
Hitasadhani Sabha in former Princely State Cooch Behar, 1946-1950: Emergence and Effects to the Indigenous People of Cooch Behar

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Abstract: *The district of Coochbehar that exists today was a native state under the British before independence. The Hitasadhani Sabha, emerged as the first indigenous political organization, came into existence in 1946 in the princely state of Coochbehar recognized by the state. All the leaders of this newly formed political organization were from a particular ethnic group of people, especially the Rajbanshis. In Coochbehar state, both the king and the tenants were Rajbanshis but most of the higher official posts of the state were held by the upper caste Hindu Bengalees. Hence, the intention of the leaders of this Sabha was aware the common people of the state about the deprivation by the outsider upper caste Hindu Bengalees and launch a tremendous agitation against them. During the period of Indian independence, Hitasadhani Sabha was in political power in Coochbehar and took a significant role to the destiny of the people of Coochbehar.*

Keywords: *Coochbehar, Hitasadhani Sabha, Identity Crisis, Princely State, etc.*

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Introduction

There are so many regional political organizations in India which are mainly formed on the basis of the socio-cultural aspects of their respective regions. These parties represent the interests and aspirations of the local or indigenous communities. In this paper efforts have been made to describe about one of such political organizations which originated in the princely state of Coochbehar during the British colonial period. At present day, Coochbehar is a Northern district of West Bengal, India. During the colonial period Coochbehar was a

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Native state under the British rule since the independence of India in 1947. Politics was publicly illegal and political activities were done secretly in the State. But there was only one exception, named 'Hitasadhani Sabha'¹ which was emerged in 1946, as the first indigenous political organization recognized by the Coochbehar State Government. The Sabha played a significant role to the destiny of the princely state and also to the people of Coochbehar towards the end of the colonial period.²

Although, the Hitasadhani Sabha was formed with the people from various communities and it was generally recognized as a local political organization. This organization was in political power in the princely state of Coochbehar during the accession of India after independence.³ Since the establishment of Hitasadhani Sabha, it gained immense popularity among the masses of Coochbehar. Majority part of the peoples of Coochbehar connected with this organization. Various programmes and objectives of Hitasadhani Sabha had made a significant impact to stimulate the ethnic feeling of the Rajbanshi community of North Bengal in post-colonial India. Even its various activities affected on the post-colonial political and social tension of Coochbehar and other parts of North Bengal, specifically in Jalpaiguri and Siliguri plains. However, from an objective standpoint it can be said that the Greater Coochbehar Peoples Association can be considered as the successor of the Hitasadhani Sabha with less differences.⁴

In this context the emergence of Hitasadhani Sabha had a socio-political background that prepared the base of its formation. To perceive the social context behind the rise of the Hitasadhani Sabha we must discuss about the demographic structure of the princely state Coochbehar. The comprehensive study of the demography of the princely state deals with its various aspects. It delves into the religious composition, the ethno-linguistic identity and the historical heritage that have contributed to the unique and captivating identity of the princely state. All these features were distinct from the other parts of mainstream Bengal. The people of Coochbehar mainly divided into two categories –Coochbeharis and non-Coochbeharis. In Coochbehar the Coochbeharis refers to as local Rajbanshi Hindus, some local converted Muslims Rajbanshis who were known as Nashya Sheikh, the Kamrupiya Brahmins i.e. the Maithili Brahmins who had settled in Coochbehar since the early days of Hitasadhani Sabha and there were some other non-caste Hindus such as Sahas, Jogis and small number of tribals. There were many similarities both the Hindu and Muslim Rajbanshis about ethnic feature, culture and even the food habits. The Maithili Brahmins

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locally known as Kamrupiya Brahmins had an amicable relationship with the Rajbanshi Hindu community. Even many social practices and religion functions of the Rajbanshis enormously the product of Maithili Brahmins. There existed a lack of social and intellectual communication among the Kamrupia Brahmins and the Brahmins of the rest of Bengal. The Saha's a traditional Bengali merchant community and jogis were the non-caste Bengali community in the category of Coochbeharis but they were not the 'son of soil'.⁵

Non-Coochbeharis people refer to those people who were not the native inhabitants of Coochbehar. In cases of language, culture and other social ritual there were no similarities with Coochbehari people.⁶ They were mainly came from other parts of Bengal viz. Dhaka, maymansingh, Barishal etc. The local people regarded them as outsiders or 'Bairer lok' and also called them 'Bhatia' as they were coming from the downstream or 'Bhatir Desh' of the river Ganges. On other hand the local or indigenous people both the Hindus and Muslims get familiar as 'Deshi' to the outsiders. Sometimes they called the local people as 'Bahe'.⁷

The Rajbanshis as local or indigenous people are the most important inhabitants of Northern part of North Bengal as well as in Coochbehar. They have a unique way of living, marked by a remarkably simple lifestyle and there are so many differences with the people of other parts of Bengal.⁸ Socially the Rajbanshis were mobilised in a simple way and this community embraced a culture of mutual respect and understanding. They were mainly relied on agriculture for their livelihood.⁹

After the treaty of Anglo-Koch which was signed in 1773 being threatened by the Bhutanese, Coochbehar became a princely state of the British East India company. Then a new policy was introduced in Coochbehar in various fields. Subsequently, a lot of non-Rajbanshi people from South, East and West Bengal of colonial Bengal migrated in Coochbehar such as Marwari, Bihari, the upper caste Hindu Bengalis and also the Muslims. Among them the Bengalis both Hindu or Muslim who came from East or South Bengal are called Bhatia (Incidentally the Marwaris and Biharis were not called as Bhatia). Through the process of immigration, a massive change took place in the entire demographic composition of the state. Therefore, the changing demographics and the transformative effects of various socio-economic factors brought about a significant alteration in the land control of the state. This transformation also occurred in the racial character of agricultural labourers, the money lender and the Jotedar. Through the commercial growth in Coochbehar town by the Marwaris and upper caste Bengalees, brought about a notable transformation in the ownership of its

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various shops. In this way in the state of Coochbehar, people those who were migrated from outside became more prosperous than the local residents.¹⁰ Thus, the social dichotomy was started between the 'Desi' or indigenous people and the 'Bhatia' or migrated outsiders.¹¹

Besides another area of antagonism between the Cooch Beharis and non-Cooch Beharis was the question of Kshatriyahood claimed by the Rajbanshis. As a result of social awakening and various advantages like education introduced by the British to the lower class and caste-communities, there were numerous religious movements arose among them in colonial India as well as in Bengal during the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century.¹² After the census of 1891, we found the different castes organised movements for the Kshatriya status. One of these in North Bengal the Rajbanshi Kshatriya movement felt as significant social tension. But the Rajbanshis claim to Kshatriyahood was never recognized by the so-called higher caste colonial Bengali Hindus. So, in the midst of the princely state Coochbehar, a malicious cold war was enhanced silently. In this regard Panchanan Barma(1865-1935), an eminent social reformer of the Rajbanshi society and his followers vigorously advocated for kshatriya status. It also became an issue for social conflict between the Coochbeharis and non-Coochbeharis or outsiders.¹³

One more important issue was further enlarged by the educational disparities. It can be said that in Coochbehar there was almost no light of institutional education till the mid-19th century. But during the reign of Maharaja Nripendranarayan(1863-1911) educational institutions were established. The administrative system of the state restructured and creating various working resources. During his period most of the outsiders benefited from education but among them some native people became educated. As a results different important and higher administrative post of Cooch Behar was filled by the outsiders or Bhatia people. The native people had no influence in the state governance in the state Cooch Behar. Not only that, all the higher posts of all educational institutions were occupied by the Bhatias.¹⁴

Although, primarily there was a good relationship between the Coochbeharis and non-Coochbeharis but gradually the relationship turns into animosity and prepared a ground for confrontation on the basis of cultural and economic distinctions. There was a perception raised among the local people that their own interests being undermined by the outsiders.¹⁵ Sometimes the word 'Bahe' which was addressed to the indigenous people by the 'Bhatia' or non-Coochbehari people seems to be ridiculous to the local people.

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Thus, the emergence of Hitasadhani Sabha was the outcome of various difference types of conflicts. It was founded on 19th May, 1946 at 'Rasmela Math' in Coochbehar. It can be said that all the leaders of this newly formed political organization were from a particular ethnic group of people. The leaders of this party at the time of its establishment were: Khan Chaudhury Amanatullah Khan (President), Jaladhar Saha (Secretary), Satish Chandra Singha Sarkar (Vice President), Majiruddin Ahmed (Assistant Secretary), Dharanishankar Bhattacharya, Ansar Uddin Ahmed, Gajendranath Basunia etc. were its another important members. At the first public meeting of Hitasadhani Sabha, Sonamoni Devi, the first female graduate from Coochbehar state within the Rajbanshis speaks among others.¹⁶ The Hitasadhani Sabha rapidly gained immense popularity and widespread support among the Coochbehari people. It reflected the expectation of the indigenous people. The aims and objectives of the Sabha uplifted the inner sentiments of the local people. Whether the programmes and activities of the Sabha are explored, it would be noticed that the leaders of this organisation directly blamed the Higher caste Hindu Bengalees for deprivation of the Cooch Beharis. In fact, the main purpose of the leaders of the Sabha was to participate in power politics of the state and thereby to recuperate various royal privileges. With this objective the leaders of the Hitasadhani Sabha started a tremendous agitation against the caste Hindu Bengalee and in various rally they provided the slogan 'Bhatia Tarao'(move out the Bhatias).¹⁷

The Hitasadhani Sabha was basically a party comprising local indigenous people and in particularly a party of native Jotedars. As there was no caste distinction between the indigenous peasants and the Jotedars in Coochbehar, hence the political distance between the peasants and Jotedars yet not created. As a result, there was no difficulty to unite the peasants and the Jotedars against their common enemy 'Bhatia' without class consciousness.¹⁸

However, when the assembly election was held in 1946 in the state of Cooch Behar, Hitasadhani Sabha gained the majority in this election. Two famous leaders of Hitasadhani Sabha, Khan Chaudhury Amanatullah and Satish Chandra Singha became most prominent figure in this election and were appointed as Revenue and Education ministers of Cooch Behar State respectively. The leaders of Hitasadhani Sabha raised the question of Cooch Behari identity crisis and sensitised the 'son of soil' or indigenous people to being united under one umbrella. Thus, the notion of being deprived by the so-called outsiders or

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‘Bhatias’. Thus, they got the success to the administrative power in the state of Coochbehar against the non-Coochbeharis.¹⁹

The movement of Hitasadhani Sabha became prominent among the indigenous people. Hitasadhani Sabha raised the importance of the indigenous people in the state of Coochbehar and some leader of it became very popular. But the leaders did not get enough time to lose their popularity without taking any concrete program for the struggling masses.²⁰ In 15th August 1947 India was emerged as an independence country. On 28th August, in the year of 1949, a historic agreement was signed between Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan and the government of India. Later on Coochbehar was included as a province of Chief Commissioner’s on 12th September, 1949 in the Indian union under part ‘C’. Incidentally there was a significant event took place on 1st January 1950, Coochbehar was incorporated with West Bengal as a district through the ‘Coochbehar Merger Agreement’ which was made on 31st December, 1949.²¹ During the merger of the native state to India and subsequently to the merger of West Bengal, there were various political activities both publicly and secretly. As a results Khan Amanatullah left for Pakistan and many others including Satish Singha, an equal prominent leader remained almost in hiding. Later on, Satish Singha and many others Hitasadhani members joined the Congress. Satish Singha took the post of Deputy Minister in Bidhan Roy’s Cabinet. But many others like Gajendra Nath Basunia continued their activities but they did not play any role of open opposition party. Even after the death of five people in the firing on a food march in Cooch Behar, all these Hitasadhani leaders were not seen in any anti-Congress role. But a few days later it was known they were involved in the Anti-Bhatia riot at Baishguri of Mathabhanga sub-division and many of them including Gajendra Nath Basunia were arrested by the police.²²

Conclusion

Thus, the leaders of the Hitasadhani Sabha brought the large number of indigenous people to unite under the same roof. It was the first organization to united the Coochbehari or Rajbanshi people against the outsiders or Bhatias. At different times the indigenous people exposed their grievances in various ways. They had taken up the ‘Bhatia Tarao’ movement and sometimes through the un-organised peasant movements they had also attempt to expose their resentment against the non-Coochbehari or non-Rajbanshi people.²³ After the independence of India, Coochbehar became a district of West Bengal in 1st January, 1950 and

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the movement of Hitasadhani Sabha stymied. However, the influence of the Hitasadhani Sabha can also be noticed on Uttarkhanda Dal' which existed in 1969 and created a political tension in all over North Bengal. Even later established UTJAS, KPP and the contemporary GCPA movements also cannot deny the influence of 'Hitasadhani Sabha'.²⁴

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