

Ideologies, Strategies and Objectives of Various Rajbanshi Organizations Relating To Kamtapur Movement: A Historical Exploration

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Introduction: In the post independent India one of the most glaring issue is regional movement on the basis of ethnic identity, cultural identity, linguistic identity etc. Several ethno-linguistic communities of the Indian subcontinent have demanded their separate politico-cultural identity since independence. India is a multi-racial, multi-lingual, multi-cultural nation. The country has witnessed several movements on the basis of identity, language and ethnicity over the century like Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Punjab and Assam. The creation of linguistic state along with ethno cultural identity emphasizes linguistic regionalism in India. One such movement is Kamtapur separate statehood movement by the indigenous community of Rajbanshis in North Bengal. Northern part of West Bengal, also called North Bengal, is no exception from regional feelings or regionalism. Present North Bengal comprises of seven districts- Cooch Behar, Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur and Malda. Before partition 65 percent of Rajbanshi community resided in this region. The majority of the people belong to Rajbanshi community; in reality they are the original inhabitant of this region along with other minor aborigines; Mech, Rabha, Limbu and Toto. But the total scenario was changed when massive influx of refugees had come from Eastern Pakistan to North Bengal in search of security and shelter; the socio-economic conditions of the Rajbanshi people became deplorable and marginal. Thus the Kamtapur movement is not a sudden outbreak in North Bengal. Land alienation, difficulty in maintaining their livelihood due to economic and social crisis created huge frustration among the Rajbanshis. This situation gradually became more and more complex and it was felt that protest could be the only way as a solution to this problem. This gradual protest at different point of time by different groups slowly gained mass community support and political representation. It gave them an idea of creating a separate state for themselves which could be an answer for their survival question.

Like any other movement the Kamtapur movement has passed through some phases of historical evolution, generating dynamics of various Rajbanshis' political organizations viz. Kamtapur Rajya Sangram Parishad, Uttar Kanda Dal, UTJAS, AKSU, KLO, KPP and others. To achieve their goal that is, a separate Kamtapur state in North Bengal, all the leaders of these political organizations have developed different political ideologies, objectives, party strategies for their respective organizations. This present research article only focuses on the evolution of ideologies, leaderships, objectives and strategies of different political associations that originated for the cause of Kamtapur Movement. Though Kamtapur movement, better to say separate Statehood movement for the Rajbanshi people has witnessed a long journey; it is a well known fact that various political organizations have played crucial role to continue the movement to achieve the goal.

Hypothesis & Methodology: The present article seeks to explore the ideologies, strategies and objectives of different Rajbanshi organizations under different leaders in the advent of Kamtapur movement in North Bengal.

The source materials which are available in the form of books, edited books, and journals are used as per historical methodologies. Own observations have been used as empirical data. Thus, attempt is made to make the paper rational as far as possible on the basis of both literary sources and empirical observations.

Main Discussion: Let's come to the core of discussion. Since the inception of this movement, the Rajbanshis Kshatriya Samiti and the Hitosadhani Sabha were the foremost social organisations (early phase) which took up the cause of the Rajbanshis including indigenous people of North Bengal for their socio-economic development. It is relevant to mention that these organizations came into existence before India achieved its freedom, i.e. before 15th August 1947. The Rajbanshis Kshatriya Samiti and the Hitosadhani Sabha were incorporated in the year 1910 and 1946 respectively. On the other hand Uttar Khanda Dal, UTJAS, Kamtapur People's Party, Kamtapur Progressive Party, GCPA were all political organizations demanding separate Kamtapur state in a legitimate and democratic way. The leadership under the organizations like Kshatriya Samiti, Hitosadhani Sabha, UKD, KPP and other ones of the Rajbanshis or the indigenous community adhere to reformist ideology. They were demanding for socio-economic development in the region. This ideology sustains all through the period from the year 1891 when

the formation of the Rangpur Bratya Kshtriya Jatir Unnyatir Bidhani Sabha¹, the first Rajbanshi organization claiming Kshatriya identity by the leadership of Harmohan Roy Khajanchi, a zaminder of Rangpur. Other Rajbanshi leaders emerged from landed gentry's educated class. The first post graduate of the Rajbanshi community, Thakur Panchanan Barma, became president of Kshatriya Samiti and actively associated till 1935. In 1920 the Kshatriya Samiti joined the political activity of the Indian National Congress under the leadership of Thakur Panchanan Barma. After the death of Thakur Panchanan Barma, Jugal Kishor Roy played an important role to carry out the activities of the Samiti. Upendranath Barman, a prominent educated political leader took the helm of all responsibilities of the organization. During this period they raised the demands related to Kshtriya status, improvement of economic condition, jobs, education, political participation etc. To achieve the Kshtriya status and other social upliftment for the Rajbanshi community the leaders of the Samiti used some strategies such as petitions, memorandums, meetings, conferences and mass agitations to draw the attention of the government. One such petition was submitted by the Rangpur Kshatriya Samity to the District Magistrate and also to the census Superintendent of Rangpur in 1891². The purpose of the petition was that the

- 1) Recognition of Rajbanshis as Kshatriya in census report and
- 2) Rajbanshi community totally different from Koch ³

In 1926, Thakur Panchanan Barma and Upendranath Barma, member of Bengal Legislative Council joined hands with BR Ambedkar to achieve Scheduled Caste status for the Rajbanshis. Ultimately the Rajbanshi community obtained the status of Scheduled Caste under the Government of India Act 1935⁴. As a result of acquiring the status of scheduled caste, the scope of job opportunity, educational facilities and electoral politics of the Rajbanshis widened to a great extent.

In 1954 Upendranath Barman from Dinhatata became the President of Rajbanshis Kshatriya Samiti. After the second conference held in 1955 at Jalpaiguri district, the headquarters of the Samity shifted from Dinhatata to Jalpaiguri and the Rajbanshis Kshatriya Samiti was renamed as Kendriya Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samiti. The aims and objectives of the Samity were as follows-

1. To improve the socio economic status of the Rajbanshis
2. To undertake the activities of the Kshatriya Samity in accordance with the ideals of Panchanan Barma ⁵

Again Jalpaiguri District Committee of the Kshatriya Samiti was also separated from the Central Committee. Thus the leadership of the Samity had differentiated after Independence and it included the ex-royal family members, trade union activist, educated gentry from different places of North Bengal.

Now we look into the inner party organization of Hitasadhani Sabha in Cooch Behar. In 1859 the Cooch Behar King Narendra Narayan set up an organization and named it as Desh Hitaishana Sabha for social, cultural and economic development of the Princely state of Cooch Behar. But there is another opinion regarding the origin of Hitasadhani Sabha in Princely state of Cooch Behar. The Hitasadhani Sabha formed on 19th May 1946⁶, was the first political organization which was granted recognition by the Cooch Behar State. The leaders of Hitasadhani Sabha- Khan Chowdhury Amanatullah, Dharani Sankar Bhattacharjee, Satish Chandra Singha Roy, Majir Uddin Ahmed etc. mostly belonged to educated family. Its main ideology was upliftment of the social, economic and political status of the indigenous people of the Cooch Behar. The revived ideology of the Rajbanshis and the other indigenous people wished to review their historical state either as a separate state or as union territory. Now let's see the objectives of the Hitasadhani Sabha. The central Objectives of the Hitasadhani Sabha were welfare and socio-economic development of the indigenous people by their own political management and seeking a separate state for themselves⁷. Besides socio-economic development of the region, the educated leaders of Hitasadhani Sabha also encouraged the poor Rajbanshi people to actively participate in this socio-economic and cultural movement. These objectives were set against the milieu of the refugees, from East Pakistan following the partition of India; as because of outnumbered people poured in to North Bengal causing complete demographic changes and deterioration of socio-economic conditions of the indigenous people of this region. One of the most important ideological aspects of Hitasadhani Sabha which is needed to be explained here is, when all the Indian political parties were bargaining on the issue of partition of India, the Rajbanshi leaders of Hitasadhani Sabha also protested against the division of India⁸. But more interesting fact is that on 4th May 1947 when Tapashilee Federation had demanded for a separate Rajasthan state for Rajbanshi community, they received support from Hitasadhani Sabha. Hitasadhani Sabha leaders supported the demand for a separate Rajasthan state for Rajbanshis, comprising Siliguri Sub division of Darjeeling district, some part of Purnia district, entire Jalpaiguri district, complete Dinajpur district and some part Assam⁹. But the British Government did not pay attention on this issue.

After Independence of India Hitasadhani Sabha changed its name, ideology and strategy of the organization. On 1949 the party leaders of Cooch Behar State Praja Congress, i.e. the primitive name of Hitasadhani Sabha, along with other political party formed a committee and named it as the Uttarkhand Pradesh Sangha under the leadership of Rupanarayan Sinha and Ranabir Subba. Their demand for establishment of Uttarkhand Pradesh for themselves was raised before the Prime Minister of India¹⁰. Thus we can see from the above presented facts, how Hitasadhani Sabha gradually and dramatically changed its own political ideologies, strategies and objectives in due course of time.

Now let us discuss about another prominent organisation called Uttar Khanda DaOn 31st May 1969, the general conference of the Kshatriya Sabha was held in Jalpaiguri District where the educated Rajbanshis youth leaders agitated against

the ideologies and techniques of the Samity such as Upendranath Barman, Jagadananda Roy, Jogeyashwar Roy and others in the wake of the ongoing exploitation and deprivation of the Rajbanshi of North Bengal by the Calcutta based leaders¹¹. Due to internal party multiplicity of ideology and leadership dilemma, there was a need for a new organization for the Rajbanshi people. This led to the formation of UKD on 5th July 1969 under the leadership of Kalindra Nath Barman¹². Therefore the UKD was formulated with the key objective of Rajbanshi community's development and a separate state. The UKD used various strategies to meet their demands, like mass rallies, conferences, meetings and strikes in different places of North Bengal in a peaceful, non-violent and democratic way in which submission of memorandums to the Chief Minister and Central Government was an important strategy of the movement of the party¹³. Thus UKD emerged as a full-fledged political party of the Rajbanshis and other indigenous communities' in the region with a wide base of leadership of educated landed gentry class. The UKD continued its struggle with more determination from 1971 to 1975. Not only that, to attain more ethical support, the leaders announced some development agenda for North Bengal before the general election in 1972. Out of them, few points are as follows-

1. Stop exploitation of natural resources
2. Distribution of waste land among the landless people
3. Provide free education for the poor students
4. Solving the employment problem of the Rajbanshi youth
5. Solving the refugee problem in North Bengal ¹⁴

There was again an ideological lacuna which was seen in the UKD regarding the approach of the Calcutta based ruling party leadership. Due to this mismatched ideals, the UKD was compelled to give a general call for a separate state for Rajbanshi people of North Bengal as Kamtapur state. On 22nd June 1980, the UKD gave an open exposure of the demand for a separate Kamtapur state for Rajbangshis. To reach their objective the party circulated leaflets, pamphlets, manifestos and held public meetings as party strategy explaining why the party asked for a separate state¹⁵.

Now we move our discussion on Uttarbanga Tapashilee Jati O Adivasi Sanghathan (UTJAS), an auxiliary organization of UKD. On May 1978 all the leaders including UKD under the guidance of the students' organization agreed to form a new front to fight for reservation in employment and other problems too. As mentioned earlier that as an auxiliary organization of UKD, UTJAS was formed under the leadership of Ranjana Roy, Noren Das¹⁶. It is an interesting fact that this party, as a party objective, had easily incorporated the Rabha, Oraon and Muslim community under their party umbrella over the same deprivation issue. One of the interesting facts is that newly born UTJAS organization had student leadership emerging from indigenous community, Dalit community and of course the Rajbanshi community from different colleges and North Bengal University¹⁷. These organizations (UTJAS and UVTJACS) were based upon socialist ideology which was a reflection of their political activity. It was an organization which was formed to provide justice and social equality to the said oppressed or deprived class of the society in North Bengal. Hence it aimed to work for the protection of the interest of the Rajbanshi society from diverse cultural and social hubbubs¹⁸. For achieving the desired goal, they formulated their protest strategies which aroused mass awareness among this alienated class of people. While working on these strategies they launched their protest by organizing mass agitations against issues like discrimination against the SC and ST students, stop infiltration into the region, creation of job opportunities, increased facilities in educational institutions such as scholarship, hostels, reservation of jobs in North Bengal etc¹⁹. From their strategies the objectives of the organization UTJAS can be clearly defined. These are highlighted as follows -

1. To resolve their own problems relating to education in North Bengal
2. To deal with the acute problems of admission, stipend and misbehavior from the upper class students.
3. To develop the Dalit students educationally, socially, economically and politically.²⁰

Some young Rajbanshis and Dalit leaders from university and colleges were trying to give a fresh impetus in Kamtapur movement. They organized a new students union in 1990. Consequently All Kamtapur Students Union was formed under the leadership of Rathindranath Roy of Jalpaiguri district²¹. Its organizing secretary was Srinibhas Das of Kumargram, Jalpaiguri district. This organization guided by of the Kamtapur Gana Parishad, drew its inspiration from UKD ideology. Subsequently the AKSU rose on the line of the all Assam Students Union with radical ideology. Their aims were to bring social-economic and cultural development of the Rajbanshis in democratic way. Now let us have a closer view of their socio-political demands that will help us to comprehend their internal (directorial) organizational strategies and ideologies. These are enlisted here as follows -

1. Formation of a separate Kamtapur state for the Rajbanshis
2. Recognition of Kamtapuri Language
3. Seventy percent of reservation of jobs should be made for the Rajbanshis
4. Broadcasting of Kamtapuri programmes from Radio and Television
5. Introduction of the history of Kamtapur in the curriculum of schools, colleges and university
6. Establishing a medical college and a university in North Bengal

Due to the inner weakness of All Kamtapuri Students' Union, the leaders realized that it was not possible to continue the movement in democratic way because of oppression and suppression of the then government. Subsequently during the crisis of AKSU two separate organizations had emerged namely Kamtapur Liberation Organization and Kamtapur People's Party²². Again we see that this KLO's ideologies are totally different from aforesaid organizations. In 1990s the KLO's ideology represented radicalism and rebellion which is clear from their activities over the decades. The main aim of the KLO was creation of a separate Kamtapur state within Indian Union with the help of organized armed uprising. There was a palpable change in the strategies of the KLO during this movement. Though it took place in North Bengal but this new ideals resembled to that of the ideals of ULFA in Assam which was based on violence and terror for achieving its goals. The leader of KLO, inspired by the radical ideology started to work against the oppression of police and political leaders by killing the ruling party leaders in the region²³. The above discussion makes it clear that the strategies and ideologies were entirely dissimilar from all other organizations. Thus the need of a separate organization was felt and hence Kamtapur People's Party (KPP) was born with a new vision. Now let us read about KPP, its policies, ideals and objectives in short.

On 7 January 1996 Kamtapur People's Party was formed under the leadership of Atul Roy in collaboration with Nikhil Roy at Dhupguri in Jalpaiguri district²⁴. Some of the other prominent leaders of KPP were Lalit Chandra Barman, Chitta Ranjan Barman, Panchanan Singha and Robin Gope. KPP's demanded only separate state through democratic way. The party aimed for separate Kamtapur state and recognition of Kamtapuri language in Indian Constitution. In a concise manner it can be said that KPP was the result of internal leadership conflict. Let it be explained. Atul Roy, KPP party secretary who once associated with the UKD after being dissatisfied with the party leaders formed a new political party (KPP). To reach its goal the party organised mass rallies, public meetings, publishing books, pamphlets and marching in processions in a democratic way to create awareness amongst the Rajbanshi people of North Bengal against the vested interests, irrespective of political opinions, caste and creed, which was based on their party strategies. Actually it is a reformation form of the Uttar Khanda Dal. To carry on its activities it formed Kamtapur Bhasa Sahitya Parishad on 1997, Kamtapur Women's Forum in 1998 and Kamtapur Youth Association to increase the strength of the party. The objectives of the Kamtapur People's Party were as under-

1. To stop infiltration in the region from the outside of the country
2. To revive their vanished historical and cultural identity
3. To revive the disappeared customs, rituals, language, literature, folkways and folklore of the ancient Kamtapur state

Again, it is to be noted that due to diverging views and opinions among the leaders of Kamtapur People's Party, subsequently under the leadership of Nikhil Roy a new party called the Kamtapur Progressive Party (KPP) was formed in 2003²⁶. Due to difference of ideology and leadership two parties worked simultaneously but their objectives were similar. The objectives of Kamtapur Progressive Party were follows –

1. To preserve the Kamtapuri language, culture, history and ethnic identity of the Rajbanshi community
2. To develop the Rajbanshi community socially, economically, politically and educationally
3. Recognition of the Kamtapuri language in the Eight Schedule of the Indian Constitution

Conclusion: On the basis of above discussion it may be said in a nutshell that through Kamtapur movement various Rajbanshi Organizations in North Bengal which was initiated before the independence had the objectives to enhance the Rajbanshis' social status and their economic development including other indigenous community. So the movement has passed through various ideological appearances like the reformist, the revivalist, the socialist. These leadership variants have emerged subsequently as well as existed simultaneously. It was only after the partition of India, the idea of formation of separate state like Rajasthan State, Uttarakhand Pradesh, Kamtapur State and Greater Cooch Behar and recognition of Kamtapuri language in Eight Schedule of Indian Constitution became more primordial objectives of the different political organizations. The strategy of the movement has also historically evolved and has diversified into various forms like petitions and memorandums, meetings, social actions, alarm etc. The pre-partition strategies mostly comprise mass agitations, petitions, meetings and electoral politics whereas in the post partition period two new strategies namely protest and terror were added to the existing ones. However the reformist and the revivalist ideology have sustained since their appearance. One of the significant results comes out through the various organizations it has stopped the social discrimination and makes them politically aware. Needless to say, the Rajbanshis had to put great effort, in their urge to create a separate state. In one hand their different organizations in its various forms tried to achieve its goal, but on the other hand they gained political awareness and greater social equality.

Acknowledgement: I offer my heartfelt gratitude to Sri Prashanta Das, Dr. Sailen Debnath, Dr. Rupkumar Barman, Sri Lalit Chandra Barman and Dr. Shesadri Prosad Bose.

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