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DISCUSSION PAPER

Examining Separatism, Ethnic Unrest and Self-determination in Post-Colonial North Bengal

Sara Bardhan

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In June 2021, Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP] MP John Barla raised a controversial demand for the separation of select North Bengal districts into a Union Territory.

INTRODUCTION

In June 2021, Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP] MP John Barla raised a controversial demand for the separation of select North Bengal¹ districts into a Union Territory. He argued that North Bengal has remained significantly underdeveloped in comparison to the rest of the state (Express News Service 2021). Following Barla's rationale, BJP MP Saumitra Khan raised a similar demand to carve the Jangalmahal region into a separate state. Both the union and state governments have stated that they do not support the division of Bengal presently. However, the appeals for separation surfaced at a time when the National Gorkhland Committee, All India

¹ Modern day North Bengal comprises eight districts, namely: Alipurduar, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, Malda, North Dinajpur and South Dinajpur.

Gorkha League, and Communist Party of Revolutionary Marxists submitted memorandums demanding the creation of Gorkhaland (Chettri 2021).

Politics in North Bengal has remained especially contentious since colonial times. The socio-political tensions in the region have assumed a new dimension in recent times wherein demands for statehood and sub-national autonomy are gaining momentum. These tensions underpin broadly two separatist movements: Kamtapuri and Gorkhaland.

Therefore, it is critical to position separatist demands and movements in the broader historical narrative to better understand their genesis, development, and viability. Especially as they surround ethnic unrest and self-determination in post-colonial North Bengal.

PARTITIONS AND THE TRANSIENT DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF NORTH BENGAL

Bengal has seen multiple partitions over the past century. Along with regional reorganisation, partitions give way to demographic, socio-political, and economic changes. Therefore, the question of separatism and ethnic unrest in North Bengal is rooted in the region's changing demographic profile.

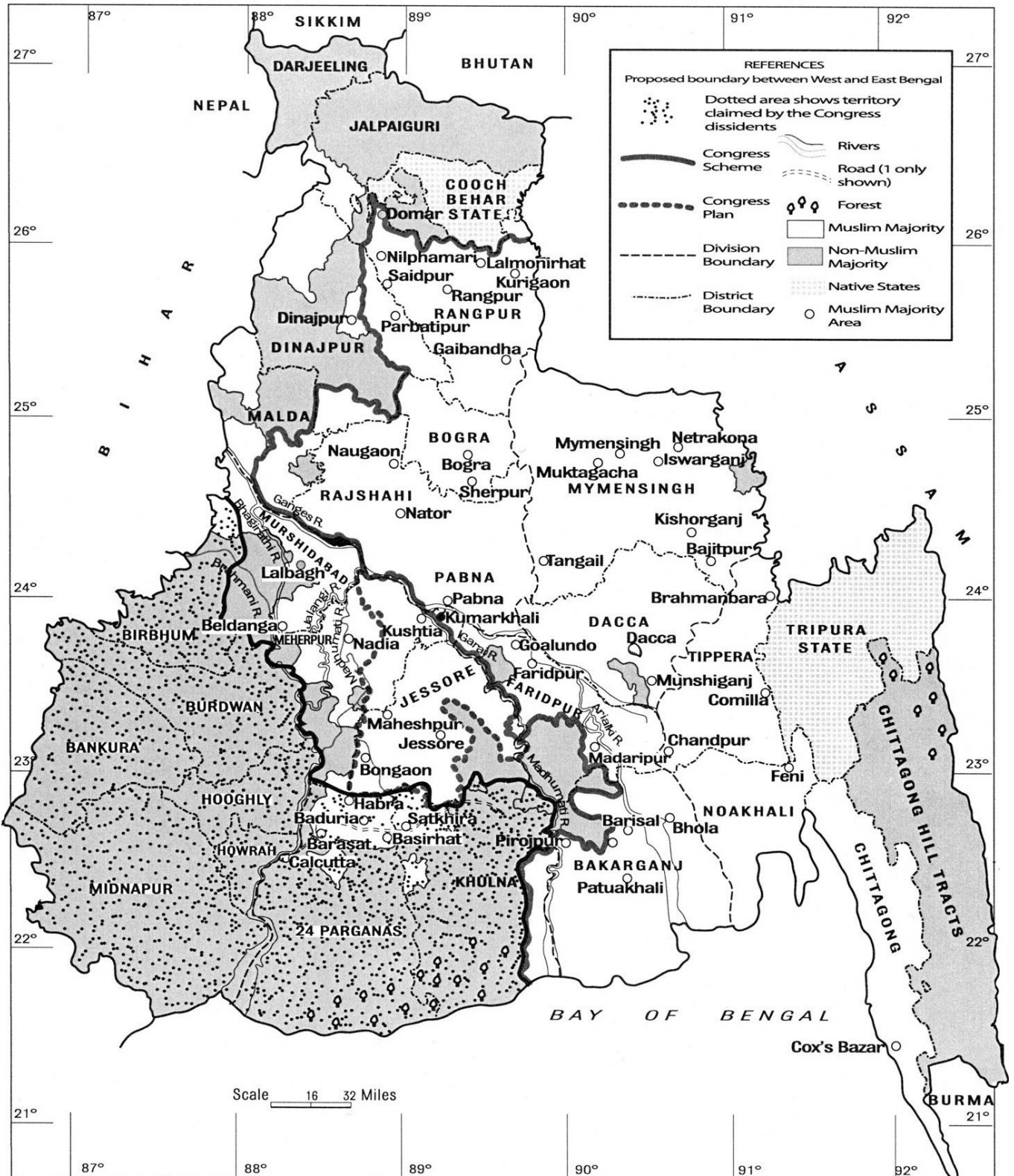
Post-colonial India (1947)

India's partition or Great Divide of 1947 is widely remembered as the dismemberment of Bengal across generations. It is an event that redefined South Asia as a socio-political unit. While in Punjab, the bulk of partition-related migration was over by the end of 1947, migration of Bengali Hindus to India and Bengali Muslims to the newly created East Pakistan continued through 1951 (Hill et al., 2005). Consequently, the effect of partition is much more difficult to determine in North Bengal². Despite that, records suggest that over 15,000 immigrants flowed into Malda, West Bengal (Directorate of Census Operations 1951). These immigrants primarily came from Bihar, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, and Nepal (Directorate of Census Operations 1951). This built economic pressure on Malda's fertile alluvial soil. On the other hand, local women had little to no share in those activities, leading to a sense of resentment and anti-foreigner feeling among indigenous Rajbanshi community. Similar trends emerged from Jalpaiguri and West Dinajpur districts which lie close to the India-Bangladesh border (Saha 2018).

However, demographic uncertainties continued to transform North Bengal's political landscape even after the Great Divide. For instance, no declaration was made to confirm the integration of Malda with either nation post-partition. Hence, Malda was under East Pakistani administration for three days until authorities finalised its inclusion with the Republic of India (Directorate of Census Operations

² According to Hill et al. (2005), a barrier to isolating the effects of Partition is the Bengal famine of 1943. The intercensal effect on deaths and population displacement due to famine is the same as during Partition. Using census data alone cannot disentangle these effects on Bengal. Hence, conclusions about the potential outflow and inflow of population cannot be made on the basis of available census data.

2011). The same happened with Dinajpur district. Further, a third of Rajshahi was included in India, strategically cutting off the northern part of North Bengal from roadways and railways from the rest of West Bengal. Cooch Behar, a quasi-independent state, signed the Instrument of Accession in 1949 and emerged as a new district in North Bengal (Islam 2010).



Liberation of Bangladesh (1971)

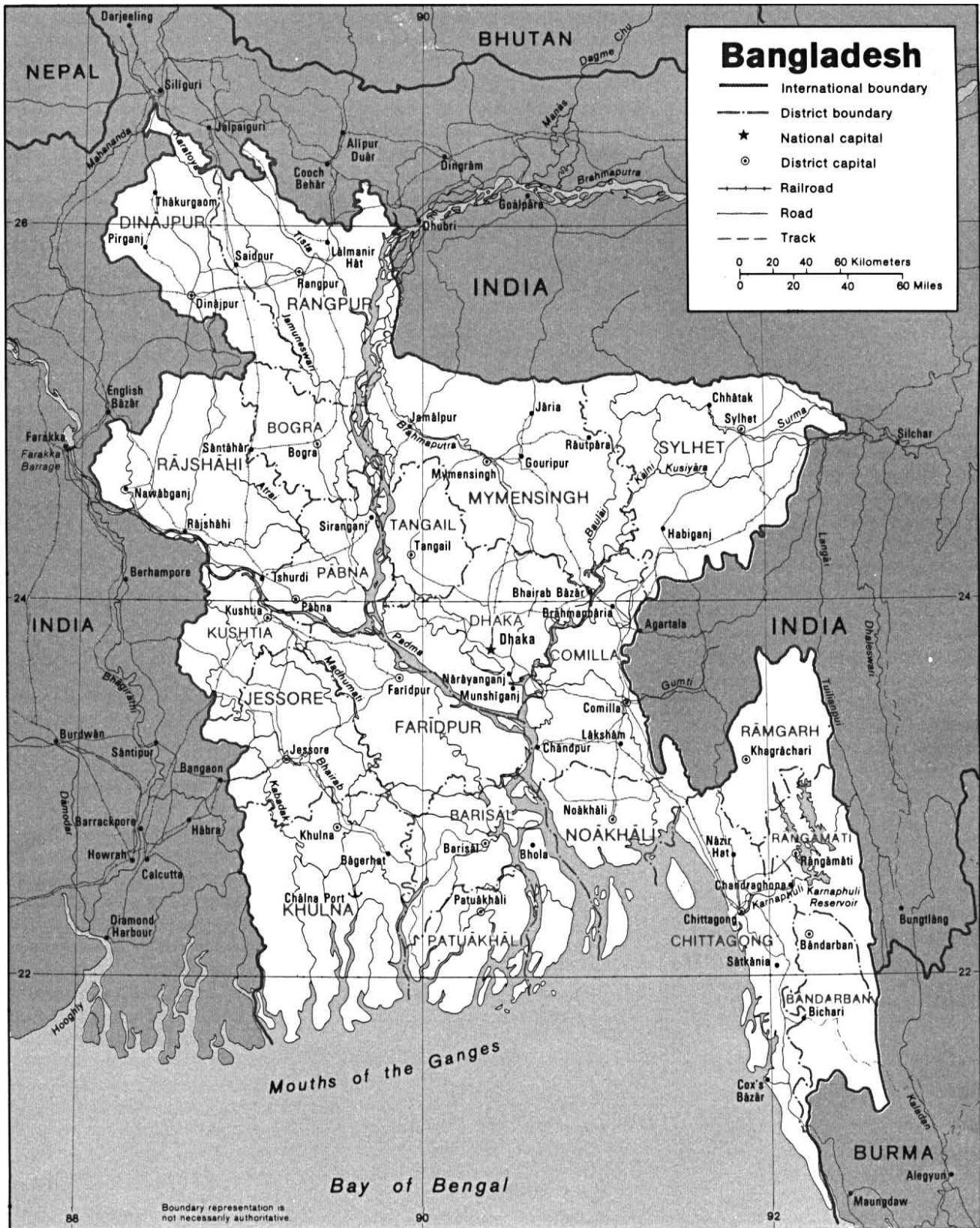
If 1947 transformed South Asia's socio-political relationships, 1971 further complicated its geopolitical ones. The war preceding the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 resulted in a massive inflow of both Hindus and Muslim immigrants from East Bengal. It brought dramatic demographic changes to the landscape with swathes of people migrating to West Bengal, especially North Bengal. The population in the region grew at 27.63%. This rate of growth was 4% more than the growth rate of the rest of the state (Table 1). According to Directorate of Census Operations (1951, 1961, 1971, 1981) data, 87,620 immigrants from erstwhile East Pakistan entered North Bengal during the decade 1961-71 (Table 1). This inflow fundamentally changed the geopolitical landscape of the region.

Table 1: Comparative table of growth rates of population in West Bengal and North Bengal in percentage

Census Year	West Bengal	North Bengal
1951-1961	32.80%	40.49%
1961-1971	26.87%	33.01%
1971-1981	23.17%	27.63%

Source: Directorate of Census Operations (1951, 1961, 1971, 1981)

Most numerically sparse tribes like Bhumijas began assimilating fully into the Hindu fold. The Bhumijas even forwent their indigenous language in favour of Standard Bangla. Moreover, land that was previously populated by indigenous communities came to be dominated by dominant caste Hindu immigrants (Saha 2018). This land occupation led to the creation of new functional, trading, and commercial classes in the economic sphere. The loss of indigenous employment and territory was supplemented by anti-foreigner sentiments and a growing feeling of alienation from their homeland. Hence, they formed the Uttar Banga Tapshili Jati o Adibashi Sangsthan to demand special government safeguards. This later became the Kamtapur Peoples Party [KPP] movement (Saha 2018).



Source: University of Texas Libraries (n.d.)

Thus, the constant spatial reorganisation of Bengal has exacerbated socioeconomic inequality in North Bengal. This, in turn, has fostered resentment, discontentment, and alienation among the local peoples.

RAJBANSHIS OF NORTH BENGAL

Caste Struggle and Sanskritisation

Numerically and historically, Rajbanshis form the dominant community in North Bengal. Although classified as Scheduled Castes [SC], they have contested this classification, demanding to be listed as Kshatriyas instead of indigenous Koch tribes (Borah 2019). Interestingly, this demand emerged only after the influx of Hindu immigrants in North Bengal. Dominant caste immigrants treated the indigenous Rajbanshis differently based on caste hierarchies. Faced with humiliation and caste-based discrimination, Rajbanshis relied on Sanskritisation³ to re-enter the social hierarchy in North Bengal. However, this attempt was met with opposition and denial by caste Hindus (ibid.).

Agriculture, Economy, and Seeds of Deprivation

Affluent dominant or 'upper' caste immigrants monopolised the region's agricultural industry and introduced an unprotected land tenancy structure to benefit them and steadily began dominating the socio-economic landscape of the region (Adhikary 2010). Overcome with resentment and alienation, the local Rajbanshis began politically asserting their hatred for new settlers. Furthermore, the government sought to distribute the lands among landless labourers under the Land Acquisition Act of 1953⁴. A vast numbers of Rajbanshi Jotedars⁵ lost their lands because of this. Rajbanshis advocated strongly for the distribution of land to members of their community exclusively. They did this so they could maintain their indigenous agrarian structure and their social dominance therein (ibid.). However, not all beneficiaries were Rajbanshi. In fact, most of them were refugees. This further alienated Rajbanshis from their ancestral land and transformed them into daily wage labourers. Ultimately, the Land Acquisition Act sowed the seeds of deprivation and discontentment within the community. This deprivation fueled the demands for statehood and autonomous governance by the Rajbanshis (Adhikary 2017).

Infrastructure, Natural Resources, and Underdevelopment

North Bengal is generously endowed with natural resources. Rivers Teesta, Mahananda, and Jaldhaka embrace the region. The rest of the landscape features dense temperate and tropical forest cover. Naturally, most Rajbanshis were subsistence-based agriculturalists (Saha 2018) keeping in mind the available resources. However, colonial capitalism leveraged North Bengal's lush greenescapes to establish tea plantation estates. The colonisers hired locals as unskilled labourers, thereby prioritising colonial industrialisation over helping nurture indigenous subsistence-based economy (Xaxa 1985). This negligence did not end with the fall of British rule. Post-colonial governments have taken no effective measures to develop fisheries, sericulture, floriculture, and agro-based

³ Sanskritisation is a term coined by the Indian sociologist M. N. Srinivas. He writes: "lower caste people adopt higher caste customs, culture, practices, and beliefs to acquire higher status in society" (Srinivas 1962).

⁴ The act provides for State acquisition of estates as well as rights of intermediaries therein.

⁵ Jotedars were a class of landed gentry in agrarian Bengal.

manufacturing to utilise the region's rich resources. Moreover, infrastructural facilities in North Bengal like power, transport, education, and health have historically trailed behind the State's average standards. Thus, the demand for statehood can be viewed as the ultimate manifestation of the Rajbanshi's discontentment with the socioeconomic and political landscape of North Bengal (Saha 2018).

Linguistic and Cultural Distinctiveness

Rajbanshi culture features distinctive elements exclusive to the community, such as Goalparia gaan, Madankam, and Mechini dances among others. While there is still debate over the status of Rajbanshi as a language or a dialect, intelligentsia throughout the world has put forward scholarly works to prove the independent linguistic status of Rajbanshi. For example, linguist Dwijendra Nath Bhakat (2004) traces the origin, existence and development of Rajbanshi to the seventh century. Furthermore, Wilde (2008) and Bandyopadhyay (2004) note that Standard Bangla and Rajbanshi are distinct in terms of semantic, syllabic, grammatical, and linguistic characteristics. However, it was only in 2018 when Rajbanshi was recognised as an official language in West Bengal (Press Trust of India 2018).

It is no surprise that prolonged negligence of Rajbanshi at the state-level has had grave socio-political implications. For example, primary schools in West Bengal provide education only in Bangla, excluding indigenous children for whom Standard Bangla is a second language. Their inability to cope with the unfamiliar language reflects in poor results and consistent drop-out rates. Therefore, in order to bolster the demand for an autonomous state and to create literary consciousness among the Rajbanshi people, Rajbanshi scholars, alongside cultural and political organisations, have established literary centres and published magazines, periodicals, and pamphlets in Rajbanshi. Unfortunately, they received a lukewarm to moderate reception (Adhikary 2009).

Despite being culturally and linguistically distinct from mainstream Bengali identity, Rajbanshi identity has come to be identified in conjunction with the former (Roy 2020). Constant re-formation of the socio-political demography of the region has made it increasingly difficult to locate indigenous culture outside the mainstream cultural matrix. This forceful imposition of mainstream identity, or 'Bengaliation' (Sarkar 2013), is another reason why the Rajbanshi community demands the establishment of a sub-national, regional identity.

Political Trajectory

Unsurprisingly, years of divisiveness, forceful assimilation and socio-economic underdevelopment resulted in a turbulent political struggle known as the Rajbanshi movement or the Kamtapur⁶ movement.

The movement reached its peak when Hitasadhani Sabha and Uttar Khand Dal became the first regional organisations to demand a separate Rajbanshi

⁶ Kamtapur was a medieval Rajbanshi kingdom spread over present day North Bengal and parts of Bangladesh and Nepal.

state. In the following years, grievances of political parties were limited to unchecked immigration and demand for development (Sengupta 2016). However, in 1997 Kamtapur Peoples Party [KPP] put forward a formal Charter of Demands to the former Prime Minister, Inder Kumar Gujral. The KPP demanded the formation of a new Kamtapuri state in North Bengal, including other adjoining Kamtapuri dominated areas in Assam. Among other points, the Charter emphasised the immediate expulsion of 'illegal immigrants' as well as the socio-economic development of North Bengal (Basu 2018). In contrast, the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation's [KLO] activities have taken a militaristic and secessionist approach. In a radical departure from KPP's politics, KLO demands an independent territory, divorced from the Indian union. It campaigned for the revival of the independence and glory of the medieval Kamtapur dynasty (Basu 2018). In response to KLO's violent tactics in 2001, the then-Chief Minister of West Bengal, Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, urged the union government to deploy additional armed forces to mitigate militancy. This move further intensified the local dissatisfaction with the state apparatus.

Interestingly, the demands for statehood in present times have assumed a different dimension altogether. While grassroots regional parties have maintained the same stance over the years, spokespersons like Saumitra Khan and John Barla cite border security and the alleged infiltration of refugees from Nepal and Bangladesh as reasons for statehood (Daniyal 2021).

GORKHALAND MOVEMENT

In comparison to the Rajbanshi movement, the Gorkhaland movement has remained at the epicentre of North Bengal's politics for decades. Even today, the demand for Gorkhaland remains unabated. However, it would be unwise to place the movement in contemporary context without first locating its genesis in history. Unlike the Rajbanshi movement, the question of Gorkhaland is intimately woven with the history of colonial rule in the region (Sarkar 2013).

Historical Background

When the Gorkhaland movement is compared with the Rajbanshi movement, curious parallels emerge. A vast number of Nepali migrants, like the indigenous Rajbanshis, were employed as wage labourers in colonial Darjeeling's tea plantations. In less than a decade, a significant population of Nepali migrants could be found in the region. They worked either in the British Gorkha regiment or as wage labourers. However, as discussed above, the Great Divide of 1947 tilted the ethnic demography in North Bengal. It reduced the indigenous Rajbanshis and migrant Nepalis to insecure minorities. Business enterprises, trade, and agriculture being increasingly monopolised by dominant caste Bengali Hindus. In light of this, growing animosity between the local Nepalis and immigrant Bengali Hindus was unsurprising.

Gorkhaland's present territorial demand includes the hills of Darjeeling, namely Sadar, Kurseong and Kalimpong and the plains of Terai and Dooars (Mohan 2014). Sarkar (2014) posits that the demand for self-governance in the hills of Darjeeling is centred on two major claims. First, is the recognition of collective

social and cultural rights that earmark the Gorkhas' distinctiveness from the Bengalis. Second, the aspiration to achieve self-governance without seceding from the Indian union. The movement mobilises issues of primordiality which includes language, culture, race, and shared history. It also engages with the idea of civility which includes nationality and citizenship as important bases of articulation.

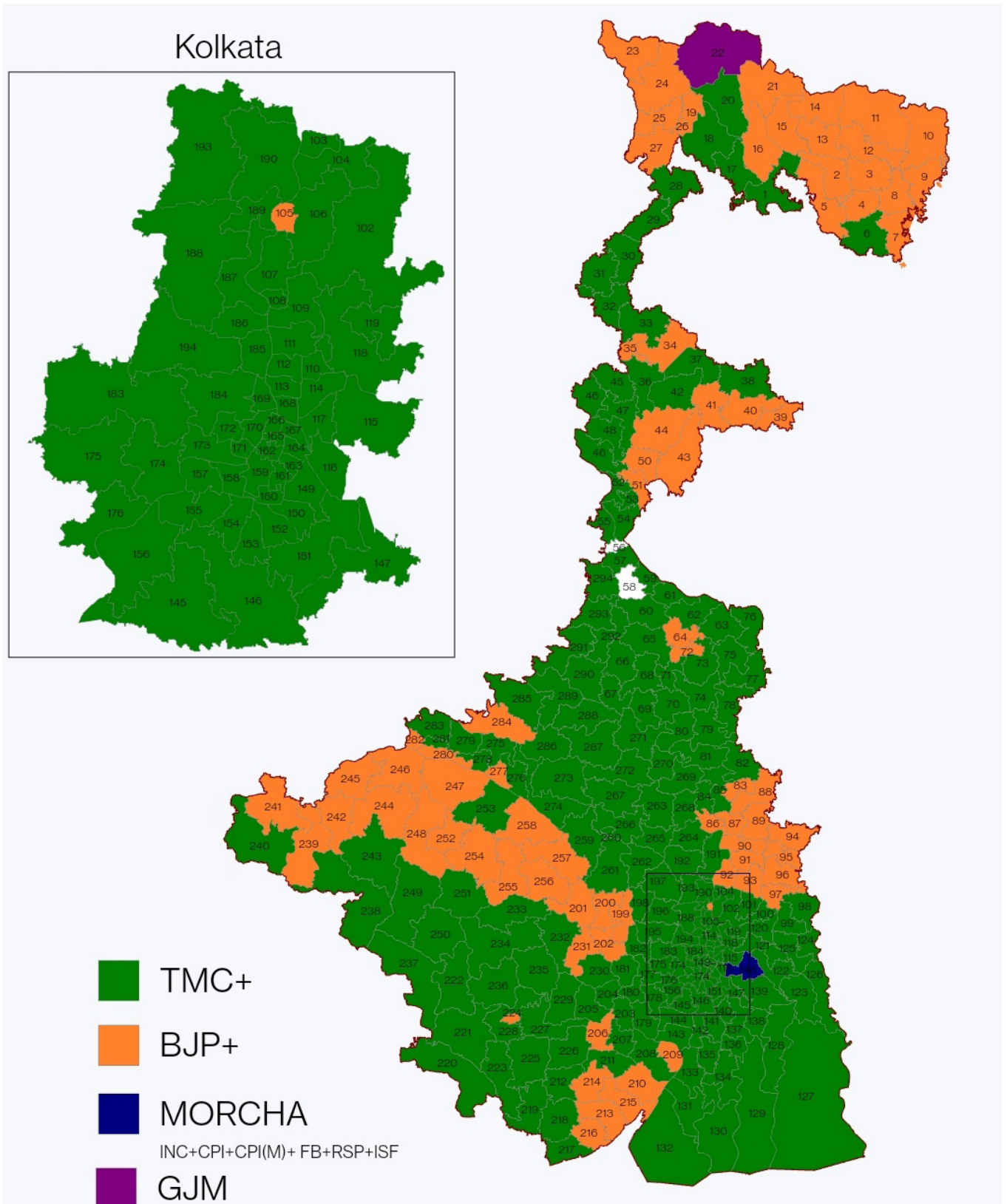
Political Trajectory

In 1943, the All India Gorkha League made the first organised attempt to struggle for the recognition of Gorkha rights. For a movement that has lasted over a century, it was not until the 1980s that the Subhas Ghising-led agitation for statehood reached its peak. Ultimately, the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council [DGHC] provisions were put in place, which devolved power in the hills to a limited extent. However, the Ghising-led DGHC turned out to be rife with corruption and nepotism, and Ghising was soon replaced by Bimal Gurung, who founded the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha [GJM] in 2007 (Sarkar 2014). Unlike Ghising whose political career was embedded in a violent struggle, Gurung approached the movement with a Gandhian attitude of non-violence. The GJM had a sweeping victory at the 2011 state elections, compelling the Centre to create the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration [GTA] (ibid.).

When the Centre greenlighted the creation of Telangana and not Gorkhaland, agitation reached its violent apex. Gurung resigned and unleashed a series of mass rallies and no-compromise protests. In what came to be known as the Antim Larai, streets of Darjeeling were filled with naked protesters self-immolating, road-rolling, and etching Gorkhaland slogans on their bodies, among other gestures. In response, the State deployed paramilitary forces. The State imprisoned more than a thousand protesters and revived all cases against GJM, which were previously closed in efforts to resolve the conflict. Unsurprisingly, new pressure groups and politically active groups emerged in the hills to continue demanding sovereignty and statehood (ibid.).

TRENDS IN PRESENT-DAY POLITICS IN NORTH BENGAL

Presently, the five districts of North Bengal, Alipurduar, Cooch Behar, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, and Kalimpong, comprise the only region in West Bengal where the BJP got votes.



Source: Daniyal (2021)

The TMC and the Left Front have historically dealt with protests, violence, and separatist demands in the region with punitive force . Therefore, it is easy to see why both the Rajbanshis and the Gorkhas have supported BJP over Trinamool Congress [TMC] in national and state elections. The two communities hope

that BJP will help fulfil their aspirations if they come to power in Bengal. The Gorkhaland agitation even made it to the BJP's 2019 Lok Sabha manifesto. North Bengal may be carved into two separate union territories or autonomous states depending on which political party sits at the helm in 2026. However, the journey from being printed in election manifestos to featuring on the party's five-year to-do list is difficult to imagine.

REFLECTIONS ON SELF-DETERMINATION AND AUTONOMY

A State automatically perceives self-determination rhetoric as a threat to national and territorial integrity and, thus, attempts to contain it using punitive measures immediately. In this context, the Indian State's response is paradoxical. Consider the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. After the territorial reorganisation, political analysts and media houses warned that the decision to divide erstwhile Andhra Pradesh could potentially fan other statehood movements across the country. In an interview, KG Suresh, Senior Fellow and Editor at Vivekananda International Foundation, argued that Telangana's claim to statehood is unique because it used to be a separate entity until 1956. Hence, the territory is merely being de-merged and not bifurcated. Further, Suresh notes that only a third of the state's revenue was being spent on Telangana and there were barely any Telangana natives who held office in state government (Arlene 2013).

Similarly, Bihar was reorganised in 2000 to establish Jharkhand as a separate administrative unit. The reasons were manifold: Jharkhand region features an Adivasi identity distinct from the rest of Bihar. The neglect of identity, compounded by frustration due to underdevelopment, provided the initial impetus for demanding statehood (Jha 2012).

Interestingly, similar arguments can be made for the Rajbanshi and the Gorkhaland movements. As discussed above, North Bengal has seen consistently low levels of development in comparison to the rest of the state. Both Rajbanshis and Gorkhas are culturally, socially, and politically distinct from mainstream Bengali identity. Despite the similarities, both movements are still far from gaining the State's approval. It is difficult to determine the exact reasons for the differential treatment. However, the answer may lie in the nature of the movements themselves. Under unstable leadership, both Rajbanshis and Gorkhas failed to mobilise in significant numbers when the State Reorganisation Committee was set up in 1953 to reorganise states on the cultural and linguistic bases (Choudhury 2015). Similar patterns have underscored the trajectories of both movements even in present times. The movements have been characterised by sporadic mass agitations, unpredictable leadership, inconsistent momentum, and factional politics. Hence, the demands made by both communities have been rendered a footnote in national politics.

Furthermore, the geo-political significance of the geographical territory that both movements claim cannot be understated. Wedged between Bangladesh to the south and the west and China to the north, the Siliguri corridor is a narrow passage connecting the Indian mainland to the North Eastern Region [NER].

Keeping in mind the recent friction along the Indo-China border, the Siliguri corridor has assumed renewed strategic importance in navigating border security (Fazl-e-Haider 2020). Thus, it is clear why centre and state governments would rather grant incremental autonomy coupled with tight surveillance instead of complete autonomy to the region.

A lack of understanding of what causes separatist movements is missing from short-sighted, temporary measures like forcefully detaining protestors and monitoring dissent. The State should then become a moderator. It should undertake efforts to accommodate regional demands by creating conditions to achieve socio-economic development and appropriate devolution of power without compromising the integrity of the Indian Union. This is not to claim that remedial measures will completely dissipate secessionist tendencies. Instead, it is suggested that a balanced approach will strengthen the State's democratic position. As Sarkar (2014) suggests, conflict resolution should find space in the larger body politic of the nation-state wherein Rajbanshi and Gorkha voices could be heard and recognised by the 'other'. The problem, at its core, is not a lack of contact or development but of security and trust (*ibid.*). However, the journey towards resuscitating trust is through the enactment of requisite developmental measures with robust implementation.

CONCLUSION

Beyond politically driven, inflammatory comments, lie centuries of violence and politics. The repeated formation and re-formation of North Bengal's demographic profile largely favoured dominant caste immigrants at the economic, social, and cultural cost of indigenous communities. Post-colonial political negligence compounded by the remnants of colonial capitalism has pushed North Bengal into economic underdevelopment and political deprivation. The Indian State's negligent, heavy-handed, and short-sighted political measures have further legitimised discontentment, alienation, and resentment among the Rajbanshis and the Gorkhas in North Bengal.

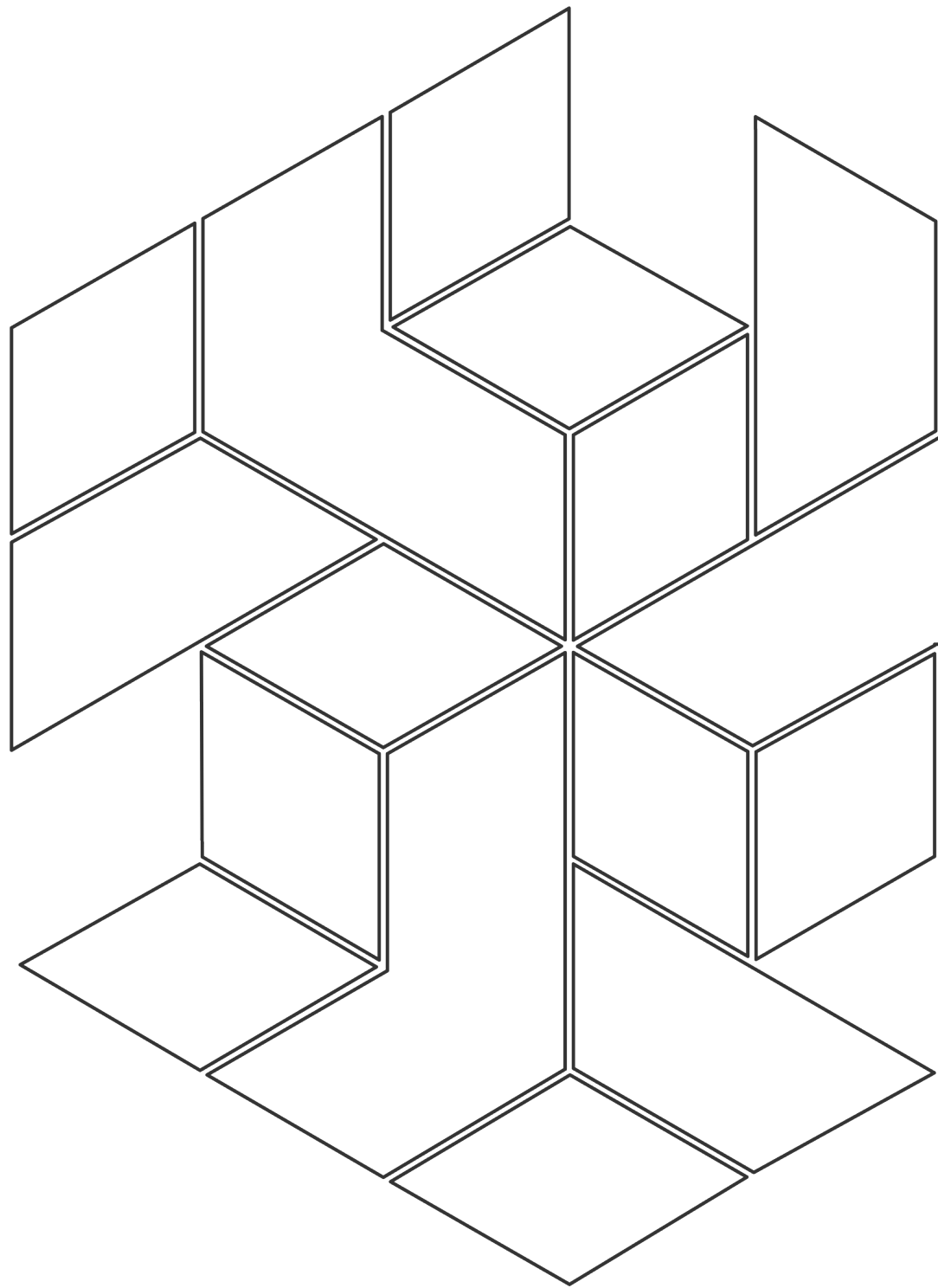
While it is difficult to establish a conclusive approach towards resolution, it is clear that using military intervention to dismantle conflict is not a sustainable or democratic option. It perpetuates a cycle of violence, aggravates conflict instead of containing it, and paints the State and armed forces as distrustful, unaccountable oppressors. Overarching national and state loyalties cannot be superimposed forcefully. Deployment of paramilitary forces cannot cultivate harmony. Instead of imposing a one-size-fits-all model on disputed territories and creating a deliberate dichotomy between ethnic consciousness and national loyalty, the State must focus on developing the Northern region to par with the rest of West Bengal. The inciting grievance of both movements was lopsided socio-economic development caused by demographic changes. When left unaddressed, these changes snowballed into violent ethnic unrest. Therefore, the aim should not be to assimilate Rajbanshis and Gorkhas with mainstream, hegemonic Bengali society. The aim should be to help maintain their cultural uniqueness, thereby remaining true to the democratic spirit of plurality.

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