

Socio-Political Mobilization of Kudmis in Junglemahal Region of West Bengal

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Abstract

Kudmis of Eastern India are important peasant community. They are highly concentrated in the Junglemahal areas of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Odisha. They are also scattered in some parts of Assam. Assamese Kudmis were migrated from Chhotnagpur region. After 1950 when the scheduled tribe list was prepared and Kudmis did not find place in the list since then they have been fighting for their identity as scheduled tribe. It is also relevant to mention that in the British era various documents projected the Kudmis as tribe and aboriginal community of India. That's why they demanded to restore their previous identity. It has also been observed that like other aboriginal tribes the Kudmis wanted to elevate their social status as 'Kshatriya' in the Hindu caste hierarchy. This process is known to us as 'Sanskritization'. This paper has tried to find the reasons behind the socio-political mobilization and movements of Kudmis of Junglemahal and the outcomes exploring the recent trends.

Keywords: Kudmi community, Tribe, Socio-Political movement, Junglemahal

Introduction

Historically Junglemahal was a very important region whether it is in the context of demography, economy, culture or politics. This region is now divided and merged into many states like West Bengal, Jharkhand and Odisha. In recent times, this region has been witnessing a new wave of developments. The Kurmi/Kudmi/kudumi community of Eastern part of India staged protest movements for various reasons. Jungle Mahal area consisted the districts of Purulia, Bankura, Paschim Medinipur and Jhargram of West Bengal, in Odisha the districts of Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Sundergarh and in Jharkhand the community also spearheaded protest movements for their long standing demands. Other than the Jungle mahal region, the Kudmis of Malda and Dakhsin Dinajpur district of West Bengal state also joined and extended their support. Several Social and Political organizations have been emerged, some of the prominent among are the 'Adibasi Kudmi Samaj' led by Ajit Prasad Mahato, Purbanchal Adibasi Kudmi Samaj, Kudmi Sena, Abga Kudmi Sena, Kudmi Samannay Samiti, Kudmi Unnayan Samiti, Kudmi Bikash Morcha and United Kudumi Samaj etc. Recently 20.09.22 to 24.09.22 Kudmis of Chhotonagpur region staged demonstrations and blocked rail tracks and high ways resulting rail and road blockade in different parts of jungle mahal areas. The areas of their movement in which rail tracks were blocked Khemasuli (Paschim Medinipur, W.B), Kustaur (Purulia, W.B), Nimdih (Seraikela Kharsawan, Jharkhand), Aunlajori (Mayurbhanj, Odisha) and Bhanjpur (Baripada, Odisha).

Areas in which roads were also blocked were Kustaur (Purulia, West Bengal), Nimdih (Seraikela Kharsawan, Jharkhand), Khemasuli (Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal), Malda (West Bengal) and Aunlajori (Mayurbhanj, Odisha) turning the movement into a new height making a spontaneous mass movement. All strata of People raised their voice to be heard. Thousand of People, not only the youths had participated in this "Rail teka" (rail obstruction) and "Dahar chhenka" (road blockade) protest

movement but also women carrying with their children and elderly people joined the protest movement. Cultural programmes like Jhumur song with dance, Karam dance, Chho Dance, Ahira song, Tusu song etc were performed during the 5 day long "Rail teka" programme giving a message to Central Government as well as State governments of respective states also. To sustain the movement People generously donated foods, financial aid and other resources they need. There were a series of demands but the leaderships put forward the main two long standing demands which were mostly vocal also viz. the reinclusion of the Kudmi community as Schedule Tribe status and the incorporation of Kudmali language in the 8th schedule of the Indian constitution.

After 75 years of Independence, this region remains underdevelopment for long time which were and are igniting resentment of the people. Irrespective of community, caste, ethnic group, religion and sex, the people have been suffering from underdevelopment; not only economically but also in culturally. After the disintegration of Manbhum from Bihar and the accession to West Bengal in 1956, the lives remain more or less unchanged. Rather the region became a super hub of migrating people moving all across the Indian states as day labourers for their bread and butter.

Apart from Kudmi organizations different other community organizations have been established viz. Tapashili jati Bauri Samaj Kalyan Samiti, Kumbhakar (Kumar) Samaj Kalyan Samiti, Purulia Zilla Yadav Sabha, Adibasi Kudmi Samaj, Purbanchal Adibasi Kudmi Samaj, Bharat Jakat Majhi Pargana Mahal etc. All these organizations are working for the welfare of the people of this region and the concerned community in particular.

In contemporary times, We have been witnessing an intensified movement by Adibasi Kudmi Samaj and its allied organization, mainly led by former Jharkhand Movement crusader Ajit Prasad Mahato. After abandoning the party politics he joined the Adibasi Kudmi Samaj in 2015 and organized "Durku Mahajuruahi" (great gathering) at Tamna in Purulia, West Bengal with mass gathering where over a lakh of people gathered to hear him for the very cause of Kudmi people and their deprivation of tribal status making their identity in crisis. In the British Period the Kudmi community was regarded as primitive tribe like other tribes i.e Munda, Oraon, Bhumij, Kharia, Santal etc. From 1872 to 1932, the Population Census conducted by British Indian Government regarded Kudmi people as 'Primitive tribe,' 'Animist', and 'Aboriginal tribe' respectively. In 1913, 3rd May and in 1931, 16th December the then British Government's home department and Judicial department published notifications (No.550 and 3563-J) in The Gazette of India and The Bihar and Orissa Gazette respectively where it was mentioned along with tribes like Munda, Oraon, Santal, Ho, Bhumij, Kharia, Ghasis, Gond, Kandh, Korwa, Male Sauria and Pan; the Kurmis of Bihar and Orissa were also tribe. These Notifications also revealed that these tribes have their own customary rules of succession and inheritance incompatible with the provisions of the Indian Succession Act, 1865 and 1925 and for that reason it was said that certain provisions of the Act to the member of those tribes were inexpedient to apply.

After Independence, a Government of India Order issued on 6th September, 1950 in which declared that only those who were in the list of Primitive Tribes in the 'Census Report of 1931' were to be included in the list of Scheduled Tribes. But the Totemic Kudmis of West Bengal Specially in the region of Jungle Mahal and other areas of India omitted from the Scheduled Tribe list. The reason behind this omission is still unclear and government did not bother to furnish any clarification.

By tracing the history and analyzing the current scenario some reasons could be indentified behind this omission.

Firstly, It is evident to us that Junglemahal was the region of uprising against the oppressors. Through Dholbhum Revolt(1767) Chuar Revolt (1769-1778),Revolt of Tilka Manjhi(1783-84),Kol Rebellion(1820),The Great Kol Uprising(1831-1832),Bhumij Revolt(1832-33),Santhal Rebellion(1854-56), Birsha Munda and his Ulgulan(1895-1900),Tana Bhagat Movement(1914) and during Congress and Mahatma Gandhi led movements the People of this Chhotonagpur region actively participated to uproot the oppressors and the British government to establish a self rule. During the British regime this region had been furcated many times to suit their rule according to the Policy of ‘Divide and Rule’. We have witnessed the same tradition after the Independence also.In 1956 the Manbhum again had been dissected and created a new district Puruliya. The major community of this region is Kudmi community and it is historically proven that they are rebellious in nature and are reluctant to be a slave, in other words they like to be independent and non-interference of outsiders, preferring the profession of cultivation. As they are one of the major community and are cultivators, owned a vast track of land. It is widely believed that if the said community was being included in the Schedule Tribe list, it was impossible to acquire their land to establish major industrial city like Bokaro, Dhanbad, and Jamshedpur.This theory is also supported by anthropologist Dr.Pashupati Prasad Mahato in his mostly debated book ‘Sanskritization and Nirbakization’.

Secondly, The another reason for this exclusion is the Politics of Hinduttva i.e the the Politics of higher castes. To maintain their dominance in administration the higher caste need the support of masses to be elected and to counter Muslim chauvinism with the initiation and propagation of Hindu chauvinism. And for that very obvious reason they tried to transform the identity of tribal people. As they do not follow the rituals of Hinduism, tribes should be kept separate and respect their culture and religion, tribals are the followers of animism. In spite of that they were regarded as the followers of Hinduism. Even today, tribal people are forced to write their religion as Hindu in every official papers as their ‘Sarna’ religion still not codified and recognized by the Indian government.The higher castes attempted to increase the polpulation of Hindu by hindunized the tribal people and in the case of Kudmis they were quite successful to de-listing them. This trend was followed up rapidly after Ramsay MacDonald’s introduction of separate electorate distinguished as “Communal Award” or “McDonald Award” in 1932 for the depressed classes of India, today they known as dalits. This separate electorate proposal was supported by various leaders including Dr. B.R.Ambedkar.

Thirdly, After the establishment of Arya Samaj(1875), Akhil Bharatiya Kurmi-Kshatriya Mahasabha(1894), Hindu Mahasabha(1915 and as a political party in 1933), Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh(1925), there was a major upsurge to transform the identity of tribes all across the country including Chhotnagpur region as Hindu. In this region Akhil Bharatiya Kurmi-Kshatriya Mahasabha had played a very crucial role to the process of hinduization of Kudmis as a Kshatriya status of Indian caste system.The process of “Sankritization” proved the Kudmis of Chhotnagpur plateau to be disastrous state. Simultaneously, We also noticed that there was an anti-Sankritization movement marching on like Gossain Movement (1931 to 1935) but it was failed.

Fourthly, Indian government failed to differentiate the ‘Kurmi’ of Bihar and Northern India and the totemic ‘Kudmi’ of Chhotnagpur region, instead recognized them all as ‘Kurmi’. This generalization and misconception led to the path of exclusion of Kudmi community as a tribe.

After independence, as literacy spread steadily to the remote part of the country and among the people of the community, they became conscious about their identity, culture, history, religion, customs, creeds and above all their rights. Subsequently, people have been organised, united and started protest movements, set up various organization to restore their identity as a tribe. Such organizations in 1970s were Sivaji Samaj, Jharkhand Students Association, Singbhum Kurmi Mahasabha, Chhotanagpur Santhal Pargana Kurmi Mahasabha and Jamshedpur Kurmi Sangha; in 80's Adivasi Kudmi Samaj, Jharkhand Kudmi Students' Association, Aboriginal Kudmi Panch and Central Kurmali Language Baisi. The other Political and Non-Political organizations which stood up on behalf of the Kudmis were Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, Krantikari Yuba Chhatra Sangharsha Bahini, All Jharkhand Students' Union and Jharkhand Sahayak Samiti etc. Recently, there have been several organizations established namely Purbanchal Adibasi Kudmi Samaj, Adibasi Negachari Kudmi samaj, Kudmi Sena, Kudmi Unnayan Samiti etc. Among them the 'Adibasi Kudmi Samaj' is the most vocal and the largest one marking their presence almost all of the blocks of Janglemahal. They have mobilized and sensitized lakhs of people through their movements from 27th Dec. 1987 Jhunjka Conference to recent 20th Sep. to 24th Sept. 2022 Rail obstruction in the districts of Janglemahal region.

The Kudmi community has been struggling long for their identity to be restored back since 1950s. They put forward their several demands time to time to the state and Central governments which are listed below:

1. The reinclusion of totemic Kudmi community in the schedule tribe list which were excluded from the Schedule Tribe list when it was being prepared in 1950. Before that in the colonial era the Kudmis were regarded as tribe in various documents.
2. Recognition and enlistment of Kudmali language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.
3. Recognition and Codification of Sarna religion as the community worshipped nature although the infiltration of Brahminism also visible. The other tribes of this region are also demanding this codification.
4. The preservice of primitive tribe culture as the aggression of Brahminism assaulting their culture.

Above mentions are the core demands of Kudmi community. Beside all these, they have been fighting for social reforms like the awareness of the malpractice of dowry, addiction of alcohol etc.; environmental concerns like banning of felling trees, conservation of forest and animals, preservice of hills etc.

After India got her Independence this community suffered considerably, following a long struggle and much more deprivation, the community gained not much more. The West Bengal government has taken some initiatives for this community and their concerns, which are the establishment of 'The West Bengal Kurmi Development and Cultural Board' (2017) and Manbhum Cultural Academy (2016) for the preservice of culture, identity, language and above all for their development, recognition of Kudmali language as the second state official language, recommending the centre to reinclude the Kudmi community in the schedule tribe list, renaming a bridge Lalgarh Setu as freedom fighter Raghunath Mahato setu in Jhargram district who was of Chuar Rebel, constructed the statue of Govinda-Chunaram Mahato of Quit India Movement in Manbazar of Puruliya district.

As observing these fact, the community got nothing much but to keep themselves satisfy with these tiny initiatives.

However, after the ‘Rail Teka’ protest there was an interesting twist and noteworthy also in the politics of Janglemahal. The existing scheduled tribes viz. Santal, Bhumij, Munda and others have protested against the Kudmi community’s demand for the reinclusion to the ST list and in this direction staged protest march and meeting at Taxi Stand on 18th October, 2022 in Puruliya district. Different tribal organizations, viz. Bharat Jakat Majhi Pargana Mahal and Paschimbanga Adibashi Kalyan Samiti led this protest actively. They were worried that if the Kudmis are included in the ST list, their privileges and opportunities laid down for them in the constitution will be taken away. For this concern they are reluctant to the reinclusion of the Kudmi community in Schedule tribe list. In that way, they put hindrances to the path of Kudmis making this situation a Kudmi-Tribal confrontation.

In the conclusion, we can say that there are some valid grounds for the Kudmi for their movements. Still this region has been suffering from underdevelopment and the cultural suppression. No visible of changes for the upliftment of the people. Does development mean only of economic development? In modern concept of development, the answer will be “No” and it means a much more. Places and People had been separated from their dear and near ones. The cascading effect of this experimentation of splitting and joining to a another region has pushed them to the brink of Nowhere world and this process badly affected the Kudmi Community. They not only loss their family and relatives but also their language, culture, religion and the history. Above all, the Kudmi community has about to lost their identity. The recent movements by this community have emphasized the idea. For this obvious reason, it is also predictable that the Kudmi community will carry on their social and political movements in the coming days. The central government as well as the state governments of the concerned states should take measures to distribute the resources of the country proportionally among the all the communities in India because at present, even the percentage of reservation of SC/ST and OBCs were not implemented what our constitutional provisions offered us. Resources should be allocated authoritatively and according the number of populace of the concerned community and it is not only for Kudmis but also for other communities also confirming their representation in administration. Taking this seriously various national and regional political parties are demanding for caste based population census in succeeding years.

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