

The Kamtapur Movement: Intra-State Regionalism in West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

In West Bengal, the study shows that democracy has been on constant trial and the underbelly of democracy has been constantly on the boil with violence that has become structural due to ideological polarity, economic problems and radicalism that threaten democratic values and practices. The Kamtapur Movement is a case in point which shows what happens if an array of demands from democracy is not met. This article focuses on the narrative of the Kamtapur movement, its demands, and implications of the movement and the state government's response at various times. The perspective of the narrative is definitely imperatives for human rights violations which have been a trademark of West Bengal politics. The conclusion is whatever may be the vision of the supporters of the Kamtapur Movement or the state government, there has been lack of understanding on the part of both making the situation more complex and tense.

Keywords: secessionism, violence, radical cultural politics, human rights.

Main Body:

West Bengal is a classic case. The political violence in the state, which this study has highlighted, is largely attributed to the surrender of the state administration to political forces that often prevented them from discharging their constitutional responsibilities fairly. If the police and local administration were fair, West Bengal would not have witnessed such a high level of political violence and the resultant violation of rights.

The Kamtapur movement has been simmering for quite some time. The movement, led by the Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO), formed in 1995, had carried out at least three violent attacks in the latter part of 2013. The last one on December 26 at Paharpur in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal, masterminded by Malkhan Singha, military chief of KLO, resulted in 6 deaths. The KLO was also extorting from the traders and industrialists in its area of operations. The organization is reported to be having a tacit understanding with the Kamtapur Peoples' Party (KPP).³⁴

The KPP, formed in 1997, however, claimed that it demands a unified territory and statehood for the Koch Rajbansis inhabiting the north-east West Bengal and West Assam only, and not cessation from India. The KLO is contrastingly clear in its secessionist demand and is campaigning for restoration of the so-called past independence of a national Koch Kamta Kingdom, which existed during the 12th to the 15th century under the control of the Khen dynasty, with capital near Moynaguri in present Alipurduar subdivision of Jalpaiguri district. The KLO's activities encompass the six districts of North West Bengal and Goalpara districts of North West Bengal and Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Dhubri and Goalpara districts of West Assam.³⁵

The implications of the KLO movement in the sensitive eastern and north-eastern parts gravely affected India's security. The KLO has developed operational and logistical coordination with outfits like the ULFA, NSCN (IM) and the NDFB (anti-accommodation Songbijit faction). The KLO's potential for disrupting civic life and undermining civil administration, particularly in the six North West Bengal districts of Jalpaiguri, Cooch Bihar, Darjeeling, North and South Dinajpur and Malda have been proven.

After Jibon Singh, Chairman of KLO, was arrested in October 1999, and later released by Assam police to wean away other KLO cadres from the organization and induce them to surrender; there has been a distinct change in strategy of the KLO. The organization has lurched towards a more violent path once again. While the Centre may be keeping a tab on the KLO's activities, ground-level coordination towards intelligence sharing and prophylactic operations between the Assam Police and its West Bengal

³⁴Gautam Sen, 'Need for action plan to counter KLO',

Source: www.idsa.in/idsacomments/NeedforactionplantocounterKLO_gsen_280214.html

³⁵Ibid.

counterparts is required along with political initiatives by the Tarun Gogoi and Mamata Banerjee governments.³⁶

Mamata Banerjee, West Bengal Chief Minister, has spoken of stern action against the KLO after the Jalpaiguri blast in 2014. The ruling Trinamul Congress Party had also taken a public posture in early January 2014 of confronting the KLO politically in 72 blocks where the latter is active. It is doubtful whether these steps alone will suffice to contain the KLO. From the perspective of security, strong state-level police action like the 'Operation Shadow', which was undertaken jointly by West Bengal and Assam Police in mid-November 1990 with a measure of success, seems necessary. Coordination with Bhutan is critical for a successful outcome as was achieved when the latter had carried out 'Operation Flush Out' in 2003 to evict the militant outfits from India who were regrouping and training in Bhutan. Strategists feel that as the impact of KLO's activities is more in West Bengal, the state government will have to adopt an internal proactive and long-term multifaceted policy to contain the outfit.³⁷

On the other hand, the KPP's demands concern, among others, cultural protection of the Koch-Rajbanshis---the ethnic group whose interests both KLO and KPP seeks to espouse---and including Kamtapuri (Rajbanshi) language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The approach to the problem in the four affected districts of West Assam, will, however, have to be slightly different. The region is inhabited by different ethnic groups and a convergence of interests of the Koch-Rajbanshis with the others like the Bodos may be contentious. Moreover, the issue of schedule-based tribal status to the All Koch Rajbanshi people is a sensitive one. A multi-prong approach is required that would enable benefits to be afforded to this community by specific targeted government investment on upgrading the educational and skill development opportunities of the Koch-Rajbanshis, without having to include them in the list of Scheduled tribes.³⁸

It is important to note that in the earlier years and even now, the Kamtapuri movement has been supported by different Koch Rajbanshi groups and politicians. Some of them, particularly in Jalpaiguri district's Alipurduar sub-division and Cooch Behar district, had even been able to garner 15000 to 25000 votes in the constituencies they contested in the past West Bengal Assembly elections. The economic conditions prevailing in the Doars and Buxa Reserve areas of North West Bengal, substantially inhabited by this community, are poor. The West Bengal governments over the years have not been able to effectively take up plans for rejuvenating the affected area.³⁹

The Left Front Government was determined to handle both Kamtapuri Peoples' Party and the KLO very severely, putting a large number of them behind the bars for a long time. A part of the civil society came out protesting against the Government's handling of the situation and called it 'state terrorism.' It urged upon the Government to hold dialogues to resolve the issues. But if it did not happen, then the dialogic relation between the Kamtapuri Peoples' Party and the Kamtapuri intellectuals in a major way did not take place either. It is due to this absence of mutual understanding and the lack of a shared vision of the future that both politics and culture suffered---the former failed to throw up a viable alternative vision, while the latter a radical cultural politics.⁴⁰

Some political observers believe that the ruling CPI (M) used the KLO as an ideological tactic to politically isolate those who demand a separate Kamtapuri. This view gains some credence from the fact that, though the Left Front government claimed to confront the demand 'politically', its primary response has been to unleash its security forces to stamp out the movement by force. Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya has even refused to sit across the table for talks with the KPP leaders. In an intensification of the State response to the KLO, Chief Minister Bhattacharya recently held discussions with the Union Home Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, LK Advani, to assess the security situation and secure additional central force requirements of the state.⁴¹

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Girindra Narayan Ray, 'Politics of Identity and Autonomy in North Bengal Perspectives'.

Source: <http://globalvisionpub.com/globaljournalmanager/pdf/1390994165.pdf>

⁴¹ 'The KLO strikes, with a little help'. Source: www.satp.org/satporgrp/sair/Archives/1_8.htm

Concluding Observations

Thus it is evident that West Bengal is not without its share of serious problems. It has been very rightly described as modern India's 'child of destiny'. It has had a chequered history. It was historically born out of a process of turmoil which culminated in the partitions of the country leaving in its wake gigantic problem for this truncated state. Thus we conclude that in West Bengal violence has become structural due to ideological polarity, economic problems and radicalism that threaten democratic values and practices. The socio-political configuration of the state is such that there is widespread absence of caste and communal cleavages. Hence, political ideology had strongly divided the society along class lines. The elitist authoritarianism of the Congress, the massive anti-establishment violence of the naxalite forces, the systematic totalitarianism of the Left Front over the years, and the rise of ethnic constituencies since the 1980s, have all contributed to a cult of political violence in the state.

Politics in West Bengal has thus evolved with considerable human rights violation; both during periods of high anti-government violence unleashed either by the ultra-Left elements, the radical elements of ethnic parties and the retaliatory segments of opposition groups, or even during more normal, routinized periods of policies, where the ruling forces have maintained their control primarily through codes of violence, subtle as well as crude, and the oppositional elements have attempted to emulate their detractors in their strong holds. West Bengal politics, therefore, despite its high voter turnouts and democratic dispensation, has evolved through a discourse of political violence and serious violations of democratic rights of both individuals and groups. A cult of political violence, both overt and covert, has taken root in the state over many decades. Political violence in the state has restricted the working of consensus politics. Violence has been institutionalized by interested groups to make it the only means of political expression. Experiences in the recent past in West Bengal bear testimony to the multi-dimensional effects of political violence. As the hot-bed of revolutionary politics, West Bengal passed through phases of extreme savagery. Here, political parties have been prisoners of the process of violence.⁴² The tenuous and volatile political environment, a declining economy, the growing fragmentation of land, the rights and counterclaims of property in land, a growing gap between civil politics and a politics of incivility and domination, and a manifest failure to bring about an accommodative political culture raised on a reliable foundation of trust and respect, have all culminated to keep human rights perennial hostage to the goodwill of the strong. Needless to say, such goodwill had been scarce in West Bengal politics. It remains to be seen whether the other states chosen in this study also reveals a similar pattern or not. But the political trends in West Bengal have hardly maintained the distinction between normal and violent politics: while the record of human rights violation in periods of armed uprising against the state has been much worse compared to normal times, but a cult of violence and mistrust seems inherent in the politics of the state. The poor record of human rights is thus structural to the state itself. This is exactly what has happened at present. But the paradox of democracy is well set in Bengal and the discourse of violence does not appear to have loosened its grip over the state. This position is unlikely to change unless a new pattern of political behaviour sets in with the emergence of a viable socio-economic order.

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⁴² Sajal Basu, *Politics of Violence: A Case Study of West Bengal*, , Kolkata : Minerva Associates, 1982, p. xi-xii