

## Movements in Cooch Behar: Focus on Economic Perspectives

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*'Can the subalterns speak?' – Gaytri Spivak (1988)*<sup>1</sup>

Gayatri Spivak's question is very poignant. The study of the subalterns is a major study area of people's history. Yet, researchers at large have remained silent, or at best, mute spectators as the powerful wheels of globalisation have rolled on relentlessly over the trampled rights of the subalterns. The subalterns have also remained silent as economic prosperity and elitist history have crushed their dreams. The benefits of GDP-driven development have not reached the bulk of the Indian workforce which continues to remain largely employed in the unorganized sector, characterized by low wages, underemployment and negligible social security. This paper is an honest of Cooch Behar district, a marginal district of West Bengal. Only with the development of the subalterns will sustainable development of the society take place, even as Bishnu Dey's 'Jal dao' poem in 'Ánwistho' harps the plight of the subalterns from the days of independence.

*'Look around at the homeless people, panting in the shades,  
At the parks, camps, roads, porticos of the mansions, lying on hard stone-slabs,  
What goes on in their minds, do they search for their homeland  
Where should they go....'*<sup>2</sup>

*'Historically, it has always been the powerful who have spoken or been spoken of.....as a feminist and a subalternist, I am used to looking at the pores of elite texts to tease out excluded itineraries.'* – Gaytri Spivak (2007)<sup>3</sup>

From independence to globalisation, India has made the giant leap from being a developing country to a Newly Industrialized country of G8+ Category. 'The developing nations' is no longer a coherent category.<sup>4</sup> However, the subalterns have remained a coherent category. Under the guise of globalization, there has been displacement and deprivation, exploitation and suppression of the subalterns- so much so that regular economics can no longer provide a rational theory for the current conditions of the subalterns worldwide. True, local dynamics have shaped the metamorphosis of the term 'globalisation' as newer terms like 'glocalisation' have entered into the lexicon of elite literature. But, global capital continues to expand by paying sub-standard wages to workers and at the expense of subalterns, who are often forced to migrate from their homeland to urban areas as bulldozers and machineries, factories and buildings sprout up on the rural landscape and the poor, displaced people are forced to work in unhygienic and unhealthy conditions under the leaden skies, as depicted by Thomas Hardy in his poem 'The Subalterns'.

*'Poor wanderer,' said the leaden sky,  
'I fain would lighten thee,  
But there are laws in force on high  
Which say it must not be?'*  
*'We still are aliens*

*The thought sets my heart ablaze  
Stiff are our hands like old bamboos  
But they say: "we are king's inheritors"  
We sold all our herds and homestead  
To beg for alms*

*Ike homeless monks  
 Mahajans sucked our bones dry  
 Good old days haunt as we close our eyes  
 Villages are now empty fields, balding cremating ground  
 Times, they are a changing,  
 Times, they are all new  
 Let a generation sprout in the northern croft.'*

'We still are Aliens' by Tushar Bandopadhyay. Tr. J. Prodhani<sup>6</sup>

A classic example of the subalterns is the Rajbanshis of Cooch Behar where Scheduled Castes form 50.1% of the total population.<sup>7</sup> The very ethos of the culturally rich Cooch Behar is exemplified by its indigenous people, the Rajbanshis. Yet, the history of the erstwhile state of Cooch Behar is written from top to down, that is it is written at the instance and the viewpoint of the rulers. As Gramsci (1976-78) had pointed out subalterns are subject to the hegemony of the ruling class.<sup>8</sup> That is exactly the reason why the soil of Cooch Behar had given birth to many movements, both social and political, involving the Rajbanshis during the last two centuries.

*'I hate to use a toga worn by a Rajbanshi'*<sup>9</sup>

The above reaction of an upper-caste Maitreya Brahmin advocate at spurning the toga used by Ray Saheb Panchanan Barma was testimony to the fact that the Rajbanshis were held as inferior and second class citizens by the upper castes. However, The Rajbanshi Movement which was led by Ray Sahib Panchanan Barma in the latter stages, was a momentous development in the history of the Rajbanshi community. The first period (1891-1901) was the formative stage characterized by simple protests made to the Superintendent of Census Operations to make a distinction between *Koches* and Rajbanshis in the 1891 Census. The second period of the Rajbanshi Movement (1901-1919) coincided with the rise of Ray Saheb Panchanan Barma. The third period of the Rajbanshi Movement (1919-1935) coincided with the post First World War period. The Montagu-Chemsford Reforms Act was enacted whereby Rajbanshis hailing from poor economic background were ensured reservation faculties in the government jobs. The Rajbanshis of Cooch Behar were recognized as Scheduled Castes. The Kshatriya Samity started bringing out the monthly 'Kshatriya' magazine. Panchanan Barma and Upendra Nath Barman participated in the All India 'Kshatriya Sammelan'. Panchanan Barma, Nagendra Narayan Roy and Upendra Nath Barman contested the elections and became members of the Legislative Council of Bengal. In 1935, Panchanan Barma breathed his last in 1935. The spirit of the movement was kept alive as the fire of discontentment was stoked alive by the divisive policies adopted by the British rulers. Cooch Behar continued to enjoy self-rule and self-independence for three years even after India threw off the British yoke (Bagchi, 2012).<sup>10</sup>

*'A drop of water, after merging into the sea, loses its very existence. Similarly, Cooch Behar, after the merger with West Bengal will lose its separate identity. The people of Cooch Behar will be deprived off their statehood. The Maharajas of Cooch Behar will cease to wield any power. There will arise problem in the dispensation of justice. The people of Cooch Behar will not get fair justice'*

The above eloquent lines of the one of the popular speeches of the *Prajahitasadhani Sabha* reflect the sentiments of the subalterns of the region. The exact birth of the Cooch Behar Hitasadhani Sabha cannot be pinpointed with accuracy.<sup>11</sup> While according to others, like the well-known communist Birendra Chandra Dey, the Cooch Behar Hitasadhani Sabha was first formed during the period 1944-45 (Bagchi, 2012).<sup>12</sup> But, what cannot be denied is the very fact that the slogan raised by the Cooch Behar Hitasadhani Sabha was '*Bhatia tarao*' or in other words 'drive out the outsiders' reflected the subaltern spirit. But, the objective of the Cooch Behar Hitasadhani Sabha was not attained as with the signing of the Bharat Bhukti Chukti on 28 August 1949, the once princely State of Cooch Behar was united with India forever.

From 1969 onwards the Uttarkhand Movement started taking shape<sup>13</sup> The genesis of the Uttarkhand Movement lay in the *Kamtapur Muktapradesh* Movement. As Sukbilas Barma (2007) had opined that '*Kamptapuri is nothing but fruitless waste of energy and genius.*'<sup>14</sup> From 1980s onwards the Uttarkhand Movement started taking a anti-State nature by demanding a separate independent Kamptapur State that would spread from Dhubri in Assam in the north to Malda in the south. It is to be noted that the proposed capital of the to-be-formed independent Kamptapur State would be Cooch Behar. On the 24th of September, 1985, under the presidency of Panchanan Mallik, the 22 member Central Committee of the Uttarkhandi Party was formed in Moynaguri in Jalpaiguri. A shadow ministry was also formed with its head being Rukmini Ray, who was Congress leader from Dhubri. The then Cooch Behar MLA Prasenjit Barman who was a Congress leader, had made arrangements for the meeting of the Uttarkhandi Party with Indira Gandhi. The Congress leader from Assam, Dharanidhar Basu had given a clarion call to all the indigenous people of not only Cooch Behar but also from neighbouring Jalpaiguri to break away from West Bengal and to merge with Assam. These movements were different from the Rajbanshi Movement as Ray Saheb Panchanan Barma had never demanded a separate Cooch Behar State.<sup>15</sup> But, what cannot be denied that at different points of time, the subalterns of Cooch Behar did manage to break the barrier of silence and attempt to voice their grievances and demands.

The subalterns were suppressed by the hegemony of the ruling class, for example, the Kshatriya Samity of the Rajbanshis did not get the support of the upper caste administration<sup>16</sup> This sense of social exclusion further swelled when the princely state of Cooch Behar was transformed into a district of West Bengal this gave rise to the Greater Cooch Behar Movement. Like the Rajbanshi Movement, the Greater Cooch Behar Movement can be divided into three periods. The first period is from 2000 to 2005, when the Greater Cooch Behar Movement had reached its peak. The second period is from 2005 to 2012, when the Greater Cooch Behar Movement subsided with the emergence of many factions in the absence of proper leadership. The third period (2012- ?) coincides with the consolidation of all the factions under the freed Bangsi Badan Barma. The Greater Cooch Behar Peoples' Association (GCPA) had put forward their view that the declaration by the then Chief Minister of West Bengal, Bidhan Chandra Ray was clearly against the Bharat Bhukti Chukti of 1949. They decided on a fully fledged implementation of the Bharat Bhukti Chukti which had recognized the Cooch Behar as a 'C' category state in the Constitution of India. They expressed the view that an 'A' category state like West Bengal has no right to run the administration of a 'C' category state. The strongest faction of the GCPA led by Ananta Ray has already declared that it will not work with Bangsi Badan Barma as it does not recognize him as their leader. Just a few days back, Bangsi Badan had organized a 'Rail Roko' agitation on the rail lines near the New Cooch Behar station and after a few days, the police resorted to forcibly remove the protestors, Bangsi

Badan fled the scene. So, the Greater Cooch Behar Movement meanders on in the absence of a unified leadership.

A study of the economy of Cooch Behar has been done taking into account the population, total workers, cultivators, agricultural labourers, marginal workers, non-workers and the industry by taking recourse to available data from the censuses.<sup>17</sup> It is seen that the population of Cooch Behar has been constantly increasing, though the rate of increase in population has slightly decreased during recent times. Taking 1961 census as the base year, overall, the population in Cooch Behar had increased by nearly 2.25 times upto 2001. The number of total workers in Cooch Behar over censuses 1961 to 2001 had shown steady increase over the years. The rate of increase in the number of total workers was the highest in the 1981 census, thereafter the rate of increase had decreased somewhat. Taking 1961 census as the base year, overall, the total workers in Cooch Behar had increased by nearly 2.33 times as compared to 2.25 times increase in population in Cooch Behar during the same period 1951-2001.

Table 1: Ratios of Total workers, Cultivators, Agricultural Labourers and Non Workers to the Population of Cooch Behar (1961-2001)

Year	Population	Ratio of Cultivators to Population	Ratio of Agricultural Labourer to Population	Ratio of Total Workers to Population	Ratio of Non Workers to Population
1961	1019806	0.24	0.02	0.32	0.68
1971	1414183	0.19	0.04	0.28	0.72
1981	1771643	0.15	0.08	0.29	0.71
1991	2171145	0.25	0.15	0.31	0.69
2001	2256180	0.16	0.13	0.33	0.67

Source: Kar & Ray, 2012<sup>18</sup>

Over the censuses 1961-2001, it transpired that only 30% of the population of Cooch Behar was a part of the total work force. Nearly 10 percent decrease in the percentage figure of the cultivators which means that they had become land losers and were converted into agricultural labourers or had emigrated elsewhere out of Cooch Behar in search of fruitful employment. It was seen that the number of cultivators in 2001 census has actually increased from 329642 to 361840, representing only 1% increase of the total population of Cooch Behar. But during the same transition phases, the number of agricultural labourers had come down from the figure of 319642 in the 1991 census to 285426 in the 2001 census, which represents a decrease of 2% of the total population of Cooch Behar. So, the question that naturally arises is that where have the people who left the occupation of being agricultural labourers gone to? The obvious answer that they became cultivators is not correct, as there was only an increase of 1% of the total population who entered into cultivating. There has been no growth in industry in Cooch Behar during the same period. Only a negligible amount, that is only 1% to 2% of the population of Cooch Behar are engaged in the household industry. Again, the actual number of people engaged in the trade and commerce in Cooch Behar actually hovers around only 1% to 2% of the population of Cooch Behar. Then the only possible answer is that they have migrated to outside Cooch Behar in search of employment, as the traditional agricultural sector could no longer provide them with the sustainable means of living. Unlike the household industry or trade and commerce, the percentage of non-workers to the total population of Cooch Behar is

consistently very high, hovering around the 70% mark. Corresponding to the increase in non-workers, the number of marginal workers has also increased. Especially in the transition phase after 1991, the rate of increase of marginal workers in 2001 census was as high as 6.16. The ratio of marginal workers has increased to 10% of the total population of Cooch Behar in the 2001 census. This figure along with the nearly 70% of population who are non-workers add up to nearly 80% of the human resource of Cooch Behar which are either unemployed or marginally employed.

From the above discussion, it is seen that the economy of Cooch Behar has employable adults but there is lack of employment opportunities in the absence of large enterprises. Traditional agricultural sector is almost saturated. Sizeable portion of the employable labour force that are marginal workers point out that some of them do not have employment all through the year. This is called bad employment. If bad employment is taken as employment for less than 150 days in a complete agricultural year in analyzing the rural employment, it is seen that even in Self Help Groups (SHGs) provide for some employment opportunities, especially to the female work force. (Kar & Ray, 2015).<sup>19</sup> The employment in SHG households is comparatively better than that of non-SHG households. But, still given the huge available employable workforce, other livelihood means need to be searched for. For example, in another recent study, it was seen that the yield rate and the income generation capacity, as a whole, of this water-melon crop along the sandy and barren river land is consistently very high in comparison to any traditional crop or co-opted crop produced in this region (Barma, Das & Kar, 2015).<sup>20</sup> So initiatives like introducing watermelon production on a large scale on the barren river beds of Jaldhaka river and elsewhere, along with the traditional crops then can be used the unused labour power of the traditional crop year in an optimum manner.

The time has come to address the needs of the subalterns by targeting to eradicate rural poverty by restructuring rural agricultural structure, either by redistributing land or by introducing different forms of agricultural alternatives. Research studies should be done to address the origin, needs and condition of the migrants from Cooch Behar who travel to other parts of India in search of employment. A few steps have been taken in the right direction, both from public and private efforts. For example, a new Technical College is being set up at Harin Chowra in Cooch Behar which will impart employable skills to the people and train them be better equipped to handle higher-skilled jobs. Also, shopping malls and township are being planned to be constructed near the National Highway which will generate more employment opportunities. However, the need of the hour is to set up industrial manufacturing units at Cooch Behar, which may be agro-based. Only with the growth of economy and development of the region, can the needs of the subalterns be addressed to in right earnest and empower them to stand up for her own rights. Otherwise, they are destined to further hardship, trials and tribulations.

*'Cooch Behar, my proud mother  
No one more delicate than her  
Lotus, hyacinth, lilies abound  
On streams and ponds all around  
Plantations and supari (areca nut) trees  
Homestead, rows of bamboo like bows  
.....  
Still are Aliens'*

-‘Cooch Behar’ by Upen Ray. Tr. P. Acharya <sup>21</sup>

## Notes and References

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