

Chapter 6

The District of Cooch Behar

6.1. A profile of the District :

The district of Cooch Behar having an area of 3,368 square kilometer and 21,58169 population according to 1991 census is an industrially backward zone. Most of the people belong to the economically weaker sections and backward communities who suffer from deep socio-economic misbalance of development.

Situated in the north and north-east of the state of West Bengal in India, the district of Cooch Behar finds itself the gateway to the state of Assam, with two neighbouring countries like Bhutan in the north and Bangladesh in the South.

6.1.1

The plight of the people in Cooch Behar deserves special attention for more than one reason. The district is washed by more or less 22 rivers, which multiply the sorrows of the rural people as the rivers frequently change courses thereby causing floods and devastations. There is dumping of sand by the riverside, frequent soil erosion wiping the irrigated land and affecting the agricultural economy and dwelling places of the rural people.

6.1.2.

The district is predominantly rural. 92.32 percent of the population of the district lives in the villages. The people of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are 52 percent. Agriculture forms the principal source of income. But the production is traditional. There is lack of irrigation facilities.

There are no large, medium or agro-related industries in the district. Among the people, only 32.15 percent belong to the workers. There is no regulated common market for the farmers producing the principal agricultural crops like jute and tobacco.

The district suffers a lot from transport and communication facilities.

For past few years, political and social tensions fueled by the frustration caused by unemployment, economic hardship and other disadvantages has become a menace in the whole of North Bengal.

The fact that political and social tension of the district can be interpreted as a reaction to majoritarian excess is partly true. There are reasons to believe that earlier the people of the backward communities (*Muslims, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes*) were not able to get the employment as compared to the advanced people. Therefore, no development of these people was possible.

The ethnic leaders could not focus the cause of the sufferings of these downtrodden people from the economic point of view rather they became busy with demanding the recognition of a separate state-hood on the basis of Kamtapuri language and culture. A fraction of the agitators went to the extremist and anti-state path.

Undoubtedly, the success of regionalism in politics all over India is a source of such inspiration.

Two other contributory causes of frustration are (i) *partisan politics has failed to address the problems that affect the marginalized community* and (ii) *Kolkata- centred politics by- passes the regional issues.*

Unlike the past, the situation is however, rapidly changing for the better.

6.1.3. Past History of Cooch Behar :

The district has a glorious past history. About five hundred years ago, the state of Koch Bihar was created with the ascendance over the throne by the King Biswa Singha in 1496. The crown ship was ended during King *Jagaddipendra Narayan* as the state of Koch Bihar was merged with the state of sovereign India in 12th September 1949 and it became a district under the state of West Bengal in 1st January 1950.

During the period of *King Nara Narayan*, the area of the state was from Manipur in the east to northeast of Bihar in the West and from Bhutan in the north to Tripura at the south. That was the whole of present North Bengal and the district of Rangpur and Sri Hatta (Now in Bangladesh) and half part of present state of Assam and the state of Meghalaya.

In 1772, it was during the period of *King Dhorjendra Narayan* the need was felt to protect the state of Koch Bihar and to make free the king Dhorjendra Narayan who was arrested under the king of Bhutan. A treaty was made between the king Dhorjendra and governor General Hastings of East India Company on condition that the state of Koch Bihar had to pay taxes annually to the company. Since 1772, Koch Bihar, virtually was included under the British domination as Princely State. Under the Act, since then, the responsibility to keep watch and superintendence of the education and betterment of the people of Koch Bihar was entrusted to British official that continued during the reign of the later Kings.

King Nara Narayan (1533) can be regarded as one of the pathfinder in bringing out the then Koch Bihar state as a sound state in field of Sanskrit and

Bengali education. In 1955 he wrote a letter to the Ahome King in Bengali, which can be regarded as the first letter in Bengali Prose. It was under the king in 1847 modern and English system of education was introduced in Cooch Behar and at least 390 schools were set up upto 1879.

King Nripendra Narayan (1883) can be regarded as the modern builder of Cooch Behar. He was a benevolent, kind- hearted, modern and English educated cultured, directly experienced through domestic and foreign tour, and an enlightened personality. For higher education he established Victoria College (present Acharya Brajendranath Seal College) in 1888.

'*Sahitya Sabha*'—is a centre of antique records of books and culture of the past. *Prince Victor Nityendra Narayan* –a truly cultural person during his brother *King Jitendra Narayan* was fond of collection of rare manuscripts books and ancient idols or historical graphities. In 1916, Nityendra Narayan in a meeting of about 600 intellectuals such as, *Sailesh Ch. Guha, Pundit Kokileswar Sastri, Prafulla Ch. Mustafi, Hirendra Narayan Chowdhury, Sitesh Ch. Sanyal, Khan Amanata Ullah Chowdhury, Satish Ch. Mustafi, Ganga Prasad Dasgupta* etc. established Sahitya Sabha.

For spiritual and ethical uplift of the people of Cooch Behar, King Jagadipendra Narayan- the last king established Siv-Yagya in Khagrabari village.

Many socio-cultural organizations like Sahitya Sabha, Khagrabari Club, Patakura Club, and Folk groups at the villages in the field of Visha Hara, Kushan, and Dotara etc.folk songs were built up under the direct patronage of the Royal Family of Cooch Behar.

6.1.4.

The people of the Cooch Behar state were mainly Koch. (1) The advanced section of the community was known as '*Rajbansi*'. The Kochas believed in Hinduism. (2) The Kochas or Rajbanshis are a mixed people arising out of a Dravidian Stock with marked admixture of Mongoloid Blood.

At present time, the Rajbanshis claim themselves to be the Kshatriyas in the caste hierarchy.

The lengthy development process of the Rajbanshis from Koch to Rajbansi-Kshatriya however ultimately came to an end when they claimed to be the scheduled caste.

6.1.5.

Cooch Behar could not have any permanent royal palace as we find in other kingdoms. Till 1874, the capital of Cooch Behar had few 'mud huts'. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, with the help of colonel Horton and his commissioners created the 'magnificent palace' abandoning the old dilapidated palace of the former kings. The palace in Cooch Behar town today deserves special attention with regard to potential tourism in the district.

Earlier the name of the kingdom was '*Kamtapur*' and capital was in '*Gosanimari*' – now is situated seven miles North West of the Dinhata Town.

The first king of the Khen Dynasty was *Niladhaja (1440-60)* whose territory was upto Bhutan at the North and border of West Bihar, Moimonsingh at the bank of Padma River now in Bangladesh and Goalpara in the east. Beside a large palace, he built a large Garh (made up of soil) for 15 miles, which after 600 years

is still visible in Gosanimari with a height of 30 to 40 hands (around 360 feet), seemed to a hill – a unique creation of those days.

It was in 1498 Husain Shah attacked the Khen kingdom and destroyed it. Then King was *Chakradhwaj (1480-1498 A. D.)*.

6.1.6. The popular form of song in the district of Cooch Behar is Bhawaiya. The legendery singer was Abbas Ud-din who brought the music popular to each person in the region.

6.1.7.

For the past last few years, agitations are being spearheaded by section of the Rajbanshis on the basis of the demand for constitutional recognition of the Kamtapur language and a separate state of Kamtapur. *Kamtapur Peoples Party (K.P.P.)* now Kamtapur Progressive Party has led the movement. Though the movement of the K.P.P. stands partly democratic and limited their demand of statehood within the Sovereign Indian Territory. The other groups like *Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (K.L.O.) Kamtapur Students Organisation (K.S.O.)*, *All Koch Rajbanshi Students Union (AKRASU)*, *Greater Cooch Behar* etc. are the allied groups which extended their support to the respective issues and the movement. KLO however went to the extremist and anti-state path.

Their proposed state of Kamtapur is comprised of 19 districts of which Darjeeling Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Malda, North Dinajpur and South Dinajpur these six districts are from North Bnengal. eleven districts from Assam, and two districts from Bihar. These groups along with a few intellectuals who support their cause claim that Rajbanshi language was lingua franka in previous days and still it has relevance in the region claiming that anthropologically Rajbanshis are

distinctly separate from the people of southern part of West Bengal and Upper Assam.

As there is the large number of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (52 percent) in the region of North Bengal Uttar Banga Tafsili Jati and Adivasi Sangathan (UTJAS) occasionally called for mass movement with a demand to stop police atrocities on them. The organization formed Swayatwa Sashan Manch (platform for self-rule) to focus their demand of separate homeland on the basis of Kamtapur language and culture in North Bengal.

There are reasons behind the plight of the Rajbanshis. The illiterate poor Rajbanshis used to be hated by the higher caste people and some of them were victims to the exploitation of the Brahmins. The abolition of the Izaradari system could not check 'depeasantization' of the Rajbanshis- Koches. It is in the social context that some social leaders of Rajbanshi communities led by Rai Sahab Panchanan Barma fought for the uplift of the Rajbanshis. (3)

6.1.8.

Cooch Behar had a glorious air route. The people of Cooch Behar witnessed a sound-flying route from Cooch Behar to Calcutta upto 1995 (December). Since 1948 (May-1st), Bayudoot air service provided 18-seated 'Dornier'. In the 1950's, instead of inclusion of Cooch Behar under India, Indian Airways, Kalinga Air ways, Jam Air, Sofai players, Air carrying between Cooch Behar to Kolkata. In the 60's, when Dacotas were closed Indian Airline maintained its '*Focker Friendship*' Air Service.

Today, the concrete of the runway is more or less in a good condition but there is no air service functioning here. *The Airport is likely to be inaugurated on 15th April 2006.*

6.1.9. The Rhaassh Mela:

The biggest crowd-pulling fair in the district is the Rhaassh-Mela (fair). This is the biggest fair in North Bengal too. It started in 1812 during the reign of Maharaja Harendra Narayan. The fair begins on Raas Purnima with a Raas (like Tazia of the Muslims) made by a Muslim artisan family brings a good example of the culture of Hindu-Muslim unity in Cooch Behar district.

6.1.10.

In 1889, Maharaja Nripendra Narayan established the now existing **Madan Mohan Temple** on the North Bank of Bairagidighi. The idol made of eight Metals was stolen in 1994. It was however replaced with a new one. Both the temple and fair are great attraction of the tourists of the region. The Dom of *the temple resembles with the similarity of symbol of Islam religion.*

6.1.11.

There is an *Uttar Banga Unnayan Parshad (UBUP)* or *North Bengal Development Council (NBDC)* for the development of the region. Chief Minister is the Chairperson and a minister from North Bengal is the vice Chairperson of the parshad.

The Parshad was established in 30th March 2000, keeping in view to organize development works for 1.5 crore people of six districts (*Malda, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar and part of Darjeeling*) of North Bengal. It was decided to establish a number of regional directorates of the government branches of West Bengal government in North Bengal. None but the Agricultural Directorate was set up. The Parshad was not able to do major function due to its lack of administrative and technological infrastructure.

6.1.12.

The district has a wide border area with Bangladesh. Moreover, there are more than 100 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh. There are also some enclaves of Bangladesh in India. The people of these enclaves do not have basic amenities for life such as education, health care etc, including the right to vote or right to life. But the government has taken no positive action for them.

6.1.13.

Since the district of Cooch Behar was once a princely state, it has its own history. It is royal, intellectual and unique in the region. There are many eminent books written on the history of Cooch Behar. Such as, *Koch Beharer Itihas* by *Bhagabati Charan Bandopadhyay*, another *Koch Beharer Itihas* by *Chowdhury Amanat Ulla*, *the Rajbanshis of North Bengal* by *Dr. Charuchandra Sanyal*, *Princes Remembers* by *Maharani Gayatri Devi*, *Rajopakhyan of Jainath Munshi*, *'Cooch Behar through the eyes of Campbell etc. books are noteworthy.*

It is alleged, there is no systematic effort on the part of the education department of the government to introduce such a glorious history of Cooch Behar in the academic syllabus for meaningful exercise of knowledge of the culture of the region.

6.1.14.

In the district as well as in the region, even in a part of Assam, the term Rajbanshi or Rajbanshi language (?) or dialect and culture plays an important role from the ethnic as well as sub-altern point of view. Rajbanshi language or dialect (whatever may be) has a vast bridge territory in Rangpur, Dinajpur

(Bangladesh); Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Terai region and Cooch Behar in West Bengal; and Goalpara of Assam.

In 1901, the term 'Rajbangshi' was first coined in the census of India. However, since the 16th century, these people were found busy to search for their Aryan Identity, especially inside the royal family of Cooch Behar. These people took the title of Narayan, accepted Madan Mohan Temple as the God of the state. The people like Goswami and Bhattacharjee were brought from the district of Nadia and other places and made Cooch Behar a centre of Aryan religious practice and culture.

The person who led such renaissance in the second decade of 20th century was Thakur Panchanan Burma. These people got so encouraged that with a view to strengthen their position they enlisted their identity as Kshatriya in the census of 1921.

The Culture of Activism and Active Organizations in Cooch Behar: CoochBehar witnessed a number of activists and active organizations along with strong and spirited movements.

Panchanan Burma was a great social reformer for the downtrodden Kshatriya- Raj Bangshi people of the North- East region. He brought this community before the civil society He was able to give the community a space in the society. In 1891, F.A.Skyne- the then Magistrate of Cooch Behar ordered the Raj Bangshi to write them, as 'Kouch' -the society was brusted into protest. Yadaeswar Tarka Ratna and others opined that Raj Bangshis are Aryan oriented Poundra Kshatriya. Since these people are renegade for several years, these people are worthy to write as 'Bratya- Kshatriya'-such an order was noticed.

In 1931, with the help of some leaders from other backward classes, five(5%) percents seats were reaserved for these people in the clerical jobs. In 1932, Lord Lothian declared the backward community as depressed classes. On the basis of the term depressed or '*dalit*', he opined that those who are untouchable and having no right to enter into the temple are called as depressed or dalits. The society was again brusted with severe protests.

In fact, at the time of all these protests it was Panchanan Burma who by taking the masses led the protest. Burma gave the reason: if the upper caste Brahmin having no knowledge, education or finance work like a cook rather than priest of a temple, they do not get respect. Therefore, being a Brahmin he (*Thakur Panchanan Burma himself*) recommended *Sir William Prentice* to amend the definition of the definition of the backwaed depressed class and tactically brought an order from Prentice, Panchanan gave a proposal that the term 'dalit' or depressed to be changed by the term *Tafsili*, i. e., '*scheduled caste*'.

In 16th Januray 1933, the Government of India accepted the proposal. And also as a result or reaction of his (Panchanan's) movement, in 1937, 'reservation system' was introduced for the expansion of education of these scheduled castes through scholarship and government jobs in the educational institutions. In 1950, the Constitution of India provided reservation for them both in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha.

It was because of Panchanan's efforts, a flow of eagerness in education and induction into jobs, scope of right to be elected as representative etc. were the items for them opened and widened the horizon of the Rajbangshi Community. *Therefore, the Rajbangshi Community is very much indebted to the Great Thakur Panchanan Burma.*

6.1.15.

Shiven Chowdhury was another activist who led the mass movement against the torture of the Kings in Cooch Behar. In 1945, while the Royal Army of Cooch Behar tortured the students of Victoria College (now Acharya Brajendranath Seal College). Mr. Chowdhury, led the masses, especially the Students.

6.1.16.

Birendra Chandra De Sarkar, was another famous leader of the people who was deported from the State of Cooch Behar by the Royal Authority on the basis of the allegation of his (Sarkar's) involvement leading the masses against the Royal whip.

6.1.17.

Professor Durga Kinkar Bhattacharya was another progressive personality of the Princely State of Cooch Behar who was vocal against the Royal torture. Prof. Bhattacharya was the leader of '*Koch Beharer Sangram Committee*'.

In 1947, while India became free (i.e., Independent) the Sangram Committee under the leadership of Prof. Bhattacharya who took a decision to felicitate Birendra Chandra Sarkar, the deported leader. At once, Prof. Bhattacharya was suspended from A.B.N. Seal College –the college where he was the teacher.

6.1.18.

Jiban De was another great leader of the people of Cooch Behar. In 1962, he became the first elected Communist M.L.A His social service in the region during the Bengal Famine in 1942- 43 is noteworthy; his protest movement against the

Kings in Cooch Behar on the issue of excessive tax taken by them in the Haats (rural markets) made among the rural local people aware about their rights to the concerned issue. He was also a good organizer who along his friends contributed a good impact among the toiled mass (marginal labourers) through creative songs.

6.1.19.

Kamal Gugha, (now a leader in Forward Block Party and Minister-in-Charge of the Government of West Bengal) had always a close touch with the toiling people and organized a lot of movements for their interest, e.g. he played a leading role for rural development and reconstruction including the reform of rural haats like Chowra haat in Dinhata—one of the busiest haats in the district of Cooch Behar.

6.1.20.

'Prajamandali' was the organization of the agricultural farmers in the State of the Cooch Behar in the Princely State of Cooch Behar. It fought against the Zotedars who were the blind loyal to the Kings.

Such above- stated activities against the Monarchy ultimately culminated and led to the great inclusion of the Princely State of Cooch Behar into the Independent Sovereign Democratic Republic of India as the district of Cooch Behar.

However, there are the dark side also, that though little, dominate the social and political environment of the district of Cooch Behar. As for example, it is the activities and sentiments of a few Rajbangshi leaders who still opt for their separate ethnic identity and often burst into violent movement in the district of Cooch Behar.

6.1.21.

Such a flare-up was found by the activities of the '*The Greater Cooch Behar People's Association (GCPA)*' in July and September through two massive movements in 2005. The Greater Cooch Behar People's Association was established in 1998. The major demand it raises are to form the separate state to be established with ranging from the geographical area of part of lower Assam to six (6) districts of present North Bengal. According to the organization... 'a contract was made between the Government of India and the then King of Cooch Behar in 28th August, 1949 in which Cooch Behar was declared as '*C*' category state. The Organization opposes the inclusion of Cooch Behar in the Indian Union as a mere district of West Bengal in 1950 rather they want its earlier rank of a '*C*' category state'.

In July 2005, the Organization gathered at least 25,000 people (or agitators) of different age both male and female from the peasants and marginal labourers (of whom, it was observed, most of the people came from different existing political parties) and submitted memorandum before the office of the District Magistrate of Cooch Behar.

The Greater Cooch Behar People's Association again, for the second time, brought more than 30,000 active agitators and was divided into four or five groups, sat in for mass hunger Strike in 20th September 2005.

The district administration, on the ground of security, law and order promulgated 144th section in Cooch Behar sadar. Therefore, the agitators were assembled at the four or five main entrance-roads nearly outside the Cooch Behar town.

The situation became grave with the death of five persons on both side –two from the agitators by police firing and three from the police personnel including one Deputy Superintendent of Police allegedly beaten up and murdered by the agitators on the spot. As per the report of the News Paper, the version of the respondent agitators was that they were carrying the dream that a separate state would mean more money for them (the people of Cooch Behar).

The leaders (*Bangshi Badan and others*) wore the dresses of the Kings of the erstwhile Princely State of Cooch Behar. Despite death-casualty the road blockade of the agitators continued for three and half day.

6.1.22.

In the late 1950's, '*Hita Sadhani Sabha*'-under *Satish Sing (later he was reknowned as a Congress leader and Minister)* launched protests on the demand of protecting the interest of the culture and language of the Rajbangshis in the region.

6.1.23. The Folk –Culture:

The district of Cooch Behar maintains strong and wide culture in the field of folk songs, dances like Vishahara. Kushan, Dotara, songs of Satyapir, Si-tol, etc. are these varieties. Among these, Bhawaiya is the most popular song of the region. Bhawaiya is the song of Bhava (idea)- the language of loving heart, as if, both the male and female lovers started tour on the boat. *Surendra Nath Basunia, Nayeb Ali Tapu, and Keshab Barman etc. a number of artists have made the song popular in the region. Among these Artists, Abbas-Uddin Ahmed – the legend singer has made the song famous in the country and abroad.*

Each year, the department of welfare for Backward Community, Government of West Bengal launches state level competitions of which the venue

takes at different towns of the district rotationally. For the last 14 years, a great enthusiasm is noticed with such a competition. It creates scope to find the new potential in the field of this song. There are many non-government institutions for imparting the song and conferring diplomas and degrees. But there is no government institution in such a field.

6.1.24. Rajbangshi Literary Practices:

In the region, especially in Cooch Behar there are many Little Magazines written in Raj bangshi Language (or, dialect) like 'Kortoa', 'Raidak', 'Ujan', 'Degar', 'Maskia Uttar Banga' etc. 'North Bengal Academy of Culture' is one of the apex organizations, which patronizes such practices.

6.1.25. The Economy:

Jute, known as the golden fibre for the people of Cooch Behar bring a source of earning for them. But jute farmers do not get due price for their produce. Local market cannot provide the jute farmers. The production cost for jute farmers for 1 bigha is 1800 to 2000 rupees. Average production is 6 to 8 Mon (Mon = 40 Kilogram) per bigha. After a hardship of 3 months, jute farmers can get Rs. 250 to 300 per Mon. While Jute Corporation of India (JCI) or big businessman buy jute at the cost of 875 per quintal (i.e. Rs. 350 per Mon), in such case, the lucky farmers are not those farmers, but these persons are middle men.

Besides, there are scarcities of jute seeds for each year. The weather of the district does not permit for easy seed conservation. Therefore, the farmers had to depend on the seeds exported from Andhrapradesh that the government supplies on the basis of subsidy. But as Cooch Behar is situated in the border district and there is heavy demand of jute seeds in Bangladesh, smuggling on jute seeds bring crisis and heavy price.

In 2002 (August), the district of Cooch Behar has witnessed the production of jute for about 41,000 Hector land, amounting to the quantity of 9 Lakhs quintal. Till date, there is no infrastructure or arrangement for Jute Corporation of India to buy jute at the local level Hats from the small farmers. Only they buy jute at their 13 specific buying centers. Jute Corporation of India for the year 2001 bought jute only about 16,000 quintal. Local level Centres at Sat Mile, Pundibari etc. were not functioned at all.

Tobacco is one of the principal crops for the region. The values of this product deserve attention in the national as well as international market. But till date no market arrangement or any research institution is found for the uplift of the product or to help the economic uplift of the farmers related with this crop.

Patato is another main source of earning to many farmers. But for last few years, the cultivation of Patato does not suit to them. Because the price of fertilizer is high. So to cope up with the high price, the potato growers take loans from the Moneylenders and sell their potato hurriedly to the stockists to repay their loan. That is, the poor potato grower cannot wait for the demand of the market or for high price in future. On the other hand, the stockists earn the maximum price.

6.1.26.

Sitai is the backward block of the district of Cooch Behar with an area of 15,488 hectre. There are only 60 primary schools, one higher secondary, two secondary and five junior high schools. The people of the block demand more schools.

The people also demand electricity. A numbner of villages like Dhumarkhata, Bajit Chatra, Purba Bharali, Nagar Sitai, Chamta, Adabari garh etc.

are having no electricity. Therefore, it hampers irrigation in these areas. Only a few solvent people can irrigate their land by the shallow deep tubewell. Whereas the area is rich for the species of high quality paddy like Boro, China, Jaya etc. Any shortage of supply of diesel create problem for them.

The people also demand new roads. They got a bridge on the river Ratnai near Madhurghat, which was the result of their long demand and agitation.

Giridhari and Mansai rivers flowed upon the Sitai Block cause havoc soil erosion in the area in each monsoon season. In Sitai, the river causes massive devastation as it washed away hundreds acres of agricultural land in the block. Kajlikura, AdaBari Sagardighi, Jhatigara, Barobangla, Silduar, Bajit Chatra, Gabua, Sonarhat, Chamta, Nakarjan Nechamuddin Kuthi etc. villages are the worst victims.

People of these areas have no alternative but to go to other states in search of job or livelihood.

6.1.27.

Tufanganj, especially Tufanganj Block-1 is the most affected area in the district of Cooch Behar by the flood problem each year. The erosion of the dam of the rivers like Kaljani, Torsa and Gadadhar create problem to the area of Deocharai Gram Panchayat 1 and 2. The river Raidak no.1 affects the Dhalpal Gram Panchayat 1 and 2.

Most of the agricultural land in the year 2002 get inundated and completely washed out.

River Kaljani affects the Panishala area of Nata Bari Gram panchayat 1. More than thousand houses were destroyed in July 2002.

In Tufanganj Block 2, Mahish Kuchi Gram Panchayat 1, Ghana Para and Bhanukumari Gram Panchayat 1 were badly affected. It was caused by the erosion of the dam of the river Raidak and Sankosh.

Such a devastaton are the routine feature of Tufanganj for each year.

6.1.28.

In Gitaldah and Okrabari Gram Panchayats villages are the victims of the Dharala Singimari River. Schools, Mosques, playing grounds, agricultural lands, are mostly inundated under the floodwater of these rivers.

The source of rivers in Cooch Behar is in Bhutan and China. Therefore, the necessity for seting up an International River Commission is urgent to find a meaningful solution to the problem. But no step is yet taken by the state or central government. More over, it is alleged that the indiscriminate lifting of dolomite in Bhutan or the dam built in an immediate distance in Bangladesh rivers cause flood in the district of Cooch Behar.

6.1.29. Mekhliganj sub-division:

Jamaldah rural health centre bears a poor picture of development. No operation theatre, no bed, no latrine, no health related modern equipments, no ambulance, no car and there is no boundary wall. There is a permanent doctor and three nurses the people do not get anti-venom drug in the hospital.

The areas suffer from the compulsions of the rules and regulations of border administrations. Border fencing of wire causes concern to the people of

Hemkumari village as about 13 hundred bighas of agricultural land fall out side the fencing. No development work is done at the border, no road, and no bridge. The bridge over the river Soniajan is broken for a few years.

6.1.30. Cooch Behar Block 1 & Block 2:

The conditions of these two blocks are also serious with regard to flood. In 2004, a number of villages were inundated by the floodwater of river Torsa at Cooch Behar Sadar. In 2005, two villages like Ichhamari and Chapaguri under Cooch Behar Block 2 were being washed away due to the erosion of Torsa River. The inhabitants of these villages had become homeless and were living on the higher level embankments and abandoned roads beneath the open sky adjacent to there areas for long time.

At least 1.6 Lakh people had been affected by the flood and 13,000 were rescue and given shelter in 95 relief camps through out the District of Coochbehar. About 65,000 houses were destroyed.

It is a fact that topography of the district is changing rapidly and many villagers and hamlets are fast disappearing due to the massive erosion. In case of Tufanganj- 2 Panchayat Samiti, Ghoksa— a village was disappeared due to the massive erosion of the Raidak River in 2002. In Nishiganj Gram Panchayat (in Mathabhanga Sub-division) Sonatali village too totally went under water of river Mansai.

Therefore, the biggest problems of the district are natural calamities like floods and river erosion. Each year thousands of people are rendered homeless and helpless. Loss of life, both human and cattle, take place; huge areas of land and crops are destroyed.

But the authorities have been ineffective in rooting out this problem. According to a source, at least Rupees 25 crores are required to manage the problem of flood and river erosion, whereas the district receives just about 8 crores.

Flood is not only a problem of Cooch Behar but also of whole of North Bengal. The elderly of North Bengal can not forget the nightmare of the devastating floods of Cooch Behar in 1954, Jalpaiguri in 1968 and Alipurduar in 1993, in which the people lost many friends and relatives. After the floods in Jalpaiguri in 1968, the state government set up the North Bengal Flood Control Commission with its head quarter at Jalpaiguri. But its role seems limited to giving intimation of water levels of different rivers to the people from time to time throughout the monsoon.

The logic behind the formation of North Bengal Development Council (NBDC) in 2000 was that it would take a regional, rather than a piecemeal view of development projects. But what is ironical, NBDC suffers from inadequate fund, engineering and other necessary departments of its own.

The North Bengal Flood Control Commission (NBFCC) maintains a non-planned fund it gets from the state government. Though damage to agricultural land, roads, bridges and a private property varies every year, the problem needs a permanent solution.

The financial position of the NBDC tells the poor picture of the council. In 2000-2001 Fund was allotted for 38 crores. In 2002-2003 it was 23 crores but actually fund was disbursed only for Rupees 18 crores. In 2003-2004 fund was disbursed for Rupees 30 crores. Such a figure speaks inadequacy of fund of NBDC.

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6.2. The Status of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in the District of Cooch Behar

6.2.1. Tufanganj Sub-division:

1. Folimari Gram Panchayat: Population 10,685 Area: 5232.04 Acre; Agricultural Land: 2616 Acre; Main Income – Agriculture.

“Rampur – Folimari Action Committee” is an organization built up by the students, youth, farmers, marginal laborers with a view to build up dam in their locality (on the river Sankosh).

2. Buxirhat:

- a) *Disha* – a social welfare cultural organization is engaged with feeding polio to the children of the locality.
- b) *The National Service Scheme unit of Tufanganj College* is also engaged with such a work there.

3. Balarampur Gram Panchayat:

Balarampur Ganasagram Committee is active to demanding development of some key issues in the locality. Their agitation was unique as it was led by the ruling left political leaders of the district.

4. Chilakhana Gram Panchayat:

South Chilakhana Beltala Swarogari Mahila Samiti was formed in 1996 taking 10 women from the most distressed families. The members now earn Rs. 600 per month.

6.2.2. Dinhata Sub-division:

1. In Dinhata Town: - Boys Recreation Club:

From Dinhata Town it organized a number of socio-cultural programmes. It also played the role of Mart to provide low cost and scientific latrine on the basis of the advice of the Panchayats.

2. In Chowdhuri Hut :

Ramkrishna Mission Ashram established in 1950 by Sudhir Kumar Banerjee, a police officer that provides social and welfare services to the locality.

3. Matal Hut Gram. Panchayat. :

The Godhuli Bazar North East Society for Empowerment of the people (G-NESEP)— an NGO is engaged with promoting Self Help Groups in Matal Hut Gram Panchayat zone since 1998. It is motivating villagers, mainly women and youths, formed about 200 SHGs in that area. Out of 200 such groups, 149 are women groups.

4. In Gitaldah.G.P. :

In Gitaldah Gram Panchayat (*G.P.*) the formation and activities of the '*Gitaldah Gram Vikash Committee (GGVC)*' deserves special attention as the committee maintains strong vigilance to check child, women and drug trafficking in border area by its network committee built with women at 24 villages.

5. In Gitaldah :

In the village of Dolgovinda the activities of the *Sambyathi Mahila Self Help Group*' deserves special attention. *Hasna Banu* of the organization has won

2nd place in the state level Handicrafts competition. The women members of the organization prepare wallet, vanity bag, and cover of dressing tables, toys –all made of jutes.

6. In Okrabari G.P. :

Nava Pragati Sangha – it is a dynamic cultural organization, sincerely works for the development of folk songs, dance and other folk relates practices through the involvement of the locally youths. The troops led by the sangh are mainly students and youth who perform stand and folk variety, earned state level prizes several times. In 1994, the organization stood first in the state in bairati dance. The dance is the customs and entertainment popular among the women of the regions in the time of Manasa Worship.

7. In Dinhata:

Durbar Mahila Samanway Samiti is very active to keep care for the prostitute women of the locality and to provide them scientific knowledge of health-care and hygiene. The samiti arranges seminars on 'war and the right of women'. It arranges medical workshops to aware about HIV and AIDS and the use of condoms and medicines.

6.2.3. In the Dinhata Block 2:

Bhekrapole Netaji Sangha – The Sangha works since 1991. It has 300 active members workers. It monitors 52 SHGS out of which 40

are women groups. It maintain crèches, women hostel, fire clinic, vocational training camp, snitation programmes etc.

6.2.4. Sitai:

In Sitai Block Spandan Society for Rural Development is actively cooperating to build up SHGs aiming at Swarna Jayanti Village self Employment Schemes. *Spandan* formed 103 women SHGs.

6.2.5. Cooch Behar Sub division:

1. The bridge on the Torsa River near Pundibari on 31 no National Highway in the district of Cooch Behar, the construction of which was undertaken as early in 1993. is still inbuilt.

Therefore, infuriated locals have formed an organization named '*Pundi Bari Torsa Setu Nirman Sangram Samity*' (PTSNSS) to get road bridge done. It was believed, the bridge once completed, would be lifeline between the rest of India and the northeast. The PTSNSS initiated a movement on the demand of construction and payment of dues and compensation to the people whose lands were acquisitioned and those who supplied materials for construction and worked as laborers. In a bid to draw attention of the authorities and to check out a plan for extensive movement, the PTSNSS organized a mass convention at Pundi Bari on 11 April 2003.

2. Cooch behar Zilla Saksharata Prasar Samiti :

Cooch Behar Block 2 Panchayat Samiti Unit :

Thousands of youth rendered voluntary labor for the expansion of literacy under the organization. Therefore, Literacy increased to 74.24 per cent in this Panchayat Samiti, which is a highest record in the district of Cooch Behar.

3. Sabuj Swapna Self-Help Group:

It was set up in *Madhupur* in 2001. People of the locality were rendered homeless due to the erosion of the River Torsa. The youth of the group with a view to keep their existence intact were united and formed such a group. They performed successful business with broiler hen, husking mill, pig farming etc. The success of their group has led or *inspired more than 54 SHGs at the Madhupur Gram Panchayat.*

4. Khagrabari G.P. :

Netaji Subhas Chandra Databya Chikistsyalay

A charitable dispensary have been run by a group of college students at East Khagrabari at Cooch Behar aimed at improving the health condition of the poor people of the locality. In each week it arranges free treatment by the surgeons and Medical Experts for the people in the locality.

5. Vidyasagar Free Coaching Centre:

In Khagrabari Gram Panchayat the centre maintains different social and welfare activities, like free teaching for the poor students, campaigning science awarness through drama etc. As a mart it prepares scientific smokeless woven, low cost latrine etc.

6.2.5. Cooch Behar Block 1 :

'Ashar Aalo' – A voluntary organization organizes six SHGs for Artisan people engaged in *paati-making*. It provides financial assistance to these people to buy bet (the raw material for pati). It has helped the groups to build up the

workshed and thereby saving them from rain or sun while work. There are the demand of the paati in the country and abroad.

6.2.6. Cooch Behar Block 2 :

In Patlakhaowa West Bengal State Prati Bandhi Sammilani leads the Gyandeeep Prati Bandhi Vidyalaya and Training Centre. At least 160 students of whom 70 def and dumbs, 40 bone affected, 10 blind, 20 cerebral palsy and 20 are mentally retarded persons. The centre attained Government approval in April 2003.

Nehru Yuva Kendra trained 45 persons in cutting and tailoring to make them self-sufficient. The literacy cell of the district trains 20 persons in Pumpset Mechanism. The local panchayat has a special care in managing the institution in better manner.

6.2.7. Cooch Behar Block – Saltia Gore Gana Andolan Committee

The committee was formed to build up a bridge on Dhepua to stop soil erosion caused by Saltia Canal. Saltia Canal passed through five Gram Panchayats followed Patchhara, Chilkirhut, Chanda Mari, Putimari, Fuleswari keeping river Jhaljhali in one

side and Kodal Khetir. Bami river on the other side. It was the demand of the people of the area to stop unmanageable flow of water of such a long Saltia Canal.

6.2.8: - Matha Bhanga Sub-division :

1. *Matha Bhanga Social Welfare Organisation* is a busy organization performing free treatment and health care including eye operation. It organized

Health Awareness Camps in Nayarhat Gram Panchayat under the financial assistance of *German Technical Organization (GTZ)*.

2.Nishi Ganj Club :

The Club conducts multi-purpose activities in the Nishiganj Gram Panchayat such as, Rural Sanitation Programme through it's own Rural MART, prepares Smokeless Chullah (Oven), conducts Survey on water pollution, etc.

3. Biswanath Deaf and Dumb School :

In Mathabhanga Block 1 the school attained approval from the department of education, Government of West Bengal. The school was started in 2000 under the management of West Bengal State Prati Bandhi Sammilani. The number of students is 76, teaching and Non-teaching. Financially, the local M.L.A., local G.P. of Shikarpur, MathaBhanga Panchayat Samiti and Local people help it. The school maintains a training centre for the students.

4.In Akrahut Village:

Dishari social welfare organization and training centre provided services for the disabled students in association with the community polytechnic cell of Cooch Behar.

6.2.9.

Besides these above-stated different kinds of civil society organizations there are many more other organizations for the district as a whole.

1. Abbas-Uddin Swaran Samiti :

The Bhawaiya Sangeet Mela is one of the biggest events in the district of Cooch Behar. The number of participants and the quality of performance has gone up considerably. The final meets are most of times held at Balarampur.

Abbas-Uddin Swaran Samiti motivates such activity.

2. Anagrasar Nasya Shaikh Kalyan Samiti :

This is a society for the 'other Backward Classes' for the region of north Bengal. It has the organization in all the six districts in north Bengal with a view to uplift the people who belong to the backward sections among the Muslims. The society primarily aware these people about government loans, provision for OBC quota in different fields with regard to job reservation, admission into educational institutions, if any, etc. The society organized welfare activity for these people.

3. Cooch Behar Zilla Byabsayee Samiti :

As the district suffers from no or little industries, the role of the samiti stands very much important. The samiti responded to the call of the government of West Bengal to expand industrial areas in the district and as a result of the coordinated effort of the samiti, in the early 1990's an industrial area having a few small industries were opened in Chakchaka near the town of Cooch Behar in March 2003. The samiti strongly demanded to the government to declare the district as the '*tax-free-zone*' for the sake of expansion of industrialization at the region.

The other demands of the samiti are 'to resume flying route from the local Airport, and to introduce a new superfast train from Cooch Behar to Kolkata.

4. Community Polytechnic Cell

The Cooch Behar Polytechnic Institution maintains the community Polytechnic cell. The cell imparts training in different fields of livelihood for the rural youth irrespective of their educational qualifications. The training is free to all (subject to minimum seat capacity on the basis of interview performance) which builds their career in the vocational field like repairing of electrical parts, or knowledge of sewing, stitching or tailoring, but tick embroidery, beautician course etc.

5. Nature and Adventure Society (NAAS)

Cooch Behar unit – Under the leadership of Arup Guha, NAAS works praiseworthy in the field of blood donation. It organizes trekking tour etc. but had a special care for the Thalasemia Children patients. Therefore, several times NAAS organized blood donation camps in the district.

6. Cooch Behar Cancer Centre

The people irrespective of political parties and also initiative undertaken by different political parties made the dream of building a cancer centre in the town of Cooch Behar successful. It is the result of the donations of the people in the late 1980's. It cares patients at low cost, if possible.

7. District Library Coaching Centre

In 2002, in the District Library (Former State Library of Cooch Behar) is organizing free coaching centre for the preparation of civil service and other competitive examination both state and National level. There are competitive books and the college teachers' act as counsellors.

8. Madhupur Krishak Unnyan Sangha (MKUS)

A farmer's club was formed with 206 farmers in Madhupur in Cooch Behar Block 2 in June 2003. The club works for the uplift of the villagers. The club tries to arrange and repay loans for its members. The MKUS is first of its kind in Cooch Behar 2 Panchayat Samiti promoting the concept of Self-Help- Groups providing loan to needy farmers – as against taking high interest loans from moneylenders. There were 39 SHGs at Madhupur up to June 2003.

9. Lions Club International (Cooch behar Unit)

It is one of the largest NGO that provides multi dimensional services. In Cooch Behar and Malda it introduces sex-education for the students of 70 high schools. It is value-based curricula, which is aimed to create, self-confidence of the students. It is also an anti-drug campaign and it enhances the skill and awareness among the students.

10. State Agricultural Technologist Service Association (SATSA) – (Cooch Behar Unit):

It is a fruitful organization for the farmers. It organizes seminars for the farmers; it conveys the technical knowledge of alternate farming, scientific technique of farming, the utility of soil testing, the use of pesticide and bio-fertilizers, the process of

cost-effective management of agricultural production. Such workshops were organized by SATSA from 18th October 2004 onwards at Chowdhuri hut (a border area village) of Dinhata, Haribolar Hut, in Sitai, Kodal kethi of Matha Bhanga, KushaBari of Dinhata etc. Villages. The numbers of workshops were 12 and about 1000 farmers attended the workshops.

11. Natun Railpath Dabi Samprasaran Samiti

With a marathon agitation, since 1995, the samiti demands a new rail route from New Maynaguri of Jalpaiguri to Jogighopa in Assam. The samiti consists of leaders and workers irrespective of different political parties from Cooch Behar and lower Assam, which is unique in the region. The Samiti achieved the people's support and made the central government understand the importance of their demand. Work on the above said route is under process.

12. Agricultural Graduate Club

A voluntary Organization formed by Amulya Mitra (Agricultural Scientist of the locality) and others. most of the members are associated with science awareness movement, mainly professors from Uttar Banga Agriculture University, and the others are dynamic district and block level agricultural officers. Their work mainly concentrates with counseling to the farmer on scientific and technical knowledge among the farmers. Though the club was born in Cooch Behar, it expands its work in the whole of North Bengal. In the year of scientific Awareness 2004, the club was invited by many organizations as one of the important 'Resource Person's Unit'. It counsels among many 'Farmers' club' which were formed in the year 2004 in different Panchayats at Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri. The club has popularized the vegetable cultivation and floriculture among the farmers. The club stressed upon storage of potato through the Godown of the Farmers club (keeping in view to help the potato farmers in the region).

13. Nehru Yuva Kendra(NYK) (Cooch Behar Unit)

For the last 15 years, NYK has attained success to extend its work to 835 clubs out of total 1139 inhabited villages in the district of Cooch Behar. NYK

intends to reach to at least one club per village. It works among the non-students youth not only in the field of sports and culture but for the socio-economic development of the community as a whole. In the district, NYK depends not on its paid workers but it motivates volunteerism among the youth of different clubs. It pays attention to the youth employment by skill development or training for them. These are done either by the NYK independently or through the concerted and coordinated effort with other development agencies or units.

14. Society For Participatory Action and Reflection (SPAR)

It is a mother NGO in the district of Cooch Behar. Upto December 2002, SPAR directly monitored 1708 self Help Groups in the district in different blocks where around 25,000 women are associated with these SHGS. SPAR extended financial assistance and counseling to these groups. Women of these group now find solvency in their family, attained the buying power whose impact is found in the local market.

15. New Bharati Club :

It is multi faculty social non-government organization (NGO) bearing crèche old age home, counselling centre on AIDS, etc. in the district. It was the only organization, which exercised much on disaster management in collaboration with the district administration.

16. Association for Better Cooch Behar (ABC) and Concern for Cooch Behar

These are the organizations which keep watch the betterment of the Cooch Behar Town. *ABC* was found to agitate against the decaying condition of the earlier Royal Ayurvedic garden inside the Town in Badur Bagan. Concern for

Cooch Behar is active for the well preservation of the Royal Heritage in the district.

6.3. The changing role of Panchayats in the district at present

There are 128 Gram Panchayats in the district of Cooch Behar of which seven (7) Gram Panchayats have won the 'Nirmal Gram Prize'. These Panchayats include: Bara Sol Mari, Fulbari and Ghoksa Danga 3 Panchayats from Matha Bhangra Block 2; Mahis Kuchi 2 Panchayat of Tufanganj Block 2; Okrabari Panchayat and Petla Panchayat of Dinhatra Block 1; Chak Chaka Panchayat of Cooch Behar Block 2. (Till 30-03-2005)

The prize was conferred by the Department of the Rural Development of the Central Government which the above-mentioned Panchayats attained after their due credit (100 percent coverage of sanitation) to the Total Sanitation Campaign (T.S.C) in the respective Panchayats.

The Panchayat Raj Institutions of Cooch Behar at three levels are engaged with new tasks of development such as expanding of Adult Literacy, Pulse Polio activities, health awareness campaigns, agricultural training, caring for the below poverty line (B.P.L.) people, organizing self help groups (SHGs) etc.

The government of West Bengal is very keen to hand over the responsibilities and maintenance of the health centers, such as Block Primary health centers, primary health centers and subsidiary health centers upon the Panchayat Raj Institutions with a view to bring dynamism in their services. In the district of Cooch Behar, Panchayats already play such a role.

Panchayats in the district today give maximum attention to the following issues:

- a) Protection of the houses, lives, lands and roads from the erosion of flood, or heavy rain, adjacent to rivers;
- b) Water harvesting, watershed development tanks, wells for conserving water for agricultural use;
- c) To supply pure drinking water;
- d) To get rid of epidemic and infections;
- e) Permanent road connectivity and making of essential bridges over the rivers;
- f) To get employment or earning opportunities for the youth etc.

Panchayats in Cooch Behar organize many types of fairs. There are Mother and child fair, raas fairs, folk or cultural festivfals etc to aware the people about meaningful way of life.

Zilla Parishad of Cooch Behar produces films too. As for example, the district has a potential in Muga Sericulture but there is no knowledge about such cultivation among the farmers and the Zilla Parishad rightly handled the matter through film.

Zilla Parishad in 2002 (7 – 8 December) organized ‘self-employment’ fair at Rajbari Stadium for the youth of the district and more than 10,000 youth attended the fair. The fair was equipped with a lot of information with regard to business and employment opportunities.

Panchayat encourages the people to voluntarism to build up road or other work, where fund is little. Therefore, now- a -days. to the Panchayats, other than empowerment, the need to arouse and utilize the *civil initiative* has become one of the prime task that are found in many cases in the district of Cooch Behar.

In 2000, 20th July, a primary school was inaugurated in the house of S. Roy in 174 Dhulia Khalisa Village in Uchhalpukhari Gram Panchayat in Mekhliganj Block. There was a demand of permanent school building. The people under the direct inspiration of the Deputy pradhan of Uchhalpukhari (the local M.L.A) and the Sabhapati of the Mekhliganj Block brought bamboo, Tin and payed their voluntary labour to build up the school building in a donated land of Manindranath Roy in the locality in the 1st week of January 2004. Prior to this on 1st January, the people in the meeting of the Gram Sansad took such a decision unanimously.

The Panchayat Raj in Cooch Behar has encouraged the cultural spirit of the youth too. Zilla Parishad has built up a modern open Manch at Burirhat (Khagrabari Gram Panchayat) for an amount to Rupees 4 lakhs. The Mukta Manch now contributes expansion of folk culture of the region. Here Panchayat plays the role of catalyst in arranging and encouraging the local artists to launch enchanting programme. In 2001, Panchayat spent an amount to Rupees 10,000 for folk festival. Panchayat also spent Rupees 10,000 for the inter sports for the primary students in the locality.