

Identity Politics and Distribution of Power: A Contemporary Study of Coochbehar

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Contemporary India has experienced several movements. Separate state movement(s) is one of them by a particular community, Rajbanshi. Generally this movement has started to get a specific identity of the community. From the late nineteenth century it was started by a leader called Panchananan Burma. Slowly this movement has mixed with Indian national politics. And now it has taken an important role in contemporary parliamentary vote politics. To ensure the political stand the upper strata of leaders of Rajbanshi separate state movement have sketched their parties (political and non-political) in the northern districts of West Bengal and adjacent part of Assam. There are many political parties and associations within 'the movement'. These parties and associations are – Greater Coochbehar Peoples Association (GCPA), Greater Coochbehar Peoples Association (GCPA, it is a political party), Kamtapur Peoples Party (KPP), Kamtapur Progressive Party (KPP) and Greater Coochbehar Democratic Party (GCDP).

The present paper wishes to explore the facts of contemporary identity politics of Rajbanshis in Coochbehar and also highlights the distribution of power within the political and non-political parties or association in the region. Data has been collected from ten villages selected from the Coochbehar district during 2010 to 2016. Secondary data was also used. Section I deals with regional identity and power. Section II deals with political parties or associations and their structural formation which helps them to establish this regional identity in recent times. Section III deals with politics of forum and also highlights the fact of distribution of power within the northern districts of west Bengal.

Section I

We attach to the term power more or less the same meaning which has been given to it by Weber : “In general, we understand by ‘power’ the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their won will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action”. The power of the state is backed ultimately by the control and use of physical force. Power, in the wider sense, which we attach to it, may be backed, in addition to physical force, by economic, ritual, and other sanctions.¹ Here power has generally used as a political aspect.

Regionally Rajbanshis are predominant group in Coochbehar as well as North Bengal. *Jotedari* abolition broke down their regional domination which I have mentioned earlier. But now they want to recover the past identity. It is surprising that the backgrounds of all top of the leader of Rajbanshi political parties in ‘the movement’ are *jotedar*. A contemporary KPP (progressive) leader says that Rajbanshis were belonged to the *jotedar* class. They were also *jotedar*. Mathabhanga town was built on their land. All tea estate were built on Rajbanshis land or built forcefully on their land².

Actually our main motive is to discuss the distribution of power. But leaders of Rajbanshi movement has always mentioned their past regional power for own interest. Regionally they moved for a separate state for Rajbanshis to redistribute the past or feudal power by the democratic movement. Because, top leaders of the movement of Coochbehar as well as North Bengal has realized the fact that without democratic process, such as vote, they cannot achieved their desired goal regionally.

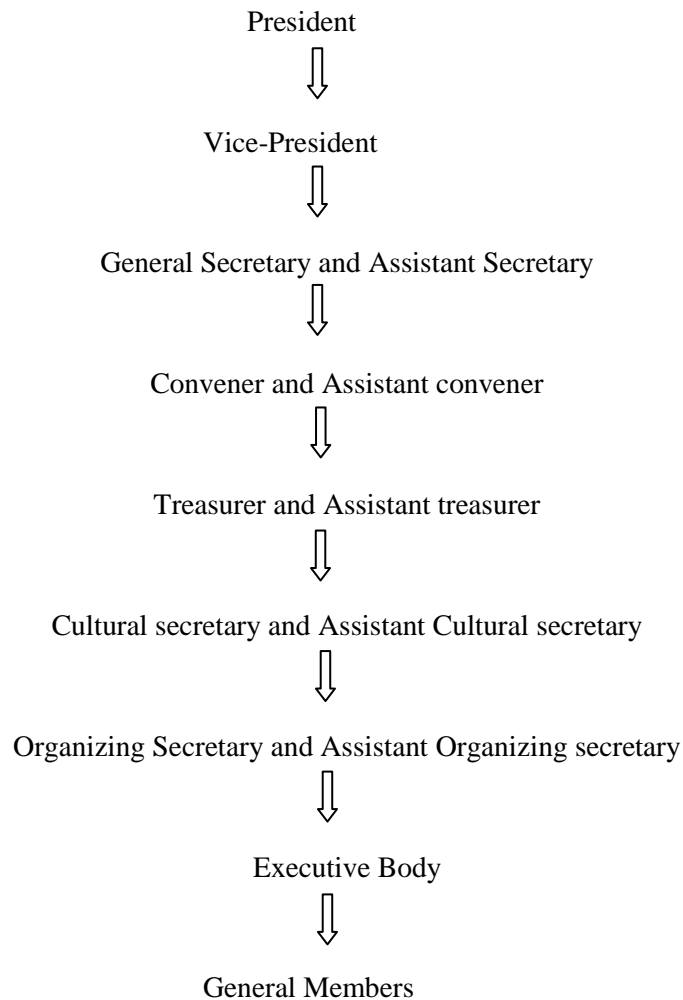
Section II

Political parties and their structural formation help to establish this regional identity of Rajbanshis in recent times. I have gone through the four political parties of Rajbanshi movement. These parties are KPP (peoples’ party), KPP (progressive), GCPA and GCDP. Structural formation or very specifically structure of power is same for all parties. Power distributed into six levels through different committees.

¹ Cited in Beteille, Andre, *Caste, Class and Power*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1966, p. 143.

² Interview of Atul Roy, leader of KPP (Progressive Party), dated – 20/05/2014.

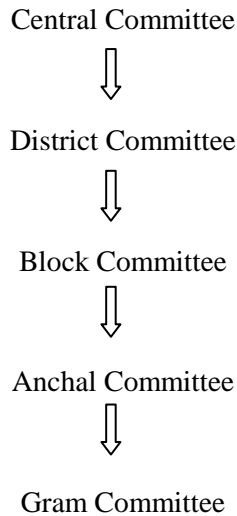
These committees are central, district, block, anchal, grampanchayet and booth level. Each committee has stratified into several power positions within the parties.



As we all know that president enjoy the top position or very specifically ‘power’ in every political parties and vice-president always helps him to conduct the party. Below president general secretary who enjoy the second power and his assistant get the same power in absent of general secretary (There is only one general secretary in a political party. Each party has propagated from central to both levels. So the existing position of the secretary must be change districts to booth levels. Such secretaries are – district secretary, block secretary and so on). Below general secretary, there is a position of convener who calls meeting, protest march etc by the order of president. Then president decide what should be next. Convener is helped by his assistant. Below convener treasurer which is a most important designation of every political party. Every party always collects their fund to promote the party. Treasurer calculates cash. Each member of every political party contributes money as donation for the development of the movement and miscellaneous expenditure for party. All cash are collect by the treasurer. In this context, it is necessary to mention here that a contemporary KPP (Peoples party) leader who is in bail accused to the top leadership. He has stated that on 27th Nov. 2000 when 1200 supporters of this party were arrested, top leadership took huge donation from party members and villagers. And then, one of them cheated all money and bought car, built a house by the fund. He also says that during that period when they were in jail the leader did not keep in touch with the family members of arrested supporters. Their family

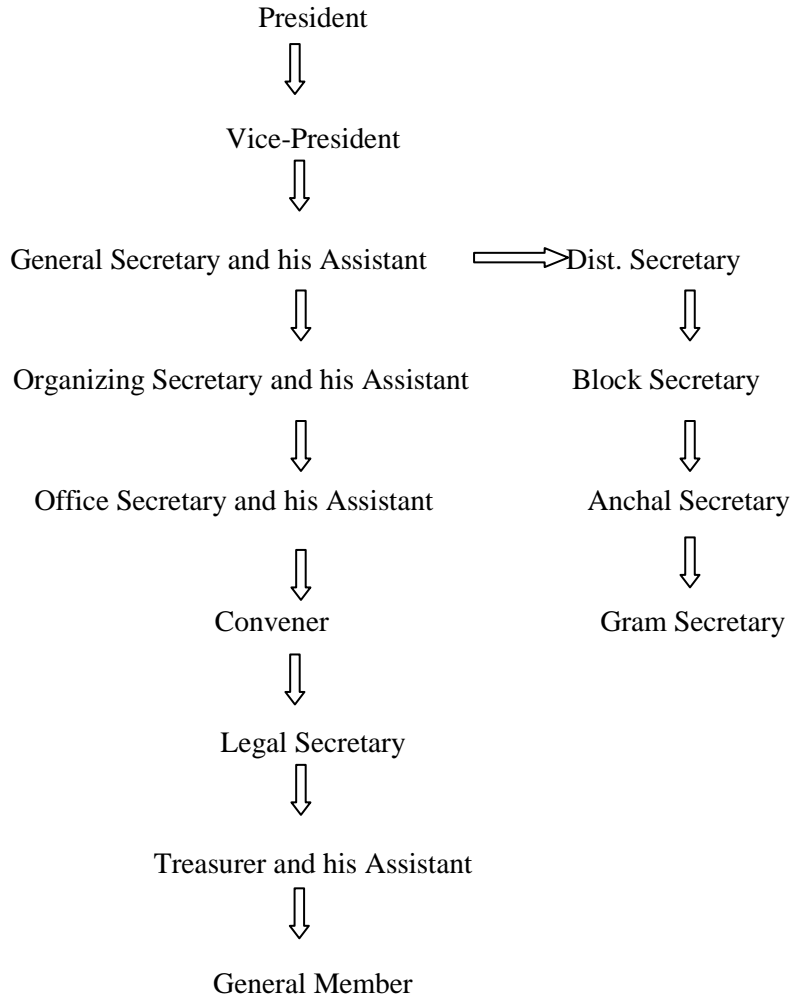
members are spent those days as begging and daily labourer. For that reason, after their bail, supporters excluded the leader from the party³. Anyway, treasurer is always helped by his assistant. Below treasurer cultural secretary upholds the cultural power of the Rajbanshis by a political platform. This is the most important designation in the context of Rajbanshi identity politics. Cultural secretary deals with different aspects of a community and brings it to the public by different cultural programs which organized politically within the region. Though the power monger, political parties are still carrying their own political culture. They confined in their own demands, as – the Rajbanshis need a separate state, they are molested, and deprived etc. And the most concerning matter is that, now they don't claim their *Kshatriyatwa* anymore. Now they identify themselves with the 'Koch' for wider caste solidarity in North Bengal and Assam. Next the organizing secretary, who works in the lower rank of the cultural secretary, takes an important role in this matter. The role of the organizing secretary is to organize people and drive the party in a disciplined way. There are a number of members who works under an organizing secretary. An executive body is formed for the sake of mass movement by these members and obviously by the order of the president. And the remaining members enjoy the power of an ordinary or common member in every political party.

It is important to mention here, that according to the secretary, GCPA not a political party, but an association. All but its structure is similar to every political party. They do not believe in Gram Panchayet. The structural formation of this association is as follows –



The association divides its power into many parts in a large village, but in a smaller one there is only one committee. Here is its hierarchy –

³ Interview of Bimal Roy (on record), an ex-activist of Kamtapur People's Party, 175 Dhuliya khalisa, Uchalpukuri, Mekhliganj, Coochbehar, On record, Dated – 11. 04. 2013.



It is necessary to mention that, the post of legal secretary of such Association is only for central committee. The duty of the legal secretary is to supervise the sub committees under central committee. But it is quite surprising that the all are in favor of Vote Boycott because they are still support monarchy, which I have mentioned earlier. And the surprising fact is that, the top leader of them is called *Maharaja*. Not only has that, the followers made a palace for their Maharaja at Chakchaka, near Coochbehar town under his leadership. This palace is also the organizational head office of this Association in the entire North Bengal and Assam.

Now, we can say that the leaders of Rajbanshi movement has claimed a separate state in both democratic and undemocratic way where power is extended to gram or village and booth level.

Section III

In contemporary time, power depends on both in economy and politics. Politics of forum helps to distribute these branches properly among various ethnic parties within North Bengal. Actually, North Bengal is constituted with many caste groups. Such groups are Gorkha Lig, Adibashi Bikash Parishad, Morcha and Kamtapuris or Rajbanshis. Each group has their different demand(s) which poise the notion

of movement within the particular community. Actually, forum is a regional political institution which wants to organize the whole caste groups/parties under a banner of regional identity separately.

Forum gives a shape of big party by the unification of all small parties. This is a joint stage which reveals the fact of separate state movement for Rajbanshis of North Bengal. Within Rajbanshi caste movement there are many wings or parties which I have mentioned earlier. Every party's have their own ideology and these ideological conflicts have divided them into several parties. These parties moved for a separate state for Rajbanshis of North Bengal but every group of people may be live in their proposed state⁴. Their proposed state is constituted with 11 districts of Assam, 6 districts of North Bengal and 2 districts of Bihar⁵ and by that proposal a new party was formed on 24th Oct, 2006 under the banner of Greater Kamtapur United Forum⁶. Forum constituted with Kamtapur Progressive Party or KPP, Greater Coochbehar Democratic Party or GCDP and All Koch-Rajbanshi Students Union or AKRSU⁷. To occupy the power, sometimes plain and mountain area of North Bengal both are alliance with each other⁸. Leaders opine at that time, "we are oppressed, neglected in plain area; people of mountain area are also oppressed in the same way"⁹. This alliance was not a new drama. In 1949 in Darjeeling Coochbehar Hitasadhani Sabha, Gorkha League of Darjeeling, Praja Mandal of Sikkim and the delegates of Jalpaiguri Gorkha League also had an alliance with each other¹⁰.

By the name of Kamtapuri movement in North Bengal and Assam several organizations are developed day by day. This organisational development and lobbying within this community gradually take into a new shape or bonding. These lobbies have a strong subjective bonding and values. These lobbies consider them into a one community¹¹ and their values are same within this region¹². It is interesting that within a region leader have a strong understanding of power distribution. This strong understanding we will observe from the following speech:

"Our main goal is to occupy two separate states through vote. For the proposed separate state we will continue our movement into democratic process. Under CPIM leadership in North Bengal, we are oppressed and this is the time to free from their oppression with separate states. We will follow the non-violence policy of Mahatma Gandhi."¹³

"We will do our movement jointly. Primarily our main motive is to free from the oppression of CPIM"¹⁴.

"We want to end the rule of CPIM. For this reason, movement will continue for separate states."¹⁵

⁴ Interview of Bimal Roy (on record), an ex-activist of Kamtapur People's Party, 175 Dhuliya khalisa, Uchalpukuri, Mekhliganj, Coochbehar, On record, Dated – 11. 04. 2013.

⁵ Bartaman, Daily Bengali News Paper, Siliguri, Dated- 28.11.06.

⁶ Barman, Lalit Chandra; *Rajjer Dabite Uttarbange Andolan*, N. L. Publisher, Siliguri, 2008, pp. 43.

⁷ Bartaman, Daily Bengali News Paper, Siliguri, Dated- 25.10.06.

⁸ Barman, Lalit Chandra; *Rajjer Dabite Uttarbange Andolan*, N. L. Publisher, Siliguri, 2008, pp. 43.

⁹ Bartaman, Daily Bengali News Paper, Siliguri, Dated- 28.11.06.

¹⁰ Barman, Lalit Chandra; *Rajjer Dabite Uttarbange Andolan*, N. L. Publisher, Siliguri, 2008, pp. 44.

¹¹ Phanindra Nath Barman, leader of GCDP told me that Rajbanshis are belonging in Koch. In this perspective Rajbanshis of North Bengal and Assam are belonging in a same category (on record). Dated- 29.05.2013.

¹² Bartaman, a Bengali daily news paper, Siliguri, dated- 05.05.2008.

¹³ Speech deliberated by Bimal Gurung, leader of GJM. Bartaman, a Bengali daily news paper, Siliguri, dated- 05.05.2008.

¹⁴ Speech deliberated by Atul Roy, KPP leader. Bartaman, a Bengali daily news paper, Siliguri, dated- 05.05.2008.

¹⁵ Speech deliberated by former GCPA leader Ashutosh Burma. Bartaman, a Bengali daily news paper, Siliguri, dated- 05.05.2008.

(The Mass gathering has organized by Gorkha Janamukti Morcha, Greater Coochbehar Peoples Association and Kamtapur Progressive Party on 4th May, 2008 at Sanghati Maydan, Dinhat.)

This mass gathering has jointly organized by the leaders of GJM, GCPA and KPP (Progressive) on 4th May, 2008. From the above speeches readers will be understand that the understanding lies on the basic factors of power. These political leaders have no ideology which I have mentioned in the third chapter. For this reason, under banner of regional proposal or regional demand or separate state demand one ethnic group or supporter from any social movement join with another social movement to show their strength within the recent political environment or parliamentary political ground¹⁶.

Actually caste solidarity, caste connection and power are interrelated with each other. And forum helps them to concrete the concept of dominance. Here ideology does not matter. But by the achievement of power territorial dominance is most important in this context. For this reason, proposed state by Rajbanshi caste leaders is now dominated by different parties. Actually 'parties are always structures struggling for domination'¹⁷. These parties are well known by regionally and ethnically. For example, within Rajbanshi caste movement there are two parties, popularly known by their proposed state, Kamtapur progressive Party and Kamtapur People's Party. These two parties are co-related with contemporary demand of Greater Coochbehar. Side by side two parties GCDP and GCPA are co-related with that demand. The last organ of this forum is AKRSU which is known by the synonymous form of the name of the caste, Koch and Rajbanshi. It is necessary to mention here, contemporary Rajbanshi caste leaders do not believe that they are Kshatriya. Leaders believe that they are Koch. Indeed, this contemporary thought reveals the fact of struggling that strengthens the power of forum as well as regional power which are the base of contemporary identity politics.

¹⁶ Barman, Lalit Chandra; *Rajger Dabite Uttarbange Andolan*, N. L. Publisher, Siliguri, 2008, pp. 44.

¹⁷ Ritzer, George and Douglas J. Goodman, *Classical Sociological Theory*, 4th Edition, McGraw Hill Companies, New York, p. 212.