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Dissenting Voices and Transformative Actions Protest Movements of Tribal Sections in North Bengal

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
	The paper seeks to highlights how the protest movement of the tribal sections of North Bengal in West Bengal region has gone through the transformative actions with dissenting voices. This paper actually tries to explain protest movement from the theoretical perspective within the broad canvas of pan-Indian outlook where political process plays a significant role in making collective identity of any movement in terms of protest generation.

Introduction

Recently North Bengal has been witnessing changes of profound socio-economic and political nature arising out of the interactions between the demand and aspirations of the people of this region and the changing political social and economic conditions. The northern part of the state of West Bengal is composed of six districts and is marked by the existence of hills and plains, distinct socio – historical, cultural and ethnic compositions, primarily agricultural background with very little industrial development. The main sources of the economic foundations are tea, timber and tourism.

Against such background the tribal unrest in the plans of Jalpaiguri and some parts of Darjeeling district have brought to the fore a number of issues which had never been addressed and which did not come to the surface. So long a 'melting pot' theory' has been generally accepted – a theory which suggest that all different kinds of ethnic, religious, linguistic and other group could be put in a 'single container' with the expectations that all will live together with a spirit of accommodation. But of late a new trend of politics of asserts can be noticed all over North Bengal in recent past. The rising tensions in the hills of Darjeeling over the demand of separate statehood named 'Gorkhaland' has triggered of serious controversies which has in a large way influenced the so called 'melting pot theory'. Closely following this the tribal assertions in this region along with Kantapuri or Greater Cooch Behar have added new dimensions to these very vital aspects.

Protest Movement - The Conceptual Idea:

Broadly speaking, protest movements are actually the efforts to redefine or recapture the past, to restructure the present and reorient the future (Oommen, T. K., 1990)**.** These movements involve a wide variety of collective attempts in which the participants organize themselves to bring about change in certain social institutions or to create an entirely new order or to resist a change (Heberle, R., 1968; Bhattacharjee, C., 1996). Thus, protests have specific objectives to be achieved, an organizational structure, and may also have an ideology oriented towards change - whether positive or negative in its character. Yet, there are a number of theoretical frameworks that claim to explain the structural conditions and

motivational forces that give rise to protest movements. The most important of these are: (1) Theory of Relative Deprivation; (2) Theory of Strain; and (3) Theory of Revitalization (Yasin, M. & P. K. Sengupta, 2004). The theory of relative deprivation centres around two different parameters - social mobility and social conflict. The basic thrust of the theory is that where a group of people begin to feel deprived of perceived legitimate share compared to the rest they resort to protests. Although the authors of the "American Soldier" (Stouffer, Samuel A. *et al*, 1949) were the first to use the theory of relative deprivation, however, it was Merton (1968) who systematically developed the theory in relation to reference group and applied it to analyze social mobility. Later, Runciman (1966), following Merton, developed the theory in relation to problems of inequalities and social justice. Here the relative deprivation was made the basis of a study of social mobility.

The strain theory, propounded by Neil Smelser (1963) treats strain as the underlying factor leading to mobilization and collective behavior. Smelser considers, from the structural-functional framework, strains the impairment of relations among parts of a system leading to the malfunctioning of the system and thus finds deprivation under strain. To him, structural strain occurs at different levels of norms, values, mobilization and situation. Thus, strain provided the structural condition for dissent and the crystallization of a generalized belief marks the attempts of persons under strain to assess their situation as well as to explain the situation by creating or assembling a generalized belief. When stain and generalized belief are accompanied by participating factors a movement is triggered off.

The theory of Revitalisation was championed by Wallace (1964). According to the theory; people seeking cultural revitalization usually first of all realize the culture as a whole and move gradually towards a movement for cultural change. Wallace argues that protests develop out of a deliberate, organized and conscious effort on the part of members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture for themselves. He observes the dynamics of protest movements for cultural revitalization in four phases: period of cultural stability, period of increased individual stress, period of cultural distortion and consequent disillusionment, and period of revitalization.

In all these theories, what is common is the prime emphasis on the participants of protests movement. The assumption is that if the people feel deprived of, or are under strain, or feel the necessity for the cultural revitalization, protests emanate, as if other factors and conditions will automatically follow. To accept this analytical framework in its totality is to oversimplify the reality. May be that there exists the objective conditions for protests, namely, deprivation, strain and/or the urge for revitalization but mere presence of these necessary conditions will not lead to protest movements unless driven by a driving force - leadership, ideology and organization. It is true that at the initial stage of a protest movement there may not be any well defined organization and ideology and once the movement gets triggered off, organization and ideology get articulated.

The Cartographic Symbol of Politics:
The tribal population of North Bengal could be classified into three groups based on their location in three distinct socio-economic setups: (a) the nepali speaking tribes in the Darjeeling Hills, both in tea gardens and outside, (b) the Central Indian tribes in the agricultural setup of Malda, South Dinajpur, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts (in Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri districts there are tribes of Mongoloid racial stock that have migrated from the North-East and Nepal), and (c) the central Indian Tribes which constitute the labour force in the tea gardens in the Terai of Darjeeling district and Dooars of Jalpaiguri district. In the plains of North Bengal Santali, Oraon and Mundas are the major tribal groups.

According to the 1991 census about 33 percent of West Bengal tribal population live in North Bengal. As per 1991 census the total population of North Bengal is 12,036,292. Out of total population 10.47 percent belongs to the tribal community. The tribals of North Bengal are historically (mainly of the tea garden belt) who came from Chota Nagpur region have been living in this region for generations and have adapted many cultural and rituals of the majority of the inhabitants of these region. Naturally in this face of this politics of assertions by them has raised a number of issues which demands immediate interactions on the basis of well constructed theoretical frame work and consequent policy imputes.
India since independence pursued welfarism of a kind and at the same time increasingly performed the function of reproduction of the order and the damage-repairing work by periodically coming up with welfare programmes to support the victims of exploitation. In the Nehruvian model of national developmental project, which was also followed by the latter regimes until eighties, the state, at least theoretically, had a firm control over the market. The Indian state in the pre-globalisation period combined capitalist growth with 'welfare packages' for the vulnerable in order to defer the legitimation crisis.

As such, India, like other plural societies, has been witnessing a spurt of protest movements during the last four decades, especially since the seventies, and these protests emanate mostly from the plural character of Indian society leading to a situation which Kohli (1991) designates as the "crisis of governability". India has moved from stability to instability and has even acquired the reputation of a "functioning anarchy" (Singh, Y., 1973; Srinivas, M. N., 1966) in the face of these protest movements that aim at expressing dissent from conditions of powerlessness, deprivation, injustice or loss of identity and seek various remedial empowerment and entitlements. Under the circumstances, an understanding of the

protest movements in India in general and tribal sections in North Bengal is particular, actually inevitably requires an analysis and understanding of the social, economic and political dynamics of the system involving major contradictions operating at different levels.

In so far the social contradictions are concern, by the logic of plural society, North Bengal exhibits heterogeneous presence simultaneously of modernity with tradition; relatively developed urban centre with all the modern facilities and amenities with the backward rural peripheries; the presence of caste hierarchy as a social phenomenon having large scale political penetration with pronounced equality; and rampant corruption at all spheres of the society reading to a situation in which the society is divided between the privileged few and the oppressed lot. Undoubtedly, all these contradictions tend to impair the legitimacy of the political system. This manifest contradiction results in a unique norm that the Indian live in one country but in many centuries.

Observers like Morris-Jones (1965) and Weiner (1963) have attempted to encapsulate the process of contradiction and adjustment that is going on in India by arguing that there are a number of "idioms" or "cultures" that are in conflict with each other. The "Traditional idioms" of Morris-Jones and the "mass political culture" of Weiner are found in the rural areas rooted in the kin, caste and communal relations while the "modern idiom" of Morris-Jones and "elite political culture" of Weiner is found in the cities. Therefore, similarly North Bengal also represents a distinct manner of political thinking and its behavior.

In line with the modernity - tradition dichotomy there are exists the rural - urban contradiction. The urban areas are found to monopolize most of the modern and basic amenities of life while the rural areas are left to the basic minimum, even less of the basic needs. In terms of education, health, marketing of products and purchasing for sustained livelihood the rural areas have virtually no option but to look to the urban areas. The consequences become deplorable when the people of the rural areas afford to go to the urban areas for education or for medical purposes. Under the circumstances, they are left to the seemingly predestined option of remaining uneducated or half educated, unemployed or underemployed, traditional in outlook and victims of traditional ways of medical treatment by the local quacks. However, during the last few years, the picture has started changing, although, this is a strong force for inequalities in the societies of North Bengal.

Closely linked with social contradictions, the economic conditions of the tribals in North Bengal are also challenging. The tribes of north Bengal are predominantly engaged in agriculture and tea industry and their economy could largely be termed as subsistence economy. The subsistence economy forces the tribal men and women and their children into manual work and they predominantly work as agricultural labourers and tea workers. In North Bengal, the closure and lock-out of tea gardens had become everyday news. At present there are nearly twenty closed tea gardens. And about 95,000 workers are suffering from starvation. They are deprived of their provident fund, gratuity benefit and medical facilities. They have no BPL cards, as they receive ration from tea gardens. Role of trade union leaders is dubious. Often they passively helped the tea gardens owners to declare lock-out in lieu of financial benefit. The region malnutrition, starvation deaths, diseases, joblessness, child trafficking have become a regular feature. Government financial assistance to the workers of closed tea garden s is not regularly paid. As a result the workers are forced to work elsewhere as daily wage labourers.

Since the early 1990s, there has been a shift of policies from mixed economy with centralized planning to liberalization, privatization and globalization of the economy of the country. The resultant policies of liberalization of import-export regime, dismantling of the state-directed detailed planning and development and export-oriented growth have been adopted with the pronounced expectation that such policies would lead to expansion and diversification of manufacturing capacities, stimulation of agricultural production and increased employment generation. The logic for these policies lies in the assumption that the conditions of the poor would improve through the general 'trickle down' effects of an expanded economy. But the experience so far reveals that these policies offer no direct benefits to the poor tribals of North Bengal.

Politics of Identity Formation:
In the Indian socio-political system, a major contradiction revolves around the ethnic and cultural domain - the contradiction between 'nationalism'- an attachment to the broad identity of being Indian -and a variety of what is called sub-nationalisms; cultural, linguistic and ethnic—denoting narrow loyalty or attachment to a particular culture or language or group as constituting primary identity. All these varieties of sub-nationalism actually lead to the regionalization of politics thus extending the contradiction to national integration and regionalization.

Thus, theoretically, there are two schools of thought on the role of impact of these micro nationalistic variations. One school believes that the activities of the groups at micro level certainly hampers the nation-building process and consequently destabilizes the balance of the state system (Kedourie, E, 1960; 1971; Smith, A. D., 1971). The other school does not find any reason to believe that micro loyalties are disastrous moves of the human collectivities to the wart the very basis of the concept 'nation-state' (Enloe, C.H, 1973; Palanithurai, G., 1990). Rather, these may contribute to the strengthening of the nation-state. The period of 'nation-building - the passage from' a nation-in-the becoming' to a

'nation in the being' (Mukehree, Partha N, 1992) - where the 'national consensus on the institutions and mechanisms of the state through which social conflicts get articulated and resolved' is lacking likely to be characterized by internal strife and conflicts over clashing values and interests, over issue of discrimination, exploitation and oppression.

However, in spite of the optimism of the second school of thought, the Indian situation, particularly in the recent past shows something different and alarming. The reorganization of states on linguistic consideration has not been able to contain the proliferation of regional movements. Rather, regional movements on ethnic ground having secessionist as well as autonomy orientations have been going on with considerable intensity and as such, pose threat to the very foundation of national integration and the nation-state itself. All the movements indicate the divide between secular national identity and primordial regional identity. The institutional and procedural incapacity of the political system to tackle and resolve these conflicts further aggravate the perceived feeling of deprivation, discrimination and oppression of one group by the other. Logically, the feeling further widens the gap between nationalism and regionalism and the alienation of the deprived section from the mainstream of the Indian political system.

The post 2007- Gorkhaland movements in North Bengal do not pose serious threat to the unity of the country though they substantially impair the integrity of the society. The basic thrust of the Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha (GJMM) was for a separate state of Gorkhaland so that the alleged Bengali hegemony over the hill people could no longer be there. Thus, it was the movement of the hill people with distinctive identity against the 'Bengali hegemony'. And the gap between these two identities has not yet been bridged even though partially the demand of the GJMM has been fulfilled with the formation of the Ghorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) and asking inclusion mouzas in Terai and Dooars in North Bengal.

Similarly, the northern part of West Bengal, particularly the districts of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, and Siliguri sub-division of Darjeeling district is witnessing a movement since the 1980's. The objectives of this movement range from mere assertion of cultural identity based on language and heritage, to a separate state of 'Kamtapur'. The movement is being spearheaded by the All Kamtapuri Students Union (AKSU), the Kamtapur Peoples Party (KPP) and the militant outfit, the Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO). Here, too, the objective is to assert the separate Rajbanshi identity against the Bengali hegemony.

Thus, all these movements reflect the divide or contradiction between two attachments -nationalism and regionalism. Against this background the study of tribal assertions by the name of 'Adivasi Bikas Parisahd' (AVP) is really significant. The Parishad claims that 80 percent of the populations in the Dooars are tribes; the Nepalese constitute only around 8 percent of the population. They argue the population of the tribes is more than 1lakh and there are 200 units of parishad in the Dooars and Terai. On that regard they are claiming autonomy. The Dooars and Terai has been a under developed region since independence. Despite one parliamentary (LS) and 5 legislative assembly constituencies in Dooars and one Legislative Assembly Constituency in Terai region reserved for Scheduled Tribes (Adivasi) and there 315 mauzas in Dooars declared as ITDA, neither the central nor the state government could do any remarkable headway for development of these areas or upliftment of the people of the said areas.

Conclusion:
Given all these contradictions operating at different levels in this region, economy and polity, protest movements should not be viewed as sudden outbursts, nor should they be confined to apparent context. The protest movements could neither be explained through the theoretical frameworks available, as earlier mentioned, because the notion of deprivation and urge for cultural revitalization is essentially psychological while the state of structural strain leading to malfunctioning of the system and resulting in deprivation is relativist. The assumptions in all these theoretical frameworks is that when people feel deprived of, or is under strain, or feel the urge for cultural revitalization, protests emanate, social, cultural, ethnic, economic and political factors that are political factors that are the sources of deprivation have not been properly covered in any of these framework.

Similarly, there are also some flawed understandings to the origin of protest movements in general as if the protests are made to originate and thus, artificially cultivated for narrow sectional interests under the garb of universal community interests. This mode of understanding is flawed because unless objective social, economic and political conditions pose threat to consciousness and identity of a section of the community leading to a perception of deprivation in social, economic or political spheres of life, passive common masses cannot be mobilized for protest. Protest movements thus cannot be made to originate; they originate if the social, economic and political parameters of the society demand.

Thus, explanations to protest movements in North Bengal should be sought in the broad dynamics of intersections of social, cultural, economic and political parameters of the society. Naturally, it may be observed and argued that the contemporary world has witnessed the resurgence of new verities of protest movements on the one hand and the decline of so-called class-based protest and movements on the other. Looking form a broader perspective, it has been very correctly held that such movements "as an organized actor, remains at the core of social conscience and has acquired renewed significance in the contemporary world to reorient path ways of social progression with assured justice and liberty" (Roy Singha Debal, 2010). Thus, these movements have their profound impact on the nature and direction of

social dynamics which in the long run, change the nature of social tension, crisis, conflict and transformation with the course of social progression. Such dynamics may create new social space, may challenge the existing values, norms and even social arrangements and may ultimately create new culture, ideas, knowledge and social cohesion.

Yet, *"the social space for social movements has become a distinct areas of the system and no longer coincides either with the traditional forms of organization of solidarity or with the conventional channels of political representation . . . the notion of movement itself, which originally stood for an entity acting against the political and governmental system has now been rendered inadequate as a description of the reality of reticular and defused forms of collective action"* (Melucci, A., 1996). Nonetheless, the tribals of North Bengal represented both protest generation and collective representation for political assertions; maybe there is variety of shades in its reflection.

Scholar like, Polletta and Josper (2001) argued, collective identity is an individual's cognitive, moral and emotional connections with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and it is distinct from personal identities, although it may form part of a personal identity. A collective identity may have been first constructed by outsiders who may still enforce it, but it depends on some acceptance by those to whom it is applied. Collective identities are expressed in cultural materials – names, narratives, symbols, verbal styles, rituals clothing, and so on – but not all cultural materials express collective identities. Collective identities do not imply the rational calculus for evaluating choices that interest does. And unlike ideology, collective identity carries with it positive feeling for other members of the group. Nevertheless, it can be said that there are three essentials, namely social conflict, social or collective mobilization and social change - without which such movements cannot be conceptualized. Any study of protest movement includes within its fold an analysis of social change and social conflict. This calls for an understanding of the structural formation of the society or in broader term, the social system. Similarly social conflicts, in their broad meanings, include aggregates of different interests as expressed through racial, religious or communal manifestations.

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