

## The Kurmi Community's Movement for Rights: Background and Relevance

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**Abstract:** Kurmi is a distinct ethnic community of West Bengal. For centuries they are residing here with their own customs and culture. The Royal British Government recognized them as Primitive Tribe in 1931 census of India. Their property succession rights also were protected by Chotanagpur Tenancy Act. But the problem arises, when new Indian Government made a new list of Scheduled Tribe communities of India in 1951 following the Primitive Tribe List of British Government except Kurmi community. Since 1951 this Community is depriving by our decision makers. As a result, these deprivation feelings emerged as a social unrest. Various social organizations have formed by this community. They are going through various Social Activities like, protests, Agitations, Written Applications, electoral nominations etc. to induce Indian Government to rescheduled them.

**Keywords:** Kurmi, Jungle Mahal, Deprivation, Tribe, Movement

**Introduction:** Movement is an ancient social phenomenon. Since the origin of human civilization, it is shaping human society. Struggle or movement less human society is nothing but a utopia. These movements or struggles are the lienholder of human history. Each movement has its own societal causes and consequences. Most common cause of any struggles of any human community against other is the feelings of deprivation. Movements of Latin American, Australian, Canadian indigenous peoples are example of it. In India many social movements or struggles also has taken places or taking place due to it. As example we may say about the struggles of North-East Indian peoples for autonomy or the struggle of Kurmi peoples of West Bengal for their identity crisis. This article will focus on later. Kurmi is a particular ethnic group of West Bengal. They have a long-past in this region. Not only in West Bengal, but in other states like, Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh etc. are the residence of them. Though all of them are called 'Kurmi' by name (ethnic name) but they are not same. By their social practices, customs, rituals, and faith there has many differences among these communities. As example the Kurmi of Bihar and Kurmi of West Bengal are not same by faith, when the Kurmi of West Bengal thought that, they are indigenous and their religion is 'Sarna' at the same time the Kurmi peoples of Bihar thought that, they are part of larger Hindu society. When the Kurmi peoples of West Bengal are scared about their identity crisis due to Sanskritization but the Kurmi of Bihar does not have any appal about it.

Getting equal rights due to equal social status is the base of Indian rubric. Indian constitution writers emphasized on this matter and included the word 'equality' in the preamble. But the real picture of the society always different from it. At least for Kurmi of West Bengal the idea of equal rights is a matter of controversy. The Kurmi peoples thought that, they are not getting equal rights as tribal, though they have enough similarities with tribals. In this situation the Feelings of

deprivation germs within Kurmi Peoples. Theoretically these kinds of feelings are known as relative deprivation feelings, where one community or person feels deprived from anything comparing to others. Not only the relative deprivation feelings but the feeling of identical crisis also chasing this community to involve into social unrest. Identity is as important as rights. It is embodied with existence. If Identity of anyone is nabbed then the existence of him/her will be downed. Identity is not a natural phenomenon, but social. Our society creates our identity, and we live according to it. Identity has various forms, these are likes- caste, race, religion, language, ethnic etc. All of these are fixed to human. Human does not have complete authority to change its own identity. In most of cases people either want to protect its present identity or to preserve its traditional identity. Kurmis are those who are fighting for the later one. If someone asks, does the Kurmi community have any caste based social identity right now? The answer is 'no'. The Kurmi community only has a particular class based social identity with constitutional recognition as OBC. Recognising one's identity is the duty of government but it should keep in mind that, recognition should be in right way because misrecognition can ruin one's life and destroy a community. According to the leaders of Kurmi movement, since 1950 the Kurmi peoples of West Bengal are wrongly recognising by the Government. This is why, their life and living are in danger. Their social customs, culture, and traditions are decaying day by day. In the era of globalisation, Sanskritization and multiculturalism all of these cultural aspects of any community are at stake. In case of Kurmi the matter is more vulnerable. Because, in this case the Governmental support is negatory and social support is pale.

Fascination to own culture and customs is very natural phenomenon. Kurmi community also have it. A person or community could only express itself completely within its own culture. Borrowed culture seems fascinating to us. But it can't provide perpetual peace of mind and heart. Sanskritization and Globalisation are main road blocks to preserve one's own culture. Kurmi community also facing it. Few years back Prof. Nirmal Kr. Bose revealed in his famous book, titled "The Structure of Hindu Society" that, the larger Hindu society is absorbing tribal cultures and traditions. Various Hindu customs have entered into tribal life. From marriage to death, in each custom Hindu way is found to be used. Hindu deities are also found to be worshipped by few tribal peoples. In this moment anybody can raise a question, if each community has affection toward his own culture, then why they will follow other cultural customs? Why the Hindu deities will be worshipped by tribals? The question is rational, but the real situation is more tough to understand. To get this point, we have to search the causes of Sanskritization. The well-known cause of Sanskritization is, desire of attaining higher social status within lower caste peoples. Again, a question may arise, who identify the communities as higher or lower caste? The answer is obviously society itself. Caste differentiation or class dividing started many centuries back by few cunning dwellers of this country for their personal interest. Till today it is flowing resiliently. We have written our constitution, made bunch of laws against it but real picture is unchanged. In this situation the process of tribal absorption starts with few illiterate tribal peoples through their ambition of being a member of higher social hierarchy. On the other hand, the defenders of so-called higher caste wait patiently for this kind of opportunity. At the time when, the tribals express their appetite, they (defenders of so-called higher castes) fling with their religious ideology and convince the tribals to follow defender's culture. Few Kurmi Mahatots of West Bengal faced or facing this

depredation. One thing we have to consider here that, as the process of Sanskritization is active within tribal communities, simultaneously, the process of cultural revivalism also operating against it.

**Methodology:** It is qualitative research. Historical and Analytical research methods is applied to understand the background and present situation of Kurmi Movement. Necessary data is collected from primary as well as secondary sources. For primary data the researcher visited various libraries, collected newspapers, analysed censuses, digital records of Governments and contents. Non-participant observation method also applied to collect the data from field. For secondary data the researcher used books, journals, articles etc. All Kurmi People are Population or Universe and Bankura, Purulia, Paschim Medinipur, Jhargram, these four districts are four sampling unit here.

**Literature Review:** To do this study, the researcher reviewed many valuable literatures, these are as follows—

- I. In the world-famous book **‘Identity and Violence: The illusion of destiny’** (2007), the writer Amartya Sen said that, singular identity is dangerous to us. A person has many identities at a time. But most of case people emphasized on any particular identity and due to it communal illusions emerge. In this book he also criticised Huntington theory of clash of civilization, because Huntington identified Indian society as Hindu society neglecting the presence of Muslims, Sikhs and other communities.
- II. **‘Who are we? The Challenges to America’s national Identity’** (2004) is another world-famous book, where the writer Samuel P. Huntington expressed his deep concern about American Identical Question. According to him American identity is based on Anglo-Protestant culture of American creed. Due to migration from Asia and Latin America, America identity is decaying day by day. If all American conscious citizen recommits to Anglo-Protestant culture, then the cultural safeguarding will be possible.
- III. In the Book **“The structure of Hindu society”** (1994) the writer Nirmal Kr. Bose presented vivid cultural description of Indian tribal communities. The most important thing of this book is, here the author described Hindu methods of tribal absorption. He shows how the tribals are assimilating with larger Hindu society and how the Hindu deities are found to be worshiped at tribals house.
- IV. **Jangal Mahaler Kurmi der abakta jibonjontronar o bonchonar ek analochito itibritto”** (2021) [in Bengali] is written by famous Kurmi writer Debendra Nath Mahato. It consists with numerous valuable discussions on Kurmi peoples of Chotanagpur. Referencing various governmental data, he tries to clarify the causes of Kurmi movement in Jungle Mahal. Simultaneously he described the constitutional procedures of India to declare a community as Scheduled Tribe and an intense description of Jharkhand Movement is present here.
- V. **“Nativist Movement”** (1943), in this article Ralph Linton, says that Nativist Movement are those, which are organised by a conscious group of peoples of a society to revive few selected aspects of their culture. The authors specially emphasized on two main things of Nativist Movement, one is ‘conscious organised effort’, and another is ‘selected aspect of its culture not the culture as a whole’. According to them, though, the said objectives of this kind of movement is, ‘either protecting their current cultural status’ or ‘reviving the past

culture' but actually what happens is that, certain current or reminisce rudiments of culture are stressed to given emblematic value.

#### **The Kurmi Community:**

Due to various socio-political causes the Kurmi community is the most smeared topic in recent time. Researcher, writer, media, film maker, etc. almost all segments of academic world are focusing on this community. The Newspaper authorities of West Bengal also used to publish article on this issue. Before going to discuss the Kurmi issue in details, we should know precisely about the Kurmi community, their origin and history in Jungle Mahal of West Bengal.

**Origin:** Actually, from where the Kurmi community is derived, is a matter of confusion. Different scholar presented different data on it. Famous scholar Mr. Khudiram Mahato in his valuable article '*The Pre-Vedic History of Kurmis of Chotanagpur and Santhal Pargana*' mentioned that, "the Kurmis must have been one of the pre-Aryans races whose labour brought into existence the settlement like Harappa and Mohan-Jo-Daro, now collectively known as Indus Valley Civilization" (26). Another scholar Bankim Chandra Mahato in his book '*Jharkhand Loksahitya*' analysed that, Kurmi and Munda emerged from the same ethnic group called '*Cherpad*' of Magadha. Among them who migrated into Manbhum many decades back is known as Kurmi in present time (24). B.K. Mahato, observed "the Kurmis had to migrate from central India to the forests of Jharkhand because of the pressure from the Gonda and Kamars in a remote past when the Kurmis were still doing daha (shifting) cultivation. Kamars are found settled in all Kurmi villages in Jharkhand" (qtd. in S. Mahato 4). He also says perhaps by the pressure of *Sadan*, *Satbahar*, and *Kusan*, the Kurmi peoples migrated toward east and settled in different places like, Ranchi, Hajaribag, Dhanbad, Santhal Pargana, Sing Bhum, Purulia, Bankura, Medinipur, Sundargarh, Sambalpur, Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Katak etc. (qtd. in S. Mahato 4). West Bengal Kurmali Academy founder Mr. Padmalochan Mahato in the introduction part of his book '*Kurmali Grammar*' comments that, approximately nine thousand years ago, *Fertile Crescent* (the most fertile land) was invented by Kurmi community. after creating it they shifted towards east and started to live at the basin of *Kuram* River, which is the righteous feeder of Sindhu River. As they started to live near '*Kuram*' river, so they were titled as '*Kurmi*'. (qtd. in S. Mahato 5). Social scientist Radha Gobinda Mahata also believes that, Kuram River basin was the point-source of Kurmi peoples. From there Kurmi peoples sprinkled into different parts of our country. Now they are found in Maharashtra and Gujrat of Western India, Madhya Pradesh of central India, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab of northern India, Karnataka and Kerala of southern India, Mithila, and Magadha of Bihar, Chotanagpur, Bengal, Orissa and Jharkhand (qtd. in Bansriyar 29). Lieutenant Governor of British India, sir George Campbell, in his '*The Ethnology of India*' mentioned, Lower Duab is the Kurmi inhabited region (93).

Ethnically there are a strong debate on Kurmi community, some thoughts that, Kurmis are Aryan descent on the other hand some does not subscribe this concept, they thought that Kurmis are Pre-Aryan or non-Aryan. British executive W.W. Hunter observed Kurmis are Aryans Descendants in his '*Statistical Accounts of Bengal-Vol.XII*' (195). But in the '*Reports of the Census of Bengal*' another British Executive H. Beverly, said that, "Kurmi peoples are not of Aryan descent. They are generally devoted to agriculture. Their religious beliefs are quite strange, they used to worship of strange God, and they also have a new form of

marriage system, where Hindu Brahmins are not allowed. They may have many wives as they choose” (174-175).

**Kurmis in Jungle Mahal:** In west Bengal Kurmis are residing in Jungle Mahal area. From 1805 to 1833 it was a distinct district. In 1805 it was formed by British Government, accumulating the forest areas of former Burdwan, Birbhum and Midnapur districts. Due to devastating Bhumij revolution in this region the British Government broke down it in 1833. Now it comes under four new districts, these are- Bankura, Purulia, Paschim Medinipur and Jhargram. Not only forest resource but the probability of huge minerals made this region valuable as it be situated under Chotanagpur plate. The geographical tract of Kurmi domicile is nicely described by social scientist P.P Mahato and K.S Singh, in their article '*The Mahato-Kurmi Mahsabha Movement in Chotanagpur*' as, “the Mahatos’ homeland consists of parts of Chotanagpur and adjoining regions of West Bengal and Orissa; its core comprises the erstwhile Manbhum District. A well-defined territory bounded by the three rivers, Damodar, Kangsabati and Subarnarekha...” (109). Jungle Mahal of West Bengal is not the only residence of Kurmi, out of it they are residing in many other states. But the important factor is the Kurmi of Jungle Mahal and the Kurmi of other states are not same. When the Kurmi of Jungle Mahal use hard ‘r’ at the same time the Kurmi peoples of Bihar use soft ‘r’.

#### **The Kurmi Movement:**

History says that, exploitation never be permanent. Exploited peoples will revolt one day. There has uncounted example of revolution worldwide, where the exploited community raised their voice against exploiter after bearing them for years. Jungle Mahal had always been a hotspot of revolution. The great Santhal revolution, Munda Revolution, Sepoy mutiny etc. has taken place in this region. So, the jungle mahal has a rich legacy of confrontment. The peoples of Jungle Mahal do not fear to take part into resistance to protest the exploitation. In case of Kurmi community, the traditionary picture is unchangeable. They are participating into social unrest leaded by some Kurmi intellectuals to get equal rights and justice against social exploitation.

**Historical Background:** The Kurmi Movement has a long historical background. It was started by Prof. Vishnu Charan Mahato. After obtaining his law degree from Patna University, he used to visit Sinha Library to read different gazetteers and census reports. After collecting enough information, he along with Khudiram Mahato submitted a memorandum before the State Reorganisation Committee and Backword Class Commission in the year 1955-56 stressing on the tribal identity of Kurmi peoples. Since then, uncounted protests and activities has taken by various leaders to re-induct Kurmi peoples into ST list.

**Why Re-induct is necessary?** – Re-induction of Kurmi into ST list is one of the main demands of Kurmi movement. But the question is why the Kurmi peoples demanding it? What is the historical reason of it? In this part of this article the answer of the above questions will be provided. By reviewing various censuses, Governmental data, books, and other related literatures it is founded that, the first census of India was conducted by British Government in 1871-72 on the basis of religion, race, caste and language to understand diversity of Indian society. Since then, the British Government conducted censuses in every ten years to make policy for ruling India smoothly. And in every census, they provided meaningful description of Kurmi peoples of Chotanagpur. Among them, Census, 1901, 1911, 1921, and 1931 are important. In 1901 census, Vol-VI, the census commissioner de-

scribed, “as explained elsewhere, the Kurmis of Bihar, are entirely separate caste, from the Kurmis of Chotanagpur. The latter are found mainly in Manbhum and are more pronouncedly Dravidian than the homonymous caste of Bihar; they have a dialect of their own known as Kurmali, a mixture of Bengali and Bihari with here & there a few aboriginal words” (Census of India 339). Census Commissioner L.S.S.O Malley in 1911 Census of India, Vol-V, commented that, “the Koiri and Kurmi are two great cultivating castes of Bihar but the latter is also the name of an aboriginal tribe in Chotanagpur & Orissa states, who spell their name with a hard ‘r’ where as the Bihari castes use a soft ‘r’” (Census of India 512). Here one thing is important to notice that, the census superintendent identified the Kurmis of Chotanagpur as ‘aboriginal’ tribe. In 1921 the census of India, Vol-V, Bengal, Part-I, was conducted, under the supervision of W.H. Thompson, here also the Kurmis of Bengal identifies as aboriginal tribe. The most debatable census is, Census of India -1931, where two antagonistic comments are found in two different parts, one is Bengal & Sikkim part, Vol-V, where the Kurmis of Bengal is delisted as depressed class, but in Bihar & Orissa part, Vol-VII, the Kurmis of Chotanagpur are identified as ‘Primitive Tribe’ (D. Mahato 120).

After getting independence the Indian nation adopted its own new constitution, and prepared a list of Tribal communities, those are constitutionally called, scheduled tribe. This list was published in 1952, before it, the then “Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had given a guidelines to the states in a call attention motion put up by former MP, late Hridaynath Kunzru and 12 other MPs that,— *all those tribes who were underlined as the primitive tribe are to be included in scheduled tribe list, subject to recommendation by Governor of the respective state that, the said community was included in the list of primitive tribe in 1931 census and by mistake have not been included in the scheduled tribe list and that before 1931 also that community under revenue protection of the government*” (Singh). But the problem is, in the newly formed ST list Kurmis are not included, though they were listed as primitive tribe in 1931 census and they were under revenue protection act of Government. The new ST list makers disobeyed the guidelines of Jawaharlal Nehru, this is why the Kurmi community is demanding the re-induction of ‘Kurmi’ into ST list.

**Major Demands of Kurmi Movement:** The Kurmi peoples of West Bengal has some major demands to the West Bengal State and Indian Government. On 2<sup>nd</sup> November of 2014, a magazine (Smaranika) was published in a rally organised by ‘Purbanchal Adivasi Kurmi Samaj’, where the editor of this magazine presented the main demands of this movement. These are as follows—

- 1) The state government of West Bengal must have to take necessary steps to re-induct Kurmi into ST list according to the letter send by central government of India.
- 2) The ‘Kudmali’ language must have to include into eight scheduled of Indian Constitution.
- 3) The Government must have to recognise Kurmali culture and traditions and have to simulcast.
- 4) The Government must have to recognise and protect Kurmali folk music (Tusu, Vadu, Jhumur etc.).
- 5) The Government must have to recognise and respect the ‘SARNA’ religion of Kurmis.
- 6) And the last but not least as long the Kurmi community is not re-inducting into

ST list, the government have to pay special attention for their wholistic development.

**Various Organisational Efforts:** The Kurmi intellectuals has formed various social organisations to lead this movement smoothly. Among them “Purbanchal Adivasi Kurmi Samaj” leaded by Ajit Prasad Mahato and “West Bengal Kurmi Samaj” leaded by Rajesh Mahato are most active. Each social organisation has young wings. In very recent time, these organisations conducted various social activities to express their demands to the government. Some of these are—

- a) Rail Strike on August-2017
- b) ‘Dahar Chaka’ on September -2017
- c) Hunger Strike Infront of Jhargram D.M office on 10<sup>th</sup> December, 2020.
- d) ‘Harka Jam’ on 7<sup>th</sup> January, 2021.
- e) ‘Ghaghar Ghera’ during 2021 West Bengal Constituency election.
- f) Nominating Representative in 2024 Lok Sabha Election as independent candidate etc.

**Governmental Responses:** Responses has come from both side of Government. The Central Government had sent a letter to the West Bengal State Government to prepare a CRI report of Kurmi peoples in 2014. The West Bengal Government made a CRI report and forwarded it to the Tribal Development Ministry on 21<sup>th</sup> April 2017. On the same year it comes back to the West Bengal government with the queries of ‘further comments and Justification’ on some particular issues. Now it is on the Government’s positive wish.

Simultaneous the West Bengal state government formed ‘Kurmi Development and Cultural Council’ in 2017 and recognised ‘Kurmali’ language as state language in 2018.

**Conclusion:** Peoples revolt to get rights or to fulfil their demands. It is not sure that, each movement will meet success. But if the movement is on a justifiable base, then, the probability of success is high in a democratic country like India. In case of Kurmi movement, it is saying that, the demands of this community is reasonable according to the governmental censuses and data. But the real political environment and intensions are antagonist to it. The major Political Parties wants to play a vote bank politics with Kurmi peoples. Actually, they do not have real sympathy to this community. The political leaders of major political parties going through various political interpretation according to their minds, it may not be linked with reality. Just to get chief media focus or jabbing political rivalry they are irrationally commenting on the matter.

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