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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE KAMTAPUR MOVEMENT AND THE CALL FOR A DIVIDED STATE IN NORTH BENGAL

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Abstract

The Kamtapur movement is a socio-political movement that originated in the northern part of West Bengal, India, and it has significant historical, cultural, and political dimensions. This demand is embedded in a distinct cultural and historical identity, tracing back to the ancient kingdom of Kamata. The movement, rooted in ethnic identity and historical grievances, reflects the aspirations of the Rajbongshi community, predominantly inhabiting this region. The demand for a separate state or autonomous region, termed 'Kamtapur,' arises from perceived injustices, including economic disparity, cultural marginalization, and political underrepresentation. Furthermore, the Kamtapur movement intersects with broader issues of identity politics and regional autonomy within India's federal structure. The Rajbongshi community's quest for recognition and empowerment within the framework of Indian democracy amplifies the movement's significance. Over the years, the movement has witnessed various forms of agitation, including peaceful protests, political lobbying, and, at times, violent clashes. This study covers the historical background of the Kamtapur movement and the various factors that led to the movement's demand in North Bengal. It also looks at the dynamics shaping the movement today, such as political mobilization, cultural resurgence, and socioeconomic difficulties. Additionally, it examines the role of various stakeholders, such as political parties, and the state government, in either fuelling or addressing the movement's grievances. Our analysis shows that the Kamtapur movement is currently revolving around three main issues i.e. more militant political-cultural demands expressed through violence, moderate political demands for autonomy, and cultural demands for recognition. The movement has received some attention from regional political parties recently, especially during election seasons, as they try to win over the Kamtapuri community. However, neither the Indian government nor the state authorities have accepted their demand for a separate state.

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Introduction:-

There are six districts in the North Bengal region of West Bengal i.e. Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur, Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri, and Darjeeling. In addition to the Bengali community, this area is home to several other ethnic groups, including the Santals (Adivasis), Bhutias, Lepchas, Rajbanshis, and Nepalis. These communities are

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primarily located in various parts of North Bengal. In the hills, Nepalese, Bhutias, and Lepchas are predominant, while Santals or Tribals (Adivasis) dominate the tea-garden areas or the Dooars, and Rajbanshis are primarily concentrated in Coochbehar and Jalpaiguri districts. Belonging to the Indo-Mongoloid ethnic group, Rajbanshis stand out from the majority population of West Bengal in terms of appearance. Although they considered themselves as Kshatriyas, this caste position was not recognized within Bengal's social hierarchy. Rajbanshis assert that the Bengali majority has ignored them for decades. Issues such as land appropriation and economic exploitation have worsened their discontent. The encroachment of urbanization on the land traditionally relied upon by settlers, who often lacked education and depended on agriculture, has further marginalized the Rajbanshi community. Consequently, despite being the region's original settlers, Rajbanshis have come to view themselves as a distinct entity due to their severe disadvantages. In this article, we will discuss the origins of Rajbanshis, also known as Koch Rajbanshis or Rajbanshi Kshatriyas, who played significant roles in the Kamtapur movements. We will explore their desire for a separate state and their demands, and analyze the state's responses to their grievances.

Aims of the Study:-

The study aims to present an extensive overview of the Kamtapur movement by looking at its diverse drivers, historical background, current dynamics, and the roles played by various stakeholders. The study also analyzes the movement's socio-political significance, including its intersection with identity politics and regional autonomy within India's federal structure. Additionally, the study seeks to explore the aspirations and grievances of the Rajbanshi community, predominantly involved in the movement, and assess the feasibility of addressing these concerns democratically.

Data and Research Methodology:-

The secondary data on the Kamtapur movement that forms the basis of this study includes a variety of information gathered from already-existing sources, including scholarly studies, official reports, media pieces, historical archives, and archives. This data sheds light on the movement's beginnings, development, and present state. The Kamtapuri people, who are primarily found in West Bengal and Assam, India, are advocates for their recognition and autonomy. Through this secondary data, we will analyze the socio-political factors driving the movement, the demographic and cultural aspects of the Kamtapuri community, and the responses from the government and other stakeholders. These sources help to construct a comprehensive understanding of the movement's goals, strategies, and challenges, contributing to a broader perspective of this regional ethnic movement in North Bengal.

Origins of the Rajbanshi or Koch Rajbanshis Community

An ancient tribe called the Koch Rajbanshi has its roots in the Koch empire. The tribe known as Koch Rajbanshi, Rajbanshi, or Rajvanshi is called Rajbanshi. A literal translation of "Rajbanshi" is "royal community". They have a rich cultural history and speak a language all their own. These ethnic groups live in parts of the Terai region of eastern Nepal, Bhutan, North Bengal, Eastern Bihar, Lower Assam, and the northern Bangladeshi divisions of Rangpur, Rajshahi, and Mymensingh. The Kamata kingdom emerged in the western region of the former Kamarupa kingdom following the collapse of the Pala dynasty in the thirteenth century, as stated on the Government of West Bengal website. The history of Assam's transition from the ancient to the medieval periods began with the founding of the Kamata kingdom. The original kings of Bengal were the Khens, but Alauddin Hussain Shah, a Turko-Afghan emperor, eventually overthrew them. Hussain Shah established large administrative systems, but he was unable to hold onto political power, and the Koch family eventually took it. Although the Koch Rajbanshis were known as the Kamateshwars (rulers of the Kamata/Kamatapur Kingdom), their kingdom was occasionally referred to as the Koch kingdom due to its immense power and territorial expansions. Under Maharaja Naranarayan, the King of Kamatapur at the time, the Koch dynasty reached its zenith, and Shukladhwaj Singha, also known as Chilarai, was one of the greatest heroes of the era, ruling over the eastern region of Kamatapur, which is now known as Assam (previously Assam is known as Pragjyotispur). In the course of several social movements between 1872 and 1891, a subset of Koch who were tribal or semi-tribal residents of what is now North Bengal and Western Assam tried to identify as Rajbanshi to distance themselves from their ethnic identity. (Adhikary, 2009, p.65).

The Koch community was subjected to maltreatment and humiliation by the Hindu caste, who called them "mleccha," or barbarians. This endeavor at social betterment was undertaken in reaction. In the early 1500s, during the reign of Biswa Singha, the founder of the Koch dynasty and a tribal who was Hinduized and elevated to the Kshatriya varna, the word Rajbanshi was established to describe Koch aristocracy who called themselves Shiva-banshi. (Sheikh 2012, p. 250). Around 1891, the Koch community was renamed Rajbanshi and given the title of

Bhanga Kshatriya to demonstrate that they were a provincial Kshatriya variety. Harimohan Ray Khajanchi started the Bhanga Kshatriya movement by forming the "Rangpur Bratya Kshatriya JatirUnnatiBidhayani Sabha" to help the community advance in Hindu society (Adhikary, 2009, p.65). In 1910, the Rajbanshis—who shared a caste with the Koches—claimed to be Rajbangshi Kshatriyas. PanchananBarma, who established the Kshatriya Samiti at Rangpur, was in charge of them this time. After receiving recognition from several Brahmin pandits in Mithila, Rangpur, Kamrup, and Koch Bihar, the Rajbanshis were able to successfully separate from their Koch identity with the aid of this organization and were awarded Kshatriya status. (Das, 2004, p. 560). Following this, the district magistrate approved the adoption of surnames like Adhikary, Sinha, Barman, Roy, Ray, and others in place of more conventional surnames like Sarkar, Das, or Mandal. The 1911 census final report also gave Kshatriya status (Adhikary 2009, pp. 169–170.). Furthermore, the Koch-Rajbangshi population in West Bengal is projected to be over 33 lakhs after independence, making up over 30% of the electorate in North Bengal (Mitra, Atri (2022).

Historical Background of the Kamtapur Movement

Following the signing of three treaties in 1949, the princely state of Cooch Behar, (which had been ruled by chief commissioners and selected by the president) immediately became a part of West Bengal as a state falling under the C category. The former Cooch Behar kingdom was split and incorporated into West Bengal and Assam on January 1st, 1950, the following year. Additionally, the Uttar Khanda Dal (UKD), a recently formed political organization, first sought a separate homeland for the Rajbangshi people of this region in 1969, when the desire for Kamtapur State first emerged. The Hitasadhani Sabha, founded by Satish Ch. Singha Roy was the first to demand a distinct homeland from the Rajbangshi population of Coochbehar. The sabha was made up of Rajbangshi Hindu and Muslim jotedars, as well as a few Kamrupi Brahmins... Their demands for a breakaway state were mostly focused on the state of Coochbehar. The Hitasadhani Sabha became the Coochbehar State Praja Congress after independence... To promote the creation of a new state known as "Uttarakhand Pradesh Sangha," representatives of the Coochbehar State Praja Congress, Darjeeling Gurkha League, Sikkim PrajaSammelan, and Jalpaiguri Gurkha League convened in Darjeeling on October 30, 1949 (Malda and West Dinajpur were not included in the proposed separate state, but Sikkim was included). Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru disregarded this demand at the time, and it resurfaced fifteen years later with the Uttar Khanda Dal's formation (Ghosh, 2007, p.180-181).

Following the footsteps of the AsomGana Parishad (AGP) and the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), the Uttarakhand Party developed in the latter part of the decade. The name of this new party was KamtapurGanaParishad. Since its founding in 1996, the Kamtapur People's Party (KPP), a branch of the KamtapurGanaParishad, has pushed for recognition of its language, culture, and heritage. Prior organizations had ignored the language issue, the most significant factor in the KPP movement's expansion (Ghosh, 2007, p.183-184). On December 28, 1995, the Kamptapur Liberation Organization, a militant group, was established immediately following the KPP. To carry out their intention to organize an armed struggle for a separate Kamtapur nation, a small group of All Kamtapur Students Union (AKSU) members approached the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). ULFA allegedly promised to train them so that they could be used as transit routes and to establish a presence outside of Assam in other geographically adjacent Indian states. The ULFA reasoned that it would provide a safe sanctuary for sick or injured cadres in addition to making cadre transit to their base camps in Bhutan easier.

The KLO is said to be the Kamtapur People's Party's armed underground section (KPP). It was founded to solve the Rajbangshi people's grassroots challenges but it quickly devolved into an armed conflict. To address problems like widespread unemployment, alienation from their land, what was thought to be a disrespect for Kamtapuri language and identity, and economic worries, the KLO was established as an over-ground organization. The data indicates that it continues to have strong ties to the ULFA. Its members were trained in armed combat in Gelengphu, Kalaikhola, and SamdrupJhankar, Bhutan, shortly after it was founded. The ULFA and the KLO have their headquarters at SamdrupJhankar. The Indian government deemed the KLO to be illegal in 1997 after it was established in 1995. The KLO had just over 50 cadres at first, but by 2006, it had over 300 cadres thanks to the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) providing the group with armaments training (Dey, Sreyashi. (2022). According to the reports, Raju Baruah, the ULFA's "deputy commander, created the KLO". The KLO's chairman is Tamir Das, also known as Jibon Singha. In October of 1999, he was arrested. He resumed control of the organization after being released by the Assam Police in exchange for the surrender of the other KLO cadres. In December 2003, as part of what security analysts in India and Bhutan dubbed "Operation All Clear," the Royal Bhutan Army raided the camps of the Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO) located in Bhutan. In the last five years, not a single violent incident in West Bengal has been connected to the KLO, claims the media report (the Print report). As per the authorities, there are instances where minor incidents of extortion from tea sellers in north

Bengal have included followers of the organization. One police personnel in an interview with the Print said that “the West Bengal Police apprehended some trained KLO operatives in 2008, but KLO has failed to organize as an outfit in the recent decade. A few unemployed kids are active KLO members right now, but their organization is lacking overall” (Dey, Sreyashi. (2022).

Demands for Kamtapur State

In his article, Haripada Ray (2007) mentioned that the Uttarakhand Dal-led protestors voiced several demands, such as:

1. rationalization of Government and Non-Governmental Services;
2. equalization of Personal Wealth in Money Values;
3. the renaming of North Bengal University Thakur Panchanan University;
4. the reclassification of the Ration Card;
5. the implementation of the motto "MatriBhasaMatriDugdha-sama" by offering mother tongue instruction in places like Rajbanshi/Kamtapuri;
6. the establishment of a High Court, Medical College, Agricultural College, Engineering Colleges, Law College, and other Technical Educational Institutions in North Bengal;
7. Development, preservation, and promotion of North Bengal's cultural heritage, among other things (Ray, 2007, pp.100-101).

However, it was not until the 1980s that the Uttarakhand Dal began to widely advocate for the creation of a separate state for North Bengal. It promoted statehood through several pamphlets, booklets, manifestos, and public gatherings, spearheaded by PanchananMullik, Sampad Ray, and others. The Dal put out a charter of demands that included, among other things:

1. Kamtapur State's creation, comprising five districts in North Bengal.
2. Allocating 80% of Central, State, and other quasi-governmental jobs to native-born individuals.
3. All North Bengal radio stations will broadcast news and other programs in Kamtapuri, including those related to agriculture, music, theater, and other cultural events;
4. Kamtapuri will be used as a medium of teaching up to the secondary school level.
5. The creation of recruitment boards in 102 districts, the reservation of 80% of defense hiring from North Bengal for native-born people, and the lowering of the age and height requirements for Rajbanshi, Rava, and Mech applicants(Ray, Haripada, 2007, pp.100-101).

The Uttarakhand Dal was renamed KamtapurGana Parishad in the latter half of the 1980s. It originated from the AsomGana Parishad (AGP) and the All Assam Students' Union (AASU). The KamtapurGana Parishad gave rise to the Kamtapur Peoples' Party (KPP), which was founded in 1995 (Ray, Haripada, 2007, p.102). Atul Roy, then president of KPP in one of his public statements mentioned that “... the security and the integrity of the country are immensely important to me. Our demand for a separate homeland is based on our distinct linguistic, cultural, and historical identity. And the demand we have raised is within the framework of the Indian constitution. We are not anti-national. The nation's unity is dear to us”. Additionally, according to him, the KPP is dedicated to establishing the state since the people of South Bengal (Kolkattiya Bengalis) can never accomplish the general development of North Bengal. A distinct Kamtapur state must be developed to achieve the KPP leadership's goal of North Bengal's total economic development. According to the KPP leadership, the Kamtapuri people have a unique history, way of life, and culture that sets them apart from the Bengalis. As a result, they seek the creation of their own state, which will be founded on the acknowledgement of these unique characteristics (Das, Jitendra Nath, 2004, p.560).

From these analyses, we found that the movement essentially evolved around three issues, which are First, the leaders of the Kamtapur movement claimed that they had their own separate identity as they had been exploited and neglected by the Bengali majority for decades. Secondly, language had been one of the basic issues in the movements and the Kamtapur language is still waiting for that eight-schedule status. Thirdly, many scholars of this region have also pointed out that the people living in the rural areas, especially people belonging to the SC/ ST community are still deprived of proper education, health facilities, and employment opportunities. Hence, the leaders of the movements often exploited this issue.

How did the Left Front and the administration led by the Trinamool Congress manage the Kamtapur Movement?

The Left Front government (1977-2011) characterized this movement as a separatist movement in West Bengal. They labeled pro-Kamtapur groups as "separatist" and "anti-people" forces. It claimed that the movement was limited to a few deluded individuals and that it lacked popular backing (Mukhopadhyaya, 2011, pp.214-215). Murders, extortions, and kidnappings have been prevalent in Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar districts since 2000. On August 17, 2002, five CPI(M) workers were gunned down in their party office in Dhupguri, effectively ending the violent agitation. In 2003, the Bhutanese Army initiated 'Operation Flush Out' to combat terrorist camps established by militant groups from Northeast India in Bhutan's jungle. Jibon Singha, the leader of the KLO, managed to escape while many other senior leaders and armed commanders were arrested. In 2004, the Left Front administration launched "Operation Nabadisha," a new training and rehabilitation program for surrendered KLO militants aimed at reintegrating them into mainstream politics. The rehabilitation program was expected to aid in the eradication of the region's militant problem, and the LF had been able to maintain its hold among the Rajbansis since 2004 by introducing new plans and programs for their development as well as slowing down police action except on specific militant hideouts (Mukhopadhyaya, 2011, pp.222-223). The CPI (M), one of the Left Front's partners, was dismissive of the Kamtapur movement, and Jyoti Basu, West Bengal's then-chief minister, considered it lacked broad support, but his successor, Buddhadeb Bhattacharyya, was in favor of talks with the KPP. Even AIFB's late leader, Kamal Guha, agreed that a conversation with the KPP would be a big step toward resolving separatist activities in North Bengal. However, for unclear reasons, neither the KPP nor the Left Front Government began the dialogue process, and thus the deadlock continued (Mukhopadhyaya, 2011, pp.216-217).

Mamata Banerjee, the West Bengal chief minister, established the Cooch Behar PanchananBarma University in 2012 as a tribute to the 19th Century Rajbangshi politician and reformer PanchananBarma. The first movement against caste politics in the previous century was led by PanchananBarma. The government of Mamata Banerjee established two distinct boards for the Rajbanshi and Kamtapuri dialects, granting them autonomy as a distinct language, in response to demands made in the past by dialect experts like AghorBarma. The two dialects were designated as official languages by the government. The Narayanipolice battalion, which is stationed in Cooch Behar, is named after the army of the former princely state of Cooch Behar. The 13-acre property for the PanchananBarma University second campus in Khalisamari was given over by the TMC-led government in February 2021, just before the state elections. Banerjee declared ahead of the 2021 assembly elections that 161 ex-members of the outlawed militant group Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO) would work as houseguards. Banerjee has approved ₹10 crore for the Rajbanshi Development and Cultural Board and ₹5 crore for the Rajbanshi Language Academy. Her government also decided to give clearances to the 200 unrecognized Rajabangshi schools. She said that the syllabus for the Rajbangshi language is ready and they wanted that their language should also be taught along with other languages (Chatterjee and Giri, 2021).

Recently, in an unverified video, a man wearing a mask and posing as KLO leader Jeevan Singha cautioned Mamata Banerjee not to oppose the demand for Kamtapur statehood. She has to avoid going to North Bengal. We'll step up our efforts in the next days and ask for everyone's help. He also mentioned Jayanta Roy, Nishith Pramanik, and John Barla, three well-known Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders who were supporters of an independent state for North Bengal. Jalpaiguri-based BJP MP Jayanta Roy did not raise any objections to the proposal to split off North Bengal into its state. "There is nothing wrong with demanding a separate State for North Bengal and what name it goes by is irrelevant." (Mitra, Atri. 2022). The leader of a faction of the Greater Cooch Behar People's Association (GCPA), Bangshi Badan Barman, spent many years in prison and demanded an explanation from the Union home ministry and the BJP as to why KLO propaganda escalated shortly after the BJP raised the demand for a separate state of north Bengal. To him, "The BJP is running the Union government and the junior home minister is from Cooch Behar. They need to make clear their stand on the KLO's demand for a separate country," In addition, he stated that he was pleased with the chief minister's "positive steps," which included setting up a language school and Rajbanshi development board. According to political expert Biswanath Chakraborty, "It seems that the KLO is trying to penetrate further, which may again cause unrest in north Bengal. No doubt, if the KLO movement gains momentum, then simultaneously other separatist organizations will also try to get consolidate themselves further" (Mitra, Atri. (2022).

Now, if we examine the strategies of these two governments, we discover that the Left Front-led government and the Trinamool Congress-led government handled this movement differently.

Left Front Government:

1. When the Left Front administration was in power in West Bengal (1977-2011), the approach towards the Kamtapur movement was largely characterized by a combination of suppression and attempts at co-optation.
2. The government often employed security measures to suppress dissent and maintain law and order in the region. This included arrests of movement leaders and crackdowns on protests.
3. Additionally, the Left Front government occasionally engaged in negotiations with leaders of the Kamtapur movement, offering concessions and development schemes to address some of the grievances of the community.
4. However, the Left Front government continued to oppose the split of West Bengal and the establishment of Kamtapur as a separate state.

Trinamool Congress-led Government:

1. With the Trinamool Congress coming to power in West Bengal, there were some shifts in the handling of the Kamtapur movement. The Trinamool Congress-led government initially showed a willingness to engage in dialogue with leaders of the Kamtapur movement and address their grievances through developmental initiatives.
2. There were instances of the government providing some concessions and initiating development projects in the region to appease the demands of the movement.
3. However, similar to the Left Front, the Trinamool Congress government remained opposed to the idea of dividing West Bengal and creating a separate state of Kamtapur.
4. Over time, the approach of the Trinamool Congress-led government towards the Kamtapur movement seemed to align more closely with the previous administration's stance of maintaining the territorial integrity of West Bengal.

Conclusion:-

Examining the history of the Kamtapur movement, we may conclude that the Rajbanshi were fighting against the social injustice that upper-caste Bengalis had inflicted upon them before independence. At that time, the difference between the common Rajbanshi and the royal family was more obvious. The movement was originally inspired by myths about the origins of the Kshatriyas, not by the Koch royal family. However, after Cooch Behar was disbanded in the post-independence era, Rajbanshi's protest campaign changed and became a call for Kamtapur's territorial recognition. Beyond just rearranging the movement for economic development geographically, Kamtapur is more. Thus, straightforward economic packages and changes to territory are unlikely to be the solution. The Kamtapur movement currently focuses on three main objectives: more militant political-cultural demands expressed through violence, moderate political demands for autonomy, and cultural demands for recognition. Through these many depictions, the Koch Rajbanshis are trying to convey that they are a people with a rich history who seek autonomy, justice, dignity, and self-respect. To exploit the Kamtapuri community's support, regional political parties have paid some attention to the movement in recent years, particularly during election seasons. Citing administrative, political, and economic obstacles, the Indian government and state authorities have, nevertheless, mainly rejected the call for a separate state. A policy that tackles these problems and sincere dialogue with different communities in Bengal and Assam could contribute to ending the cycle of instability and dissatisfaction.

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