

## INTRODUCTION

The present study is an attempt to look into the significant characteristics of the caste, society and politics of North Bengal and the factors and consequences of changes that had been taken place between the years 1869-1977. The five districts of the northern part of present day West Bengal viz. Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Malda and Dinajpur are together officially and unofficially known as North Bengal (the district of Dinajpur was divided as North and south Dinajpur in 1992). It deserves mention that though the main area of focus will be the above stated districts of present day West Bengal, yet it has to be considered that in the pre-independent period the geography of North Bengal was not the same. Before 1874, the northern part of Bengal was constituted by the districts of Purnea, Goalpara, Rajshahi, Malda, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling and Cooch Behar (Cooch Behar was then a Princely State). Except Cooch Behar the eight districts were under Rajshahi division. In 1874 the Goalpara district was made part of Assam which was then made the Chief Commissioner's Province<sup>1</sup>. The district was under the District and Sessions Judge of Dinajpur until 1905 October when it was placed under the Judge of Purnea and again in April 1912 it was placed under Dinajpur (Rajshahi Division)<sup>2</sup>. After partition in 1947 the whole of Rajshahi, Rangpur, the eastern part of Dinajpur with 17 police stations, five police stations of Malda, five police stations of Jalpaiguri, a few parts of Cooch Behar and one police station, Phansidewa of Darjeeling went to east Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and Purnea became part of the State of Bihar<sup>3</sup>.

Before entering into the subject of concentration we must understand the geography and the historical background of the area concern, otherwise it will not be possible to understand the caste society, its distinctiveness etc. because the caste and social structure of this region has no match with that of the rest of Bengal. Moreover it is known to all of us that the society of a particular region gets very much influenced by its geography as well as history and it is historically true that geography and history together with other factors determine culture, customs, behavior, language, and above all help in making the socio-political structure of a particular region and North Bengal is no exception to that.

North Bengal is situated at the bottom of the Himalayas. The geographical location of North Bengal has determined its history since the dawn of its civilization. Due to its existence in the sub-mountain zone it has commercial as well as cultural contact with Tibet, China, Sikkim, Nepal and Bhutan in the north, Assam and Bangladesh in the east, Bangladesh and southern part of west Bengal and Bihar in the south; Bihar, Uttaranchal and Uttarakhand in the west. On the other hand it maintains a relation with the rest of India through the river Ganges. As a whole it occupies a strategic position and lies between the eastern India and the Aryavarta or the rest of India. Thus the region has been serving as a gateway for the trade and commerce as well as cultural relation and exchange of ideas from the very beginning between Indian subcontinent in the west and Assam, Burma, china and other parts of south-east Asia in the east. Therefore the region is situated in one of the greatest migration routs of people since time immemorial. As a result all most all the races like Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, Alpine-Iranian had assimilated in this region. Among all these groups the people of Tibeto-

Burman i.e. Indo-Mongoloid group are most numerous and predominant<sup>4</sup>. Not only that the people of Indo-Mongoloid and Aryan groups had been intermingled there. The Indo-Mongoloid group of people is known as Kirata. The Kirata and Aryan civilization had developed a mixed culture in this region. Another important point is that according to historians the history of North Bengal bears the glory of two different zones of imperial Kingdoms i.e. Pragyothispur-Kamrup-Kamtapur in the northern part of North Bengal and the Pundra-Gour Kingdom in the southern part of North Bengal<sup>5</sup>. In addition to that there is a small hilly portion which had also a different tradition of outside the subcontinent.

North Bengal may be considered as a miniature of India considering its diversity regarding geography, demographic composition, caste, race, religion, language, ethnicity etc. The northern part of North Bengal is situated at the foothill of the Himalaya; naturally this part is covered by dense and deep green forest. But the southern part is absolutely different with vast plain and cultivable lands. According to historians and scholars, at the very beginning there inhabited the people of Nordic group and then the people of Mongoloid origin began to settle there. The Aryan described the people of north eastern India as 'Kirata'. Moreover there had taken place an admixture of Aryans and Mongoloid group of people though Mongolian influence is much dominant among them<sup>6</sup>. Therefore the region is basically a non-caste zone. The most numerical groups amongst them are Rajbansi, Koch, Mech, Paliya and Deshi. Of these groups, except the Mech, all had gone through a process of Hinduization long before the period of our study. There are two main forces/streams of origin amongst the tribes of North Bengal i.e. Mongoloid and Proto-Austral. The Mongoloid people came from

the neighbouring countries of northern and north-eastern part of North Bengal. Amongst these groups Rajbansi, Koch, Mech, Dhimal, Rabha, Garo, Lepcha, Bhutia are in majority. On the other hand the Proto-Australoid group of people had migrated from the central part of India and Bihar. Munda, Santal, Oraon, Malpahari, Mahali, Kheria etc. groups do represent the Proto-Austral origin in the region. During medieval period new religion-based community came and also played a role in changing the socio-cultural life of the region. But in the pre-British period no major change took place in the areas of North Bengal because most of the areas of present day North Bengal were covered by dense forest and almost deserted. With regard to the religion, people of almost all the religious groups' viz. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islamism, Jainism, Christianity and also the believers in animism live in this region. Diversity is also present in respect of language e.g. Bengali, Nepali, Hindi, Kamrupi, Tibetan, Lepcha, Sadari, Suryapuri and a number of regional dialects can also be found here.

As it has mentioned earlier that all the districts of undivided North Bengal were under Rajshahi Division, but there were differences of administrative system in different portion of North Bengal districts. For instance the whole of Darjeeling and the western Duars of Jalpaiguri district were non-Regulated area, that means no law or rule prevalent in the rest of British Bengal (Regulated area) was applicable in this non-Regulated portion. Only the Governor will run the administration with the help of District Magistrate or the Administrator in Charge of this area. In addition to that Cooch Behar was a Princely State (tributary). Such type of different administrative complexities must have affected the people and society and also the politics of the region which has been discussed as a sub-chapter under chapter- 4. It

has also mentioned earlier that most of the districts of present day North Bengal are the creation of British Colonial Government. The people in the non-Regulated portion almost all are migrants and the society is therefore migrants' society. With the expansion of British administration into the region the process of migration increased, though there were early settlers, their number was not very significant and the decadal census operations showed that the number of migrants phenomenally increased in this part with the passage of time. The migrants flocked into the region from various neighbouring districts as well as provinces with their own traditions, culture, customs, habits etc. which in a long run resulted in the development of a mixed culture through the process of intermingling between themselves.

Though a good number of works have been done by scholars on the social mobility movement and caste politics and the academic value of those works are immense, yet an overall study of the various aspects of caste, society and politics of the different districts of North Bengal during colonial and particularly in post colonial period is remained unexplored in academic area studies. Most of the scholarly works have dealt with not more than one or two districts of the region and till independence. It is interesting to note that more than sixty-four years have been passed away and meanwhile considerable changes have taken place with regard to the socio-cultural and political life of the region. Moreover, no major research work is discernible regarding the caste history covering the period after independence, though district wise works are coming in these days. However, this work intends to make a comprehensive study over the region dealing with various aspects of changes that had taken place time to time in the colonial and post colonial period.

Regarding the period or time-frame of the study, it has already mentioned that the districts of present day North Bengal are the creation of British Colonial Govt. It also deserves mention in this respect that long after the establishment of British colonial hegemony in central and eastern Bengal, (more than a hundred year), the British Government brought this area under the mainstream administrative periphery of Bengal, though Dinajpur came under East India Company's control in 1765 and the Malda district was made in 1813. These two districts were historically and socio-culturally very much associated with the Barind Bengal. After a number of changes the Darjeeling district was made in 1864 and the Jalpaiguri district was made in 1869. It is interesting to note that being the youngest district it was made the sub-divisional headquarter of Rajshahi division immediately after the formation of the district. It can undoubtedly be said that since then the geographical configuration of present day North Bengal has been completed, though a number of changes had taken place regarding the jurisdiction of the area from time to time. So a new region had been developed which actually consolidated the three historical regions under a common administrative umbrella. That is why the period 1869 has taken as the beginning of our study. The whole study has been divided into two specific phases i.e. Colonial and post-Colonial period. The reason behind such division is that the Colonial Govt. in order to run its administration properly promoted the cause of caste, race, and religious diversities amongst the subject people. The census of 1881 mentioned the caste, race and religion etc. of each community and group. The result was the emergence of a number of caste consolidation as well as caste mobility movement throughout the sub-continent which gradually assumed political character taking the opportunity

provided by the Colonial Govt. in the name of 'protective discrimination'. These movements have been adequately delineated by a number of eminent scholars. The works of Prof. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, Prof Swaraj Basu and Prof. Biman Dasgupta are worth mentioning so far as the caste movement of Bengal particularly North Bengal is concerned. In addition to these a good number of Scholars of this region are engaged in writing various aspects of the history, society, polity etc. of this region. But after independence the constitution of free India does not allow caste based differentiation amongst its citizens. So a new turn in the caste movement and caste politics took place in this particular phase. What is interesting is that despite such constitutional provision the colonial legacy is still continuing and caste is playing as 'proxy' from behind the door in the name of reservation. In addition to this the case of North Bengal is further different because in the post partition period huge number of refugees from East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, most of whom were of scheduled caste category began to settle in different districts of North Bengal permanently. The early inhabitants (predominantly the Rajbansis) were also of scheduled caste category. With the passage of time the latter began to consider the refugees as encroachers to their facilities from Govt. services to agricultural fields as they suffered economic backwardness in competition with the refugees and gradually became marginalized. So out of such resentment a number of movements came into existence which gradually took the shape of ethnic identity movement. If we compare the problem of refugee infiltration and the relative economic crisis with southern part of West Bengal we will find that the refugee scheduled caste and the earlier inhabitants who were also scheduled caste were of same origin i.e. Aryan origin. But in North Bengal the refugees are of Aryan origin and the early inhabitants are of Mongoloid origin. So the

caste consolidation movement of colonial period converted into the ethnic identity movement in the post independent period in North Bengal. Such movement received a further change after 1977 i.e. after the formation of the Leftist Govt. in West Bengal. The Govt. ideologically does not believe in any discrimination regarding caste, race, ethnicity and religion etc. instead it propagates the cause of the removal of all kind of discrimination on the basis of class. Therefore another turn in the caste history had been started in the region with the Leftist Regime. That is why the whole study will end in 1977.

Regarding the chapters, in the first chapter, as it has already mentioned that there are three distinct historical as well as ethno- linguistic and socio-cultural regions found in North Bengal, therefore in this chapter three specific regions and their caste picture are categorically discussed both during colonial and post colonial period. These three zones may be classified as- a) The northern portion of North Bengal which is constituted by the districts of Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar (then Princely State), and the Terrain portion of Darjeeling. It has already mentioned that the Rangpur and eastern part of Dinajpur were transferred to East Pakistan, now Bangladesh in 1947. They played a crucial role in the formation of the social and caste geography of this area. The district of Cooch Behar was a Princely State before independence and its merger to Indian Union on 28.08.1949. Similarly Goalpara which was transferred to Assam in 1874 constituted an important position because the above mentioned area along with Goalpara has been a land of particular caste groups' viz. Rajbansi, Koch, Mech etc. The area between the rivers Tista-Karotoya and Brahmaputra was part of the Kingdoms of Pragytishpur-Kamrup-Kamtapur from time to time. In

addition to this political connection, the people of the area have socio-culturally and ethno-linguistically an association with common characteristics. In this respect this part is different from other two sections of North Bengal as well as rest of Bengal. b) The hilly zone comprised with the hilly portion of the district of Darjeeling with three sub-divisions viz. Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong. This part has also specific characteristics. It has already mentioned that the area had connection with the Himalayan and sub-mountain countries. This area was almost covered by dense forest and with regard to the inhabitants the Lepchas, Bhutias, Tibetans etc. communities were predominant in Sikkim and its adjacent hills of Darjeeling. Therefore the history and culture of the hilly North Bengal is basically a part of the Lepcha culture of Sikkim which is associated with the Buddhistic culture. With the coming of the Nepalis from eastern part of Nepal in various phases of British Colonial rule there developed also a mixed socio-cultural belt in this area. Another interesting feature is that there is sharp difference between the socio-cultural life of Nepalis of Nepal and the Nepalis residing in Darjeeling-Sikkim-Bhutan areas. c) The third one is the southern portion with the districts of Malda and Dinajpur. This portion had an association with the Barind region of central Bengal (undivided) in one hand and Purnea and Bhagalpur Divisions on the other. In these districts the early inhabitants were mostly Deshi, Poliya, Rajbansi etc. During colonial period a large number of tribes began to settle there. Although in the pre Colonial period the migration of different tribes from Bihar and Central part of India was there, the rate of migration increased phenomenally in the Colonial period. Therefore the people of this region have a close connection with regard to the social, cultural and historical traditions with these two regions. This characteristics has made this southern portion a

separate zone distinct from the northern and hilly zones of North Bengal. Thus we can see that geographically, historically, ethno-linguistically and culturally there are three different zones within the periphery of North Bengal. But after independence a large number of infiltrations from East Pakistan in all the districts of North Bengal took place. Most of them were of Indo-Aryan origin. On the other hand migration of Nepalese from Nepal in the terrain and doors further contributed for the emergence of a mixed and heterogeneous socio-cultural life in the area concerned.

The second chapter deals with the social awakening of North Bengal and contemporary Bengal where we have found that western education and nineteenth century renaissance left their impact over the northern part of Bengal with minimum extent as the majority of the people of this part was illiterate and the society was comparatively backward. Not only that, this area responded to such developments in a much later phase as because the colonial administration was established in this region comparatively later. But interestingly the social awakening movement of southern Bengal made considerable influence over the single largest community of the area i.e. the Rajbansis and they also started their social mobility movement.

In the third chapter the condition of the Rajbansi community has been discussed. Without understanding their condition it will not be possible to understand the background of their community consolidation movement. It has mentioned earlier that the society of the Rajbansis is endogamous one where there was no caste hierarchy in their social structure, though the leaders of the Kshatriya Samity Movement claimed of their Aryan origin. The leaders also argued that they were at once the ruler of the whole of

northern part of North Bengal. Gradually they became socio-economically backward. Situation began to change with the migration of the high caste Bengali Hindus from eastern and central Bengal. They became dominant in the socio-cultural and economic life of the region though their number was lower. The Rajbansis began to feel themselves as outcaste and a sense of alienation developed among them which accentuated with the census issue. In the post partitioned period (1947) a new phenomenon arose with the United Front Government's land acquisition policy, which said that no individual Jotedar or Land-lord would hold more than 25 Acres or 75 Bighas of land. Therefore, land exceeding 75 Bighas was confiscated by the Government and distributed those vested lands to the landless cultivators. But the major portion of the vested lands was distributed among the refugees. As results, the local Jotedars discontented against such act of the Government and within a few years an ethnic based movement was launched by them named Uttarkhanda Dal movement which demanded separate state for the Rajbansis (Hindu and Muslims). Such antagonism further aggravated with the coming of the large number of scheduled caste Namasudras, particularly in post 1971 period. The latter became dominant in the socio-economic life of the region in the following periods which generated a new crisis among the Rajbansis who claimed themselves as son of the soil. This resulted in the ethnic consolidated movement questioning the proper application of the reservation benefits to the backwards. It has to be kept in mind that the outburst of such confrontation occurred noticeably since the eighties of the twentieth century though the seeds of conflict germinated during the period of study.

In the fourth chapter an attempt has been made to depict the dichotomy regarding the movement of the Rajbansis for their uplift. In this regard we

find that the leaders of the community claimed of their Kshatriya origin and demanded the recognition by the Government in the census records. On the other hand they demanded safeguards from the government citing their poor and economically backward condition. For that they demanded their name to be enlisted under scheduled caste category. This question actually has placed the community in an unending debate residing in North Bengal, Assam, Bihar and Nepal. In North Bengal they are enjoying scheduled caste status since colonial period, in Assam they are of scheduled caste category but fighting for getting scheduled tribe status, in Bihar and Nepal they are enjoying Other Backward Caste status. In Bangladesh they are treated as general category.

In the fifth chapter I have tried to analyze the caste picture of the hill region that the three sub-divisions viz. Darjeeling or Sadar, Kurseong and Kalimpong of Darjeeling district. The original inhabitants of the hill areas were the Lepchas, Bhotias and Tibetans and their number was very low at the time of British annexation. The Nepalese from eastern Nepal migrated in the hill region during colonial period as labourers in the plantation industries (tea, cinchona), workers in various developments, shouldered in British Army etc. Plain people also migrated. In course of time the Nepalese emerged as the single largest community in the hill of Darjeeling. Though the structure of Nepali Society is as same as the Hindu society of Bengal nay India and the society of the hill is heterogeneous, yet a peculiar linguistic consolidation is found in this area and diversities regarding caste are almost disappeared. It is true that colonial rule contributed for the emergence of a lucid society among the Nepalese. Simultaneously separate administrative set up made the hill area different from plains of the region. in the post 1950

period huge number of Nepalese from Nepal, Meghalaya, Assam etc. migrated in the Terai and Duars of the Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri respectively which is still a continuous phenomenon.

In the sixth chapter an attempt has been made to study about the movements which were launched by various minor groups and communities of the region concern. In this context we will find that there were two distinct phases with regard to the characteristics of the movements in the colonial and post independent period. Most of the movement during colonial period were aimed at socio-religious and cultural reforms by a number of groups and communities and ended with the realization/understanding that no movements will be successful unless or until educational and economic developments are made for the respective communities and for that most of the leaders entered into electoral politics. So, upward mobility movements are found during this period. In the post independent period the movements started with specific demands for economic developments and for that purpose the leaders gave stress on demands for extending reservation benefits. So in this period the movements demanded scheduled caste and scheduled tribe status from the government for the respective groups and communities and most of the movements became strong since the nineties of the twentieth century.

The seventh chapter concentrates on the changed perspective of the caste, society and politics of North Bengal caused by the introduction of Constitution after independence in 1947. The Constitution of free India does not endorse caste based politics which was prevalent during colonial period; instead it has provided special socio-economic safeguards to the backward

and depressed classes in the name of social justice. Thus a radical change in the socio-political scenario has come out. After the partition in 1947 a large number of refugees most of them were scheduled caste Namasudras infiltrated into the region and settled permanently. Gradually with regards to the sharing of reservation benefits tensions arose among the Rajbansis against the refugees and it is surprising to notice that the reservation facilities instead of redressing the long drawn grievances rather generating a new crisis amongst the backward people themselves particularly in this region.

In course of the study it has revealed that Cooch Behar was a Princely State and with regards to the administrative and political aspects it maintained a distinction from the British Bengal, though historically, socio-culturally, ethno-linguistically it had close contact with the surrounding districts of undivided Bengal i.e. Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, terrain of Darjeeling etc. Therefore in order to understand the caste society and politics of Cooch Behar a sub-chapter entitled 'caste, society and politics of Cooch Behar till 1950' has been added to this work (Chapter-4) which was not given in the proposal/ synopsis of this study. The ethno-linguistic and socio-cultural condition has already been discussed in chapter-1. So, administrative and political development of the State was absolutely different from the rest of Bengal. Therefore it deserves special mention. The study also reveals that in Cooch Behar a division of the people viz. Cooch Behari and non-Cooch Behari took place which was approved by the Royal Authority of the State. It has also mentioned that after its merger with Indian Union on 28<sup>th</sup> august 1949, it became a district of West Bengal on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1950 and came under common administrative structure. But an inner current of separate ness

was there among the people of Cooch Behar and in course of time along with complex socio-economic development of the region as a whole an ethnic identity movement emerged among them and the people of the surrounding districts of North Bengal, which is however discussed in chapter-7.

**Methodology:** with regard to the methodology, it has to be mentioned that the study is basically documentary and historical. Therefore I had to depend on primary and secondary source materials. For primary source I have collected materials in the State Archives (Kolkata), National Library (Kolkata) and for secondary source the Central Library of North Bengal university under which the work has done. In addition to these the Cooch Behar State Library which has invaluable primary source materials regarding the socio-economic and political history of the state, has provided important source materials. As the study is regional one therefore the materials available in the region has great importance and values. Particularly the journals, little magazines, newspapers, periodicals, weeklies, leaflets etc. published from various districts of North Bengal since colonial and post colonial period. It is worth mentioning that a number of works at districts level have been coming out both in the academic and non-academic arena. The little magazines play a very crucial role in developing the study of various aspects socio-cultural and political life of the people at regional level and in this respect it will not be irrelevant to state that in the post independent period the publications of little magazines in the districts of North Bengal has placed it in a unique position. These magazines reflect almost all the nooks and corners of the history, society and politics etc. of the region and the research value of those works is significant.

In addition to that I have collected the records of comparative statistics of the participation of the two major scheduled caste communities of the region viz. the Rajbansis and the Namasudras in the academic area from various academic institutions such as Ananda Chandra College Jalpaiguri, Acharya Brajendra Nath Shil College, Cooch Behar etc. Another source of collecting both primary and secondary study materials is the personal library of the supervisor under whose guidance the work has done which is unquestionably a profound source regarding the history of the region. Therefore I had depended much on it and it provided some superfluously primary source materials. But at the same time I have to admit that I could not collect some more information due to non availability of the preservative measures of sources in a few non-academic institutions at block level offices.

Special emphasis has also been given to oral studies as one of the recognized methods of regional history writings. In this relation I did conduct personal interviews with eminent and concerned personalities, and I also collected the excerpts of interviews taken by scholars for their respective studies from persons who were either active in or close witness to various socio-political activities of the region during the period under study.

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