

Understanding the Kamptapur Movement from A Feminist Perspective: A Study of Role and Participation of Women in the Movement for Autonomy

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt to understand the Kamptapur Movement of North Bengal the region from the theoretical lenses of the feminist school. It is an effort to trace how the movement which initially started with the demand for recognition and autonomy eventually has ignored and disregarded the role and importance of women leading to a gender-biased construction of identity crisis. Baking primarily on a feminist critic the paper makes a serious effort to find the research gap that was the major factors for understanding the question of identity politics of individuals and groups. Through empirical data and an extensive filed based survey and interviews the paper will try to explain that despite evidence and reports of women participation why there in almost all existing kinds of the literature we find a very narrowly narrated contribution of the women in the movement.

Key Words: Kamptapur movement, Feminism, Role of Women and Women Autonomy.

I. Introduction

Social movements occupy a vital position in social science research and with the birth of identity politics social movement has been perhaps the most vital essence of Indian politics. As Amartya Sen points out, "India's recent achievements in science and technology (including information technology), or in world literature, or in international business, have all involved a good deal of global interaction." And "these interactions are not unprecedented in Indian history." Indeed ideas "as well as people have moved across India's borders over thousands of years, enriching India as well as the rest of the world.² To be

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² AMARTYA SEN; THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN: WRITINGS ON INDIAN HISTORY, CULTURE AND IDENTITY; 1995; New York, Picador; pp 84

very precise Identity politics refers to politics driven by demands and concerns rooted in identities - religious, ethnic, linguistic, national, gender, etc. Identity politics or what we might call the demand for recognition is thus, at its core, essentially the politics of equal dignity and the politics of difference (or authenticity). It has emerged both in the developing and developed world, and has roots in gender politics, sexual politics, ethnic politics, and religious interpretations, or some combination thereof.³ With regard to identity politics, one can make a clear distinction between two dimensions: macro and micro. The macro questions have to do with national, sub-national and group identities-religious, linguistic, tribal, caste-related and how they have been prominent in national politics whereas the micro questions have to do with how families and individuals adapt to, and counter, changes in environment, and what sorts of politics such adaptations and challenges spawn. This paper makes an attempt to understand one such social movement which has been witnessed in the discourse of Indian Politics based on the principle of identity and recognition. Primarily resting on the macro level analysis this paper seeks to explore how the perils of the social movements eventually has its spillover effects on the micro level understanding and analysis of the movement. As Charles Taylor has famously argued, two basic developments - the demand for dignity and the urge to find one's authenticity-are critical for understanding the identity politics of individuals and groups, the paper thus tries to explore deep the major dynamics and underlying factors that resulted in the birth and the rise of the *Kamptapur Movement* in some North Eastern States of the India.⁴

The term movement came from a French word '*movior*' which means to move. Social movement is engaged in moving towards a change in our society. According to M. N. Karna in his book "Social Movements in North-East India" change is a social reality and for that the conflict.⁵ Rudolph Heberlein his book "Social Movements: An Introduction of Political Sociology" also says that social movement is a collective effort to transform established relations in

³ CHARLES TAYLOR; MULTICULTURALISM AND THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION; Princeton University Press; 1995; PP 25

⁴ Id.

⁵ M.N KARNA,; SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN NORTH EAST INDIA, Indus Publication; 1991

existing society.⁶ In the book “Theory of Collective Behavior” Neil Smelser views social movements as directly oriented towards a change in social institution and social norms.⁷ MSA Rao in his book “Social Movements in India” represents social movements as a collective mobilization. The plural character of the Indian society manifest a large number of socio-political mobilizations and some of them have developed into bitter, violent and sectionals protest directed against the discrimination, differentiation regarding the mentioned variation in the society. In overall view social movement is considered as the voice of people against the existing order. Thus it’s pretty evident that like the question of identity politics social movement seeks as a medium to channelize the core grievances and voices for recognition and acknowledgement. Generally a movement can be classified in different categories based on different issues. In case of person it can be *special individuals* or it can be *everyone* and in case of nature of the movement that how much change will be occurred by the movement it can be *limited* and *radical*. The phenomena of the movement have been changed periodically in compare to old social movement. With the onset of globalization and identity based movements the nature of the new social movement has taken a completely different formeand moderate in nature. The term new social movement refers to those movements which have come up since mid-1960s. These differ in from the old that, (a) they are concerned with non-material phenomena; (b) they work for quality of life, rather for merely life; (c) they are cooperative and non-conflictive; (d) they are followers-oriented rather than leader oriented; (e) they are decentralized, rather than centralized ones. T.K Oommen refers three different types of movements. *Charismatic, ideological, organizational*. But because of the different structure of the society the same kind of movement can be different in nature.⁸ Moving further deep in understanding the discourse of social movement from the theoretical dimension one can use multiple paradigmatic shifts in interpreting the definition of movement, like political, sociological, cultural, and more commonly Marxist approach. The very first and foremost reason behind the social movement is the

⁶ Rudolph Heberle,; “Social Movements: An Introduction of Political Sociology” New York; 1951

⁷ Neil Smelser, ; “Theory of Collective Behaviour” Routledge and Kegan Paul; 1962

⁸ T.K Oommen,.; “Sociological Issues in the Analysis of Social Movements in Independent India” Sociological Bulletin; 1977

political power which fuels the issue regarding the gap between two sections in society. According to Gurr (Gurr,1970) the theory of Relative Deprivation portray the picture of a gap between the expectation and capabilities involving three general sets of values-economic condition, political power and social status. This gap may originate when expectation remains stable but capabilities decline then it is called as detrimental deprivation; When expectation rise and capabilities decline it is called as progressive deprivation and when expectation rise but capabilities remain stable it is called as aspirational deprivation.⁹

Finally perhaps the most precise understanding these new social movement in the post industrial world order in the context of identity question is forwarded by Alain Tourain and his idea of '*Historicity*' and '*Social Actor*'. Historicity is contented a set of culture, economic, political situation on which a set of relation in a specific environment is formed. Social actor is an individual or a group of individuals live in the field of historicity and covered with it. In the absence of historicity there is no social actor. When in their own set up any adversary called '*Foreign*' enters they get afraid of losing their own identity, culture, their historicity. According to Touraine in this situation a '*Class Relation*' is formed. This class relation does not articulate money or capital. This is demarked by the own historicity which the ruled class tries to preserve which gives birth to the identity based social movement or ethnic social movement.¹⁰ Given this background the succeeding section of the paper seeks to trace the rise, evolution and multi-layered aspect of the Kaptapur Movement of North Bengal region primarily from a feminist perspective with and attempt to explore how the macro level dimension of the movements eventually made its inroads in the micro level understating the setting the societal equation.

II. Historical Background of the Kamptapur Movement

Primarily due to the geographical location and the geo- political composition the Northern part of West Bengal possess a wide range of diverse ethnic composition which includes so many ethnic groups like Mech, Toto, Rabha, Munda, Bodo, Santal. Bhutia, Lepcha, Limbu etc. Amongst them one important aboriginal community which has played a significant role in shaping the geo-

⁹ MOHAMMAD YASIN, SRINANDA DASGUPTA; INDIAN POLITICS: PROTEST AND MOVEMENTS, Anmol publication, New Delhi.

¹⁰ALAIN TOURAINE, AN INTRODUCTION OF THE STUDY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS; 1985.

political landscape of the region are the Rajbanshis (they are called Rajbanshis as the descendants of 'Raja' or 'King'. Basically they are the original homogenous people of northern part of India, specifically North Bengal who includes different tribes, such as Bodo, Mech, converted Muslims etc. these Rajbanshis people are recognized as Schedule Caste in North Bengal of West Bengal) who later on led the foundation pillars of the Kamatapuri Dynasty. According to Nalini Ranjan Roy Rajbangshis or Kamatapuri people basically trace their origin from mediaeval kingdoms of Kamatapuri and modern Cooch Behar kingdoms of Eastern/Northeastern India. They have the mixed origin of Mongoloid, Dravidian and Aryan where Mongoloid features are more prominent.

Kamatapur dynasty was founded by Kashitrya King Prithu Ray in Kamarupa, Assam. After his death in 1228 AD his successor King Sandhya Ray transferred their capital to the plains of Gosanimari, (presently at) Dinhat subdivision in Cooch Behar district, West Bengal. Multiple attempts to seize the dynasty was seen from 1200 to 1400 AD from Ikhtiyar-ud-din Ujbek (1257), Tughlak (1332), Ilyas Shahi (1404), Hussain Shah (1498) till the advent of the most popular king Niladhawaja (1440-1460) who restored peace and stability in the region followed by King Chakradhwaja and King Nilambara.¹¹ Under different rulers the Kingdom eventually spread from Goalpara district of Assam to the North and South-West of Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Malda, Bogra, Rajshahi and Pabna district.¹² (Adhikary, 2015) Geographically the dynasty stretched its boundary from Korotoa River in west, to the east it was Brahmaputra River, to the north it was the foot hills region of Himalaya and in south it was Gouda district of Bengal¹³(Barman, 2005). This Kamatapuri dynasty ended up with the king Nilambar and it shifted with the hand of King Biswa Singha to the new place in Cooch Behar.

¹⁰ Niladhawaja belonged to 'Kshen' dynasty. The term 'Kshen' is divided in two parts 'Kshe' from 'Kshatriya' and 'Na' from the word 'Noti'(dancer).one of the famous narratives behind it is that Niladhawaja was the son of the parents where the paternal relation came from Kshatriya and the maternal relation came from the 'Noti' (dancer) community.

¹¹ Adhikary, Chandra, Madhab; "Identity Crisis A Study of the Rajbangshis of North Eastern India(1891-1979)"; 2015

¹² Harimohon Burman,; "Kamatapur Rajyer Kahini" North Bengal Printing Works; 2005

After the partition of Bengal in 1905 the refugee problem started. After independence the Bengali Hindus started to come in Bengal from the then East Pakistan and settled over here in Kalyani city and Kolkata. The population was different from the people of North Bengal in terms of their origin, their culture, their language, their rituals etc. they started to come over North Bengal from Kolkata because of its rich natural resources. In comparison with the refugees the ethnic group of North Bengal was less educated and simple minded. According to the participants of the movement popularly known as the “*son of the soil*” were being dominated by the migrated Bengali main stream people whom they call as “*Bhadrolok*”. Here according to Tourain’s theory the ethnic society of North Bengal carried ‘*historicity*’ and the indigenous people were the ‘*social actor*’ where the migrated people were ‘*foreigners*’. The limitless deprivation of the indigenous people by the main stream Bengali people made them to demand for their separate “Kamatapur” state along with the demand for recognition of Kamatapur language in 8th schedule in the Indian Constitution.¹⁴(Barma, 2007)

In the post-independence era the first systematic demand for the Kamtapur people was voiced in 1950 when independent Cooch Behar was merged with West Bengal as a district. A group called Uttar Khanda Dal (UKD) under the leadership of Panchanan Mallick renewed the idea for a separate homeland for Koch Rajbanshis again in 1969 in North Bengal. The Kamatapur movement has been going through with different organization based on different ideology with different period of times in different places but their demands were same. Eventually the demand of separate kamtapur state was organized in Assam in 1955 at the time of state reorganization by the princely family of Gouripur under the leadership of Santosh Badua with their support in 1967 the “Kamtapur Rajya Sangram Parishad”(KRSP) was formed under the leadership of Dr. Girija Shankar Roy in west Bengal.

Gradually in the year 1984 the “Bharatiya Koch Rajbangshi Kshatriya Mahasabha” (BKRKM) was established under the leadership of Dr. Purnanarayan singh in Dhubri, Assam. Their demand was for overall

¹⁴ Sukhbilas Barma; “Socio Political Movements in North Bengal” 2007

development of the Rajbangshi people living in Assam and West Bengal. They also fought for the preservation of Kamrupi-Kamatapuri language.

“Kamatapur Gana Parishad” (KGP) one of the most important organization in the movement which was formed following the same pattern of “Assam Gana Parishad” (AGP).along with these organization there were some extremist organization named “All Kamatapur Students Union” (AKSU), Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) who violently protested against the mainstream people.

The movement reached to its zenith under the strong leadership of Atul Roy and Nikhil Roy who founded “Kamatapur Peoples Party” (KPP) in 1996 in the village named Daukimari in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal, demanding six districts of North Bengal(Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur, Malda). Along with these the Kamatapur Peoples Party also demanding Alipurduar district of North Bengal. In the year 1999, they submitted a 9 point charter of demands to the President of India through the C.M of West Bengal highlighting on –the recognition of Kamtapuri language in 8th schedule of the Indian constitution, demanded a separate and full-fledged department of Kamatapuri language and history in North Bengal University and a dedicated programme at the All India Radio. In due course of time the demand moved beyond language and recognition to rights for improved condition of livelihood of the Kamatapuri people, to increase the job opportunity, uplift the education system to increase the literacy rate etc.¹⁵But later in 2004 KPP got fractioned and the new party emerged under the name of “Kamatapur Progressive Party” (KPP) with the leadership of Atul Roy in Shibmandir, Darjeeling district. But later on in 2010 both Kamatapur Peoples Party and Kamatapur Progressive Party got merged and again before 2011 assembly election the party got divided. ¹⁶(Barman, 2016, second edition) Nikhil Roy called his party as KPPU(Kamatapur Peoples Party United) which includes KPP, KWRF(Kamatapur Women’s Right Forum), KVSP(Kamatapur Vasha Sahitya Parishad), AKSU(All Kamatapur Students Union).

¹⁵ LALIT CHANDRA BARMAN, RAJYER DABITE UTTARBANGE ANDOLON N.L.Publisher; 2016.

¹⁶LALIT CHANDRA BARMAN, RAJYER DABITE UTTARBANGE ANDOLON N.L.Publisher; 2016.

III. Eminent Views Relating to Kamptapur Movement

A critical understanding of the paper however provides a different interpretation of the movement. Almost all existing dominant literatures provides one sided interpretation of the movement and has been projecting 'men' as the sole flag bearer and vanguards of the Kamatapur Movement. This section thus seeks to explore the feminist dimension of the movement and strive to fill in the research gap by challenging the main-stream literature and dominant narratives through raising the question of identifying women's participation in social movement.

In the book named "*Rajyer Dabite Uttarbange Andolon*" the chapter "*Kamatapuri Andolon*" have projected and depicted the role and contribution of the women community in this movement. The author narrates the existence of a "*Kamatapur Women's Forum*" which was formed in the year 1998. The member of the forum actively worked for the upliftment of Kamatapuri people and raised their voice for the recognition of their language in the 8th schedule of the Indian Constitution.¹⁷

Interviewing the former Kamatapur leader Nikhil Roy from Dhupguri on 11/03/2019 it was further revealed that perhaps the most important and active women wing of the organisation was the WUK (Women's Union of Kamatapur). Formed in a small village named Daukimari in Jalpaiguri district, WUK was apparently more radical and strong in rejecting and protesting the repressive state apparatus and fight for the demand of recognition. Among the eminent members of the group was Mrs. Sonamani Roy the wife of Nikhil Roy Mrs. Sumati Barman who was the secretary of the organization from Malda district.¹⁸ This women organization reorganized on 17th January 2021 in Daukimari village and Rina Roy Barman became the new president.

In an another interview with Madam Mrs Mitali Roy, a former Kamptapur leader and present MLA of Jalpaiguri District narratives of Mitali Roy, narratives of other such string operational and active women fronts in the movements were unveiled. Accounts of police atrocities on Mrs Mitali Roy, Mamuda Begum, Sunila Roy, Maya Roy and others were mentioned while recalling the activities like strike, dharna, submitting deputation in police

¹⁷*Id.*

¹⁸*Id.*

station centering the movemnet during the early 90's in the adjoining regions of Dhupguri and Jalpaiguri. Referring to one such movement Mitali Roy narrates that how once *“organizing a rally in Rangdhmali in Haldibari in the district of Jalpaiguri, we were violently repressed by the police and the armed forces, the armed force raided the villages on the fixed day and used repressive physical violent means to eradicate the members of nearby villages so that the rally turns out a failure. Despite their repressive dominance we did not stop and managed to organise the rally but then the police forces started beating up the women community. The attack was so violent that the did not feel to make a distinction between young and old even between pregnant and old aged ladies. They were brutally harassed and I also was badly injured in the course of negotiation and two of my party members Pratima Roy and Menaka Roy was imprisoned for 9 months in Jalpaiguri jail. It was a heinous attempt of the state apparatus to suppress the movement. However this did not break out our goal and we again within few days started organizing and strengthening our activities.”*

Recently, on November 2019 a gathering was held at the famous Jalpesh Temple in Jalpaiguri, demanding about their recognition of Kamatapuri language in 8th schedule of Indian Constitution. The most interesting part of it was the more participation of women rather than men. Similarly on 6th November, 2020 the prominent student organisation of Kamatapur movement AKSU (All Kamatapur Students Union) submitted a deputation to Jalpaiguri Commissioner Office on the demand of Kamatapuri Language and for the separate statehood, along with many female participants.

IV. Conclusion

Despite such active role and participation of the women community the core question which instigated the study is the fact that why the role and importance of the women in the Kamatapur Movement has been blatantly ignored. One objective criterion could be the lesser number of active women in compared to the men in the movement might have provided a safe ground for all academic scholars and existing literatures to remain silent on the issue of the role and participation of the women in the movement. However the empirical data and an extensive filed based survey and interview negates the existing hypothesis and proves the fact that there were multiple women warriors who were not only actively guiding the movement but played a very crucial role in mobilizing the

mass throughout the region. This is however not surprising phenomenon, since the field of social movements, especially compared with other areas of study, has been remarkably untouched by the gender scholarship produced in the social sciences over the past decade. The few social movement scholars who have examined gender relations in protest groups find that movements are organized along gender lines in ways that previously have gone unrecognized.¹⁹ This relatively scant or ignorance attention to gender by main-stream scholars of social movements provides a stark contrast to a growing body of case material on women's protest by feminist writers, which demonstrates that gender is, in fact, a pervasive feature of social movements.²⁰ Gender hierarchy is so persistent that, even in movements that purport to be gender-inclusive, the mobilization, leadership patterns, strategies, ideologies, and even the outcomes of social movements are gendered and this is primarily what has happened with the Kamatapur Movement too. In her study of Black women's participation in the civil rights movement, Robnett (1997) identifies a distinct form of grassroots leadership carried out by women who were prevented from occupying formal leadership positions by the exclusionary practices of the Black Church. She coins the term "bridge leaders" to refer to the behind-the-scenes leaders who held no formal titles but played key roles both in mobilizing mass participation and creating movement solidarity,²¹ which might have been the case with the leaders in the Kamatapur Movement. Nagel's thesis holds that masculinity is integral to nationalist politics in the contemporary world. Gender hierarchy is expressed not only in more subtle forms, such as the construction of patriotic manhood and exalted motherhood as icons of nationalist ideology and the designation of gendered places for men and women in national politics, but in more explicit forms, such as the domination of masculine interests in the ideology of nationalist movements and sexualized militarism that simultaneously constructs the male enemy as oversexed and undersexed and the

¹⁹ Rick Fantasia; *Cultures of solidarity: Consciousness, action, and contemporary American workers*; Berkeley; 1988; University of California; pp 32.

²⁰ Kathleen M Blee; *Becoming a racist: Women in contemporary Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi groups*. *Gender & Society*; pp- 680-702.

²¹ Blinda Robnette, *How long, how long? African-American women in the struggle for civil rights*. New York: 1997; Oxford University Press.

female enemy as promiscuous.²² This paper although at this moments fails to test the various existing dominant thesis on the question of ignorance and exclusion of women in the discourse of the Kamatapur Movement however seeks to conclude the paper with a question on the incomplete gendered interpretation of the Kamatapur Movement.

²² Joanne Nagel; Masculinity and nationalism: Gender and sexuality in the making of nations; *Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies*; 1998; pp 21-24.