



Economic Background Of Ethnic Movement In Cooch Behar

Samapti Saha

Asst. Prof, Dept. of Economics, A.B.N. Seal College,
Cooch Behar, West Bengal, India

Abstract:

There are different kinds of reasons behind the demand of separate states. People of the Rajbanshi origin are also demanding a separate state of Greater Cooch Behar. This paper brings about the economic background of Greater Cooch Behar movement and finds that there will not be any such movements for separate state if any province/region is economically and socially stronger.

There are near about eight different groups of people live in Cooch Behar. They are the Rajbanshis, the Rava, the Saontal, the Oraon, the Nepali, the Bengali, the Bihari, the Marwari etc. Among them the Rajbanshi is a most prominent ethnic group of people in West Bengal because they were from the beginning of the history of Kamtapur i.e. the early medieval period and through the different socio-political movements like the Uttarkhand Movement, the Kamatapuri movement and the Greater Cooch Behar Movement .They became more prominent ethnic group.

On 19th January 1950, Cooch Behar was merged with the province of West Bengal. S.Debnath has written in his book titled “The Doars in Historical Transition”, “Since the attainment of independence, this particular stack of people began to feel scourge of disaffection from the side of the ruling class and rulers of West Bengal who dint of their plans and activities failed to command the support and respect of Rajbanshis. As a result of this alienation the Rasbanshis in course of time resorted to socio-political movements of different categories of democratic as well as armed mobilization”.

Going into the historical background of the movement, it is found that the movement started under the leadership of Thakur Panchanan Barman. During those times Rajbanshis did not like to mention themselves as ‘Koch’ which was considered as inferior term. Under the leadership of Haramohan Khajanchi, Harikishor Barman and afterwards under Thakur Panchanan Barman and Upendra Nath Barman, the people organised “Kshatriya Andolan” and claimed “Kshatriyahood” for themselves. But the movement could not procee successfully due to certain reasons. The Koch Royal family of Cooch Behar drifted gradually away from caste rigidity and caste based identity and another reason for not accepting ‘Khatryiahood’ for Rajbanshi was beginning of process of modernisation in Cooch Behar by them. King Nripendra Narayan (Concept of modernization was influenced by the then commissioner of administration of Col. .J.C.Haughton).The King himself liked to give the real power of administration into the hands of educated persons who were outsiders from Southern and Eastern Bengal (Since the educated people were very few in the Rajbanshi class).

The responsibility and power of tax collection came into the hands of such administrators who were more interested in making-profit for themselves rather than making any significant improvement in the condition of the Rajbanshis. But the ruler of Cooch Behar did not give due attention to the system of tax collection and the prevailing condition of his citizens. So the Rajbansishes were victimised by the tax collectors who

came from the outside. H.N. Chowdhuri has brought out in his book titled "The Cooch Behar State and its Land Revenue Settlement" that Cooch Behar was very famous in production of silk, cotton and jute fabrics (Part I, Ch-VI, Page -154). He also brings out that silk produced in East Kamrup region was very much comparable with the European silk in quality. Besides silk, East Kamrup was also famous for bamboo and wood works. Mathabhanga was well known for ghee production and Tufanganj for mustered oil.

Dr Henter in his book "Statistical Account of Cooch Behar"(1872)(Ref.- H.N. Chowdhuri "The Cooch Behar State and its Land Revenue Settlement") has written "Nearly all the commerce of the state, except such as is carried on in the weekly, is in the hands of foreign merchants, chiefly Marwaries from Bikaner, who bring more energy and enterprise to the work than the Cooch Beharis usually possess". A book titled "Cooch Bihar-er Etihad" written by Kha Chowdhuri Amanatulla Ahamed brings out that during ancient period general people of Koch province remained engaged with playing and household chores till the age of 17-18 without undertaking any kind of studies. Women were involved in breeding of cocoons and weaving the yarn. Despite being so good in production of certain goods, the region as a whole did not develop economically due to unhealthy tendency of the people being lazy, running away from the work and uneducated. Thus the business and commerce activities got transferred into the hands of foreign merchants which created Pikar (middle man) who purchased goods from cultivators and sold to foreign merchants earning high margin of profit. After the partition, thousands of refugees who came from East Pakistan and Assam changed the demographic scenario and socio-economic conditions of Cooch Behar. These refugees were able to produce various kinds of crops in a year after occupying the land and thus became economically stronger with their dedicated efforts to improve the agricultural produce by employing various innovative methods. They also laid equal emphasis on getting education and thus became more educated in comparison to the original residents of this region. The Rajbanshi people did not make the required efforts to become financially and educationally stronger and instead felt inferior with the development of refugees. They turned these feeling of inferiority and undergrowth into a psychological and social dimension movement without giving due emphasis on economic front.

S. Debnath has brought out in his book "The Doars in Historical Transition" that most of the 'Kshtriya Samity' leaders were virtual representatives of the Rajbanshi Zamindars, Jotdaras and big land holders; and no wonder they were busy in preserving

the privileges of the rich at the cost of the poor share croppers in the Rajbanshi community.

In 1978 the Left Front came to the power in West Bengal and the new government led to new fragmentations and configurations of political party structure in the course of Khas land distribution, 'Barga' operation and setting up of three tiers Panchayet System. Since 1978 the Rajbanshi share-croppers, landless rural wage earners and political activists have benefitted to a great extent. In the Panchayati System, most of the seats of Anchal Pradhan, Panchayats , Panchayat Samity and Zilla Parisad members have gone into the possession of the Rajbanshis. Jotdars and powerful land holders who lost their land to bargadars and landless peasants soon turned to be powerless and frustrated. This economic –political frustration took the form of KPP, KLO and greater Cooch Behar.

Cooch Behar is primarily an agricultural belt. The main source of income is agriculture. But large tracts of unirrigated land in North Bengal approvingly have not been a reliable source of income and the amount of per acre yield is negligible .There is no agro-based industry or any other industry to absorb the unemployed villagers.At the time of king Nripendra Narayan there was a 'tobacco industry ' in Dinhat and match industry in Cooch Behar. But after merging with the province of West Bengal the industries were closed down and no new industries were set up.Though temporarily Barga operation was helpful to improve the condition of bargadars but in the long run, it failed despondently because of the bargadars getting non fertile land. Without the intervention of the government the bargadars failed to reap the benefits of Barga operation.Rajbanshis got the political power through the three tier panchayati system. Through this power they improved their political knowledge but their socio-economic condition did not make any remarkable progress.

Suggestion

The condition of Rajbanshi people will not be improved by demanding separate state. It may only be possible by improving socio economic factors like- education (by giving more schools and colleges), health (by giving more facilities in hospitals and establishing more rural health centres), infrastructure such as roads, electricity, banking facilities and agro- based industries. According to B. Chatterjee and D.K. Ghosh in their book "Towards a District Development Report for West Bengal"(2004), the rank of Cooch Behar in NDDP (net district domestic product), per capita income and share of manufacturing in DDP is 15th, 16th and 16th respectively. In fact all the districts of North Bengal are industrially backward. In agriculture Cooch Behar is in good position. But there is no such agro-based industry where number of unemployed young and middle aged people (who migrate from rural place to other place like urban, other states or other neighbouring country e.g. Bhutan) can engage themselves. To improve the socio-economic situation of this province a thorough investigation to find out the nature of disparities is required.

References

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