

Autonomy Movements in North East India: A Study of Koch Rajbongshi Autonomy Movement (Kamatapur Movement) in Assam

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Abstract: The Autonomy Movement launched by the Koch Rajbongshi people of Assam is known as Kamatapur Movement. There were a number of causes of conflict which led to the emergence of this movement. 20th August, 1949 is the red letter day for every Koch Rajbongshi as on that day an agreement was signed between the last Koch king of Cooch Behar and the Government of India by which Cooch Behar State was incorporated within the Indian Dominion. Koch Rajbongshi demand for autonomy i.e. Kamatapur Movement is an inter-state conflict whereby they demanded a separate state within the Indian union and raised several demands to the government. But however in the recent times the formation of Greater Kamatapur is not possible because it is a very complex matter. According to the leaders of this community the inclusion of the Cooch Behar state within Indian Union is the main reason for marginalization of their history, heritage, art, culture etc. and it was the main reason which eventually led to the Kamatapur Movement.

Keywords: Autonomy, Koch Rajbongshi, Refugees, Kamatapur, Tribe, Heritage.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The question of Autonomy has been becoming a burning issue of attention in the past few decades. The increasing demands for Autonomy by different ethnic groups and religious communities have been due to persistent ethnic conflicts around the world both in the developed and developing countries. Movements for Autonomy have marked the political discourse in North East India for the past decades. The aim and purpose of Autonomy movements is not only to bring about a change in the existing system but also to augment legitimate expressions of aspirations by the people having a distinct culture, tradition and common pattern of living. In the post colonial period, North East India which is a land of diverse ethnic communities has witnessed a series of Autonomy movements centered on political demands for statehood. While some have resolutely expressed the need for more Autonomy within the present administrative setup, other movements have evolved more militant and secessionist ideas of political and geographical demarcation of territory.

The Autonomy Movement by the Koch Rajbongshi and the idea for a separate homeland is decades old. The Autonomy Movement launched by the Koch Rajbongshi people of Assam is known as Kamatapur Movement. There exists a peculiar distinction between the demand for a separate state by the Koch Rajbongshi and other ethnic communities of India. Most of the ethnic groups of India who are demanding separate state for their communities are using ethnic names for their proposed state like Bodoland for the Bodos of Assam, Gorkhaland for the Gorkhas of West Bengal etc. But in case of Koch Rajbongshi they are demanding Kamatapur as a separate state which is rooted in the historical memory of their erstwhile Kamatapur Kingdom and are not using any ethnic name for their proposed separate state. Historically, the Koch Rajbongshi had rich culture, language, tradition and distinct identity during the Koch kings but after independence especially with the merger of their land with the state of Assam and West Bengal, they have gradually lost their distinct cultural heritage and identity in the melting pot of Assamese Society. This has eventually given birth to the Kamatapur Movement which is demanding a separate Kamatapur State since the mid and late 1990s with the formation of All Assam Koch Rajbongshi Students Union (AAKRSU) in 7th January 1990 in Assam. Koch Rajbongshi community is an indigenous community of Cooch Behar, origin of which are found in parts of present day Nepal, the Indian States of Assam, West Bengal, Meghalaya and Kishanganj in the state of Bihar and certain parts of Bhutan. The two terms 'Koch' and 'Rajbongshi' although are used interchangeably today but originally these two communities sprang from entirely different sources, the Koch's being Mongoloid community or origin while the Rajbongshis are a Dravidian tribe. However, at present it is nearly impossible to differentiate these

two communities of separate historical origin from each other. Today they are widely distributed over most of the plain districts of Assam. However, a heavy concentration is observed in the districts of Kamrup and Goalpara. The Autonomy Movement by the Koch Rajbongshis seeks to create the Kamatapur State by including some areas of present North Bengal and Assam under the constitutional provision.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

- To understand the Autonomy Movement of Koch Rajbongshis in Assam.
- To find out the causes that led to the emergence of Kamatapur Movement and its demands.
- To suggest probable suggestions to tackle the Kamatapur Movement of Koch Rajbongshis in Assam.

III. METHODOLOGY

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

IV. KAMATAPUR MOVEMENT AND ITS CAUSES FOR EMERGENCE

The Kamatapur Movement by the Koch Rajbongshi 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 Rajbongshi of Assam into the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category instead of separate statehood demand. It is usually opined that the Kamatapur Movement that became stronger in Assam after 1980s 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 Rajbongshi Students Union (AAKRSU), Kamatapur Liberation Organization (KLO) which is a militant organization. Besides these there are also other non-governmental and literary organizations of Koch Rajbongshis which are working for the socio-cultural development of their community with sympathy to the demand of Autonomy like Koch Rajbongshi Sahitya Sabha. Koch Rajbongshi Cultural Society is another literary organization of Assam working for the development of Koch Rajbongshis history, culture and literature along with the territorial demand.

The Koch Rajbongshis originally from the ancient Kamrupa-Kamata kingdom are one of the largest plain tribe 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 Sep, 1949. Under Naranarayan, the Koch Dynasty reached a position of glory although in course of time their hay days did not last long. The Koch Rajbongshis 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 Rajbongshi people of Assam are the indigenous people of this region and therefore this region originally belongs to Kamatapuris. The Koch Rajbongshi 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 aim of the land reform policy is to improve the economic condition of the rural people. But through this policy the Koch Rajbongshi people of Assam were not benefited rather their land has been transformed to the newly migrants i.e. Bengali Hindus and Muslims who had migrated to the Kamatapur region from the 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.

There were a number of causes which led to Kamatapur Movement. *Firstly*, 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 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 1st January, 1950. Thus the leaders of Koch Rajbongshi blamed that this kind of degradation of Cooch Behar State is a breach of trust anti commitment, unlawful and unconstitutional. *Secondly*, the language, literature, culture of the people of the area is different from those of the people of west Bengal and Assam.

Presently, the indigenous people (Koch-Rajbongshi) of the area have lost their historical glory, prosperity and happiness and also face suppression, oppression, domination and endless exploitation in all aspects of their life. *Thirdly*, the economic conditions of the Koch Rajbongshi people have been deteriorated day by day. Their Inhabiting areas are still backward and underdeveloped and the proposed Kamatapur area is predominantly rural with over 80% of the population residing in the rural areas. In spite of the wealth and varieties of its natural resources like forest, river etc this region remain industrially backward. *Fourthly*, the negligence of the Central and the State Government resulted in feelings of alienation even more among the people of the Koch Rajbongshis and the denial of their cultural rights by the mainstream Assamese Society also added fuel to this. *Fifthly*, due to the influx of large number of caste Hindu Bengali from East Bengal before and after independence to Kamatapur area, might have played 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, modernity of language, education which Indigenous Rajbongshis could not stand anywhere and they gradually lost their culture, language and land. Above all they became minority due to the flow of this immigrant and ultimately lost their last asset which was their identity. In this aspect the Kamatapur issue has close similarity with Tripura where local Tripuri had been made minority in their own homeland by the immigrant Hindu Bengalis. But Koch Rajbongshi has been more unfortunate compared to the Tripuris, at least in terms of preserving their identity because it was able to retain its historical identity in the form of Indian State but the Princely State of Cooch Behar was made a district in Independent India. Moreover, the inclusion of Koch Rajbongshi dominated areas into Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) without consulting the Koch Rajbongshis has also fuelled the demand for Kamatapur. AKRSU president Biswajit Roy asserted a demand for a separate state of Kamatapur comprising 15 districts of Assam and six of West Bengal in the lines of Telangana. As stated above various causes are responsible for Kamatapur Movement. The genesis of Koch Rajbanshi identity consciousness started due to the feeling of discrimination, deprivation, and domination by the caste Hindus and the dominant groups.

DEMANDS OF KAMATAPUR MOVEMENT

The 20th August, 1949 is the red letter day for every Koch Rajbongshi as on that day an agreement was signed between, Jagaddipendra Narayan Bhup Bahabur, the last Koch king of Cooch Behar State and the Government of India by which Cooch Behar State was incorporated with the Indian Dominion. According to the leaders of this community, the inclusion of Cooch Behar State within Indian Union is the main reason for the marginalization of their history, heritage, art, culture, literature, language, identity etc. The Koch Rajbongshis of Assam has been carrying out a democratic movement in the name of Kamatapur Movement with dozens of Demands. As per the memorandum, submitted by various Koch Rajbongshi Organizations such as Koch Rajbongshi Sahitya Sabha, All Koch Rajbongshi Students Union, Greater Cooch Behar People's Association (WB), All Assam Koch Rajbongshi Sanmilani, Chilarai Sena, All Koch Rajbongshi Mohila Samiti etc under the banner of Separate State Demand Committee to the Government of India as well as Assam shows a number of Demands.

Some of their demands can be noted as below:-

Firstly, Demand for the formation of a separate Kamatapur State comprising six districts of North Bengal namely Cooch Behar, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, North Dinajpur and South Dinajpur and Malda and some districts of Assam namely – Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Goalpara, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup, Marigaon, Darrang Sonitpur up to Lakhimpur district of Assam which they once had to loss.

Secondly, Inclusion of Kamatapuri or Koch Rajbongshi language under the Eighth Schedule of Indian Constitution along with the demands of cultural and socio-economic development of their community.

Thirdly, Rescheduling Koch Rajbongshi community of Assam, as Scheduled Tribe (P), which was declared in 1996 through a Presidential Ordinance.

Fourthly, Propagation of the Kamatapuri Language and culture through state controlled radio as well as All India Radio and Television.

Fifthly, Reservation of seats for the Rajbongshis in educational and technical institutions for their higher education.

Sixthly, Reorganization of Vishwa Mahavir Chilarai's birthday on Maghi Purnima as State holiday to Government of West Bengal and Assam and also to name a portion of national highway (Siliguri to Cooch Behar) in memory of this Hero of Kamatapur.

Sevently, Koch Rajbongshis leaders also demands for the establishment of 'Maharaja Naranarayan Cultural Complex and Research Centre in the undivided Goalpara District in order to preserve develop and spread their rich cultural heritage.

Although they have articulated about various demands but their major demands remains the Separate Kamatapur State; Recognition of Scheduled Tribe (P) and inclusion of Rajbongshi language into the Eight Schedule of Indian Constitution.

V. ANALYSIS

Koch Rajbongshi demand for Autonomy i.e. Kamatapur Movement is an intra-state conflict whereby the Koch Rajbongshi people demanded a Separate state within the Indian Union and raised several demands to the government. But however in the recent time the formation of Greater Kamatapur is not possible because it is a very complex matter. For the formation of Greater Kamatapur it will not only include areas within Assam but also areas in other states such as West Bengal, Bihar, and some parts of Meghalaya etc. So as a solution to this problem, the aspirations of Koch Rajbongshi people should be given utmost importance within the Indian Constitution framework by both the Central and State Government. Moreover due to the influx of large number of Caste Hindu Bengalis from West Bengal to Kamatapur area, it led to creating a feeling of insecurity among the locals and thereby leading to identity crisis and so steps should be taken by the Government in order to protect their culture, language and identity and to increase the prospects of peace. The Government of India declared the Koch Rajbongshi as Scheduled Tribe but only for three months by an ordinance of President of India, dated 27th Jan, 1996. After that an official bill was introduced before the parliament for the regulation of the ordinance that declared the Koch Rajbongshi as a ST but due to conspiracy and politics of the upper caste politicians and ignorance of the government the bill was not passed and still hangs in the Parliament. Presently, a total of six communities of Assam have been demanding ST status through the Koch Rajbongshis demand is one of the oldest one. The Koch people are demanding the ST status on the ground that they possessed the traits which are required to acquiring the ST status. So if they are given the ST status, to some extent it will lead to prospect of peace. But however while doing so it should be kept in mind that it should no way affect the earlier status and identity of the previous Scheduled Tribe (ST) people or else it will lead to emergence of new conflicts. But in Assam the scheduling issue of the Koch Rajbongshi is entirely politicized by the national as well as by the regional parties. Before every election (both general and assembly) the political parties make false promise to schedule them but after the election they fall silent on this issue. According to the constitutional provision the government can declare any community as ST on the basis of five criteria i.e. indication of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, economic backwardness and shyness of contact with other communities. The Tribal Research Institute of the Assam government, in its study conducted in 1994 found and stated that there is adequate justification to declare the Koch Rajbanshis as ST and on the basis of the report the Register General of India agreed to include them in the schedule Tribe category of Assam. But later on the Register General again stated that they do not fulfill the five criteria and therefore they cannot be scheduled as ST, while the community makes their self assertive evaluation that they fulfill all the five criteria which have been undermined by the centre.

Moreover like the Bodo people for the Koch Rajbongshi people also there should be an Autonomous Council and the powers should be decentralized and should not be concentrated in the hands of a few who is taking the lead role in the movement and the interests and aspirations of the whole community should be taken into account.

In addition to these, attempts should be made for the establishment of Maharaja Naranarayan Cultural Complex and Research Centre which they demanded in order to preserve, develop and spread their rich cultural heritage.

Moreover, a survey should be conducted so that the social, economic and political conditions of the Koch Rajbongshi can be understood. Any policy which aims to address the issue of the community, in order to be successful should have a clear understanding of their socio-economic and political problems and conditions.

The feeling of alienation and relative deprivation of the Koch Rajbongshi people which is the main reason behind their autonomy movement can be addressed only by protecting their very distinctiveness and by improving the socio-cultural and economic conditions.

The language controversy is another important issue and in order to put an end to the debate their mother tongue should be given constitutional recognition. Along with this, spreading quality education and creation of employment avenues may go a long way in solving such problems.

Koch Rajbanshis at present are facing problems ranging from ethnic identity crisis, economic underdevelopment, land alienation, illiteracy, unemployment etc. Most of the Koch Rajbanshis in Assam are living below poverty line. No policy measure has been taken by the government to uplift their economic conditions. The claim for ST status is a long drawn demand. They were in hope that if they get the ST status they will at least be able to get some opportunities for their socio-economic and cultural development. But they are deprived from that too. After 1980s the immigration into Koch Rajbanshi dominated areas of lower parts of Assam emerged as a major problem. Relative deprivation is another factor which makes them feel deprived from opportunities of socio-economic development from the government. The feeling of deprivation is an

important reason which has fuelled the Kamatapur movement in Assam in recent times. It may be safely argued that the Kamatapur movement is in many ways the outcome of the socio-political and economic marginalization of Koch Rajbanshis.

VI. CONCLUSION

The period from 1515AD- 1940 AD was the period of Koch Rule in the Kamata Kingdom. It is a period of pride, tragedy, conspiracy, downfalls and emotions for the Koch Rajbongshi community. The demand for Kamatapur tells was about the issue of nationalism within nationalism. Koch Rajbanshis autonomy movement is a long drawn battle to preserve, protect and develop their distinct identity. The genesis of Kamatapur movement or Koch Rajbanshis nationalism was in the colonial period. The merger of Cooch Behar State with West Bengal and its transformation from a native state to a mere district of West Bengal play a very important role in the present Kamatapur movement. Along with this there are some factors which contributed a lot to the Kamatapur movement in Assam. Issues of poverty, economic disparities, identity crisis and relative deprivation are some important factor that has given new shape to the Kamatapur movement in Assam. But however, only creation of Kamatapur state will not benefit the Koch Rajbongshis till their rights are not protected.

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