



A Study of Autonomy Movements in North East India with reference to Kamatapur Movement of Koch Rajbangshi

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Abstract: In the contemporary period autonomy movements play a vital role in the socio-economic and political aspects of North Eastern society of India. Sometimes, it makes very complex situation within the concerned state. As like other autonomy movements of North-east India, the autonomy movement of Koch Rajbangshi people is also considered as prominent. To protect their history, culture, language and distinct identity, they launched an autonomy movement in Assam which is popularly known as Kamatapur Movement. On 20th August, 1949 an agreement was signed between the last Koch king Jagaddipendra Narayan of Cooch Behar and the government of India by which Cooch Behar was annexed with the Indian Dominion. Hence, they raised the demand for formation of separate statehood within the Indian dominion and also raised several demands to the government. But, in the recent time the formation of Greater Kamatapur state for Koch Rajbangshi people is a very complex matter. According to the leaders of this community, the annexation of the Cooch Behar with Indian dominion is the root cause for marginalization of their history, heritage, art, culture and language. Thus, it was considered as the prime reason that led to the Kamatapur Movement in Assam. In this paper, an attempt has been made to understand the autonomy movement of Koch Rajbangshis and to find out the root causes of Kamatapur Movement along with its demands.

Key Words: Autonomy, Cooch Behar, Identity, Kamatapur, Koch Rajbangshi, Movement

Introduction

The concept of autonomy has been becoming a burning topic of attention in the last few decades. Due to ethnic conflicts around the world, the importance of autonomy movement is increasing rapidly. Movements for autonomy have marked the political discourse in North East India for long time. The aim and objective of autonomy movement is not only to bring change in the existing system of the society but also to protect their distinct identity, culture, traditions and customs. In the last few decades, North East India has been witnessing a series of autonomy movements which are mainly centered on political demands for statehood.

The autonomy movement led by the Koch Rajbangshi is very old which is known as Kamatapur Movement. This movement is quite different from the demands of other ethnic communities of India. Most of the ethnic groups of India are using their ethnic names for their proposed state like Bodo people demand for separate Bodoland, Gorkha people of west Bengal demand for

Gorkhaland etc. In case of the Koch Rajbangshi community, they are demanding for separate Kamatapur state which is rooted in the historical memory of their ancient Kamatapur Kingdom and they are also not using their ethnic name for their proposed separate state. Historically, the Koch Rajbangshi community had rich culture, heritage, language, tradition and distinct identity during the rule of Koch kings but in later period mainly after independence especially with the merger of their historical homeland with the state of Assam and West Bengal, they have gradually lost their distinct cultural heritage and identity in the melting pot of majority Assamese culture. This has eventually birthed the Kamatapur movement which is demanding separate statehood for Koch Rajbangshis since mid and late 1990s with the formation of All Assam Koch Rajbangshi Students Union (AAKRSU) in 7th of January, 1990 in Assam.

The prime objective of this paper is to understand the Autonomy Movement of Koch Rajbangshi in Assam and to find out the causes that led to the emergence of Kamatapur Movement and its demands.

The paper is descriptive and analytical in nature. It is primarily based on secondary data. The secondary data are collected from several published materials in form of books, journal papers, magazines and from other internet sources.

Causes for emergence of Kamatapur Movement

The Kamatapur Movement of Koch Rajbangshi is a historic one. Although, the historical root of Kamatapur Movement was in the colonial period but in case of Assam, the movement gained its momentum 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. In Assam, there are several organizations which raised the demand for the separate Kamatapur State like All Assam Koch Rajbangshi Students Union (AKRSU), Kamatapur Liberation Organization (KLO) which is a militant group in nature. Besides, there are also other non-governmental and literary organizations like Koch Rajbangshi Sahitya Sabha which are continuously working for socio-cultural development of their community.

There are several numbers of reasons that led to Kamatapur Movement which are as below-

Firstly, as per the history of Assam in the period of pre-British rule in India, Maharaja Naranarayana of Cooch Behar captured all the small states of entire North East India in 16th century and established Koch Kingdom. But, on just before independence, an agreement was signed between last Koch king Jagaddipendra Narayana and the government of India and annexed Cooch Behar with West Bengal as a district in 1st January, 1950. Therefore, the leaders of Koch Rajbangshi felt that this kind of degradation of Cooch Behar was a unlawful and unconstitutional work.

Secondly, the culture, literature and language of the people of that area are different from the people of West Bengal and Assam. In the present period of time, the indigenous people (Koch Rajbangshi) of this area have been losing their historical glory, culture and prosperity and also face endless domination and exploitation in all aspects of their life.

Thirdly, the economic conditions of the Koch Rajbangshi have been declined day by day. Since, they are mainly dependent on agriculture therefore this region remains industrially backward which directly affects the life standard of Koch Rajbangshis.

Fourthly, the negligence of the Central and State governments towards the demands of Koch Rajbangshi people is another major cause that led to Kamatapur Movement.

Fifthly, the migration of Hindu refugee from East Bengal had played a very crucial role in creating feelings of insecurity among the Koch Rajbangshis. Bengali Scholars like Soumen Nag mentioned that the Hindu Refugee from East Bengal developed their own culture, education and modernity of their language as a result of it, Indegenous Rajbangshis started to losing their culture, language and land. Further, they became minority due to the flow of immigrant in their region.

Demands of Koch Rajbangshis

There are several prominent demands raised by the Koch Rajbangshi organizations such as Hit Sadhini Sabha (North Bengal), Uttar Khnda Dal(North Bengal), Kamata Rajya Dabee Parishad (Assam), Kamatapur Liberation Organization (North Bengal), All Koch Rajbangshi Students Union (Assam), Kamatapur Peoples Party (North Bengal), All Kamatapur Students' Organization (Assam) and Greater Cooch Behar Association (North Bengal) to protect their culture, language and identity which are mentioned below-

- 1) Demands for the formation of separate Kamatapur State which includes six districts of North Bengal namely Cooch Behar, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, North Dinajpur and South Dinajpur and Malda. On the other hand, they propose some districts of Assam namely, Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Goalpara, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup, Marigaon, Darrang, Sonitpur to Lakhimpur.
- 2) Inclusion of Kamatapuri language under the Eighth Schedule of Indian constitution.
- 3) Rescheduling Koch Rajbangshis of Assam as Schedule Tribe (ST) which was given in 1996 through a presidential ordinance.
- 4) Promotion of the Kamatapuri language and culture through both state controlled radio and All India radio and Television.
- 5) Seats should be reserved for the Rajbangshis in technical and educational institutions for their higher education.
- 6) Vishwa Mahavir Chilarai's birthday on Maghi Purnima should be declared as state holiday by the government of Assam and West Bengal.
- 7) Koch Rajbangshis leaders also demands for the establishment of 'Maharaja Naranarayana Cultural Complex and Research Centre in the undivided Goalpara district in order to protect and spread their glorious cultural heritage for future generation.

Although they raised several demands in front of the government but their major demands remains formation of the separate Kamatapur state, recognition themselves as Scheduled Tribe (P) and inclusion of Kamatapuri language into the Eighth schedule of the Indian constitution (Saikia, 2019).

Discussions of the Study

The Kamatapur Movement is an inter-state conflict whereby the people of Koch Rajbangshi community demanded a separate state for themselves within the Indian Union. But in the contemporary time, due to complexity of this issue, the formation of separate Greater Kamatapur State will not be so easy. In the process of formation of Greater Kamatapur State, it will not only include the areas of Assam but also areas of others states such as West Bengal. So, as a solution to this problem both the central and state governments should provide utmost importance to the aspirations of the Koch Rajbangshi people within Indian Constitutional framework. Further, due to influx of large number of Caste Hindu Bengalis from West Bengal to this areas of Koch Rajbangshis are led to creating the feeling of insecurity among the local people and lead to identity crisis. Therefore, in order to protect their identity, culture and language the government should take some steps and to increase the prospects of progress and peace. On 27th January, 1996 the government of India declared Koch Rajbangshi as Scheduled Tribe but for only three months through an ordinance of the President of India. After that a bill was introduced in floor of parliament for the regulation of the ordinance that recognized Koch Rajbangshi as ST but due to some political conspiracy of upper caste politicians and ignorance of the government the bill was not passed and hanged in the parliament. Therefore, at present Koch Rajbangshi demand for ST (P) status, which is one of the oldest one. So, if they are given the status of ST (P) without hampering the existing Scheduled Tribe people then it will be able to solve this issue to some extent or else it will lead to emergence of new conflicts among the tribes. In Assam this issue of Koch Rajbangshi is entirely politicized by the national and regional political parties. Before every election they make promise to schedule them but in practically after election they keep silent on this issue. According to the provision of Indian constitution the government can declare any community as Schedule Tribe on the basis of five criteria which includes indication of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, economic backwardness and shyness of contact with other communities. In 1994, The Tribal Research Institute of the Assam government stated that there is enough justification to declare the Koch Rajbangshi as ST and on the basis of this report the Register General of India agreed to include them in the Schedule Tribe category of Assam but in later the Register again stated that the Koch Rajbangshi do not fulfill the five criteria and so they cannot be included in the category of ST. While the community makes self assertive evaluation among themselves then they find that they fulfill all the five criteria which have been ignored and undermined by the centre (Saikia, 2019).

In addition to these, attempts should be made for the establishment of Maharaja Naranarayana Cultural Complex and Research Centre which they demand to protect, preserve and spread their rich cultural heritage.

Moreover, survey should be conducted by the governments to know about the socio-political and economic conditions of the Koch Rajbangshis in the recent time. After getting the result of those surveys, the governments should take needful steps towards the development of the community rapidly.

The language controversy is another important issue of Koch Rajbangshi and in order to fulfill their aspirations their mother tongue should be included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian constitution. Along with all these efforts, spreading quality education and creation of job opportunity can also solve their economic problems to some extent.

Conclusion

The Autonomy movement of Koch Rajbangshi is considered as a major concern in the recent period of time in North East India. The demand of separate Kamatapur reflects about the issue of nationalism within nationalism. It can be considered as a battle by a community to protect, preserve and develop their distinct identity. The root of the movement was in the colonial period. The merger of Cooch Behar with West Bengal played a very significant role in the present Kamatapur movement. Issues of poverty, economic backwardsness, educational backwardness and identity crisis and relative deprivation are some important factors that shape the Kamatapur Movement in Assam. However, formation of separate Kamatapur state will not benefit the Koch Rajbangshis if their rights are not protected within the state.

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