

Research Article

Exclusion of the Koch/Rajbansi Community of the Princely State of Cooch Behar: Exploring Crises and Complexities

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ABSTRACT

Exclusion or marginalisation has generally been defined as the social process whereby something or someone is pushed to the edge of a group and accorded lesser importance. This is predominantly a social phenomenon by which a minority or sub-group is excluded, and their needs or desires ignored. Social exclusion refers to processes in which individuals or entire communities of people are systematically blocked from rights, opportunities and resources. Exclusion or marginalisation of various communities, especially various ethnic groups including the aboriginal communities, is considered to be a product of colonisation and as a result people at the margin lost their land, were forced into destitute areas, lost their sources of income and were excluded from the labour market. Additionally, marginal groups lost their culture and values through forced assimilation and lost their rights in society. In the context of exclusion or marginalisation of the communities, the objective of this paper is to explore the perceived economic and cultural exclusion of the Koch/Rajbansi community in the princely State of Cooch Behar. The Koch/Rajbansis constituted the most pre-dominant section of the local Hindu population in the Princely State of Cooch Behar. They were a socially homogenous community because there was no sub-caste among them. They have their own distinct culture totally different from the Brahmanical culture. The situation changed over the years with gradual political and cultural penetration of the British colonial authority in the Princely State of Cooch Behar. Consequently as it had happened in other areas of colonial India, a major cultural shift took place in the colonial endeavour to construct 'the native'. The subverted identity crisis of the royal family of Cooch Behar, which was held by the Koch/Rajbansi populace as their cultural icon outdistanced them from their erstwhile cultural moorings. In this way the Rajbansi mass was culturally marginalised. Together

with it the factor of land alienation caused by revenue reforms undertaken by the Cooch Behar government triggering non-Koch/Rajbansi migration in the Cooch Behar State had intensified the process of economic marginalisation of the Koch/Rajbansis. These immigrants got hold of a vast amount of land and gradually established their monopoly over the local administration. Many of the Koch/Rajbansi Jotedars were turned into sharecroppers in the lands that they once owned. Therefore, a complex dichotomous social order was created between the locals and the non-locals on socio-economic, ethnic and cultural grounds.

Keywords: Exclusion, Migration, Land alienation, Cultural exclusion, Marginalisation, Princely State, Colonial period, Ethnic community

INTRODUCTION

Exclusion or marginalisation can generally be defined as the social process in which groups of people are excluded by the wider society. Exclusion is often used in an economic or political sense to refer to the rendering of an individual, an ethnic or national group, or a nation state powerless by a more powerful individual. Social exclusion refers to processes in which individuals or entire communities of people are systematically blocked from rights, opportunities and resources. Exclusion of various communities, especially various ethnic groups including the aboriginal communities is considered to be a product of colonisation and as a result people at the margin lost their land, were forced into destitute areas, lost their sources of income and were excluded from the labour market. Additionally, marginal groups lost their culture and values through forced assimilation and lost their rights in society. In the context of social exclusion of the communities, the objective of this paper is to explore the perceived economic and cultural exclusion of the Koch/Rajbansi community in the Princely State of Cooch Behar.

A HISTORICAL OUTLINE OF THE PRINCELY STATE OF COOCH BEHAR

A discussion on Cooch Behar State demands a study of brief history of Cooch Behar. Cooch Behar, a former Princely State is situated in the far eastern part of northern West Bengal surrounded by Bangladesh, Assam and the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. The political metamorphosis of conquest, superimposition and assimilation ultimately led to the formation of Koch kingdom or the Cooch Behar State in the first decade of the 16th century. The political status of the district has kept on changing, from a Koch Kingdom to a Princely State (1498–1773), then to a revenue paying state to the British (1773–1947) and finally it became a district of the state of West Bengal by its merger with India in 1949 (Mitra, 1953). Cooch Behar State was representing the political aspirations of an ethnic community

namely Koch/Rajbansi through state building process. The state building dynamics appear to materialise in a synergy of tribal political ambience and sanskritisation. From various accounts, though not always consistent and very clear, it appears that before and after the British intervention in the Cooch Behar State, the Koch/Rajbansis, who had formed the major ethnic group of the region, belong to a semi-tribal community (Chaudhury, 1903). Upper-class people and Muslims were very few in number in the Cooch Behar state (Chaudhury, 1903). Naturally, the economy, culture and religion of the Cooch Behar State were primarily represented by the economy, culture and identity of Koch/Rajbansi people. To substantiate my argument of the economic exclusion of the Koch/Rajbansi community in the Cooch Behar state, I have taken the process of land alienation as an indicator. The following discussion will show how the process of land alienation affected the exclusion of the Koch/Rajbansi community.

The economy of the state was primarily agrarian in nature. And the prime source of income of the state was land revenue. For a considerable period of time the Koch/Rajbansis were settled agriculturist, with regional diversity, raising crops mainly using a plough drawn by bullock (Sanyal, 1965). The *Jotedari-Adhiari* system dominated the agrarian relations in the Princely State of Cooch Behar (Ray, 1979). The agrarian structure shows that the *Jotedar* was at the top of the hierarchy. He got land from the Raja or the Government, subject to the payment of rent at prevailing rates. The rent paid by the *Jotedars* was subject to enhancements. The *Jotedars* can underlet their holdings to inferior tenants or farmers, and also transfer all the rights and privileges to their under-tenants. These subtenants or farmers have the power of again subletting their lands to holders of the third degree and so on. So below the *Jotedar* was the *Chukanidar* who paid a fixed rent to the *Jotedar* and the latter could not oust him from the land if he paid the rent regularly. His title to his holding was heritable and transferable. The *Chukanidar* could again sublet the land to *Dar-chukanidar*, and the *Dar-a-dar chukanidar* was the under tenant of the *Dar-chukanidars*. All these under tenants had occupancy rights in the Cooch Behar State (Hunter, 1974).

An *adhiar* or *praja* is a person who cultivates lands on the condition that he gets half of the produce of the crop; he is, in fact, a hired labourer, paid in kind. The *adhiars* had no rights on the soil. But from the year of 1872 the *adhiars* got the occupancy right on the land. Each class of tenants usually cultivates some of his land through *adhiars*. Thus there were *adhiars* under *Chukanidars*, *Dar-chukanidars* as well as *Jotedars* (Hunter, 1974). The most important fact is that the *Jotedars* or *Giris* who were the most dominating class in the local agrarian social structure stayed in villages with their share-croppers, followed almost the same life styles and cultural practices followed by their share-croppers, a majority

of whom belonged to the same community (Ray, 1979). Another important factor to be noted here in this context is the absence of non-cultivating upper caste gentry in the state. But the situation began to change from the late 19th century with the migration of upper caste Hindu gentry in this area. Question comes how did it happen?

ECONOMIC EXCLUSION OF THE KOCH/RAJBANSI COMMUNITY

The process of revenue reforms undertaken by the Cooch Behar government has triggered the process of non-Rajbansi migration in the Cooch Behar state. In order to enhance the revenue and maximise the profit, measures such as land-revenue reforms, rent-revisions and waste-land settlements took place a number of times in the course of little less than hundred years. Due to this settlement activities revenue of the Cooch Behar State went up from 3,00,000 to ~18,00,000 within the period from 1872 to 1927 (Ganguly, 1930). But the total land under cultivation and consequently having been settled with the *jotedars* does not of course show a corresponding quantum change. From a total area of 24,82,183 bighas in 1872 the area increased in 1927 to 25,52,299 bighas, that is, an enhancement of 2.83% only (Ganguly, 1930).

This quantum jump was achieved by conversion of waste-land into arable land, reduction of tax-free land grants and reclamation for revenue purpose a good part of *Debottar* (land donated to the deities), *Brahmattor* (land donated to the priests), *Mukarrari* and other service grants. Under the circumstances it is likely that at every stage of revised settlement a part of the total *Jotes* had been surrendered by the erstwhile *Jotedars* on account of inability to pay enhanced revenue. The *Jotes* thus obtained had been settled with new *Jotedars*, many of them were immigrants from other districts. Originally the *Jotedars* were the cultivators of the soil and the residents of this state. Gradually there was an influx of the immigrants from other districts, they were more intelligent than the Cooch Beharis and they began to grab all real power in the State (Ganguly, 1930). The reclaimed lands were mostly being purchased by the migrants of neighbouring areas. Besides the changes that were taking place in the economic sphere as a result of First World War, subsequent great depression of 1930s and famine in Bengal also severely affected the existing pattern of land ownership in the Princely State of Cooch Behar. A crisis in rural credit that followed the depression compelled many small *Jotedars* to sell their lands. The beneficiaries from the crisis were the merchants, moneylenders and speculators who invested their capital in land. The net result of this development was the transfer of land from the Rajbansis to the non-Rajbansis (Bose 1986). Alienation of land of Cooch Beharis was, therefore, an unavoidable corollary of the process. Further urgency to introduce commercial crops to boost

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revenue income necessitated a new class of revenue farmers. It is needless to say that the burden of rent-escalation has caused a number of structural disorders in the peasant society of Princely State of Cooch Behar. It was seen that the small Rajbansi *Jotedars* had transformed into under-tenants, subservient to a new class of immigrant landed gentry.

Another important factor for the transfer of land to the non-Rajbansis was the migration of a large number of outsiders from the different districts of Northern Bengal to the Cooch Behar State (Mitra, 1953). With spar of immigration of caste Hindus-Bengalis, Beharis and Marwaris as also of Muslim from the neighbouring districts such as Rangpur, Pabna, Noakhali and Kumilla, the Rajbansis of this area underwent a process of cultural assimilation and transformation through both Hinduisation and Islamisation (Mitra, 1953). The attractions of this region were the abundance of land and job opportunities in Government offices as the local people were not in a position to compete. The administrative and the judicial set up (Chaudhury, 1903) created new employment and opportunities for Hindu upper caste having formal English education. As the system of English education did not develop much in Cooch Behar, so for the clerical as well as administrative services in courts, schools and other establishments they required the services of the educated Hindus. This was one of the reasons of the migration of the upper caste Hindus from the south and east districts of Bengal.

As the Tenancy Legislation of 1910 (Cooch Behar Tenancy Act, Act No. V of 1910, Cooch Behar) of the state was more pro-tenant in comparison to Bengal Tenancy act, the agricultural labourers were also attracted to the state for job opportunities. The census figures on migration for the period between 1891 and 1921 in Cooch Behar give us an idea of the volume of migration that was taking place in Cooch Behar (Table 1).

Table 1: Migration to Cooch Behar State (1891–1921)

	From contiguous districts		From other districts	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1891	12997	15192	3262	1201
1901	9165	12531	12668	2255
1911	11000	13000	5000	2000
1921	9000	12000	10000	6000

Source: A. Mitra, West Bengal District Handbook, Calcutta, 1951, Cooch Behar, p. xxxvi.

This large influx of people led to the growing demand for land and a rise in land prices. The local people tempted by the increased prices soon began to sell their

lands leading to the transformation of the local small and middle *Jotedars* into under-tenants, subservient to a new class of immigrant landed gentry (Basu, 2003).

Under the British Administrative system the communication system was also geared up with the opening of the new roads and the Cooch Behar State Railway for traffic in 1893 (Majumdar, 1977). With the opening up of the country by roads and railways it was quite natural to expect that the export–import trade of the state would gradually expand. Thus Cooch Behar became an area of lucrative trade and commerce. So as years rolled on, various merchant communities such as the Marwaris, Gujratis, Bengalis (Gandhabaniks, Subarnabaniks in particular) and Khattris got attracted to the vast business prospects of the state and began to migrate and settle here to exploit the situation. The pioneers in this field were the Marwaris (Saha).

In the Princely State of Cooch Behar, the Marwaris were the leading money lenders. The absence of any landed aristocracy (Administrative Report of the Cooch Behar State for the year 1912–1913) usually seen in the rural Bengal who lent money to the peasants in the Cooch Behar State and non-existence of any state regulation for agricultural loans to the peasants helped the Marwari *Mahajans* to become the money lenders. They usually lent money to the distressed peasants against the guarantee of land to be mortgaged to them. Gradually their early occupation, i.e. money lending or banking helped them to a great extent to become *Jotedars*. It was so because in most of the cases the poor peasants failed to refund the money, which they had taken in high interests from the Marwari money lenders. This helped the Marwari a lot to become proprietors of land holdings (Saha). That a large number of *Jotes* in the Cooch Behar State were being alienated from the original inhabitants of the district and passing into the hands of the Marwari money lenders has been expressed in the various district Gazetteers and official records. But there was no record of any tension or strife between the local peasants and the Marwari money lenders. They have little impact on the nature of the economy and society of the rural Cooch Behar. Though they came across the revenue set up in the state but they had added nothing to the internal forces of change in the socio-economic set up in the state nor had they introduced any external force of change (Saha).

Thus in the Cooch Behar State, the people from outside those who were mostly in the administration and in the business of the state and were perceptively more resourceful than the local inhabitants, grabbed a large number of *jotes*. By 1872 in Cooch Behar 54% of the revenue, paying land had passed into the hands of the outside (Ganguly, 1930). Thus this phenomenon of transfer of land from the Koch/Rajbansis to the non-Koch/Rajbansis became a standard pattern of land-ownership process of Cooch Behar and in course of time it generated a sense of grievance

among the dispossessed Koch/Rajbansi gentry. Therefore, most of the official posts in the Government jobs were fulfilled by the non-Koch Rajbansi population. In this way the Koch/Rajbansi people of Cooch Behar State were economically excluded.

CULTURAL EXCLUSION OF THE KOCH/RAJBANSI COMMUNITY

On the other hand, the process of cultural exclusion or marginalisation of the Koch/Rajbansis was going on simultaneously by two ways. They were culturally marginalised by their own Koch/Rajbansi royalty in one way and by the immigrant upper caste Hindus in another way. The Cooch Behar Royal family and the overwhelming number of their subjects having originated from a singular ethno-cultural background, i.e. the Koch/Rajbansi cultural syndrome, there was not only the relationship between the two in terms of 'patron and clientage' but also a relationship feedback from 'locality to the royal centre'. On the whole, there was no element of cultural binary and so there was no social tension as such. Before the colonial cultural penetration in the Cooch Behar State, Cooch Behar culture could be easily interpreted in terms of the study of human activity. There was no cultural dichotomy between the Cooch Behar Royal family and the Cooch Behar mass. The culture of the royal family was the culture of the rest of the people of Cooch Behar (Goswami, 1917). The rulers of Cooch Behar were the cultural icon to the common people.

But after the colonial cultural penetration in the Cooch Behar State through the establishment of Resident System (Chaudhury, 1903) after Cooch Behar–Bhutan War in 1773, the cultural equanimity of the Cooch Behar state tended to be coming under some cultural strains. The British Commissioners coldly under the influence of colonial requirement and for practical purposes appeared to be initiating the process of Westernisation in the Cooch Behar Royal family (Chaudhury, 1903). The forces released by them gradually gathered momentum and it became further complicated due to the influence of the Brahma movement having been ushered in the royal establishment by one of the queens. Broadly speaking the new cultural forces either singularly or together differentiated the royal family from their Rajbansi clan.

As the British Commissioner became the pilot of the administrative system of the state, it was the demand of the situation that every member of the royal family should be taught the western education. The royal representatives of the Cooch Behar State were not only interested to accept the English education but were also interested to internalise occidental culture. Gradually their authentic culture was completely overshadowed by a mimicry syndrome (Sarkar, 1999).

Not only their mind but also their bodies were colonised (Sarkar, 1999). The Cooch Behar culture lost its homogeneity through the inter-caste, inter-race marriages, through a complete change in spoken language and this de-homogenisation of culture led the process to a complete change in character of culture. As a result of inter-caste marriage, e.g marriage with Maharaja Nripendra Narayan with Sunity Devi, the daughter of Keshab Chardra Sen, leader of Brahma movement, in 1883, and the marriage of Maharaja Jitendra Narayan with Indira Devi, the maratha princess of Baroda, the physique of the children of the Cooch Behar Royal family was totally changed. Nearly all the men in the Cooch Behar Royal family were over six feet and extremely handsome. The men folk were very proud by getting the colour and heights of the colonisers (Devi and Rau, 1982). There was a complete denial and avoidance of native culture among the royal family members. The princes were very much interested in playing cricket and some of them became famous polo-player (Devi and Rao, 1982). The boys and girls of the royal family were trained to play the tennis and to play the western music (Devi and Rau, 1982). Mimicry to the western culture reached to such an extent among the rulers of Cooch Behar state that they also started to name their children as victor like the English names (Das, 1995). For cooking foods they also appointed English cook who had a separate kitchen (Devi and Rao, 1982). The Maharajas of Cooch Behar had always depended over foreign doctors and their prescriptions for their health (Das, 1995). Even they made their palace on the replica of Buckingham palace and the architect was also a British (Devi and Rao, 1982). Understandably Cooch Behar culture lost its mass character, that is, the Cooch Behari character (Devi and Rau, 1982). In this way the identity of Cooch Behar Royal family became a subverted identity. They avoided themselves to be recognised as Koch/Rajbansis. They tried to live on that identity, which was given to them by colonisers. Assumingly, the mental gap between the royal family and the mass widened.

On the other hand, the common people were also in a crisis. Economically, socially, culturally, religiously a catastrophic paradigmatic shift took place. Under the impact of European enlightenment, the rulers of the state since the days of Narendra Narayan set out to English medium schools in Cooch Behar (Chaudhury, 1903). They were found to have lost interests in establishing the vernacular schools. Though the new educational policy had promoted the cause of modern education but its benefit does not appear to have filtered down through the upper most bureaucratic society and the non-Rajbansi immigrants to the level of the Rajbansis in general (Sarkar, 1999). The presence of the non-Rajbansi students in the English medium schools is suggested by the concentration of a large number of non-Rajbansi middle-class gentry in the administration of Cooch Behar.

Another dichotomy arose between them through religion. After the marriage of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan with Sunity Devi, the daughter of Keshab Chandra Sen, the leader of Brahmo Movement, the religion of the maharaja changed (Chaudhury, 1903). The Maharaja embraced Brahmoism as his personal religion and all the festivals of royal family were done according to Brahmo rites (Chaudhury, 1903). But most of the subjects of the state believed in Hinduism. So the religion of the Koch/Rajbansi subjects and the religion of the royalty had started to distance itself from the other resulting in the development of parallel cultural streams. Vaishnavism as one of the principal props of the native cultural framework had suffered a setback. It seemed to have survived as a counter thesis to the new religious doctrine of the Royalty (Sarkar, 1999).

Due to the long stay in Europe particularly in England for education, the members of the royal family of Cooch Behar returned home knowing foreign languages, but they did not know the Sanskrit or Urdu, and most unfortunately they hardly liked to speak the local dialect because they found it difficult to speak the local language (Das, 1995). It is presumable that this led to a serious communication gap between the Koch/Rajbansi royalty and the Koch/Rajbansi mass.

So from the above discussion it can be said that the subverted identity of the Cooch Behar rulers led the process of its de-iconisation amongst the mass. In every sphere of life the Koch/Rajbansi royalty outdistanced themselves from the Koch/Rajbansi mass consciously or unconsciously. The Rajbansi mass could not identify themselves culturally with the Rajbansi royalty. Thus in this way the Koch/Rajbansi mass was culturally marginalised or excluded by the royalty.

On the other hand, the cultural domination of the immigrant upper caste Hindus also marginalised the Koch/Rajbansi subjects in the Cooch Behar State. As a result of the immigration to the state the cultivators did not have the kinsman relationship with the respective migrated *Jotedars*, *Chukanidars*. They felt the absence of heartily relation with the new landed gentry because of their different racial identities (Mukhapadhyay, 1987). As there was no racial similarity between the immigrant *Jotedars* and Rajbansi under-tenants or *Adhiars*, the volume of exploitation has extended. As the most of the *Jotedars* became the non-cultivating *Jotedars*, naturally the sense of belongingness towards the *Jotes* was absent among these *Jotedars*, which also affected the *Jotedar-Adhiar* relationship. It was seen that the Koch/Rajbansi people who once dominated the local society and economy of the state were gradually subordinated by the newly settled dominant upper caste gentry.

The other complexity that developed was the dichotomy between the locals and the immigrants on ethnic and cultural ground. The attitude of the *Jotedars*

belonging to the local ethnic groups also changed substantially as they came in contact with the upper caste gentry. The gradual settlement of the upper caste Hindus in the Cooch Behar State had shaken the cultural autonomy of the Rajbansi people of this region, bringing them closer to the Orthodox Hindu culture (Basu, 2003). There was one section of the Rajbansis who felt the urge to change their existing cultural practices and life style and also the religious practices. But this section of the people was economically more affluent rather than the others (Mukhapadhyay, 1987). They suddenly started to worship the god and goddesses of the upper caste Hindus instead of local deities (Basu, 2003). Now the concept of the sub-castes developed among this community. Discarding their traditional clothes, both men and women started to dress themselves in the fashions of the upper castes in society (Sanyal, 1965). Now they started to disallow the widow remarriage (Sanyal, 1965). They had also started to follow idolatry and the Brahmin priests were invited to officiate their ceremonies. They formed a distinct group within the Rajbansi community (Basu, 2003). Educationally they were advanced than the common peasant folk. This makes one point clear that there was a vertical division within the community. Initially the economic differentiation did not lead the cultural differences within the community. But the penetration of the market forces, administrative and political changes brought a significant change in the local society. As they came in contact with these new forces of change, a sense of exclusion gradually developed among the Rajbansi elite, which affected the intra-community relationship among the Rajbansis (Roy and Choudhury, 1987). This intra-community relationship also affected the social life of the rural Cooch Behar. The affluent Rajbansis started to migrate to towns, send their children for higher education and take up other subsidiary occupation besides their family occupation, i.e. cultivation. All these tendencies of the Rajbansi elites disassociated themselves from the more backward sections of the community and as a result the concept of social equality was replaced by a system of status differentiation (Mukhapadhyay, 1987).

CONCLUSION

So the most important fact, which emerged from the above discussion, is that the common Koch/Rajbansi people were excluded sometimes by their royal kinsmen and sometimes by the immigrant upper caste people in the Cooch Behar State both economically and culturally. Not only that sometimes the illiterate and poor Koch /Rajbansi mass people were marginalised by the affluent and elite Koch/Rajbansi people. This differentiation in terms of social and cultural practices and economic profile within the Koch/Rajbansi community is very important and possibly it sowed the seeds of dynamics of their caste movement.

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