

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF AN AUTONOMY MOVEMENT IN NORTH BENGAL: A STUDY OF KAMTAPUR MOVEMENT.

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**Abstract:** Over the past few decades, there has been an upsurge of regional movements launched by different communities in different parts of the country. The particular community or ethnic groups involved in this movement are found quite assertive and demand for autonomy in the form of a formation of a separate state, and at a time for secession. This has become a major concern in social science discourse in recent times. There are different causes behind the demand of separate states. People of the Rajbanshi origin are also demanding a separate state of Kamtapur. This paper will examine the socio-economic background of Kamtapur movement.

**KEY WORDS:** Rajbanshi, Autonomy, Refugees, Kamtapur

### **Introduction**

Over the past few decades, there has been an upsurge of regional movements launched by different communities in different parts of the country. The particular community or ethnic groups involved in this movement are found quite assertive and demand for autonomy in the form of a formation of a separate state and at a time a for secession. This has become a major concern in social science discourse in recent times.

In the North Bengal region apart from other socio-economic disparities and deprivation, the Rajbanshis being an indigenous community, are at present facing a lot of hardships and are fast losing their ethnic identity, culture, language and other attributes under the pressure of alien Bengalis (Bhatias), who have mostly come from the downstream region of southerneast Bengal (now Bangladesh) into this territory. This fresh surge of consciousness has provoked them to demand a separate statehood and self-rule over an area that covers all North Bengal districts-Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, and Malda. They contend that Rajbanshi have nothing in common with the alien Bengalis either in terms of physical appearance, language or culture, and they do not belong to the Bengali community.

The Kamtapur is the ancient name of Koch Dynasty which is situated in the northern part of West Bengal. Most of the parts of present Assam, adjoining parts of Bihar, Nepal, Bhutan and the present parts of ancient Rongpur of Bangladesh were included within this area of Cooch Behar. In the past few decades movement for ethnic autonomy has marked the political discourse not only in North Bengal and North East India but throughout the country as a whole. While some of them strongly advocated the need for autonomy within the present administrative setup, other resolutely expressed their support for more militant or secessionist ideas of political and geographical demarcation of territory.

Ethnic diversity as well as the geographical location and its environment along with ethnic politics are playing the decisive role in the question of social relationship and are watering the germination of the feeling of regionalism which ultimately led to the march of demanding a separate state to accumulate the political power to govern the region wherein, they claim a demographic majority. It is also playing a decisive role not only in the functioning of state power but also becoming an important factor in creating the social and political unrest in almost all countries of the world. India is not an exceptional one.

### **Objectives**

- i. To understand the background of the autonomy movement of Rajbanshis in North Bengal.
- ii. To find out the causes that led to the emergence of Kamatapur Movement and its demands.
- iii. To suggest probable suggestions to tackle the Kamatapur Movement of Rajbanshi community in North Bengal.

### **Methodology**

The paper is a descriptive and analytical one, primarily based on secondary data. The secondary data are collected and consulted from the published materials in the form of books, research journal papers, magazines and from other internet sources.

### **The Background of the Kamtapur Movement**

North Bengal, comprising the districts of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Uttar Dinajpur, DakshinDinajpur and Malda has been synonymous with insurgent movements like Tebhaga, Naxalbari, Gorkhaland, Kamtapur, Greater Cooch Behar etc. Scholars trace the history of the Kamtapur Movement back to the 1970s. The movement started with the formation of Uttarkhand Dal in 1969 which demanded a separate homeland for Rajbanshis, the indigenous settlers of the area. That led to the formation of the Uttarbangha Topsilli O Adibasi Sangathan in 1979 in rural and tea garden areas in Dooars. It got split during the latter part of the decade. Out of it developed Kamtapur Gana Parishad (KGP). Kamtapur People's Party was constituted in 1996 as an offshoot of KGP.

After some initial sporadic activities in Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri district, KPP remained dormant till 1998 when it underwent a resurrection of sorts. Since then, and particularly along with the emergence of Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO), an extremist outfit, during

1993-94, it is a political bee in a bonnet of the state Government (Choudhuri: 2000). Historically the demand for a separate state and self-rule for the Rajbanshis over an area comprising all the northern districts of West Bengal has taken its present form through a long process of evolution (Haldar: 2000). At the same time, it has become an important issue in the arena of state politics. In recent past Kamtapur has been a big factor particularly in the panchayat and assembly elections in North Bengal (Mukhapadhyaya: 2011).

The major sentiment floated in favour of Kamtapur movement is that apart from other existing socio-economic disparities and deprivations that Rajbanshis face, they being a numerically dominant indigenous community, are at present facing a lot of hardships and fast losing their ethnic identity, culture and language under the pressure of alien Bengalis whom they call Bhatia. Land alienation and other forms of economic exploitation of the community are also issues that have moved centre stage. Lack of employment opportunities and alternative means of livelihood have gradually heightened their sense of deprivation. The language issue has been the single biggest factor behind the growth of Kamtapur movement. The leader of this movement trust that the formation of a separate Kamtapur state is the only way to protect the dignity, cultural right, identity and economic interest of the local people of Kamtapuris.

The nomenclature Kamtapur attributed to the proposed state is an attempt to revive the glorious past of the early Kamtapur Kingdom in the medieval period located in northern parts of undivided Bengal and western Assam. The Kamtapur Kingdom later emerged as a princely state of Cooch Behar, a citadel of Koch Rajbanshis (Mukhapadhyaya: 2011). After independence this feudal state merged with the Indian Union and emerged as a separate district of West Bengal in 1950. So, there is a historical antecedent in embracing the name Kamtapur for a cherished homeland or state for Rajbanshis. It equally helped fuelling sentiment of the local Rajbanshis about their illustrious past.

### **Kamatapur Movement and its Causes for Emergence**

The Kamatapur Movement by the Koch Rajbansi people for the demand of the separate state within the Indian domain has taken a historic movement. The historical origin of Kamatapur Movement was although in the colonial period but in case of Assam the movement acquired its momentum only after the 1980s. Their old demand was the inclusion of Koch Rajbansi of Assam into the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category instead of separate statehood demand. It is usually opined that the Kamatapur Movement became stronger in Assam after the 1980s; it was actually the expression of frustration of the people on the politics played by the government towards their demand for Scheduled Tribe. There are some organizations which are spearheading the demand for the Separate Kamatapur State like the All Assam Koch Rajbansi Students Union (AAKRSU), Kamatapur Liberation Organization (KLO) which is a militant organization. Besides, are also other non-governmental and literary organizations of Koch Rajbanshis which are working for the socio-cultural development of their community with sympathy to the demand of Autonomy like Koch Rajbansi Sahitya Sabha. Koch Rajbansi Cultural Society is another literary organization of Assam working for the development of Koch Rajbanshis history, culture and literature along with the territorial demand. The Koch Rajbanshis originally from the ancient Kamrupa-Kamata kingdom is one of the largest plain tribes of India. The Koch people trace their genealogy from the person known as Hariya Mandal, a resident of Chkangram (present

Kokrajhar district) who was a Koch. He was recognized as the Mandal (Head) of twelve leading families of Koches. After his death, his bravest son Bisu took over the reign as a new Mandal and became the first Koch King of the reign known as the Kamatapur reign. Eventually, he assumed the name of Bishwa Singha and his brother Sisu assumed the name of Sib Singha and from the period of Bishwa Singha the Koch Dynasty was ruled by different Koch Kings and lastly by Jagaddipendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur till 12th September 1949. Under Naranarayan, the Koch Dynasty reached a position of glory although in course of time their heydays did not last long. The Koch Rajbanshis despite having a glorious past have been facing identical problem for a long time due to external threats, colonial interferences, partitions and negligence of the governments and so on. The central argument of this movement is that the Koch Rajbanshi people of Assam are the indigenous people of this region and therefore this region originally belongs to Kamatapuris. The Koch Rajbanshi people of Assam had rich culture, language, identity in history but in the post-independence scenario, they have become economically weak due to various reasons. The most vital factor for their deteriorated condition is due to the land reform policy. The land reform policy aims to improve the economic condition of the rural people. But through this policy, the Koch Rajbanshi people of Assam and North Bengal were not benefited rather their land has been transformed to the new migrants i.e. Bengali Hindus and Muslims who had migrated to the Kamatapur region from present Bangladesh both in the period of pre- and post-independent India. Therefore underdevelopment of the region that they inhabit and other ethnic causes mainly due to loss of land and non-availability of employment opportunities has laid down the seeds for the growth of Kamatapur Movement (Saikia: 2019).

There were a number of causes which led to Kamatapur Movement. These are:

1. As per the history of Assam before the British rule in India, Maharaja Naranarayan of Cooch Behar captured all the small states of entire North-Eastern India in the 16th century. However, it is important to note that the proposed area of Greater Cooch Behar or Kamatapur state was not the part of West Bengal and Assam and has been shared by them after Independence of India. On the eve of Independence, an agreement was made that Cooch Behar would be given the status of a state of India after Independence but later it was only made as a "C" category state as a district of West Bengal in 1<sup>st</sup> January 1950. Thus, the leaders of Koch Rajbanshi blamed that this kind of degradation of Cooch Behar State is a breach of trust, anti commitment, unlawful and unconstitutional.
2. The languages, literature, culture of the people of the world are different from those of the people of West Bengal and Assam. Presently, the indigenous people (Koch-Rajbanshi) of the world have lost their historical glory, prosperity and happiness and also face suppression, oppression, domination and endless exploitation altogether aspects of their life.
3. The economic conditions of the Koch Rajbanshi people deteriorated day by day. Their Inhabiting areas are still backward and underdeveloped and therefore the proposed Kamatapur area is predominantly rural with over 80% of the population residing within

the rural areas. In spite of the wealth and sorts of its natural resources like forest, river etc this region remain industrially backward;

4. The negligence of the Central and therefore the before the government resulted in feelings of alienation even more among the people of the Koch Rajbanshis and the denial of their cultural rights by the mainstream Assamese Society also added fuel to the present;
5. Thanks to the influx of a huge number of castes Hindu Bengali from East Bengal before and after independence to Kamatapur area may have played a more crucial role in creating feelings of insecurity among the locals. Bengali Scholars like Soumen Nag says that the Hindu Refugees from East Bengal developed culture, the modernity of language, education which Indigenous Rajbanshis couldn't stand and that they gradually lost their culture, language and land, in particular, they became minority thanks to the flow of this immigrant and ultimately lost their last asset which was their identity.

### **Origins of various Organisations:**

The history of Kamtapuri movement is often traced back from about the seventies of the 20th century. At the very onset, the movement started alongside the demand for a separate Uttarakhand state from Uttar Pradesh giving rise to a strong organization, named the 'Uttar Banga Tapasili Jati, Upajati, Sanghatam' (U.J.J.A.S). Later in 1992 it split and gave rise to Kamtapur Gana Parishad (KGP), All Assam Students Union (AASU), and Assam Gana Parishad (AGP). The Kamtapur Peoples Party (KPP) may be a branch of KGP. According to Ghosh (1992) in 1910, Rajbansi Kshatriya Samity was formed as a social organisation which in later period changed its outlook and took part in national politics. Again, a neighbourhood of the Rajbansi community within the name of Koch Behar Hitasadhani Sabha raised their voice in demand of a separate state. It had been an area people party controlled and dominated by the Hindu and Muslim native state. An advocate, Satish Chandra Singh Roy Sarkar of the Dinhata Bar Association and also a Jotedar of this area founded this party. In course of your time to spotlight the matter of the Koch Behar state Koach Behar People's Association was formed in Calcutta. The two organizations now taking the lead during this field are the Kamtapur Peoples' Party (KPP) and therefore the Kamtapur Liberation organizations (KLO). The previous is more moderate; yet its leader, Atul Roy, reportedly said recently that 'We won't abandon our demand for statehood, and if Rajbansi mothers need to lose their sons for achieving the goal of statehood, so be it.' The origin of the Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO) is often traced to the attempts of certain members of the Rajbansi community belonging to the all Kamtapur Students' Union (AKSU) to arrange an armed struggle for a separate Kamtapur state. For this purpose, they decided to form the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). ULFA reportedly agreed to coach them so as to realize foothold outside Assam, within the other geographically contiguous Indian states, to use them as a transit route. ULFA's line of thinking was that it might not only facilitate the movement of its cadres to their base camps in the Kingdom of

Bhutan but also provide a secure haven for the injured or sick cadres. The KLO came into existence on 28th December 1995. At the time of its formation, its cadre strength was estimated at about 60. There are legal, above/overground political parties (Kamtapur People's Party, Kamtapur Progressive Party) which try to advance the difficulty of Kamtapur statehood by electoral means, civic disobedience and strikes. KPP was established in January 1996 by Atul Roy. KPP works amongst the Rajbanshi population. KPP demands to form a separate Kamtapur state and recognition of the dialect of the Kamtapuri as a separate language. The scholar wing of KPP is that the All Kamtapur Students Union (AKSU). The women's wing called Kamtapur Women's Rights Forum. Ahead of the 2001 West Bengal assembly elections; KPP joined the All India Trinamool Congress-led Bangla Bachao Front. In spring 2003 KPP suffered an indoor division. Atul Roy, considered as a moderate, was dethroned and replaced by a more hard-line leadership. The president of KPP is Nikhil Roy and the general secretary is Subhas Burman. Atul Roy again becomes a member of the central committee. KPP may be a democratic organization formed for developing the Koch-Rajbanshi community. Before the 2004 Lok Sabha elections, KPP formed a front alongside Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (Mukhapadhyaya: 2011).

### **Causes behind Social Distress**

Koch Behar region of the past was unique and distinct from the other regions in respect of its ethnic and cultural identity, linguistic, climatic and geographical characteristics. Coupled with the ethnohistory of Koch Behar, many factors together contributed in the formation of Kamtapuri movement which is as follows:

The Kamtapuris or the Rajbanshis consider themselves as the most important indigenous dominating inhabitants of this state. Though they belong to scheduled caste group but they claim themselves as Kshatriyas. They constitute about 14 percent of the total population, 51.76 percent of schedule caste population and 54 percent of the total Hindu population in this region. After independence, a large number (according to 1991 census record 29.3 percent) of immigrants or refugees migrated to this area came from the lower plain of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to settle down. The Rajbanshis used to call these refugees as 'Bhatia'. These outsiders gradually become the main competitors in all spheres of life over the indigenous Rajbanshis in a quest for survival and subsistence. This in turn gave rise to a social distrust among the indigenous Rajbanshis against the alien people of Bhatia's. Again in the year 1955, after the incidence of land reform, excess land was given to the immigrant people or the Bhatia's depriving the 'sons of soil' or the Rajbanshis. This way the 'sons of the soil' continuously were victimized and deprived socio-economically from their sole competitor Bhatia's. Thus giving rise to a social revolt from their end.

There are several historical and geographical reasons; industries could not be developed in north Bengal. Again the twin forces of development and regionalism worked together to strengthen this movement. This might be because of the developmental measures which have been taken for the local people of this areas is in reality weak and ineffective for the public residing here and hence giving rise to anger to take collective decisions and to revolt.

According to Basu, "...some common factors responsible for the rise of nativist, regional demands have been specified, viz. influx of migrants, cultural differences between the migrants

and local people, restricted job opportunities for indigenous middle class, immobility of local population, rapid growth of education among the lower middle classes, language domination or a sense of insecurity of language, culture, religion etc (Basu: 1992)." On the other hand, regarding regionalism, Majeed says that it is "... the outcome of some real or perceived sense of internal colonialism, the result of maldevelopment or asymmetrical development. Regionalism is the response of unequal sharing of the benefits of development activity. It may be resulted due to power inequality between elite and marginalized groups of people, the local and outsiders, thus resulting in conflict situation and tensions in public life. It promotes the development of leadership at the regional level which wants to take hold of the political-economic situation of the region (Majeed: 1987)."

In this particular case, the regional consciousness of the Rajbanshis, ethnic and cultural identity with development in all spheres of life with various demands. According to the Rajbanshis, after the merging of Koch Behar with West Bengal as a district, no further development took place for them. Reversely they have been neglected a lot throughout this time period. According to the leaders of the Rajbanshis or the 'sons of soil', the inclusion of the Koch Behar within the union of India was 'illegal', unjustified, unconstitutional, undemocratic because, during the time of signing of the agreement between the king Jagaddipendra Narayan and the Government of India, Cooch Behar was promised to give the status of 'C' category state, but in reality, it was merged as 'A' category. The Rajbanshis or Kamtapuris consider themselves as subordinate to the state of West Bengal under the administrative and massive pressure of a class of people belonging to a different culture from them. They are deprived of their culture or ethnic identity, even their mother tongue Kamtapuri language has been removed from primary schools.

### **Demands of Kamtapur Movement**

One cannot, but be surprised to go through the demands of these Kamtapuris. The KPP or Kamtapur Peoples' Party on 26.09.97 submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister of India, Indra Kumar Gujral, through the Divisional Commissioner of North Bengal, Jalpaiguri division. The 11 point charter of demands included:

1. In order to enable the Kamtapuri speaking people to govern their own lives by reason of ethnic, linguistic, historical, cultural and social distinction from the rest of the people of West Bengal a separate statehood namely 'KAMTAPUR' be created within the framework of India comprising the whole of North Bengal and adjoining Kamtapuri populated areas in India, in accordance with the article (3) of the Constitution of India.
2. With a view to advancing the language of the Kamtapuris, it is included in the 8th schedule of the Constitution of India.
3. On the basis of the base-year of 1971 (Indira-Mujib accord) the expulsion of illegal foreigners from Kamtapuri areas of North Bengal be implemented soon.
4. In order to curb the illegal influx of immigrants in North Bengal and adjacent Kamtapuri dominated areas, the 'INNER PERMIT LINE' must immediately be imposed on the said areas.

5. With a view to restraining the intrusion of illegal foreigners in North Bengal, barbed wire be erected on the borderline of both India and Bangladesh without further delay.
6. Regarding various cultural programmes of Kamtapurians for the Kamtapuri people of North Bengal should be arranged to telecast on the television by opening FulbariDoordarshan substation centre immediately.
7. With a view to ensuring all-round development of North Bengal, the 'Teesta irrigation project' should be immediately declared as a national project.
8. In order to enrich the culture of the Kamtapuri people of North Bengal as well as neighbouring areas, different types of cultural programmes of Kamtapurians be broadcast through 'All India Radio, Siliguri at par with daily programmes in Nepali by the All India Radio, Kurseong.
9. In respect of promoting higher education for the aboriginal people of North Bengal a Central university namely after Roy Saheb Thakur PanchananBarma University be set up in the district of Coochbehar immediately.
10. Regarding the exchange of enclaves, Indian enclaves in Bangladesh and Bangladeshi enclaves in India are exchanged without further delay.

In respect of pre and post-independent history of North Bengal a 'WHITE PAPER' regarding economic status, culture, population and ethnical identity of the original people of North Bengal be published immediately (Saikia: 2019).

### **Counter Mobilization**

The ruling left front took up a strategy of counter-mobilization to counter the Kamtapur movement. It is said that the State Government is capable enough to take Kamtapuris in a democratically. The party workers were asked to fight on these issues democratically and politically. The leaders were advised to formulate the necessary strategies to counter Kamtapuris. Commenting on Kamtapur movement, Jyoti Basu the CM of the state said, 'We do not want to respond bullet to bullets, violence with counter violence'. On 13<sup>th</sup> December 2000, he told a rally in Jalpaiguri that divisive forces encouraged by BJP and its ally were raising their voices to divide ethnic harmony in the state in particular in North Bengal.

Many top brass party leaders tried to convince the masses that the KPP had little public support. They asked the Rajbanshis not to be misled by the KPP propaganda as the movement had no historical and cultural basis. The Left Front minister Dinesh Dakua and Jogesh Burman call on the people to stay away from the Kamtapur activities. The CPMs continuous tirade against the Kamtapuri agitation, dubbing them separatist forces appear to have gone down well with the Bhatia population who were scared of eviction from the region in the wake of Kamtapuri movement. The ruling parties were keen to convey the message that the movement as mounted by the KPP would hardly hit the interest of the common people.

Following, the tragic Dhupguri massacre in August 2003, where five CPI (M) cadres were shot dead and 12 injured, the CM alleged that militants with destructive intents in the north Bengal

and in the adjoining areas were operating from Bhutan and funded by ISI. Anil Biswas, the then State Secretary of the CPM, said that the attacks by the KLO activities at Dhupguri office in Jalpaiguri district were part of an experiment to weaken the CPI (M) and the Left Front and the experiment would fail. Incidentally, around the same time in Alipurduar sub-division, a hitherto unknown group going by the name Kamtapur Liberation Organization killing squad had threatened in open leaflets to kill KLP members if they continued to assassinate people. The district administration had acknowledged the incident. The incident initiated an investigation to locate the source of the leaflet. Above all, what is more important is that the claim of the government to handle Kamtapuri movement politically turned about after Tarbandha incident (Mukhapadhyaya: 2011).

### **Development**

The study strongly subscribes to the view that backwardness in north Bengal has greatly contributed to the emergence of social movements on ethnic lines or put it on the other way, the genesis of the present Kamtapuri movement is largely rooted in economic and social backwardness of the region in general and Rajbansis (a major SC community) in particular (Jana, 2008). Atul Roy however, attributed the rise in militancy in north Bengal to the exploitation of the indigenous population under the Left Front rule.

In February 2004, Priya Ranjan Das Munshi raised the matter in Parliament about the socio-economic backwardness of the Rajbanshis and overall development of north Bengal. In 2002 he also moved a private member's bill in Lok Sabha urging the centre to accord special status to north Bengal to enable its economic development. He urged the state government to take up necessary measures under the 10<sup>th</sup> plan to improve the economic condition of the region. The Left Front government, however, argues that north Bengal is certainly underdeveloped but not neglected and it is trying to uplift the condition of the region. So the Uttar Banga Unnayan Parishad has been constituted to improve the socio-economic situation of the people of north Bengal.

The demand for a separate state of Kamtapur is not a completely new one since the demand for a separate state for the Koch Rajbanshis of north Bengal had existed since the 1970s. The demand however, was confined to limited groups and was restricted in its spread. At the present, it is much more organized and mature, though, in recent years, fissures have developed in the leadership of the movement. The KPP was formed in 1995 by Atul Roy and some of his close associates to agitate peacefully in a democratic way for the creation of the Kamtapur state' (Halder, 2000). In their original demand for Kamtapur State, they included not only north Bengal but also Goalpara district of Assam though they were not very sure about this district. The central argument is that the north Bengal region originally belongs to the Kamtapuris who are predominantly Rajbanshis, Khens, Meches and Koibartyas in caste terms and are culturally, linguistically, socially and historically distinct from the Bengalis.

It is argued that the Kamtapuris, though they constitute 65 percent of the total population of north Bengal, have lost their identity because of the continuous influx of Bengalis or Bhatia's from Bangladesh. The KPP attempts to create a Kamtapuri identity and not a Rajbanshi one by claiming that they speak a language called Kamtapuri and not Rajbanshi. This is deliberate since the leaders seek to mobilize other categories of population (other than Rajbanshis) into the

movement as well. The KPP claimed that the Kamtapuris are economically backward and that successive regimes in West Bengal are responsible for this. It contends that the dignity and socio-cultural identity of the Kamtapuris can only be protected and colonial exploitation and neglect can only come to an end with the formation of the Kamtapur state within the Indian union. No state-level or national-level political party has supported the Kamtapuris in their quest for statehood (except the support of the BJP to one of its fraction), but they have been able to enlist the support of several organizations that operate in the region like the CPI(ML) Santosh Rana faction, CPRM, Samajwadi Jana Parishad, Uttar Bangal Jharkhand Sangharsh Samiti, etc. some of these organization have endorsed the claim of the KPPs for the reorganization of the Kamtapuri language though all do not support the demand for a separate state.

In the assembly elections, the KPPs had followed a different strategy. Realizing that their strength was very limited and confined to the Rajbanshi-dominated areas in the region, they had given a call to ally with other forces including the Trinamul Congress, now the principal opposition in the state. In the 2001 assembly elections, the Kamtapur Progressive Party (KPP), which was undivided, contested 16 seats without success (The Week, 16 November 2003). In the 2006 assembly elections the Kamtapur Progressive Party (KPP), led by Atul Roy, failed to form an alliance with the Trinamul Congress and fielded candidates in constituencies including the Siliguri constituency where Kedarnath Sinha was fielded as a candidate. Roy contested the Kranti set in Malbazar subdivision of Jalpaiguri district. Both the factions have fielded more candidates in Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts, both in the assembly and parliamentary elections, than in any other district in north Bengal but success has eluded them so far. As stated earlier, they have only had limited success in the Panchayat elections.

The Kamtapur movement, even though has weakened in recent years with the split in 2005, still remains a cause for concern for all. This is because of two factors. First, it is because of the fact that the region had remained underdeveloped and this underdevelopment had affected the Rajbanshis adversely, hence the community remains volatile. An organized and determined leadership can mobilize their full support in the future since they are a politicized community unlike many other backward communities in the state. Second, there is a possibility of the movement gaining momentum in the future since there are indications that the KPP faction of Atul Roy, which had registered itself as a political party with the election commission, is trying to garner support from other forces that mobilize on ethnic lines. The KPP, led by him, appears to be the main party or faction, the Nikhil Roy faction (the original one) being dormant at the moment. It has also revived its demand for a separate state since May 2007 in a public rally in north Bengal.

### **Recent Developments**

Recently taking a cue from the Gorkhaland agitation in the hills area which intensified after the Telangana stir, the two Rajbanshi outfits in the plains have come together to re-launch their movement for a separate Kamtapur state. The coming together of the Kamtapur People's Party and Kamtapur Progressive Party has proved to be a huge morale booster for pro-Kamtapur activists, who had been neutralized after the Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO) movement was crushed in 2003. Two leaders of the respective parties - Nikhil Roy and Atul Roy- have been elected to jointly lead the movement at a recent meeting in Maynaguri. "They

need decided to return together because the people wanted us to try to so. While demanding a separate state, we cannot ignore the sentiment of the sons of the soil. Now that we have come together, our movement will be much stronger and bigger," said Nikhil Roy.

The Kamtapur People's Party that is demanding a separate state of Kamtapur comprising areas of lower Assam and six districts of North Bengal, has decided to intensify its agitation and intend to initiate talks with the state and central governments regarding constitutional recognition of the Kamtapuri language and the socio-economic development of the Kamtapuri community.

According to party sources, KPP leaders had in the recent past submitted petitions to Union Home Minister Sushil Kumar Shinde and Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee through North Bengal Divisional Commissioner A. K Singh. KPP chairman Atul Roy led a rally today that convened in front of Singh's office. The programme marks the first combined activity initiated after the merger of the Kamtapur Progressive Party and the Kamtapur People's Party. Roy expressed his grievances against the state government and said the Kamtapuri community has been deprived of several facilities since long. He added the demand for statehood would always prevail but since the formation of a state would take time, setups similar to the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration and Lepcha Development Board should be offered to the Kamtapuri people.

Roy said that the government has overlooked the needs of the Kamtapuri people. The Santhali and Punjabi languages have been accorded constitutional recognition, but the Rajbanshi Academy is yet to gain recognition, he said. Meanwhile, KPP general secretary Nikhil Roy said, "We will even start massive movements in North Bengal demanding a separate state if required."

### **Conclusion**

The present study makes an attempt to explore the causes of the Rajbanshis movement in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century by the Rajbanshis of north Bengal. The demand for a separate Kamtapur state is not new. In the last decade or so the Kamtapur peoples party has been vocal on the issue demanding that a separate Kamtapur state be carved out comprising of six northern districts of West Bengal and a few other districts from the neighbouring states of Assam and Bihar. The sectarian claim has of late been sufficed with the constitutional recognition to the Kamtapuri language and a uniform tribal status for the Kamtapuri language and a uniform tribal status for Kamtapuri or Rajbanshi population living across the various states in India. Through this movement, the indigenous Rajbanshis are putting up a resistance against the gradual erosion of their cultural and linguistic identity and their economic marginalization. So far as their economic grievances are concerned their main allegation was till 2011 against the ruling party in the state and its dominant political partner the CPI (M).

The Rajbanshis of north Bengal in recent times demands for a separate state. The Kshatriya identity apparently lost its relevance once the movement got them to enlist as scheduled castes and become entitled to protection in education, job and electoral politics. However, their growing sense of relative deprivation compared to immigrant Bengali gentry in north Bengal created a strong sense of resentment among the Rajbanshis. In reality development issues, job opportunities, etc., are not problems specific to any particular social group. But the Koch Rajbanshi leadership using their shared ethnic identity capitalized the grievance to mobilize their community members and projected this as discrimination against their community. In the early

1980s in some district of north Bengal, the movement was launched by a section of the Rajbanshis for a separate state in the name of Uttarkhand which the leadership of the Uttarkhand movement claims would end their exploitation. Analyzing the Uttarkhand movement R.S Mukhopadhyay has commented that it was basically an offshoot of the conflict over sharing of power between the local indigenous tactfully used the mythical tradition of the Kamtapur kingdom to mobilize the local indigenous people. After a gap of about a decade, the Koch Rajbansi community of north Bengal has again launched a movement in the name of separate Kamtapur state.

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