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## **Politics of Identity and Fragmentation of National Character: A Study of Three Regional Movements in West Bengal**

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**Abstract:**

*Identity politics in a globalised world is a misnomer. Identity is a concept that means belongingness. This concept of belongingness is the root cause of all conflicts and uncertainties in the contemporary world. This paper attempts to negotiate identity politics in terms of nation's fragmentations with reference to the Indian context. The strong national identity that was crafted during the period of struggle for freedom in India disappeared immediately after the attainment of independence. The process of nation building was met with serious contestation. People began to think in terms of fragmentation, exclusion, separation rather than integration. Peoples are being divided in the lines of majority-minority, local-outsider, son of the soil-immigrants, hills- plains, tribals and non tribals and so on. To reconcile one's self with nation's self political structure of each just society should reflect a dialogical paradigm among the diverse cultural communities within that society. Preconditions like freedom of expression, agreed procedures, and basic ethical norms, participatory public spaces, equal rights, a responsive and popularly accountable structure of authority and empowerment of all citizens are to be maintained. Public policy should be framed in such a way that can preserve minority cultures, resist pressure of assimilation, and enjoy equal cultural citizenship and interaction with dominant culture.*

**Key words:** *identity, minority culture, fragmentation, assimilation, dialogical, exclusion*

### **1. Introduction**

Identity politics has now become one of the most influential and controversial themes in the field of modern politics. Negotiating identity politics in a liberal democratic system like India\* is a Herculean task for the social scientist. In common parlance, identity politics may be defined as a movement based on such markers as tribalism, ethnicity, gender, racial or sexual attachments. A serious debate has been going on among the social theorists about the impact of identity politics in the public sphere. Approaches to the study of identity politics are of many and embodies different types of views. The first, the identity politics based on the markers of ethnicity, language, gender, race or, sexuality entail a problem of nationalism within nationalism. It often creates demand for a separate homeland, leading to intra-national problem in the sense that one's imagined exclusive homeland is actually a shared homeland of many friendly or conflicting communities into reality. As a result, one's demand for separate homeland is not valued by the others, sometime creates a serious tensions leading to ethnic cleansing or other kind of hostility. Thus, many social science theorists believe that identity politics is to be contained, for, group identity narrowly defined and aggressively sustained can be a serious hurdle to a wider sense of inclusive solidarity, people hood, or, community and in the long run be a determinant of fragmentation of national character. The second view finds its manifestation in a recent collection, "Social Theory and the Politics of Identity of Craig Calhaun (1994a). In this book Calhaun challenges wide spread perception that the identity based politics of racial-ethnic groups, the women's movement, the gay movement, and other self assertions by excluded peoples represent something new. According to Calhaun (1994b:3): "Identity formation on most models--- including for example, Habermas's famous theory of the public sphere--- prepares one for entrance into the public arena. It gives one individual strength and individual opinions. Conversely, the public sphere calls on one to put to the side the differences of class, ethnicity, and gender in order to speak as equals. And it thereby makes it all but impossible to thematise those very differences as the objects of politics instead of as obstacles to be overcome before rational political of the collective will" "since the assertion of individual or collective identity is rooted in desires and aspirations that cannot be fulfilled, identity movements are open ended, productive and fraught with ambivalence". Calhaun argues that this generative 'tension' is the source of identity politics that aim not simply at the legitimization of falsely essential categorical identities but at leaving up to deeper social and moral values (1994c:29). Collective assertions of identity may thus be simultaneously to the manipulation of leaders such as Slobodan Milosevic and to noble community aspirations and self-scarifying moralities. In liberal democracy being a way of life having faith on cultural diversity, pluralism and preservation of identity of all social groups, assertion of one's identity appears to be quite natural especially in a diversified country like India which has people from all the religion in the world, where 114 languages were spoken by 10000 or more people, more than six hundred tribes have been identified by the state governments of which many of

them are conflicting with each other and heterogeneous in character,( Mahajan, 2005) for example, Naga and Kukies in Manipur, Garo and Khasis in Meghalaya, Karbis and Dimasas in Assam.

## 2. Identity Movement in West Bengal

The history of identity movement in West Bengal is not of recent origin. One can trace the origin of identity politics prior to independence. The present paper is an attempt to locate regional identity with the national identity with reference to three regional movements which have been casting its shadow in one form or other in the state politics in West Bengal. North Bengal as a nomenclature is not present in the official map of West Bengal. In common parlance, North Bengal is the northern part of West Bengal comprising six districts of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur and Malda .As per 2001 census, the total population of the region 14.72 million which was 18.35 per cent of the state of West Bengal. The region is predominantly rural. The district of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Dinajpur (both Uttar and Dakshin) are characterized by incidence of higher proportion of SC population (well above the state average). In Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts the ST population accounts for a sizeable proportion i.e., 21.0 per cent. The districts of North Bengal were also characterized by low level of literacy rate, low level of industrialization and low level of per capita income. Besides, diversity and disparity are the characteristic features of the region. Available statistics indicates that in terms of three main civic amenities, i.e. electricity, safe drinking water, and sanitation, the districts of North Bengal are poorly placed in comparison to the districts of south of West Bengal. All the districts of North Bengal were characterized by low level of literacy (50.13%, 2001), where in the rest of West Bengal, it was 61.70 (ibid, 2001) so as the level of very poor per capita income except the district of Darjeeling (Report on Comparative Backwardness of North Bengal Region: A Study Sponsored by Planning Commission, Government of India, 2002). The North Bengal region is also culturally diverse, ethnically multifarious. **Rajbansis**<sup>1</sup>, an indigenous group of eastern India, is considered to be the earliest settlers in North Bengal (Basu, 2003). They are predominantly numerous in the districts of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri (Census, 2001). Apart from them, Nepali, Bhutia, Lepchas, Sherpa etc. are the major tribes in the hill areas of Darjeeling whereas Santhal, Munda, Oraon, Rava, Toto constitute majority in the **Duars**<sup>2</sup> region. In addition to Rajbansis and tribes, a sizeable proportion of population in the region belongs to other communities who migrated from East Bengal, now Bangladesh form twentieth century onwards. Due to this large scale migration, the process of acculturation was a dominant trend and the indigenous people gradually abandon their distinctive culture with the pressure of these external social forces, which ultimately created identity crisis among the indigenous people (Basu, 2003) leading to at least three regional movements based on identity, language, ethnicity etc.

### 2.1. Gorkhaland Movement

Gorkhaland Movement had its origin in 1980s. But demand for autonomy had existed in some form or the other since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but more particularly in 1940s. Demand for recognition of Nepali Language, employment opportunities, separate administrative unit—all these issues, were raised in one form or other long before the present agitation( Chakrabarty,1988). Autonomy movements in the hill areas of Darjeeling were presented in three different ways (Dasgupta, 1999). The first was represented by the Hillman,s Association under the leadership of S.W. Ladenla ( 1876-1936), a retired Additional Superintendent of Police in Darjeeling. The second type of demand came from the educated middle class and the third from the Nepali working class engaged in tea plantation led by the communists (Ibid). In these demands they expressed grave concern on the aggravation of the economic problems in hills during the last decade of the colonial rule. It was in 1943 that the Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League (ABGL) of Damodar Sing Gurung<sup>3</sup> came into existence and put forward the demand for autonomy with broader social base claiming among others the recognition of Nepali language in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution (Constituent Assembly Debates, (Proceedings), Vol. VII, 4<sup>th</sup> November, 1948) . In the 1980s, however, the autonomy movement, took a violent shape with the emergence of Gorkha National Liberation Front ( GNLF) under the leadership of Subhash Ghising. The GNLF turned to be a militant organization and demanded the separate state of Gorkhaland outside the State of West Bengal. But surprisingly, the demand for a separate state was first put forward by Pranta Parishad, another tribal organization, through their petition to the Prime Minister in 13<sup>th</sup> April, 1980 ( cited from Pranta Parisad by Chakrabarty, 1988:42). Ironically, Pranta Parishad was marginalized by GNLF. Any way, it was at this stage that an accord was signed between the government of West Bengal and the GNLF that led to the formation of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council ( DGHC) in 1988. With the establishment of DGHC, the GNLF gave up the demand for separate state for the time being and entered into a phase of autonomy within the constitutional framework. Within a very short period, there grew resentment against the functioning of DGHC and GNLF in the hills. The main allegations were mismanagement and misappropriation of funds by the leaders and absence of democracy in the GNLF. In a joint declaration, Gorkhaland Sanjukta Morcha, a front comprising ABGL, Communist Party of Revolutionary Marxist(CPRM), Pranta Parisad, National Union of Plantation Workers and some other organizations alleged: “ The GNLF in connivance with the CPI(M) tried their level best to create a total confusion in the national level so far as the movement of Hill People is concerned... but above all the people at large were deprived from their basic fundamental rights”( The State of Gorkhaland: Our Fight for Separation(1907-2000),2000:13). However, the then Left-Front government of West Bengal, appeased their demand granting autonomy by forming Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Development Council(DGHC). But, DGHC was not survived being failed accommodating the identity issue of the Gorkhas and indulged in unbounded corruption. With this resentment against the functioning of DGHC and the dictatorial authority of Subhash Ghising, Bimal Gurung an important aid of Ghising and apopular councilor of DGHC who was later expelled for anti-party activities formed another organization called Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha (GJMM) in 2007. Thus, the demand for separate state was again renewed from 2007 with the formation of GJMM under the leadership of Bimal Gurung. The demand for separate state was vehemently opposed by the non-tribes of the plain areas of Darjeeling district and by the tribes of the Duars region of the Jalpaiguri district. The tribes of the Duars

region are not in favour of the separate state and contrarily they are in favour of the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Subhash Ghising had lost public support in hill areas of Darjeeling district and Bimal Gurung was very much successful to renew the agitation for separate homeland in the hill region as well as in some areas of Gorkha dominated plains in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts. Gurung appealed to all people of the region irrespective of their political lines to join the GJMM so that the hill could speak in one voice to attain Gorkhaland. Again the demand for separate state was met with another phase of autonomy with the change of thirty four years Left regime in West Bengal replacing DGHC with Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA) after signing a tripartite accord among the Central Government, Government of West Bengal and GJMM on 18<sup>th</sup> July 2011. Thus the demand for a separate state was like a magic prop which the leaders of Gorkha people had been using time and again.

## 2.2. Kamtapuri Movement

Like Gorkhaland movement, identity mobilization among the Rajbansis took place in the year of 1996 with the formation of Kamtapur Peoples Party (KPP) under the leadership of Atul Roy demanding a separate Kamtapur State comprising the districts of Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur and undivided district of Goalpara, Assam. But such a demand for separate state is not new. It had its origin in 1947 ( Ghosh n.d.) when Jogendra Nath Mandal, a leader of the Rajbansi Community declared a proposal for separate state comprising the districts of Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur, the Purnia district of Bihar, Goalpara District of Assam and certain parts of Rangpur now Bangladesh and Darjeeling district. What is surprising that Mandal did not include Cooch Behar in the proposed state. However, the demand did not evoke much response from the Rajbansis. The same demand was again raised by the Cooch Behar Hitosadhani Sabha, <sup>4</sup> a small and local group dominated by Hindu Rajbansis and Muslim Jotedars prior to independence. But Hitosadhani Sabha was not consistent with its demand. In the first stage, they demanded that Cooch Behar be made a separate state, at another stage they favoured that Cooch Behar be administered centrally, and finally they demanded that Cooch Behar be made a part of Assam or be merged with Bangladesh. With this self contradiction, Hitosadhani Sabha had lost its relevance and failed to evoke much response from the people.

In independent India, the demand for a separate state was renewed with the formation of Uttarakhand Dal in 1969. The leaders of the movement were trying to building solidarity among the Rajbansis on linguistic and cultural lines. It's key leaders were mainly from the members of the traditional joteder family ( Mukhapadhyaya, 1987). The peculiar feature of the movement was that its leaders believed in electoral politics and contested in elections in the state. However, the movement failed to sustain itself, for the defeat of its leaders in the election with a great margin was a clear manifestation that the movement failed to rouse active response from Rajbansi community. The politics of culture and language did not appeal to the community concerned as the politics of class was more important than the politics of culture and language at that juncture. However, it was the KPP under the leadership of Atul Roy that had acquired an additional significance in the politics of the region in particular and in the state politics in general. The central demand of the KPP was the formation of a separate state consisting of all six districts of North Bengal including the district of Goalpara in Assam. The rationale behind their demand was that The North Bengal happens to be the original homeland of the Rajbansis—who are predominant, Khens, Meche, Kaibartas etc. who constitute sixty-five percent of the total population of North Bengal and who are culturally, linguistically, socially and historically distinct from the Bengalis. They had lost their identity because of the huge influx of migrants from Bangladesh. They had been considering themselves as economically backward and held the then Left regime of West Bengal responsible for their backwardness. The formation of separate Kamtapur State, they believe, is the only way to preserve socio-cultural identity of the Kamtapurians. The feeling of alienation among the Rajbansis, particularly in North Bengal, started with the influx of upper caste Hindu gentry who came from East Bengal, now Bangladesh into the Rajbansi dominated North Bengal in early twentieth century, “ an age of migration” (Castles and Miller, 1998)). Swraj Basu ,a prominent social scientist, writes :

“...With the gradual settlement of upper caste Hindu gentry in what were traditionally the Rajbansi dominated areas of North Bengal the existing balance of local power structure had changed. The immigrant upper caste in course of time had become the most dominant group in the local society, economy and politics. They manned the local administration and by virtue of their closeness to the administrative power and their shrewdness emerged as the dominant land holding class. As they are guided by the traditional Brammical cultural values, the Rajbansis with a tradition and culture of their own failed to get a respectable position in the status estimation of these immigrant upper caste gentry. There were sharp dissimilarities between the cultural practice of these two groups and the gentry treated the Rajbansis as ‘ backward and even antyaj’ ( Basu, 2003)”

Arguing on the same lines another Bengali scholar states:

“The Hindu refugees, who came from the districts of Rangpur, Mymonshing, Panna, Dinajpur, Dacca and others to Cooch Behar after independence had good economic background. They had a strong cultural awareness with a good knowledge of cultivation. In front of their developed culture, modernity of language, education and efficiency the indigenous Rajbansis could not stand anywhere and gradually they lost their culture, language and land. Above all they became minority due to the flow of this immigrant and ultimately they lost their last asset, which was their identity (Nag, 2003)”

Rajbansis were culturally humiliated by the upper caste gentry. They regarded the Rajbansis as backward, uncultured and even antyaj (qtd. in Journal of Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Vol. 10, No. 1,p. 48). In the Rajbansi Caste literature, as also in some contemporary accounts, there were number of references of humiliation of the Rajbansis by the upper caste Hindu. Called as antyaj by the upper caste Hindus, Rajbansis had no right to enter the places of worship on the occasion of any public celebration or pujas or to enter the kitchen in the upper caste households. Even water was not accepted from their hands by the upper caste Hindus ( D.N. Sarkar, 1391 as per Bengali calendar Year). Therefore, existing scholarship shows that a “combination of cultural, political and economic deprivation of the Rajbansis is in a great part responsible for adding to the feeling of alienation and discontent among the community” ( qtd. in North East India History Association’s 29<sup>th</sup> Annual Session, Nov. 2008). In addition to the formation of separate state in North Bengal, they are raising their voice for a number issues that include ( i) inclusion of

Kamtapuri Language<sup>4</sup> in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution; (ii) broadcasting of Kamtapuri Cultural Programmes from the All India Radio Station;(iii) declaring of Teesta Cannal Project as a national project for all round development of North Bengal;(iv) establishing a central university in Cooch Behar after the name of Thakur Panchanan Barma; (v) publishing a white paper on the economic status, culture ,population and ethnic identity of the original people of North Bengal; and (vi) expulsion of foreigners who entered North Bengal after 1971 ( Jana,2009).

### 2.3. Greater Cooch Behar Movement

With the lines of Kamtapuri Movement, an intellectual section of the Rajbansi community mainly from the Cooch Behar district came under the umbrella of a new non- political organization called Greater Cooch Behar People's Association(GCPA) in 1998 with a declared objective for the welfare of the people of Cooch Behar and placed a demand for separate statehood. A faction of this party formed another party named 'Kamtapuri Pragatishil Party' which participated in the assembly elections in 2000. Off late the demand for separate State has been gaining a significant momentum when some regional ethno cultural political parties like KPP, Greater Cooch Behar Democratic Front, Kamtapur Progressive Party etc. came on a common platform. Cooch Behar, one of the most important princely states of British India, got merged with Indian dominion on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1949 and it was categorized as class 'C' State under an agreement signed by Mr. V.P. Menon, the then advisor to the Govt. of India and Lt. Col. His Highness Maharaja Jagadweependre Narayan , the last king of Cooch Behar Kingdom . On the historic occasion of handing over of power, Honourable Home Minister, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel sent a message to Sri Nanjappa, Chief Commissioner of Cooch Behar on the eve of formal handing over function:

On the handing over of Cooch Behar to Central administration, I send to its people my best wishes and assurance on behalf of the Govt. of India that though far, their interest welfare will claim our close and intimate attention, I am fully aware of the many problems, political and economic, which affect the state and I am confident that with their co-operation and assistance we would succeed in solving them in the best interest of the state and the country for their happiness and prosperity, unity and mutual adjustment between the constituent elements of the population are essential pre-requisites without this such resources and personnel as we may be able to spare for them would avail little.

I hope therefore, that the people of Cooch Behar will work with single mindedness and devotion to duty as a united team for their own betterment and to achieve their due place in the political and administrative set-up of India.

To accept transfer of territory from a ruler is no small responsibility which we feel on this occasion. To give up sovereignty over territory is no mean sacrifice. I am grateful to him for the spirit of accommodation and understanding which he has displayed and the prompt manner which he accepted our advice.

May he and his people be happy, prosperous under the new dispensation which is being inaugurated today.

(Patel's Correspondences, 1945-55, Compiled by Durga Das, Vol.7 page 553)

But ultimately Cooch Behar was merged with West Bengal which is an 'A' category state with a denial of political aspiration of the native people of Cooch Behar. The leaders of the Greater Cooch Behar Movement believe that if Cooch Behar be made a 'C' category state, their political aspiration will be fulfilled and all round development of region will be possible. Thus, the merger of Cooch Behar with West Bengal, they demand, is illegal.

### 3. Conclusion

The socio-politico, ethno cultural identity movements that are discussed above seem to be confusing and overlapping each other. It is confusing in the sense that all the three regional movements are taking place in the same region. They are overlapping in the sense that they are demanding territories of some other states which may create interstate disputes, even challenging national identity. Now, how to reconcile the ethnic identity with identity of nation's cape? This is problematic. Very few modern nations, as the critic of ethnic approach to nationalism pointed out, are actually homogeneous. Indeed, with possible exception of Japan, Korea and Iceland, it is very difficult to find examples of modern nations that do not contain significant ethnic diversity (Catriona Mckinnon, 2008). So diversity in culture, language, tradition is a fact of modern life. But what is important is that such diversity is the root cause of most conflicts, tensions and uncertainties in the contemporary world. When "right to self-determination" is to be attained, a "war" against an enemy is to be won, "foreign rulers" are to be expelled from the country, only at that point of time people thought in terms of nation (Watson, 2002). As soon as the nation formed, foreign rulers were expelled, people-communities, classes, religious and ethnic associations began to discover new foci as their sources of identity and self respect (Ibid, 2002). This is the dilemma that post colonial nations are confronting with. India is no exception to this post colonial dilemma. The strong national identity that was crafted during the period of struggle for independence disappeared immediately after the attainment of freedom. The process of nation building was met with serious contestation and thinking in terms of fragmentation, exclusion, separation had been gaining prominence in Indian nation's cape giving birth a syndrome of "majority-minority", "local-outsider", "son of the soil- immigrants", "hills and plains", "tribal and non-tribal, and even inter tribal and intra-tribal. Migration being a worldwide phenomenon had been largely responsible for bringing a change into demographic, economy and social structure, and a new cultural diversity, which often brings into question national identity (Castles and Miller, 1988:4). How to reconcile ethno cultural identity with national identity—seems to be a difficult task for the social scientists. Where person's sense of belongingness is intimately and unavoidably bound up with their cultural identity then what the state can do if it wants the nation or national identity to survive. It can do one of two things. First, it can try to destroy multicultural dimension of society by rooting out all the cultures except one which will become a dominant culture, (Watson, 2002). But there is the possibility of mischief. At the extreme it may possibly lead the kind of genocide that happened in the twentieth century in the form ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia. But unfortunately in one way or the other some so-called apparently liberal democratic states adopt this kind of mono-cultural adventure through the policy of " coercive assimilation", " their schools, legal

system, qualification of citizenship” etc. But pluralism is the present day reality. So, task seems sociologically impossible and democratically infeasible. The alternative to any attempt to mono-cultural society is to celebrate and encourage multiculturalism in the expectation that citizens who are proud of their culture and see that culture being endorsed by the state will be anxious to join common citizenship with members of other social groups to protect the liberal tolerance which is important for them. But unbounded multiculturalism should be avoided as it promotes “assimilation” rather than “integration”. Assimilation which requires minorities to abandon their own distinctive culture, institutions, and values is morally untenable and sociologically unlikely to succeed in view of the people’s deep adherence to normative values. So, this is morally unjustified as it does not accept the values and institutions upheld by the society. So, these two approaches are not unilaterally sufficient to address the issues of identity, ethnicity, exclusion etc. As each nation is (an) “imagined community..... because the members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet , in the mind of each lives an image of their community’ ( Benedict Anderson: 1991). Thus it is difficult to create a cosmopolitan view of society among its members. Nation is essentially a belief system, based on collective cultural tie and sentiments. These convey a sense of identity and belonging which may be referred to as national consciousness (Seton-Watson: 1977, A.D. Smith: 1986). In the ultimate analysis, as long as one’s affinity to one’s community will exist, thinking in terms of region, identity, ethnicity, separation, exclusion .etc will tend to be flourished. In most cases, group identity is asserted in opposition to others rendering the solution more complicated. For example granting autonomy is a constitutional solution in case of India to address the issues of separatist movements. But autonomy unites (Maras<sup>5</sup>) as well as divides (Mara-Lai<sup>6</sup>) people as in case of North East India and Gorkhas and Lepchas in case of Darjeeling. Liberal democracy needs to go beyond toleration and accommodation of other cultures to a dialogue with them and this dialogue has to be institutionalized. This is known as “dialogical approach” for which Bhiku Parekh deserves special mention. The political structure of each just society will, however, vary, for it ought to reflect and be a product of an equal dialogue of the diverse cultural communities within that society. Amongst its preconditions are ‘freedom of expression, agreed procedures, and basic ethical norms, participatory public spaces, equal rights, a responsive and popularly accountable structure of authority and empowerment of all citizens’ (Parekh 2000, 340). It is also likely to require giving encouragement and support through public resources to minority cultures which may be suffering from oppression and marginalization, to rebuild confidence, resist the pressure of assimilation, enjoy equal cultural citizenship and interaction with dominant cultures enrich society for all ( ibid, 108).

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