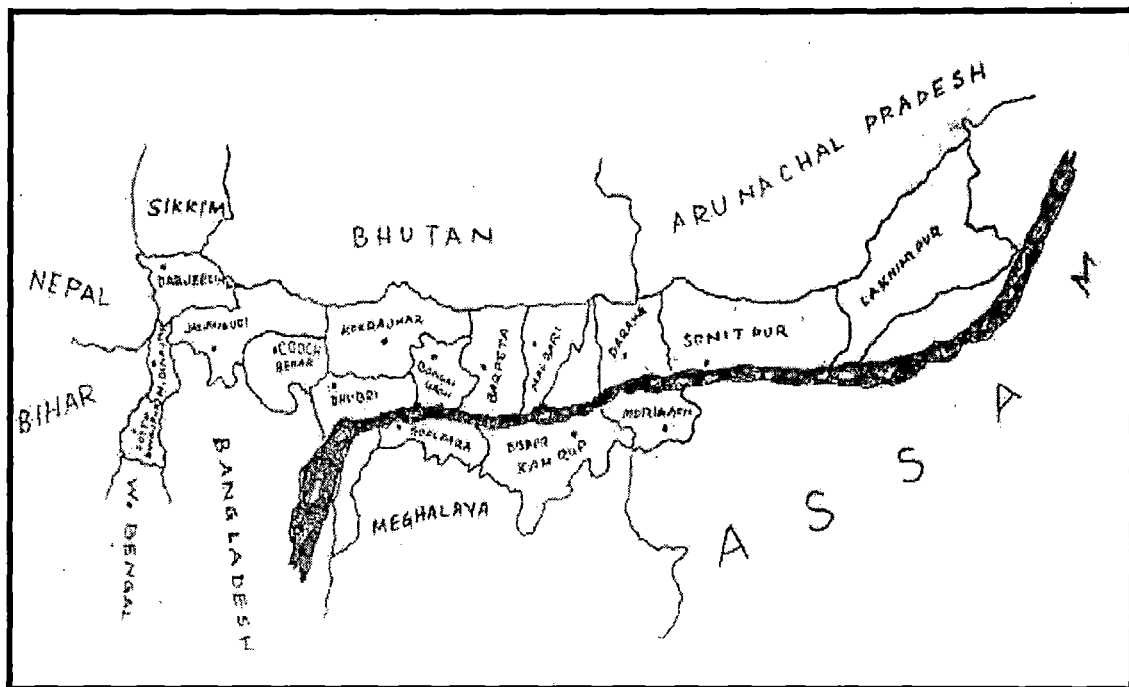
⁴The Gorkhaland Movement is one of the oldest statehood movements in the North Bengal region of West Bengal, with the history often being traced as far back as 1907. See Chapter 3 of the present research on the details of the Gorkhaland movement.

movement. However, in the present chapter, we shall dwell with only the Kamtapur movement and its leadership, focussing on the relationship between the movement dynamics and the role of political leadership therein. However, before venturing into the analysis of the movement and the role of movement leadership therein, we shall briefly explore the profile of the study area which would serve as the basis for the understanding of the origin and development of the movement in the region.

2. PROFILE OF THE STUDY AREA

The geographical area of North Bengal districts (proposed districts for the Kamtapur state), is 21325 square kilometers which is 1/4th of West Bengal with majority of population belonging to Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes. The Rajbanshis (Kamtapuris) are considered to be the earliest settlers in the region along with other ethnic groups. They primarily inhabit the rural areas and constitute almost 60 percent of the total population of North Bengal who are concentrated in the districts of Coochbehar and Jalpaiguri. (Mukhopadhyay, 2005). The map below represents the proposed state of Kamtapur:

⁵ The Greater Cooch Behar Movement is a movement spearheaded by the Greater Coochbehar Peoples' Association formed in 1998. The Movement has been demanding the formation of a separate Greater Cooch Behar state comprising Cooch Behar, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, North and South Dinajpur districts and the undivided Goalpara district of Assam.



Forests, tea, jute, rice-wheat and minerals are the valuable resources of North Bengal. Forest covers over 8 lakhs acres, Tea over 6 lakhs acres, Jute over 6 lakhs, rice-wheat over 30 lakhs acres of land, pulses, oilseeds and spices over 1.5 acres of land, sweet fruits like banana, mango, oranges over 5 lakhs acres of land. Tea, Timber, Tobacco and Tourism are the invaluable wealth and revenue sources of the region.

North Bengal has huge mineral resources as well. There are coal mines, sufficient amount of copper, iron, mica, lead, limestone, soapstone, etc. Large industries can be set up with these valuable mineral resources in the region. It also has the potential of power generation as there are number of rivers like Mahananda, Tista, Jaldhaka, etc which carry water throughout the year. Lakhs of acres of land can be irrigated and used for

producing crops along with the production of fish and generation of electricity if suitable irrigation projects are taken up.

3. GENESIS OF THE MOVEMENT

The genesis of the Kamtapur Movement in North Bengal is a contested terrain. According to Mukhopadhyay (1987), its genesis cannot be understood in isolation of the movements spearheaded by the different groups and organisations in different ways and manners in different times. This is because, for instance, according to Ghosh (2007), the attempts of the Rajbanshi community to establish themselves as Kshatriyas in the first half of the 20th century under the leadership of Rai Saheb Panchanan Barma assumed the form of a movement popularly known as the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Movement, which eventually acted as the base of various ethno-political movements in North Bengal (Barman, 2000). The Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samity, a central organisation of the Rajbanshi community was essentially a social organisation. However, they began to change their outlook and decided to take part in politics also. As a result, the Samity fielded candidates in the Council Elections between 1920 and 1929 and the Assembly Elections of 1937 and 1946. It also fielded candidates against the national organisations, the All India Congress Committee and the Communist Party. Rooted to this may be traced the origin of the Kamtapur movement. However, it was, as Ghosh (ibid) contends, Jogendra Nath Mandal, the leader of the East Bengal Scheduled Caste community, who made, for the first time, the demand for separate state for the scheduled caste people of North Bengal, in

1947, which forms the basis of the present Kamtapur movement. Jogendranath's demand was the creation of a separate state 'Rajasthan' (in the name of the Rajbanshi people), which would be comprised of Jalpaiguri and Dinajpur districts and central portions of Rangpur and Darjeeling districts as well as Purnea in Bihar and Goalpara district in Assam., which was mostly inhabited by the Rajbanshi people (Ghosh, *ibid*).

The movement was followed by the Hitasadhani movement (Das, 2007), primarily in the princely state of Cooch Behar towards the end of the 1930s. The movement was basically started by some high level officials of the kingdom of Cooch Behar⁶, initially aimed at organising the forces against the merger of the state to the Union of India. The Hitasadhani movement⁷, however, was concerned only with the Cooch-Bihar Native state and they shifted their demands in different stages⁸. In spite of the

⁶ Satish Chandra Singha Sarkar and Amanatulla Khan Chudhury, two main ministers in the council of Cooch Behar Maharaja were the main leaders of the Hitasadhani Movement.

⁷ The Uttarkhand Movement emerged out of deliberate and organised effort on the part of a class of Rajbanshis to attain certain goals. Creation of a separate state (Kamtapur) for the Rajbanshi or for the "sons of the soil" was the ultimate goal of the movement. The leaders of the Uttarkhand movement propagated the idea of the promised land of 'Kamptapur' which would include the five districts of North Bengal (Mukhopadhyay). The motive behind the Uttarkhand movement was to brand a particular section of people (Bhatias) as outsiders and demand their expulsion from North Bengal. The Bhatias had been identified by the Uttarkhand leaders as their chief competitors in economic, social and political spheres in this region. Moreover, there was a feeling that even while the Rajbanshi are members of the dominant indigenous community, they are subjected to the domination of the so-called alien population. Thus, a kind of intense distrust against the alien communities arose out of a quite distinct psychological attitude on the part of the Uttarkhand leaders (Mukhopadhyay).

⁸ First, they demanded a separate state, in the second stage, they demanded that Cooch Behar be a centrally administered territory, and in the third instance they demanded that Cooch Behar be merged with Assam and not with West Bengal. and

hindrances, the demand for a separate state raised by the *Hitasadhini Movement* did not get obliterated completely. On October 30th, 1949, the representatives of Cooch Behar State Praja Congress, along with Darjeeling Gorkha League, Sikkim Praja Sammelan, assembled in Darjeeling and together called for a separate state as 'Uttarkhand Pradesh Sangha'. On 5th July, 1969, the Uttarkhand Dal (Party) was formed at the historical Jalpesh temple of Mainaguri of Jalpaiguri district with Panchanan Mallick, Kalindranath Barman, Hiramohan Barman, Soma Oraon, Sitanath Roy and many others to set apart North Bengal from South Bengal and create a prosperous Indian state called 'Kamtapur'⁹ in order to protect the people of North Bengal from the exploitation of 'Calcutta-centric capitalist leaders'. The party assured that in their proposed new state the people would reside peacefully irrespective of caste, class and creed (Ghosh, 2007).

4. CHARACTER, COURSE AND CONTENT OF THE MOVEMENT

As revealed from the discussion on the genesis of the movement, the Kamtapur movement has a long history, scattered through various

raised before the then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, when he came to Darjeeling in 1952, the demand for a separate state of Uttarkhand Pradesh Sangha (Ghosh, 2007).

⁹ They adopted the name of 'Kamtapur' because of historical traditions. In the colonial literature, the Rajbanshis were generally regarded as a purified group of the Koch (a semi-aboriginal tribe) who had adopted Hindu manners and customs by abandoning some of their traditional cultural practices. Panchanan Barman, the first intellectual of the Rajbanshi community suggested a historical link of the present Rajbanshi community with Bhaskar Varman, King of Kamrup (Present Assam) in the 7th century A.D. It is said that after the exit of the Palas of Kamrup in 12th century A.D., their capital Kamarupanagara might have grown into Kamtanagara during the reign of the Khens or Sens in the 15th century. Husian Shah ousted these Khens and assumed the title "Conqueror of Kamta". It was in the beginning of the 16th century that the Koch chieftan Visvasimha drove away the Muslim intruders and established the Narayani dynasty with his capital at Kamtanagari (Das, 2007).

stages, and with changing objectives, strategies, tactics and leadership. The nature, character and content of the movement, its strategies and objectives have undergone series of changes with the change in the leadership styles and methods.

The Uttarakhand movement led by the Uttarakhand Dal in the early 1970s started peacefully through public meeting covering the villages of North Bengal. The movement, according to Haripada Ray (2007), under the leadership of the Uttarkhand Dal came forward with several demands, some of which are:

- Equalisation of the Personal Wealth in money's worth,
- Rationalisation of Government and Non-Government Services,
- Reclassification of ration card,
- Implementation of the slogan "Matri Bhasa Matri Dugdha-sama" by introducing the medium of education in mother tongue like Rajbanshi/Kamtapuri,
- Renaming the North Bengal University as Thakur Panchanan University,
- Establishment of agro-based small and medium sized industries in the villages like jute spinning, weaving, paper, tobacco and timber products,
- Introduction of free education up to class XII,
- Introduction of subsidy to the poor and marginal cultivators,

- Establishment of High Court, Medical College, Agricultural College, Engineering Colleges, Law College and more Technical Educational Institutions in North Bengal,
- Promotion, preservation, maintenance and development of the cultural heritage of North Bengal, etc.(Ray).

However, it was in only in the 1980s that the Uttarakhand Dal made a general call for a separate state for North Bengal- the Kamtapur state. It gave wide publicity to the concept of statehood through various leaflets, pamphlets, manifestos and public meetings under the leadership of Panchanan Mullik, Sampad Ray and others. The Dal came forward with a charter of demands that included, among others,

- Formation of Kamtapur State consisting of five districts of North Bengal,
- Reservation of 80% of jobs of Central, State, and other semi government for the sons of the soil,
- Introduction of Kamtapuri as the medium of education up to school level,
- Broadcasting of news, and other programmes relating to agriculture, music, drama, and other cultural functions in Kamtapuri language on all the radio stations of North Bengal,
- Reservation of 80% of recruits from North Bengal in defence services for the sons of the soil, setting up Recruitment Boards in

each district and relaxation of age and height for Rajbanshi, Rava and Mech candidates,

- Following the Indira-Mujib agreement, 1971, should be the base year for citizenship,
- Reservation of seats for the residents of North Bengal in North Bengal University, North Bengal Medical College, Jalpaiguri Engineering College and Cooch Behar Agriculture College,
- No handing over of the Tin Bigha of Cooch Behar to Bangladesh,
- Exchange of Chit Mahals of India and Bangladesh,
- Setting up of High Court in North Bengal, etc.

In the later part of the 1980s, the Uttarakhand Dal came to be known as Kamtapur Gana Parishad. It rose on the lines of the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). The Kamtapur Peoples' Party (KPP) formed in 1995 was an offshoot of the Kamtapur Gana Parishad.

Meanwhile, the students of various educational institutions in North Bengal working on the problems of Dalit felt that the so called main stream upper class leadership of students were reluctant to look into their problems and as such they have to form a separate organisation for highlighting and resolving their own problems (Das, 2007). The dalit students formed an organisation in North Bengal University in August, 1976 with 11 students under the name "*Uttar Banga Viswavidhlaya Tapashilee Jati O Adivasi Chhatra Sangathan*" to deal with the problems

of admissions, stipend and also misbehaviour from the upper class students. It was in 1977, that the necessity of a broad based student organisation was felt and led to the formation of "*Uttar Banga Tapashilee O Adivasi Students' Organisation*". The students launched movement (led by Bijay Chandra Barman, Pradip Kumar Roy, Sukhbilas Barma and others) throughout North Bengal in various institutions to implement the government declared facilities for the dalit students and uplift the economic conditions of the down trodden people.

The movement launched by the students led to the formation of "*Uttar Banga Tapashilee Jati O Adivasi Sangathan*". The organisation submitted a memorandum to the Sub Divisional Officer, Tufanganj in December 1978, with the following demands:

- (i) The members of Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes be provided with loan facilities for improving their financial conditions,
- (ii) Vested land be distributed as per provisions of West Bengal Land Reforms Act with priorities to scheduled tribes, scheduled castes and general castes,
- (iii) The students be allowed to write in any application in column of mother tongue, their own mother language, i.e. Rabha, Oraon and Kamtapuri etc. in place of Bengali (Das, *ibid*).

With the formation of the Kamtapur Peoples' Party under the leadership of Atul Roy in 1995, the party has been demanding the formation of a

Kamtapur state comprising six districts of North Bengal , namely, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Malda, North and South Dinajpur. The formation of Kamtapur Peoples' Party has marginalised virtually all other organisations to their call for the creation of a separate state of Kamtapur. The total area of proposed Kamtapur State will be 21699 square kilometres with a population of approximately 20 million. The KPP, apart from the six districts of North Bengal, has also demanded Goalpara district of Assam, but they are not very clear in this issue.

The KPP argues that the region is the original homeland of the Kamtapuris i.e. predominantly Rajbanshis, Khens, Meches, Koibartyas and that there is a constant marginalisation of the Kamtapuris by the intruders, there is a need for the creation of separate state of Kamtapur for the Kamtapuris. The basic argument is that the Kamtapuris constitute 65% of the total population of North Bengal and are culturally, linguistically, socially, and historically different from that of Bengalis. The KPP attempts to create a Kamtapuri identity and not a Rajbanshi identity by claiming that they speak a language called Kamtapuri and not Rajbanshi. This is a deliberate attempt to mobilise other sections of population (other than Rajbanshis) into the movement. The KPP argues that Kamtapuris are economically backward and that the Government of West Bengal is responsible for this. It argues that the dignity, socio-cultural identity and economic interest of the local people would be protected only with the creation of a separate state for Kamtapuris.

The objective of the KPP, according to the constitution of the Party, is the protection of the interest of the Kamtapuri speaking people and scheduled castes and scheduled tribes of Kamtapur, to protect their culture, language and identity, to end colonial exploitation and neglect by the establishment of the Kamtapur state within the framework of the constitution of India.

The Kamtapur movement which has seen an upsurge in the Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Cooch-Bihar, North and South Dinajpur districts (North Bengal) of West Bengal is an ultimate outcome of the struggle for power and the associated privileges between the indigenous communities (particularly, the Koch Rajbanshis) and the Bengalis (Das, 2007). The main argument is that the North Bengal region originally belongs to the Kamtapuris who are predominantly Rajbanshis in terms of caste and are culturally, linguistically, socially and historically distinct from the Bengalis. It argues that the Kamtapuris, though they constitute 65 percent of the total population of North Bengal, have lost their identity because of the continuous influx of Bengalis or Bhatias from Bangladesh (Jana, 2008).

It exemplifies the efforts of an indigenous community in putting up a resistance to their gradual economic marginalisation and erosion of culture and linguistic identity in the guise of a development process which was primarily derived through land acquisition. The marginalisation and pauperization of the indigenous Rajbanshis has given a general feeling of alienation and unrest among them which is further aggravated by the

apathy shown by the mainstream society primarily composed of the upwardly mobile Bengali community. For maintaining their cultural and linguistic identity, they find themselves at the receiving end of a degrading eco-system and an alien social structure which is indifferent to their traditional identity. This has led to a feeling of deprivation and disillusionment among the Rajbanshis who are now growing more and more identity conscious, in terms of their history, language, traditional social structure, occupation and land rights.

5. LEADERSHIP AND MOVEMENT DYNAMICS

According to Rupkumar Barman, (2000) it was during the colonial subjugation that the Rajbanshis began to lose their identity. In 1874 the then British Indian Government created a new Chief Commissioner's Province known as 'Assam', by incorporating a portion of Rangpore district (Goalpara) and Kamrup district which once were a parts of the Koch Kingdom. This political/territorial fragmentation of the Rajbanshi community actually began their present-day identity- crisis. The Rajbanshis who had been identified by the British Government as 'Koch' revolted against their being considered a low tribe or low caste by the census officials. The claim of the Rajbanshis to be enumerated as a Kshatriya but not Koch (tribe) began to take the shape of a movement at the time of the census of 1891. They pressed the government through persistent agitation that:

- i). the Rajbanshis be recorded separately from the Koch; and

ii). the Rajbanshis be recognised as Kshatriyas by descent.

(Mukhopadhyay, 1999)

However, in the adverse situation under the British impact, there were not many strong leaders who could have united the Rajbanshis into a particular resistant force before the emergence of Panchanan Barma. Only Haramohan Khajanchi could organise a '*Bratya Khatriya Jatir Unnati Bidhayani Sabha*' in 1891. However, it was Panchanan Barma, who founded the Kshatriya Samiti in 1910 with the objective to the social position of the Rajbanshis from the rank of Bratyakshatriyas to Kshatriyas. (Rajbanshis officially obtained the Bratyakshatriya status in 1891, march 15, from the Rangpore Dharmasabha. Panchanan Barma obtained the permission for Kshatriyaization of the Rajbanshi community from the Brahmins of Coochbehar, Kamrup, Mithila and Navadip after consultaion with them).

The objective of the movement led by Panchanan Barma was to bring up the Rajbanshi community who were considered to be in the lower strata of the Hindu caste hierarchy by institutionalising the use of sacred thread for them. It was a symbolic protest against the domination and oppression of the upper castes. The movement aroused the Kshatriya sentiment of the Rajbanshis and helped their unification under a Kshatriya banner.

The first demand for a separate homeland was raised by a section of the Rajbanshi community of Coochbehar through the Hitasadhini Sabha

under the leadership of Satish Chandra Singha Roy and Khan Choudhury Amanat-Ulla-Ahmed. After independence on the question of joining of the native state Coochbehar into the Indian Union, the Sabha demanded for the proclamation of Coochbehar as a separate state. However, the demand for a separate state made by the Hitasadhini Sabha was different from that of the demands of the Uttarakhand Dal and the present Kamtapur Movement. The Sabha was concerned mainly with the Coochbehar Native state. The Hitasadhini sabha also shifted their demands at different stages of their movement. At the first stage, they demanded the formation of a separate state. At the second stage, they demanded that Coochbehar be centrally administered territory, and at the third stage, they demanded that Coochbehar be merged with Assam and not with West Bengal. The movement was basically meant for the welfare of the local people and mobilisation of the local people against the outsiders i.e., the Upper caste Hindus. It was with the formation of the Uttarakhand Dal in 5th July, 1969, that the demand for a separate state gained momentum. It was formed at the historic Jalpesh temple of Mainaguri in the district of Jalpaiguri with Panchanan Mallick, Kalindranath Barman, Jogendranath Bhattacharya, Hiramohan Barman, Soma Oraon, Sitanath Roy, as the founding members and the leaders of the Uttarakhand Dal.

The objective of the Uttarakhand Dal was the setting apart of the region of North Bengal from that of South Bengal and the creation of a separate state called 'Kamtapur' state for protecting the people of North Bengal

from the exploitation of South Bengal. The leaders of the Uttarkhand Dal demanded for the creation of a separate state of Kamtapur, as they argued that the states have been created on the basis of language and culture.

5.1. Leadership in the Kamtapur People's Party and Movement Dynamics

The demand for the formation of a separate state of Kamtapur has been an important issue in the wake of the formation of the Kamtapur Peoples' Party formed in 1995 under the leadership of Mr. Atul Roy. To him the objective of the movement is to peacefully agitate in a democratic manner for the creation of a separate state of Kamtapur outside West Bengal, comprising of the six districts of North Bengal, viz., Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Malda and North and South Dinajpur. The Kamtapur Peoples' Party's main argument is that the Kamtapuris are economically backward and deprived under the Government of West Bengal, and they are on the verge of losing their socio-cultural identity because of the immigration from other parts of India and because of the refugee influx from Bangladesh. The Party also put forward that North Bengal originally belongs to the Kamtapuris who are culturally, linguistically, socially and historically distinct from the Bengalis. Atul Roy (in an interview to Tapas Ganguly, (the Week, Nov. 16, 2003) alleges that there has been no development in North Bengal region after independence. The worst- affected are the Kamtapuris, who have lost their land and are unable to find jobs. The leadership tries to convince the

people that the movement for a separate homeland is necessary because the state government has failed to look after the interests of the Kamtapuris in particular and the common people of North Bengal in general.

In one of the speeches delivered by Atul Roy, he declared,

“...the security and the integrity of the country are immensely important to me. Our demand for a separate homeland is based on our distinct linguistic, cultural and historical identity. And the demand we have raised is within the framework of the Indian constitution. We are not anti-national. The nation’s unity is dear to us”.

He also stated that KPP is committed to have the state because the overall development of North Bengal can never be achieved through the people of South Bengal (Kolkattiya Bengalis). The objectives of KPP leadership are the overall economic development of North Bengal, which can be achieved only after the formation of a separate Kamtapur state. The KPP leadership also contend that the Kamtapuri carry a distinguished tradition - a history, social existence and culture distinct from the Bengalis, and hence demand formation of a separate state on the basis of recognition of these distinctive features.

The KPP put forward a charter of demands containing eleven demands.

Among its demands are:

- Carving out a separate state of Kamtapur comprising several North Bengal districts in order to enable the Kamtapuri people to govern their own lives by reason of ethnical, linguistical, historical, cultural, social distinction from the rest of the people of West Bengal,
- Recognition of their vernacular language by including Kamtapuri language in the 8th schedule of the constitution of India,
- By the base year of 1971 (Indira-Mujib Accord) regarding expulsion of illegal foreigners from the land of Kamtapuris be implemented,
- Imposition of 'Inner Permit Line' in order to curb illegal influx of immigrants in North Bengal,
- Erection of 'Barbed Wire' on the border of India and Bangladesh in order to restrain the intrusion of illegal foreigners,
- Telecast various cultural programmes of Kamtapuris on television by opening Fulbari Door-darshan substation centre,
- Decleration of 'Teesta-Irrigation Project' as National Project,
- Broadcast various cultural programmes of Kamtapuris through All India Radio, Siliguri,
- Set up a central University (Roy Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma University) in the district of Coochbehar,
- Exchange of enclaves in India and Bangladesh,
- Publication of a 'White Paper' regarding economical status, culture, population, and ethnic identity of the aboriginal people of North Bengal.

The KPP leadership feel that the solution to all their problems lies in the creation of a separate state in which they will constitute a majority. This numerical majority will ensure them political power and control over administration which can be used for cultural development.

The Kamtapur movement under KPP and its leadership is a well organized movement compared to that of UKD and other associations which had demanded for the creation of a separate state of Kamtapur. There are several frontal organizations that operate and mobilize support for the movement. These organizations include the All Kamtapur Students' Union (AKSU), Kamtapur Vasha Sahitya Parishad (KVSP), the intellectual front, the Kamtapur Womens' Rights Forum which is the womens' front. The most militant and controversial of the organization is the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO). However, the nature of relationship between the KPP and the KLO is not known.

According to Rajat S. Mukhapadhyay (2005) the premise from which the leaders of KPP want to mobilize their community members in favour of Kamtapur movement is that of 'Cultural rights', i.e., the rights of the indigenous Rajbanshis to preserve their culture and language. Therefore, they demanded appropriate constitutional and administrative recognition of their language called Kamtapuri. The KPP leaders, thus potently make use of the linguistic affinity and sentiments to cultivate 'we' feeling among Rajbanshis across North Bengal. And the appealing slogan "Kamtapuri is a language of heart, a medium of self expression" has been used as booster to hasten the mood of protest and keep their community

members somewhat emotionally charged. Therefore, to Mukhopadhyay, the movement under the new leadership has adopted a strategy of cultural revivalism. Several outfits like All Kamtapur Students' Union (AKSU), Kamtapur Vasha Sahitya Parishad (KVSP) are revitalizing the past history, language, culture and traditions of the Rajbanshis.

The KPP leadership, in order to create awareness about their language and culture has been organizing, from the very beginning, conferences and seminars in different places (like Kalier Hat, in Dhupguri, Champasari, in Siliguri and other places), which are often attended by important dignitaries. In one of the discussions, Mr. Girindra Narayan Roy said that, "Language is the identity of man, through which, unit of states, state and culture are formed.... who gets language, they capture the power". Therefore, recognition of Kamtapuri language and nourishment of language, history and culture have been accorded the highest priority in the movement.

5.2. Leadership Differences, Splits in Leadership and Movement Dynamics

The differences in leadership in KPP, particularly with the two leaders Atul Roy and Nikhil Roy, had been brewing since 2001. It was in 2001 that Nikhil Roy, without the knowledge of Atul Roy, the then President of KPP, made some independent initiatives like forming the Coordination Committee of Kamtapuri Organization, calling of a 72 hour bandh in North Bengal, etc.

Since 2001, on the other hand, resentment in the KPP against its President, Atul Roy was increasing. This was because of Atul Roy's certain acts without consulting other members of the party. The dissolution of the Coochbehar and Jalpaiguri district committees of the party by Atul Roy, his planning for a meeting with the JMM in Kolkata and his failure to get the recognition of the party from the election Commissioner, particularly, on the eve of Assembly polls in West Bengal, all these had certainly created a resentment amongst the members of the party against him.

It was in 2003 (March, 9th) that the KPP elected Nikhil Roy, who was then underground, President of the party, by unseating the then President, Atul Roy. However, after being elected as President, Nikhil Roy surrendered to the authorities of the West Bengal Government. Subhas Barman was made the General Secretary of the party.

Atul Roy, in turn, in 2006, broke away from KPP and formed a new party as Kamtapur Progressive Party. However, the objective of both the factions was similar as both the parties were primarily concerned with mobilizing support for the creation of a separate state of Kamtapur.

The split in the party and the formation of Kamtapur Progressive Party was a big setback for the movement. The Kamtapur Peoples' Party and the new Kamtapur Progressive Party differed on several issues pertaining to the movement, its objectives, and its strategies, including that of

alliance building. Hence, the division weakened the movement because of having lost the strength of the unified force. With the division in the Party, the support base also got divided because of the obvious divisions of their loyalties. Since the two groups were opposed to each other, there was a clear current of fear that the mobilisation of any of the factions by the opposition forces in their favour would be deadening for the movement. Hence, the movement lost its vigour and profile, became shaky with each group sustaining with dwindling support bases and contestations over the objectives, issues, strategies and techniques of the movement. Hence, the split resulted in a form of contradiction within the movement, providing it a driving force to move and transform. Thus, the split in the leadership of the movement was significant in terms of movement dynamics and transformations.

5.3. Leadership in Kamtapur Progressive Party and Movement Dynamics

The Kamtapur Progressive Party was formed after a split away from the Kamtapur People's Party, ahead of the 2006 West Bengal Legislative Assembly election, under the Presidentship of Atul Roy. Unlike the Kamtapur Peoples Party, the Kamtapur Progressive Party became supportive of the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM). Taking a different political and ideological stand vis-a vis the Kamtapur Peoples Party, according to the Progressive president Mr Atul, his organisation along with allies, the Greater Cooch Behar Democratic Party and the All Koch Rajbanshi Students' Union, would do everything possible to achieve the

common goal of a separate Kamtapur state. Apart from the paramount statehood demand, it was further declared that the party would press the Centre to stop infiltration from across the Bangladesh border and to bestow a Constitutional recognition to the Kamtapur language. As a part of its activities, a seven-member delegation of the Kamtapur **Progressive Party** headed by office secretary Darshan Chandra Singha submitted a memorandum to Home Secretary, Government of West Bengal Ardhendu Sen on its demand for a Kamtapur state comprising entire North Bengal and Lower Assam. In March 2009, Kamtapur Progressive Party (KPP) forced a 24-hour shutdown to protest the state administration's refusal to let it hold a public meeting. Demanding the dismissal of the district magistrate, superintendent of police and sub-divisional officer of Jalpaiguri, Kamtapur Progressive Party activists put up roadblocks on the National Highway 31A, cutting off supplies to Sikkim for some time. Protestors squatted on railway tracks to disrupt train movement. Long distance trains were delayed.

In the Party's struggle with its opponent camp to emerge as the dominant party of the Kamtapur movement, the Progressive Party, as revealed from the above discussions, threw open a large number of programmes and activities, covered everyday by the regional and local media. The competition among the two parties led to production of a series of news columns in the dailies. This had a twofold impact on the movement. First, the movement developed a sort of internal contradiction capable of disintegrating the movement. However, the second impact was more

positive. The competition also resulted in the production of counter expertise by the movement, through various research activities, countering the oppositional forces of the movement. In a bid for competition, both the Kamtapur Peoples' Party and the Kamtapur Progressive Party published series of pamphlets and their activities reported in the news media acted as educative agencies for those involved in the movement. The net result was that the disintegrative tendency of the movement was balanced by the production of knowledge on various issues central to the movement.

However, the nomenclature adopted by the new party leadership as the party being a 'Progressive' party too had several implications. Reflections and retrospection on the part of the Kamtapur Peoples Party as to whether it means that the old Peoples' Party was regressive in its methods and activities, led to the party adopting more proactive role in designing the strategies of the movement, and democratising it to accommodate the younger generations in to the party's fold. Self christening of the party as 'Progressive' by the new leadership compelled them to make the party organisation more democratic and open in its organisational structure and functioning, with clear envisioning of the movements objectives, goals and strategies. Consequently, the leadership of the two parties moved forward being more democratic, opening space for future merger of the parties in to a single force to champion the cause of the movement.

5.4. Leadership and Movement Dynamics: The Mainaguri Merger and After

The rift between the leaders of Kamtapur Peoples' Party, under Nikhil Roy and Kamtapur Progressive Party, under Atul Roy, seems to have come to an end as both the factions decided for the merger as it was realized on their part that the objectives of the movement cannot be achieved with a division in the leadership itself and followers and supporters being divided into two different and hostile camps. It was on the initiative of both the leaders Nikhil Roy and Atul Roy that a joint meeting was organized on October, 10th, 2010 where they decided for a merger into a single party the Kamtapur Peoples' Party.

In an interview with the Statesman (October, 13th, 2010) Atul Roy said,

"There had been difference between us, leading to the formation of the new party. However, we found it tough to carry on with th campaign for the separate kamtapur state and the recognition of the Kamtapuri language. The support of the movement was getting divided between two of us. The followers felt discouraged by the rift between the two parties and there was pressure from them for the merger".

Nikhil Roy added,

" It was important that we were together as there was no denying the fact that both the groups had grown weak in

terms of support base. We had lost the spontaneous support of the Rajbanshi population”.

It was in October, 10th, 2010 that the two factions invited delegates from all over North Bengal at Mainaguri, in the district of Jalpaiguri where more than 2000 people gathered to give their consent on the merger of the two groups, keeping aside their differences and to carry out the objective of the movement together ,i.e., carving out of a separate state of Kamtapur under a single party Kamtapur Peoples' Party . After the merger, Atul Roy was re elected as the President and Nikhil Roy as the General Secretary of the party.

However, it is interesting to note that such mergers are quite rare. Hence, the merger is often speculated as being either a result of the question of survival of such breakaway factions within the movement, or as a consequence of the attempts at accommodation of whatsoever different interests held by the two dissenting groups. This, however, has remained largely unexplored. The present research does not intend to analyse the merger as either a survival strategy or an accomodationist technique. What interests the present research is the fact that the merger has strengthened the movement in terms of both the leadership as well as the support base, thereby giving the movement an impetus to further move and transform.

5.5. The Radical Fringe Leadership and Movement Dynamics: KLO Leaders in Perspective

Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) is a radical wing within the Kamtapur Movement. The origin of the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) can be traced to the attempts of certain members of the Rajbongshi community belonging to the all Kamtapur Students' Union (AKSU) to organise an armed struggle for a separate Kamtapur State. The group perceived the failure of other party organizations spearheading the movement in realizing the goal of the creation of a separate state of Kamtapur as owing to the strategies and tactics adopted by these party organizations which were primarily legal-constitutional and hence, passive and mild. They felt the necessity of a radical group with radical strategies and techniques like an armed rebellion for the realization of their objective of Kamtapur statehood. For this purpose, they approached the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA, which is reportedly said to have agreed to train them. The KLO came into existence on December 28, 1995. At the time of its formation, its cadre strength was an estimated to be approximately 60 persons. However, subsequently, it is said to have increased its cadre-base to approximately 300 active cadres. The objective of the KLO was to carve out a separate Kamtapur State comprising six districts—Cooch Behar, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, North and South Dinajpur and Malda—of West Bengal and four contiguous districts of Assam—Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Dhubri and Goalpara. At its inception, the KLO was an over-ground organisation and was formed to address problems such as large-scale unemployment, land alienation,

perceived neglect of Kamtapuri language and identity, and grievances of economic deprivation. Soon, its strategy transformed into waging armed struggle, as a consequence of which, it, in a short while, became underground.

The KLO was armed in its inception with a host of radical leaders. Tamir Das alias Jibon Singha, who headed the organization as its chairman. He was arrested in October 1999. However, he regained control over the outfit after he was released by the Assam Police in a bid to make the other KLO cadres surrender. Milton Burman alias Mihir Das took the position of the second in command of the outfit. Tom Adhikary alias Joydeb Roy became the outfit's *crack squad* chief. Both of them were arrested by the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) during the December 2003 operations. Bharati Das, Chairperson of the Women's Wing, was arrested from Jalpaiguri district in West Bengal on August 7, 2002. The outfit's operations chief, Suresh Roy, surrendered on January 24, 2002. Some of the other prominent KLO insurgents who could be in positions of decision-making are Hiten Roy, Ravi Rajbongshi, Rahul Roy and Kajal Roy. With the operations by the RBA, the radical wing of the movement lost its relevance.

Although the emergence of the KLO as a part of the Kamtapur movement led to a spur of activities towards the achievement of the avowed goal of Kamtapur state and gained lots of attention by the media, local, regional and national, yet the activities of the KLO were apt to attract state criticism as a terrorist organisation and warranted immediate action

against it. The state could, in the name of lynching the violent force, could employ the coercive measures at its disposal not only to quell the KLO but also to suppress the entire movement. Although KLO disappeared from the scene in a short while, its death simultaneously weakened the movement because of the use of coercion against the movement and its participants by the state.

5.6. State Responses to the Movement, Movement Leadership and Movement Dynamics

Like in case of Darjeeling, the state response to protest politics was not favourable even in the doors and terai region of present West Bengal, which constitutes the area of Kamtapur Movement today. The practice of suppression is rooted in its colonial history and legacy. To quote an instance, During the course of Non-Cooperation movement some students of Victoria College, presently ABN Seal College, Cooch Behar were getting prepared to take part in this movement. In this context, His Highness the Maharaja of Cooch Behar Sir Jitendra Narayan Bhup-Bahadur K.C.S.I. delivered a warning speech to the students of Victoria College, Cooch Behar, on 24th of March, 1921 stating that,

"It has been reported to me that there was some trouble among the students of my college here over the movement generally known as Non-Cooperation..... The Victoria College was established primarily and entirely for my subject and those who come and join this college from British India are only allowed to do so if there are vacancies in the classes after

*admitting my subjects..... I shall first address those students whose only connection with my state's the college. I have heard that most of the troubles which arose here, was at the instigation of these students. To them, I would say if you do not like the system of education which I have adopted for my college, there is nothing to prevent you from going else where to seek the system you want."*¹⁰

The state responses to the Kamtapur Movement today is also not very different from the nature of responses to political protests during the colonial period. Ipsita Halder (2000) and Rajat S. Mukhopadhyay (2011) have critically analyzed the response of the state of West Bengal towards the Kamtapur movement. According to him, from the beginning the state of west Bengal (the left front government) branded the Kamtapur movement as a secessionist movement. The argument, according to Mukhopadhyay (2011), of the state against the creation of a separate Kamtapur state has been built on linguistic and cultural foundations, grossly unsubscribing to the economic factors. From Jyoti Basu to Ashok Bhattacharya to the then tribal welfare minister Dinesh Dakua, all held the movement as an 'anti people forces', restricted to a handful of disgruntled people with no popular support (Mukhopadhyay, 2011). Of course the government time and again reiterated the availability of space for dialogue to address the issues raised by the movement, paradoxically,

¹⁰ See for details, Upendra Nath Barman, *Uttar Banglar Sckal O Amar Jiban Smriti* (In Bangla), Temple Street, Jalpaiguri, 1392 B.S. p. 31

however, the movement was time and again suppressed with the use of force, branding it to be a law and order problem. In a nutshell, the response of the state was confrontational and was characterized by a conspicuous absence of judicious statecraft in handling the movement.

This confrontationalist method of the state in handling the Kamtapur movement met with similar responses by the movement participants and movement leadership. Consequently, the movement gained more currency to counter state coercion, which led to the strengthening of the movement. The ultimate consequence was the series of transformations in the character and content of the movement, rejuvenating each time with a new vigour.

Media, Leadership and Movements

In North Bengal press publication was a latecomer. This owed to several reasons, the prime one being the infrastructural disadvantages. The region was socio-culturally backward characterized by low literacy rate, lack of printing machinery, and absence of railway communication and institutions of higher learning. North Bengal also witnessed the wave of Bengal renaissance quite late. The combined effect of these factors could be seen in the press and media emerging in North Bengal quite late. Yet the Kamtapur movement has benefited in terms of making use of news media in their efforts towards the mobilisation for protest. Arjun Das (2007) appropriately appreciates the role played by the media in transmitting to the movement participants the discourses of protest,

counterexpertise discourses by the movement against the hegemonic knowledge about the movement, etc. However, it needs to be noted here that there seems that a negligible amount of efforts have been made by the leaders of the Kamtapur movement to mobilise for protest through media coverage and media participation. Although news reporting by local and national dailies like the Uttarbanga Sambad, Ananda Bazar Patrika, the Talaegraph and the Statesman sometimes cover on the movement issues, the role of leadership in categorically mobilising the media for the cause of the movement has remained a far cry. Possibly because of this, the movement has not assumed its strength in comparison to such movements elsewhere.

Concluding Note

The study of the Kamtapur movement in a historical perspective reveals that the movement has spanned over a long period of time. In its course the movement has matured, fragmented, weakened, united, and reborn with newer strength and continues to mature further. In other words, the movement has originated, grown, moved and transformed in its various phases. The primary role in movement's dynamics has been played by the leadership – of the movement and of the majority party forming the government in the state. The impact of the leadership on movement dynamism has been such that they have acted as active agencies transforming the objectives, strategies, and methods of the movement, and consequently resulted in variations in the movement support base as well. Whereas able, determined and committed leadership have

strengthened the movement at times with re-definitions of objectives, goals, and strategies of the movement, the conflicts in leadership has led to divisions and factions weakening the movement and its base. Further, the conflicts in leadership have marred the clarity and purpose of the movement often leading to the emergence of radical fringes within the movement determined to achieve the objectives through revolutionary and violent methods. However, the violent and revolutionary methods adopted by the radical fringe leadership of the movement opened space for the state to resort to coercion to combat and suppress the movement. Although the popular movement response to the state sponsored atrocities over the movement was huge, the course, content and character of the movement experienced shifts, changes and transformations, with each attempt of the movement leadership to respond to the state atrocities. In a nutshell, the history of the leadership's role in the Kamtapur movement reveals that the leaders and their design of the movement in relation to the various forces and factors confronting the movement has resulted in movement dynamics with noticeable changes in its strategies and tactics towards the achievement of their avowed goal of the State of Kamtapur, and the recognition of the Kamtapur language officially as an independent language, different from the dominant Bengali language in the state.

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