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## Contours of Associative Politics in the Afterlife of the Partition: The Hitasadhani Sabha and ‘*bhatia tarao*’ Movement in Coochbehar

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### ABSTRACT

The very dynamic of the post-Partition displacement and relocation in India determines that the afterlife cannot but be long. Like the rest of the state, after the Partition there was a massive influx of people into the West Bengal district of Coochbehar from the newly created East Pakistan. It goes without saying that this post-Partition influx caused major demographic, economic and social alterations in this district. As a large number of people came within a span of three –four decades, this seismic alteration was bound to alter social-economic-cultural equations. This essay brings out a juncture of the associative politics of post-Partition time of the West Bengal district of Coochbehar. In this essay our study of the Hitasadhani Sabha would show how a dominant section of the host population publicly proclaimed a feeling of aversion and sometimes even intolerance towards the Partition-displaced people.

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### Introduction: Demography and Beyond:

The West Bengal district of Coochbehar has long history of different communities living side by side. In order to bring out the complex afterlife of Partition on the district Coochbehar and study the identity politics, it is necessary to study the situation of this district prior to the Partition of India. Apart from high caste Hindus, this area was also inhabited by people who are categorized as scheduled castes and tribes in different census enumerations. Rajbansi, Koch, Mech, Garo, Dobhasia, Morangia, Polia, Bhutia, Lepcha, Garo, Toto and other castes and tribes, ‘*Nasya Sheikh*’ or local Rajbansi Muslims – all of these



communities together had formed the population of this geographical locale. Oraons and Mundas from Chotonagpur and Santhal Parganas and a sizable chunk of Nepali labourers had formed the labour force of the tea gardens of Duars. But the movement of these labourers remained mostly restricted in and around the tea garden areas. However, in this district as well as in the population of North Bengal, the Rajbansis were the numerically largest group. Also, they were the predominant section of the Hindu population. Coochbehar has never been a densely populated area; rather before 1941 the growth of population remained almost static. But the apprehension of the Partition had led to a steady growth of population from 1941. The decades of 1951-61 and 1961-71 has registered increase of population by 52.45 percent and 38.47 percent respectively. This growth is suggestive of an altered demography, a demography which has now included a large number of immigrants.

Thus the immigration after the Partition has changed the composition of the population of this district. The census reports show that in between 1891-1951 the Hindu-Muslim ratio remained almost static. But in the two decades of 1951-71 the growth rate of the Hindus has surpassed that of the Muslims and it was due to migration of people after the Partition. As the Census of 1961 has enumerated, of 10,19,806 persons of this district a little over 252 thousands were born in Pakistan. The inclusion of Coochbehar state into Indian union in 1951 had propelled an accelerated population growth.

This immigration came to be perceived over time as a pressure by the pre-existing population in this district. Though the pressure was not felt at the very outset, later it came to be felt with successive waves of immigration spanning from roughly 1967-68 and 1971 till the end of the century and even after. The arrival of more and more Partition-displaced persons to this part was bound to produce repercussions. The Hitasadhani Sabha and its politics are situated in this historical setting.

### **Hitasadhani Sabha and Regional Power Dynamics:**

Immediately after the Partition, the Hitasadhani Sabha of Coochbehar came up with their “*bhatia tarao*” (expel the *bhatia*, literally meaning people of the ebb, here denoting all outsiders) agenda. Here the connotation of the ‘*bhatia*’, though remained ambiguous, often seemed to encompass the non-Rajbansi Hindu people who had come much before the Partition to this district. Riots targeting the Partition-displaced people, though not widespread, did crop up at their instigation.

However, the princely state of Coochbehar has never been a state where only the Koch-Rajbansis had monopolised the avenues of power. On the contrary, though at the beginning of the twentieth-century major portion of the population of the state of Coochbehar was Rajbansi; their representation in the offices of the state was far from being dominant. The official language of the state was Bengali, which was used in day to day conversation of the court too. The history of this princely state, in general,



demonstrates that the Maharajas of Coochbehar had always appointed people of merit- irrespective of their caste, language or even province.

Still the non-Rajbansi Begalis had always formed a powerful section among the elites. They had been appointed as local *jotedars-jamindars* and administrative office-bearers. The power wielded by them and the positions monopolised by the non-Rajbansis had the potential to elicit reactions of the Rajbansis, particularly that of the educated Rajbansis. Abbasuddin Ahmed, the noted folk singer from this region represented this section as he voiced detest and unease of the Rajbansis about the monopoly of “*bangali babu*” in the royal court. Dinesh Chandra Dakua, a Leftist Rajbansi politician from this region noted how phrases like “*rajake ghire chirodiner bhatia shashane*”- *the rule of the bhatia enveloping the King* -was often used as a reference to instigate the local Rajbansis against the ‘*bhatia*’ (more often than not signified non- Rajbansi Bengali Hindus).

However, in the 1940s some educated Rajbansis from the upper echelon of the society could become members of the Coochbehar State Legislative Council. It was a prominent shift, as before 1946 in the State council we do not notice any noteworthy representation of Rajbansis. In the election of 1946 Khan Choudhury Amnatullah Khan, who was also the President of Hitasadhani Sabha and Satish Chandra Singha Roy Sarkar, the Vice-President of the Hitasadhani Sabha were elected, and received the portfolios of Revenue and Administration in the court.

There is no concrete record regarding when the Hitasadhani Sabha was founded. The well-known folk singer of this region, Abbasuddin Ahmed has mentioned that Hitasadhani Sabha was founded during 1914-15. Another opinion is that this organization was established on 18<sup>th</sup> May 1947. However, Shri Parbananda Das, a retired Head Master and a member of that organization testifies that it was founded on 19<sup>th</sup> May, 1946. Emphasizing the nature of this organization Ahmed also stated in his memoir that the Hitasadhani Sabha was founded as a “reaction to the dominance of the ‘*bahiragata*’ (outsider) in the administration and society of Coochbehar”. Further, some contemporary Left intellectuals have stressed its pro-landlord character -that it was not against the outsiders per se; that it did not oppose the Marwaris-the money lenders, the big businessmen, who were also partners in exploiting the poor downtrodden people but they targeted only the immigrant non-Rajbansi Hindus.

However, there is no definite answer of whether the otherization of the ‘*bhatia*’ by Hitasadhani Sabha signified otherization of all non-Rajbansi Bengalis of this region. A close observation of the composition of the Governing Committee of the Hitasadhani Sabha, reveals that it represented Rajbansis, Nashya-Shiekhs (local Rajbansi Muslims), and as well as non-Rajbansis. The president of this Party was Khan



Chowdhury Amanatullah Ahmed; Vice President was Dharani Shankar Bhattacharya and Satish Chandra Singha Roy Sarkar; Secretary was Jaladhar Saha; and Assistant Secretaries were – Majir Uddin Ahmed, Kumar Purnendu Narayan, Satish Chandra Roy. All of these leaders were either local *jotedar/zaminder* or the aristocrats. Divided by their ethnic and religious identities these leaders have come together to serve their class interests.

The relationship of the Coochbehar Royal Court and the *Sabha* is also full of ambiguity. The Coochbehar state had not allowed any political organizations in the state earlier- this *Sabha* was the first political recognized by the state. This recognition is also suggestive of a definite shift in the policies of the State. From this perspective, the Sabha was also a unique political organization. Abbasuddin Ahmed, the renowned folk singer associated with Hitasadhani Sabha, testifies that the Maharaja was sympathetic towards the cause of the Hitasadhani Sabha,; and Indrajitendranarayana from the royal family had addressed one meeting at Mekhliganj subdivision. It is very unlikely that, in the princely state of Coochbehar, where political organizations had never been allowed to operate so far, the birth of the first registered political organization had not secured protégé of the royal family.

Whatever equations this *Sabha* might have with the Royal family, their political propaganda demonstrated how they detested the ‘*bhatia*’. They propagated against the “domination of Bengalis” in the state. This antipathy was also reflected in the songs used during the political campaign of the Hitasadhani Sabha. In the first public meeting of the Hitasadhani Sabha held on 19<sup>th</sup> May, 1946, at the Rasmela Maidan of Coochbehar a song was sung by the famous folk singer Abbasuddin Ahmed. Written by his younger brother Abdul Karim, the song was composed in Rajbansi dialect and it clearly pointed that how a *bhatia* should be regarded as the ‘other’, as opposed to ‘us’; that they are burdens on the land and consequently the principal cause of the misery of the local people; -

*“o bhai mor coochbihari re*

*chaturdike jwale suruj bati*

*tomar kyane dekhong andhar raatire*

*bhai re bhai, porar bojha tomra kotdin boiben bhai.*

*balutiti ponkhi kande nijer aahar joter badere-*

*tomrao bujhi neo nijer adhikar*



*bhaire bhai,*

*bhatia ki ar hoire apnar-*

*bhai mor coochbehari re.*

(Oh my Coochbehari brother, there is light everywhere, why only you should remain in dark. Oh my brother, how long will you bear the burden of the ‘other’ people? Balutiti bird is crying for its own meal. You must demand your own right. Oh my brother do you really think *bhatia* can be regarded as our own!- Oh my Coochbehari brother).

During the first public meeting of the Hitasadhani Sabha another leaflet, elaborating the agendas of the leaders of the Sabha, was distributed. It has also called for the expulsion of the ‘*bhatia*’ from the land; -

*“otho re native, jago re native*

*...tarao bhatia sob,*

*gorji uthilo satish singha tuli hunkar rob.*

*eso deshpran jaladhar eso*

*satish sange kori*

*dharonir sathe eso ansar*

*kori gola dhora dhori*

*kothai mojar mojar ei desh*

*gelo bhatiar hathe*

*gelo koto bir purnendu eso*

*khan chowdhurir sathe”*. [Rise oh native from your slumber and evict the bhatia from our land. Satish Singha (Singha means lion) is roaring. Come oh patriotic Jaladhar with Satish, and come Dharani and Ansar together. How wretched our native land has become, everything is under the control of the bhatia. Come mighty Purnendu with Khan Chowdhury to serve our cause].

Later in different public meetings of Hitasadhani Sabha held at Mekhliganj and Mathabhanga subdivisions and other adjoining areas the leaders, again and again, had called upon for the expulsion of



the *bhatia*. This pre-Partition construct of the term '*bhatia*' has now clearly encompassed the educated Bengalis engaged in different professions and Bengali businessmen. However, they excluded the immigrant Rajbansis from this new connotation of '*bhatia*'.

The leaders of the Hitasadhani Sabha, tried to provide practical dividend to the pre-existing people using the state machinery of Coochbehar. They arranged for the remission of fees in Schools and Colleges, formed investigating committees to distribute agricultural loans exclusively among the "*coochbeharis*" (both Hindus and Muslims). During this period, government notifications from the office of the Public Health and Education Minister i.e. S.C.Roy Singha Sarkar had highlighted this "*cooch behari*" tag further. Applications were "invited from the Cooch Behari candidates" to take trainings in Bengal Agricultural Institute at Dacca with a government stipend. One year later, there came another governmental proclamation from the same office that no boy or girl other than a son and a daughter of a '*Cooch Behari*' or of a Coochbehar subject or of a state servant should be admitted without the previous written approval of the Education Minister. However, how far this has been put into practice is not beyond questioning. We do not come across with any reference that the state had barred a refugee child from getting admission in a school. On the contrary, there are ample pieces of evidence that a '*bangal*' or refugee child was admitted to the same school where a '*deshi*'/ '*Rajbansi*' child was admitted.

However, such belligerent attitude of the *Sabha* against the non-Rajbansis must have alarmed them. But the local newspapers and periodicals are completely silent about the activities of this *sabha*, as well as about the repercussions of these activities on society. It seems that the freedom of press in this princely state greatly depended on the good wishes of the Maharaja- who perhaps had preferred to suppress these activities during a time when the future status of the Princely state was to be decided. So we need to depend on the reportage of local newspapers of the contiguous district of Jalpaiguri to know about the socio-political effects of the activities of this *Sabha*. Particularly Dr. Charu Chandra Sanyal, the well-known physician, litterateur, social activist, and politician from Jalpaiguri raised his concern in the *Janamat patrika* against such "divisive politics" of the *Sabha*. He wrote about how such activities had frightened an ordinary non-Rajbansi of this area.

### **Conclusion:**

It seems the *Sabha* could have ensured the support of a considerable section of the local Rajbansi people. Some students of Tufanganj Nripendra Narayan Memorial School had demonstrated support to the organization by boycotting class. When the Hitasadhani Sabha was denied permission to organize a rally at the Mathabhanga town in around 1949-50, it had infuriated a section of the '*deshi*' or the pre-existing



Rajbansis and had delighted the ‘*bhatia*’ people. If there was no overt demonstration of such reactions, there were certainly discussions within the community- as some contemporary writers testify. At the beginning of 1950 a rumour spread that an attack on the ‘*bhatia*’ people was being organized by the ex-Hitasadhani Sabha member Gajendra Narayan Ray Basunia, who was the leader of the ‘*bhatia tarao*’ campaign. This had led to the appointment of Sikh guards in the houses of the money-lenders in Mathabhanga town. Thus, it is evident that the call for the expulsion of ‘*bhatia*’ could instigate at least a fear psychosis among the non-Rajbansis. Although scuffles against the refugees were almost absent in this area, a riot directed against the Partition-displaced did pop up at Baishguri village of Mathabhanga subdivision of Coochbehar district, sometimes in between May-June of 1950. Contemporary writers presumed that the *Sabha* had instigated the people.

But beyond the activities of this Sabha, the ordinary Rajbansis remained mostly tolerant to the post-Partition influx. Even the anti-*bhatia* attitude of the Hitasadhani Sabha was not subscribed by all the leaders of this organization. In his memoir, Dinesh Dakua, a lawyer and a minister of the Government of West Bengal in his later life, writes about his uncle- who was also a leader of the Sabha. He states that Hitasadhani Sabha, as an organization- and Satish Singa was against *bhatia*. But there were other individuals in the organization like his uncle- Abinash Dakua who had refused to endorse this attitude. He had many *bhatia* friends in the Mathabhanga town. They frequently visited their home and they used to share meals as well. During the merger of the Coochbehar state with the Indian union other political organizations also made their presence felt. These organizations also contested the Hitasadhani Sabha and represented different voices.

With the merger of the Coochbehar state with India the Hitasadhani Sabha faded into oblivion. We do not find mentioning of this association in later records. However, the end of Hitasadhani Sabha does not signify any cessation of political mobilizations in the initial years after the Partition. On the contrary, the Partition has opened up new arenas of political mobilizations in this area, whereby the mutual attitude of post-Partition immigrants and the settled population reconstituted each other’s identities.

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