

ASSERTION OF REGIONS: EXPLORING THE DEMAND FOR THE SEPARATE STATE OF KAMATAPUR

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ABSTRACT

This paper will take into account the details of the movement led by the Koch Rajbanshi people for the separate state of Kamatapur. These people are demanding on the basis of the historical evidence of Kamata Kingdom. This movement is different from other movements as it involves two states i.e. Assam and West Bengal. These people are involved in agitations and protests for the fulfilment of their demands. Violent situations also arises in the Koch Rajbanshi inhabited areas of Assam. The organisations like Kamatapur Liberation Army (KLO) are militant outfit which may result in violent situation. There are also the organisations like All Koch Rajbanshi Student's Union (AKRSU) which presented their demands before the government. The government if Assam also assured them of having talks with the central government regarding their demands. Kamatapur movement is an example of nationalism within nationalism and there is the need to find solution for their accomodation with the Assamese and Bengali nationalism

KEYWORDS: Kamatapur, Koch Ranjonsi, Struggle, Assertiveness, Conflict of Identity, Agitation, Separation, Protest

INTRODUCTION

This paper will focus on the assertion of different regions in Assam. It also looks into the matter of how the socio-economic conditions and the feeling of deprivation along with the historical factors have fuelled the demand for the separate state of Kamatapur by Koch Rajbanshis, what is the present status of the movement and whether it is justified to create the separate state of Kamatapur.

India has been witnessing the struggle started around assertiveness and the various demands made by the ethnic groups and the identity conflict among them. The reasons may be the uneven development or the negligence of the centre. Such conflicts are present in Assam and other North-Eastern states. Ashutosh Kumar has rightly said "The recent decades have witnessed the assertion of well-defined geographically, culturally and historically constituted distinct regions that have emerged within the states."¹ The decision of creating a separate Telengana has given incentive to other groups in India to assert them also. Violence and protest have been made throughout the country including Assam. Before going to discuss the issue of separate statehood demand of Kamatapur, we may refer to the idea of what are regions and nations and regionalism in India.

UNDERSTANDING REGIONS AND NATIONS

Regions are the areas broadly divided on the basis of physical characteristics, human impact characteristics and

interaction between humanity and environment. They are basically the connected part of a space. In a broad sense, it is a place without special reference to location, but it is regarded as an entity for geographical, social or cultural reasons.

Nation refers to a group of people who have a common language, culture, ethnicity or history. It is composed of one or more nationalities which has its own territory and government. So nation has various meanings.

If we look at region and nation, a nation has sovereignty whereas a region does not have. It is just a geographical locale.

Benedict Anderson in his book “Imagined Community” defines nation as an imagined political community. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (Anderson, 1983) He said, “ It is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind... It is imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which the enlightenment and revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely ordained, hierarchical dynamic realm. Finally, it is imagined as a community because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may occur in each other, the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship.” (Anderson, 1983) 2

He has regarded nationalism as a positive force. He argues that language plays an important role in shaping national identity and nationalism. Anderson’s concept of imagined community shows that nations can be re-imagined and can be transformed.

Anderson argued that nationalism was a cultural artefact which is spontaneously created through convergence of discreet historical forces at the end of the eighteenth century, and transplanted across the world because people became able to imagine themselves as a part of community defined by nationality. Anderson explained the historical reasons behind the development of nationalism, the ways in which people’s understanding of nationalism can change over time.

Kymlicka has also provided views on nation. Kymlicka’s theory is not advocating secession in order to create really independent nation-states (although he also does not reject secession). He endorses the idea of a multicultural state that would enable the national groups to exercise territorial self-government within a large state. He believes that the liberal states, although officially neutral with respect of the cultural identities of their citizens, have typically engaged in nation building process which privilege one identity as a national one. Nation building thus put other identities on a relatively disadvantageous position.³

David Miller lists five elements of national identity. First is shared belief. He writes, “Nationality is essentially a subjective phenomenon, constituted by the shared beliefs of a set of people, a belief that each belongs together with the rest.” Second is an identity that embodies historical continuity. Third is an active identity that the members do things together. The fourth is homeland which connects nation and states. The last is something in common like common public culture but not necessarily biological descent.⁴

While talking about the concept of region, the idea of regionalism is also important. Regionalism is a political force which is created on the interests of a particular region or a group of regions. It tries to increase their region’s influence and political power. Regionalism describes the situations where different religious or ethnic groups with

distinctive identities within the same state boundaries are often concentrated within a particular region with strong feelings of collective identity. Regionalism also involves those ethnic groups which want independence from a nation state and development of their own political power.

The concept of Regionalism and nationalism are inter-connected, but still they have sometimes opposite meanings. For e.g. in some context, regionalism is associated with nationalism (Spain), while in others, it is considered as opposite (Italy). Regionalism has many positive qualities. It promotes economic and political co-operation. It can help in democratization, increase transparency, and make states and international organisations more accountable. Regional co-ordination is crucial for the success of government.

GROWTH OF REGIONALISM IN INDIA

Regionalism is not a new phenomenon in Indian politics. In the pre-independence period, it was promoted by the British imperialists. They encouraged the people of various regions to think in terms of their region rather than the nation as a whole, in order to maintain their hold over India during the national movement. After Independence the leaders tried to foster a feeling of unity among the people. To achieve this, the framers of the constitution introduced single citizenship for all, a unified judiciary, all Indian services, and a strong Central government. But then also regionalism made its appearance in India.

The first manifestation of regionalism was the demand for reorganisation of states on linguistic basis, but the most effective example of regionalism was the victory of the DMK against Congress in Tamil Nadu in 1960s. Initially the central govt felt that regionalism was political factor confined only to Tamil Nadu and so did not pose any threat to national unity. However, that assessment was found to be wrong. Soon in Punjab the Akali movement was started, while in Jammu and Kashmir Sheikh Abdullah revived the National Conference. During these years all the political parties continued to adjust with these regional forces. The Indian National Congress which enjoyed monopoly of power between 1947–1967 also contributed to the growth of regionalism in India. The local Congress leaders encouraged the growth of regionalism and strengthened their hold on local party organisation.⁵

India's political landscape, which was controlled almost exclusively by the Congress party in the 1950s and '60s, is now crowded by a number of state-level parties animated by local interests and backed by strong electoral bases. "This is the era of regionalism," said Zoya Hasan, a professor of political science at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. "States have become the most important theatres of politics in the country."⁶

There are a number of reasons which are responsible for the growth of regionalism in India. Firstly, the administrative policies and decisions as well as the developmental plans taken by the central government may not be able to satisfy all the people of the country and in such a situation, there is the formation of regional parties to solve their problems. Thus the parties like D.M.K etc are formed. Secondly, there are regional parties which emerge on ethnic, racial or religious grounds like the Hindu Mahasava. Thirdly, regionalism may emerge on language basis. The parties like D.M.K and A.D.M.K are formed on language basis. Fourthly, sometimes regionalism in India may be formed in order to safeguard the interest of the minorities for eg the parties like Jharkhand Mukti Morcha etc.

Sentiments of regionalism within regions are becoming strong in many States. Importance of Regionalism in India is immense because India has a number of religions, cultures, languages, ethnic groups, castes, different ideologies etc. So

there is need of maintaining unity among them and by decentralization or by creating new areas to safeguard their culture regionalism has played important role. Regional Parties can gain the confidence of people who belonged to their region and can lead to region's progress. No harm could be done to India's integrity and unity as long as there is positive motive in regionalism. In principle, regionalism need not be regarded as an anti-national phenomenon unless it takes an aggressive turn and encourages the growth of secessionism (as it did in Punjab during the past five years or so). National unity is not hampered if the people of a region have a genuine pride in their language and culture. But regionalism can be a serious threat to national unity if the politicians do not go beyond their regional loyalty and stand only for their regional interests. If regionalism is regarded as an unhealthy phenomenon, decentralization too would be objectionable, which of course it is not. So there is nothing contradictory between nationalism and regionalism. At the same time, the growth of regional values and consolidation of regional forces do not pose a challenge to the central administration of the country. Any attempt to counter regionalism is not conducive for the national interest of the country. Regional parties do not hinder national unity as long as they do not exceed their area of activity. People have confidence in regional parties because they believe that they alone can safeguard the interests of the State concerned.⁷

However, regionalism at present has become one of the main challenges. The sub-regional sentiments can divide linguistic unity. Advocates of smaller States argue that smaller size is good for better administration and better development. This is in contrast to Nehru's idea that "small States make small minds". He batted for the multi-lingual and multi-cultural States when faced the problem of re-organization of provinces after independence. People who do not favour regionalism are of the view that if the regional party comes to power in a province, it will try to gain the maximum benefits neglecting the interest of others. This will lead to the creation of ill feeling among others.

Regionalism has been an important aspect of Indian politics. Sometimes, it has posed threat to the unity of the country. Hence it is necessary to take steps to reduce such tendencies. Some such measures can be promotion of even development of the neglected areas so that they can feel themselves as a part of the national mainstream, non-interference of the central govt in the affairs of the State unless it is unavoidable for national interest, dealing with the problems of people in a peaceful and constitutional manner, assurance of freedom of the states to run their own affairs, introduction of the system of national education etc. ⁸

DEMAND FOR KAMATAPUR

It can be stated here that there is the presence of partly complex social structure and also the paralysis of the centre in India's North-East. Creating separate states essentially speaks about the relation between central and state forces, which in the case of northeast is not very smooth. The lack of borders between extremely diverse social groups may be the biggest impediment in the way of settling the statehood issue in North East.⁹ If centre creates a new state to meet the demands of a tribe or community for autonomy, another group will also demand who shares same geographical space.

The report of State Reorganization Commission has also become irrelevant in case of North East India as the SRC has failed to see the pre- colonial roots of regions in North-East India. The SRC was rendered irrelevant because states are now not seen as linguistic areas in this part of India.¹⁰

In case of Assam, the UPA government's decision to create Telangana has created more agitation and violence as different ethnic groups like Bodos, Koch-Rajboshis etc are demanding for separate states. If we look at the demand of

Koch Rajbonshis, their case is slightly different as there is historical evidence of Kamatapur kingdom. The Kamatapur is the ancient name of the Koch dynasty which includes the present divided Kamatapur kingdom which includes the entire North-Bengal of the West Bengal, most of the parts of present Assam and adjoining parts of Bihar, Nepal, Bhutan and the present parts of the ancient Rongpur of Bangladesh. It is a state which is demanded by the Rajbongshi/Koch-Rajbongshi people.

People in West Bengal have claimed discrimination by the West Bengal government that has led to the poor state of affairs in the region. At the same time, Koch Rajbonshis did not get a respectable position in the society. Bengali writers like Nagendranath Basu in the early 20th century while writing his Vishwakosh (Encyclopedia) mentioned the Koch Rajbanshis as barbarians or (Mlechha). Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, the renowned Bengali scholar says in 'Bongo Darshan' that the Koch identity cannot be synonymous with Bengali Hindu identity. It is not only in the literature where Koch Rajbanshis were humiliated, they also faced social oppression in their social life in Bengal and Assam. According to one scholar, in the early 20th century the Koch Rajbanshis were even denied entry into the temple of Jagannath Puri.¹¹ Even in Assam also they were not allowed to enter in the Barpeta Kirtan Ghar. So, all these issues were sufficient to create a strong background for the movement and the Rajbonshis organized themselves for the movement for separate state. Their demand of the separate state of Kamatapur comprises of the areas of both West Bengal and Assam (15 districts of Assam and six of West Bengal).

Though we have heard about the Kamatapur movement recently, the idea for a separate homeland for the Koch Rajbanshis is more than fifty years old. According to one scholar a gentleman from undivided Bengal named Jogendranath Mondal, had demanded a separate state for Rajbanshis called "Rajar-sthan" or abode of king before independence. He feared that if Bengal were divided, a section of the backward classes would be dominated by the upper caste Hindus while the other would be under the Muslims.¹²

A group called Uttar Khanda Dal (UKD) again started demanding separate homeland for Koch Rajbanshis in 1969 in North Bengal. UKD demanded the formation of the Kamatapur State, but was not successful and was first replaced by the Kamatapur Gana Parishad in 1987. Even in the Goalpara district of Assam, an organisation called Kamata Rajya Sangram Parishad (KRSP) was formed which demanded Kamata state in around 1969. Though most of the leaders of KRSP were from the Koch Rajbanshi community, there were also persons from other communities of the historical Kamatapur region in KRSP.¹³

However, the demand for Kamatapur is comparatively new in Assam. The All Assam Koch Rajbonshi Sanmilani which has been demanding the Schedule Tribe status for Koch Rajbonshis of Assam since 1966 once opposed the demand for Kamata Rajya (state) by Kamata Rajya Sangram Parishad in and around 1969. This shows that the feeling of alienation was not present in the Koch Rajbonshis from the past itself. Though the staging of these demands have completed fifty years now these have not been fulfilled. Many observe that if Koch Rajbonshis had been given the ST status in Assam, Kamatapur demand in Assam would not have been raised. Moreover the inclusion of Koch Rajbonshi dominated areas into Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) without consulting the Koch Rajbonshis has also fuelled the demand for Kamatapur in Assam. ¹⁴

All Koch Rajbanshi Students' Union (AKRSU), the Assam based student organisation of the Koch Rajbanshi community has also been raising the Kamatapur issue.

If we look at the history of Assam, it tells about a rich and colourful history of Kamatapur. Most of the time Kamatapur was described as the capital of Kamata kingdom. And sometimes Kamata and Kamrup have been regarded as the same kingdom. At that time, the kingdom of Kamata comprised the areas of both Assam and undivided Bengal. Kamata was ruled by different dynasties from mid 13th century to 15th century until the rise of Koch dynasty. During this time, Kamata was attacked by different rulers. Biswa Singha established the Koch dynasty in Kamatapur in the early part of 16th century and he was able to bring political stability in the Kamata region. His son Naranarayan with the help of Chilarai established Koch sovereignty almost on entire North East Indian kingdoms. After the death of Chilarai, Kamata kingdom was partitioned in 1581 into Koch Bihar and Koch Hazo or Kamrup. The partition weakened the power of the Koches. Because of this partition, subsequent histories of the eastern and western part of the kingdom became somewhat divergent. The eastern kingdom became close to Ahom kingdom, and the western to Mughal province of Bengal. In 1773, during the rule of Dharmendra Narayan, Koch Behar came under the British India by a treaty where the British agreed to drive away the Bhutiyas from the kingdom. From 1515 A.D. to 1949 A.D. there is the Koch rule in the Kamata Kingdom. The period of Koch rule is regarded as the golden period of history. The memory of this period is still in the mind of the Koch Rajbanshis.¹⁵

The Rajbongshi community at present also are demanding separation. The All Koch Rajbongshi Students Union (AKRSU) and several organizations in the Koch Rajbongshi community have demanded a separate Kamatapur state and these organizations also initiated agitation programmes. 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. He pointed out that the Centre has adopted a totally discriminatory attitude by creating Telangana even without forming a state reorganization commission. "If the Union government fails to resolve the issue of a separate Kamatapur state, agitation will be continued," Roy said.¹⁶

A violent situation might arise in the Koch-Rajbongshi-inhabited areas of lower Assam where there is the intensification of the demand for a separate state of Kamatapur by the Kamatapur Liberation Organization (KLO), a militant outfit. Since there is an armed outfit involved, the situation could be violent. A large number of cadres of the KLO have received training in Myanmar and may join the movement. There is a feeling among them that no solution can be achieved without violence.

There are two major dissimilarities between KLO and other civil society organizations in their demand for Kamatapur. Firstly, KLO wants sovereign Kamatapur, not a state (federal unit), but the civil society organizations want a state. Secondly, KLO's sovereign Kamatapur includes areas of North Bengal only. On the other hand, the proposed Kamatapur state includes areas of both North Bengal and Assam which makes this issue trans-border one. In October 21, 2013 there was a meeting in Bongaigaon, where 12 Koch Rajbongshi and Kamatapuri organizations met which strongly felt the need of a common struggle for Kamatapur and provided strategy for the current agitation. In Nepal, the Maoists had declared a separate state for Koch Rajbongshis named "Koch or Kochila Pradesh" on November 11, 2009. Some Indian Koch Rajbongshi organizations maintain close contacts with their fellow organizations in Nepal. So this might have a link with the present enthusiasm among the Koch Rajbongshis.¹⁷

The Koch Rajbongshis have formed their own organisation, the Kamtapuri People's Party (KPP) which is continuing the agitation. Kamatapur progressive party (KPP) has also called for demand of separate state. The party has

asked the supporters not to pay taxes or repay government loans. In a statement, party chief Atul Roy announced that its activities would start a rail and road blockade in the West Bengal region and also the participation in the hunger strike. 18 The KPP on 26.09.1997 has submitted a memorandum to the then Prime Minister I K Gujral consisting of 11 points charter of demands containing. Some of its demands are: carving out a separate state of Kamatapur comprising several North Bengal districts, recognition of their vernacula, Kamtapuri language as part of the eight schedule of the constitution, establishing a separate university namely Roy Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma University, development of education, opening of Fulbari Doordarshan to telecaste various cultural programmes of Kamatapuri people, declaration of Teesta irrigation project as national project for the all round development of North Bengal etc. 19

Sections of the Rajvanshi people claim that they are different from the Bengalis, and their language cannot be called Bengali. According to them, it is a different language called the Kamtapuri language. The All Kamatapur Students Union (AKSU) has made a demand that Kamatapuri language should be given place among the national languages of India.

In their memorandum to the Governor of Assam J. B. Patnaik, the Koch people cited the agreement by king Jagaddipendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur of the erstwhile Cooch Behar kingdom for merger with India and subsequent 'C' category state status. They demanded immediate action for formation of Kamatapur through formulation of the re-organization commission of the states.

In Assam KMSS leader Akhil Gogoi has also provided support to the movement. Addressing the mass, he said that "Koch Rajbonshi people are agitating for legal rights. But I know that this bureaucratic government, whose base stands on flattery and lie, had never thought about the common people and hence, they will not give them their rights easily. So all Koch Rajbonshi people have to be prepared for a massive and long term agitation." He also said that KMSS will support every agitation for Kamatapur. But Biswajit Roy and other leaders of the movement have to assure them that they will not molest the rights of people and will provide land right to every farmer in Kamatapur.20

Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi has assured the leaders of AKRSU that his government would facilitate talks with the centre regarding their statehood demands and appealed to them for the suspension of their agitation. The Biswajit Roy and Barman factions of AKRSU held tripartite talks in New Delhi in September 2013 regarding the creation of Kamatapur. A 10 member delegation of the AKRSU has met the Chief Minister to discuss on the issue and the meeting was cordial and positive. 21 Even as the Hiteswar Barman faction of All Koch Rajbongshi Students' Union (AKRSU) has expressed their satisfaction over the recently concluded tripartite talks with the Centre, it said it would continue mass mobilization programme for the creation of Kamatapur state and granting of Scheduled Tribe status to the Koch Rajbongshi community.

However, "Save Assam", a voluntary organization of the state of Assam has requested the Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh to reject the ongoing demands of further dividing Assam by several organizations and get necessary amendments in the Constitution of India to include the Koch Rajbongshis, Ahom, Chutia, Moran, Matok and Tea Tribes in the list of Scheduled tribes. In a memorandum recently sent to the Prime Minister, the organisation said that if the separate states are formed, the other communities will lose their economic and political rights in their own homeland. These communities would then be compelled to start agitation for their homeland and it will make the situation more dangerous. Assam would lose its identity if such demands continue.22

CONCLUSIONS

The demand for Kamatapur tells us about the issue of nationalisms within nationalism. The need is not to counter the Kamatapuri nationalism, but to find solution to accommodate this nationalism with existing Assamese and Bengali nationalism. Koch Rajbanshi people are making different demands and trying to say that they are the people with glorious past. A policy that can address these aspects may help to find solution to the agitation. But at the same time it is important to state here that only creation of a Kamatapur will not benefit the Koch Rajbanshis, till their rights are not protected.

Kamatapur state may or may not be a reality. The creation of a separate Kamatapur state cannot be regarded as a solution to the present movement after considering the experience of Northeast India. Then what is the possible solution for the Kamatapur movement? It is very sad that the West Bengal Government, treating the issue of the Koch Rajbanshis as a law and order situation, has used police and security forces as the solution for the movement. It shows that the West Bengal government may not be interested in solving the statehood issue of Koch Rajbanshis. But it has not discouraged the spirit of KLO or AKRSU. The leaders and the Rajbanshi people are very optimistic about their goal of kamatapur state.

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