

## The Problem of Identification as OBC : A Sociological Study of the Tili Community in West Bengal

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### *Abstract*

*The OBCs are given protective discrimination by the Constitution of India, but the issue of identification has become problematic due to their highly ambiguous social position and difficulty in providing an accurate statement of their population. It is generally assumed that they are ranked below the 'twice-born' castes, but above the untouchables or the dalits from ritualistic point of view. Interestingly, the mobility of the caste system which reflects the positional change of a caste within the specified hierarchy has made this problem a deep-rooted one. After Independence, these middle-level communities, through their respective caste organizations, are functioning as active agents for furthering social mobility by adopting the role of political pressure groups to acquire the desired power in the field of politics and economy. The prominent presence of OBC movements in different states of India like Maharashtra, Gujarat, Haryana, Rajasthan, etc can be considered as the proof of this. In West Bengal, however, due to its traditional history of non-caste orientation of politics, the nexus between caste and political parties in the process and movements for identification as OBC is weak. The present study of the Tili community, an OBC-aspirant group in West Bengal, tries to explore this situation. Case study and focus group discussion of Tili caste leaders and the key informant have been conducted and secondary information from different relevant sources are collected. There have been considerable internal differences in the community, the study reveals, regarding the very purpose of getting recognition as OBC in this state. No such concrete nexus between caste and political parties is found in this regard. The findings of the study confirm the relatively caste-neutral political structure of West Bengal. It also reveals that the movement for recognition as OBC has largely remained insulated from the on-going political processes.*

*Keywords: OBCs, OBC movements, protective discrimination, Tili, twice-born castes, untouchables or dalits.*

### **Introduction**

If hierarchical order is considered as one of the important features of caste, then uncertainty relating to the relative position of each caste within that hierarchical order is also very crucial. While clarifying the concept of 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs), this becomes quite clear. The OBCs are designated as 'socially and educationally backward'. It is generally assumed that they are ranked below the 'twice-born' castes, but above the untouchables or the dalits from ritualistic viewpoint. Though the OBCs are given protective discrimination by the Constitution of India, but the issue of their identification has become problematic due to their highly ambiguous position in the caste hierarchy. Difficulty in providing an accurate account of their population size, unlike the SCs and STs, makes the situation even more complicated. Moreover, differences of opinion within a particular community pertaining to the acceptance of the OBC status might also be an issue. Compared to the reservation benefits, it might be more uncomfortable to some sections of a community to withstand the social stigma of backwardness attached to such identification. The present paper tries to analyse these in the

particular context of mobilization of the Tili community in West Bengal for obtaining OBC status. Keeping in tune with the sociological approach, it would place the mobilization of the Tilis in the wider context of the OBC movements in India in order to understand the continuity and disjuncture of the particular situation of the Tilis with the general scene.

### **Movements for Caste Mobility in 20<sup>th</sup> Century India**

Movements for caste mobility have a long history. Numerous incidents are found where the lower castes are trying to upgrade their caste status through the movements for caste mobility. The de-scheduling attempt of the Kurmi-Mahatos (Chatterjee, 2008) and the mobility movement of the Ahirs, Goalas, etc., to gain the Kshatriya status (Jha, 1977) can be cited here as examples.

The Kurmi was considered to be one of the tribal communities in Chotanagpur till 1931. Since the latter half of the nineteenth century, a section of this community became efficient in agriculture and economically prosperous. As a result of these, they tried to give up their tribal identity possibly due to the stigma of backwardness attached with it. This sanskritization drive for claiming a caste status disowning that of the tribe ultimately resulted in the de-scheduling of the Kurmi-Mahatos in 1931 (Chatterjee, 2008). Similarly, in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, many lower castes and communities of Bihar plains, like, Goalas, Ahirs, etc., had tried to achieve Kshatriya status, not because of their economic prosperity, but because of economic and social oppression (Jha, 1977).

During the post-Independent period, the reverse trend in the context of caste movement has been noticed. In pre-Independent period, the demand was to upgrade the caste status, but in post-Independent period, caste movements are taking place primarily for gaining the status of backward caste. The reason behind this, possibly, is to obtain reservation benefits offered by the protective discrimination policy of the Government of India in the post- Independent period. The Kurmi-Mahatos, presently an OBC community in West Bengal, asserting their cultural similarity with the tribal people, have been demanding re-inclusion in the S.T. list (Chatterjee, 2008). Beside the history of ethnic similarity of the Kurmis with the tribes, their demand to be re-included in the S.T. list might also be due to the increasing competition within the OBC category resulting from the proliferation of its population size. The case of the Kurmi-Mahatos might be a classic proof of the reverse trend being witnessed in the caste mobility movements in contemporary India.

### **OBC Issues in the Present-day Society**

After Independence, it is seen that most of the peasant castes of India have come under the category of OBCs and because of agricultural modernization, these middle-level communities have become resourceful. They have realized that once they acquire the desired power in the fields of politics and economy, it will be easier and meaningful for them to enjoy the symbols of higher ritual rank. In many cases, the caste organizations are functioning as active agents for accelerating social mobility by adopting the role of political pressure groups. The OBC movement of the Patidar community of Gujarat, the issue of Maratha reservation of Maharashtra, the Jat reservation agitation in Haryana, the Gurjar agitation in Rajasthan, etc., can serve the examples here. In this context, an important verdict of the Supreme Court is noteworthy. The Court addressed that India is probably the only country where a particular community is organizing movement for gaining the status of 'backwardness'. There is a trend of 'downward movement' rather than 'upward movement'. If a community can move downward, more reservation facilities would be available to it. Evidently, a 'politics of backwardness,' has turned out to be the order of the day (Roy, 2007).

Such a peculiar tendency, however, has not missed the attention of the sociologists working in the field of social stratification in India. Beteille (1969) argues that the dominant castes have developed a vested interest in projecting them as backward to enjoy a number of governmental benefits in education and employment in post-Independent India. Through the help of political power, they exert pressure on the government to include them in the list of backward classes. Beteille (1983)

has further stated that the expectation of material advancement through job reservation have led to a certain form of competition for backwardness among castes placed in the middle levels of the caste hierarchy. Rudolph and Rudolph (1998) also consider the political ascendance of the independent agricultural producers to have some definite influence in the caste mobilizations in contemporary Indian society. This group encompasses two overlapping categories, a producer group, the middle peasants designated as 'bullock capitalists' and a status group, the "backward classes".

In this background, the identification of the OBCs and extending them the privileges of protective discrimination have become a contentious issue from the Constitutional perspective. Starting with Kaka Kalelkar Commission (1953-55) to Mandal Commission (1979-80) and later, several efforts have been made by the central and different state governments to identify the criteria of backwardness. Backward Classes Commissions are functioning at the central and state levels under the aegis of the Supreme Court to determine the 'listing' procedure. Regional variations can be noticed in the listing and the benefits given to the OBCs which make the process of identification or listing of OBCs problematic enough to deserve scholarly attention.

In West Bengal, a committee was set up by the Left Front Government in 1980, which opposing such policy of reservation in government jobs, reported that instead of caste, poverty and poor living condition should be considered as the important criteria for the identification of the backward classes and the report was accepted by the government. Jyoti Basu, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal, sarcastically commented that in West Bengal, '...there were only two castes: the rich and the poor!' (Ghosh, 2001, p. 5). In order to overcome some limitations of the criterion, following the directives of the Supreme Court in an important judgment, West Bengal Commission for Backward Classes was set up and several factors relating to socio-economic and educational backwardness of any community began to be judged by it for identifying as OBC in the state. In this process, while a number of castes got identified as OBCs; many others have been organizing movements for gaining OBC status. Compared to OBC movements in some other states of India, these are apparently not so vibrant. This, however, does not imply the absence or weakness of caste in the social structure of West Bengal. Various scholars have dealt at length with the social reality of West Bengal marked by caste distinctions. The evolution of caste in Bengal and positional changes of caste are discussed by Sanyal (1981) and the social movements among various castes in Bengal are examined by Bose (1975), but Ghosh (2001) has argued about the failure of caste to make its presence felt in public life here. The existence of caste in social life and its prominent absence in political life of West Bengal has also been shown by Kohli (1987), Chatterjee (2012) (2016), Samaddar (2013), Sinharay (2014), Kumar and Guha (2014), Chatterjee and Basu (2020). Though caste as a form of social hierarchy is noticeable in West Bengal but to many critics, the political processes have remained largely uninfluenced by it.

### **Objectives of the study**

The present study tries to capture the problem of identification of the Tili community as OBC in West Bengal. In this study, an attempt has been made to explore the internal differentiation within the Tili community for inclusion or non-inclusion within the OBC list of the state which may create the identification issue a problematic one. Further, it also attempts to focus on the functions of their respective caste organizations in this regard and the nexus between caste and political party, if any, behind the mobilization of this community.

### **Methodology of the study**

To attain the stated objectives, the study primarily relies on qualitative methods. Case studies of twenty two persons of the Tili community including leadership and the key informant of their caste organizations in Kolkata and Howrah have been conducted. Beside this, a focus group discussion with three portfolio-holders and eight members of the Tili caste organization in Bankura has also

been conducted. The Tilis of Bankura are very active in the movement for OBC recognition in West Bengal. Apart from the primary sources, information from some secondary sources have also been collected from various government reports, the Report of the Mandal Commission and other archival reports, books, newsletters, magazines, newspaper report, census reports, etc.

### **A Short History of the Tili Caste**

While dealing with the issue of the problem of identification of the Tili community as OBC in West Bengal, a short discussion on the emergence of this community indicating the division between them and the Telis can be stated here.

Risley (1981) had mentioned that 'Teli', 'Taili', 'Tailika', 'Tailakar', 'Tailpal', 'Kalu' (identified through different names) was a large oil pressing and trading caste of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. They were probably attached with their original vocation of oil-pressing and the caste may be designated as a functional group coming from the respectable middle class of Hindu society. All Hindus used oil for domestic and ceremonial purposes and its manufacture could only be done by men whose social purity was beyond dispute. In Risley's words (ibid, p. 307),

"Originally, it is said there were no divisions, and all oilmen belonged to one caste, but in course of time, as wealth accumulated in their hands, the richer families, ashamed of their ancestral occupation, have adopted a new name to conceal their parentage. Thus in the district of Central Bengal Telis who have grown rich call themselves Tilis, and affect to be of a higher lineage than the Telis, although they still retain the old family titles. Wealth and prosperity have made them give up the manufacture of oil, and led them to become Amdawalah, or traders buying goods wholesale and selling them by retail. Some go the length of saying that Tili is a caste wholly distinct from Teli, but I doubt whether the process of separation has as yet gone so far as this." As the time went on, those, who became richer, called themselves 'Tili' and others were known as 'Teli'. In Datta's view (2008), the Tilis are an oil trading community of Bengal. The name has been originated from *tula* or balance. Another view is that it has been originated from *tel* (oil) of *til* (sesamum).

According to Sanyal (1981), the Tili community has been formed by the superior segment of the Telis. Bharatchandra Ray, the mid-eighteenth century poet, has mentioned the Tilis in the lists of castes provided by him in the *Annadamangal*. It may be that Tili has been used here as a substitute for Teli which is not mentioned in his list. Sanyal (1981) has further stated that in the mid and late eighteenth century documents, the term 'Tili' frequently has appeared as the name of a caste. During the second half of the nineteenth century, Tili was known as a symbol of superior status among the Telis. According to Sanyal (ibid), the origin of the dissident Telis can be traced back to the sixteenth century. In Mukundaram's description of castes, it is seen that the Telis were sub-divided into three occupational groups. One group gave up their traditional occupations and had adopted agriculture, another group, though abandoned oil-pressing, but engaged in oil trade and the third group still continued their traditional occupation. These cultivating and trading Telis constituted the dissident group among the Telis. Though trade and cultivation were the occupations of the dissident Telis in the sixteenth century as portrayed in different literary sources, yet, from the seventeenth century the dissident Telis were engaged in production of silk, trade in silk and silk textiles. During the second half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century some dissident Teli families were engaged in salt trade. In the nineteenth century, the dissident Telis had become one of the important mercantile communities of Bengal and some of them were very popular as internal traders in rice, jute as well as moneylenders. Apart from these, the dissident Telis also became landholders and substantial peasants. The landholders and the substantial peasants among the dissident Telis combined trade and money lending with cultivation. By adopting different occupations, the dissident Telis tried to move up the hierarchy of caste and sever their connections with the parent caste belonging to the unclean *Ajalchal* rank. They had adopted different names in order to mark their distinction. Tili was one such name (Sanyal, 1981).

### **The Tili Identity Movement**

The movement of the Tili community to consolidate the Tili identity needs some special attention here. In 1872, when the first census operations were conducted in Bengal, the Tili movement gained momentum to satisfy the aspiration of a distinct Tili identity. From the available data of 1891 Census, it is seen that the aspirant Telis were divided into several groups which can explain the noteworthy fluctuations in the number of Tilis in several districts of Bengal between 1872 and 1891. Apart from the Tili movement, Saha Teli and Manohar Pal and Ekadas Teli movements were also organized by other dissident groups of the Telis in order to secure a better social position than the ordinary Telis. Considerable confusion, however, was there in the ranks of the dissident Telis about the specific goal of their movements. Whether they would form a superior sub-caste among the Telis or would form a new caste, named as 'Tili' by entirely suppressing their caste identity was the bone of contention. In this situation, the leadership of the Tili movement was taken up by Maharaja Manindrachandra Nandi of Kasimbazar who tried to consolidate the Tili movement by bringing the aspirant Telis within its fold. The *Bangiya Tili Jati Sammilani* (Bengal Tili Caste Conference) was formed in 1901 by the initiative of the Maharaja in order to propagate the rationale of the Tili movement and to integrate the potential members into a separate caste, named as, the Tili. The Maharaja also took the initiative to persuade the endogamous sub-castes of different regions to establish affinal relationship with each other in order to accelerate the integrating movement. The Tilis had come to be universally recognized as *Nabasakh*<sup>1</sup> (Sanyal, 1981). In this way, the Tili movement gradually began to gather momentum and became successful in attracting the majority of the aspirant Telis of Bengal. The Tilis had established a separate identity of their caste as distinct from the Telis during the first quarter of the twentieth century. The Telis and the Tilis had accordingly been shown separately in the returns on Census of India, 1931. The Tilis had renounced all connection with the profession of oil-pressing and oil-selling of the erstwhile Telis and claimed trade and in particular, the sale of betel-nut as their traditional occupation. They were said to be *Jalacharaniya* (i.e., from whom a Brahmin can accept water) whilst the Telis and Kalus were *Jalavyavaharya* (i.e., from whom a Brahmin or a person belonging to the clean Sudra castes cannot accept water) (Census of India, 1931). So, the Tilis received recognition as a separate and relatively higher caste from the census authorities in 1931. Such a sanskritizing drive of the Tilis, finds its similarities with some other caste mobility movements of the same time like those of the Kurmi-Mahatos, Ahirs and Goalas, as mentioned earlier.

### **The Tili Community and the Movement for OBC Recognition**

The emergence of the Tili community and their movement for separate, relatively superior, caste identity are relevant here in order to study the mobilization process of this OBC-aspirant community in West Bengal, at present. The Tilis were enlisted as other backward class (Sl.No: 172) like the Kalus or the Telis (Sl.No: 85) in 'West Bengal' section in the Report of the Second Backward Classes Commission, popularly known as 'Mandal Commission' (B. P. Mandal: Chairperson), Government of India (1980, Vol. 6). This Commission recommended reservation in the field of education and occupation for the enlisted communities on the basis of their socio-economic and educational backwardness. Many states of India followed the recommendation of Mandal Commission. In West Bengal, West Bengal Commission for Backward Classes was formed and this Commission tried to determine the status of those communities in this state who were in the Mandal list. On behalf of the Tili community, it was addressed to the Commission that though some Tili families of Kolkata and other districts were well-off, but most of the Tili people of Bankura, Purulia, Nadia, Twenty Four Parganas (North and South), Howrah, Hooghly, Midnapore (now, East and West) and some districts of North Bengal were socio-economically and educationally backward. So, they wanted

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<sup>1</sup> *Nabasakh* being interpreted as 'naba'= nine, 'sakh'= branch, i.e., nine branches of the clean Sudras.

to be included in the list of backward classes in the state. The Commission completed the hearing process on 30<sup>th</sup> March, 1999, but no positive step was taken in favour of the Tilis in this regard [*Tili Bandhab Patrika* (in Bengali), 2001- 2003].

Though the attempt was unsuccessful, but the Tili people realized the importance of organized movement for OBC recognition. On 20<sup>th</sup> February, 2000 the Tilis of Purulia had organized a conference at Purulia Rabindra Bhavan and a street demonstration for the purpose of inclusion of the Tili community within the OBC list of the state was also held. Near about four thousand Tili people of *Bankura Zilla Tili Samaj Seva Pratisthan* (a caste organization of the Tilis in Bankura) in their Third Annual Conference had also raised their voice in favour of such inclusion on 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 2000<sup>2</sup>. For the purpose of OBC recognition in West Bengal, near about three hundred people of the Tili community of Bankura, Purulia, Hooghly, Howrah, Nadia, Kolkata, North and South Twenty Four Parganas, etc., assembled at the office of West Bengal Commission for Backward Classes on 28<sup>th</sup> March, 2001. On behalf of them, some representatives of leadership stature met with the Chairman of the Commission and submitted a memorandum to him requesting for the inclusion of the Tili community in the OBC list of the state. The Chairman assured those representatives by saying that the Commission would convey their opinion to the government very soon in this regard. Another hearing took place at Commission's office on 12<sup>th</sup> September, 2001. On the basis of the judgment made in the hearing, some new information was given to the Commission on behalf of the Tili community regarding their claim for inclusion. On 10<sup>th</sup> October, 2002, the Tili community, through their letter addressed to the Chairman of the Commission, inquired about the result of their application for inclusion. On 30<sup>th</sup> October, 2002, the then Member-Secretary of the Commission informed them that the report had been sent to the state government. As per law, the Commission could tender its advice to the state government and so the Commission could not communicate the contents of its report to anybody. But, no conclusive directive came from the government in this regard [*Tili Bandhab Patrika* (in Bengali), 2001- 2003].

In 2006, near about four hundred Tili people of Burdwan District (now, East and West) organized three kilometer street demonstration for the purpose of inclusion of the Tili community in the OBC list of the state [*Tili Bandhab Patrika* (in Bengali), 2006 -2007]. In spite of their several attempts, no positive response has come from the state government in this regard till date. No active support of any political party to the mobilization of the Tili community could be found either. This reluctance of the political parties to support caste mobilization confirms the relatively caste-neutral political structure of West Bengal. It also indicates that the movement for recognition as OBC has largely remained insulated from the on-going political processes.

While consulting different secondary materials on the problem of the identification of the Tili community as OBC in this state, it is seen that some well-off Tili people do not support the claim for getting recognition as OBC in this state. They are of the opinion that the OBC status indicates a backward position. It is not at all prestigious for them. This internal differentiation within the Tili community might be an obstacle in the process of getting recognition as OBC in this state. At the time of hearing, the Commission also referred to the condition of some reputed Tili people and considered the Tilis as business community and dismissed their prayer for inclusion accordingly.

Apart from studying these secondary materials on the problem of identification of the Tilis as OBC in this state, case studies of the Tili leadership and the key informant of Kolkata and Howrah and a focus group discussion with the Tili caste organization of Bankura will reveal the internal differentiation within this community for inclusion or non-inclusion within the OBC list of the state, the functions of caste organizations in this regard and the opinion of them regarding the nexus between caste and politics in their mobilization process.

As far as the socio-economic and educational conditions of the Tili caste leaders and the key informant are concerned, the study finds them to be very small in number and are mostly urban-

<sup>2</sup> The then President of Tili Samaj Seva Pratisthan addressed this issue to the Letter Section of 'Sambad Pratidin' (a Bengali Newspaper) on 13<sup>th</sup> May, 2000.

centric. Although, this cannot be generalized to the entire Tili community in West Bengal, but this will give us a picture of their condition on the basis of which the validity of their claim for OBC identification can depend a lot. Social status of a particular caste or community can be assessed on the perception of the people and their behavior towards that particular caste or community. From the case studies of the Tili leadership and the key informant, it is revealed that caste is not at all a determining factor here. People usually assess each other on the basis of socio-economic and educational status. The study has noticed that the Tilis, in general, accord less importance to caste in considering the social status of individuals which might be one of the impediments in their movement for OBC identification. From the case studies, it is also revealed that there is little caste-based social restriction in the social intercourse of the Tilis with people belonging to other castes in their areas. Strikingly, people of other castes also do not attach the stigma of backwardness on the Tilis. From the inter-caste social dynamics, enough evidence has not found in favour of the claim of backwardness of the Tili community. This makes the affair more difficult for the aspirant Tilis, since, social backwardness is one of the important criteria for identification as other backward classes. This could be yet another reason of the Tili community, not being considered as OBC in this state till date.

While conversing with the Tili caste leaders as well as the key informant regarding their educational qualifications, it is seen that almost all of them and their family members are well-educated. In the present study, no boy or girl, aged five to fifteen, is found who has never attended school and no drop-out boy or girl in the same age-group is found within the families of the caste leaders. A certain kind of aspiration for getting higher standard of education has been noticed across generations among the caste leaders during the course of in-depth interviews with them. Through the case studies, the indicators of educational backwardness are found to be almost absent among the members of the Tili community.

During the course of the study, it is seen that the Tili caste leaders are engaged in different types of occupation. While talking about average age at marriage of males and females in their families, it is seen that in most of the cases, males usually marry at a later stage than females. Very few caste leaders have informed that the average age at marriage of females is below 18 years and males is below 21 years in their families across the generations. Almost all the caste leaders have stated that there was no unemployed member (aged between 18 to 40 years)<sup>3</sup> in their families. They were or are not engaged in traditional caste-based occupation of the Tilis, i.e., oil trading. Some of them have considered business of different kinds as their hereditary occupation and think that their business is not considered to be low, undignified and unclean or stigmatized by the society. But, almost all the caste leaders, who are not associated with the traditional caste-based occupation of oil trading, think that this occupation is not viewed as low, undignified and unclean or stigmatized by the society.

During the span of in-depth interviews with the Tili caste leaders and the key informant, any serious concern or gross dissatisfaction over their economic condition could be traced. Their economic condition, hence, appears to be more or less satisfactory. This is corroborated by the information about their monthly family income and their material possessions, as well.

So, from the brief discussion of socio-economic and educational conditions of the Tili leadership and the key informant as revealed through the case studies, it can be stated that the indicators of backwardness are almost absent. Though this cannot be a generalization about the socio-economic and educational conditions of the entire community, but nonetheless it provides some input about the contested issue of the backwardness of the community.

There have been considerable internal differences within the Tili community regarding the very purpose of getting recognition as OBC in this state. Different secondary sources as well as the primary information obtained through the case studies and the focus group discussion lend support

<sup>3</sup> The age- range of unemployment is considered from 18 to 40 years in the present study and this category is 'employable age-group category'.

to this. When the Tilis were actively involved in the movement for OBC recognition in this state, some well-off people of this community did not support it. They thought that the status of OBC could reveal their backward social position which is not at all prestigious. So, a clear difference in opinion had been noticed regarding inclusion or non-inclusion within the OBC list of the state. While talking about the movement of the Tilis for OBC recognition in West Bengal, majority of the caste leaders whole-heartedly supported this. To them, though the Tilis are socially respectable, yet, the socio-economic and educational conditions of them in Bankura, Purulia, Birbhum, Midnapore (East and West), Burdwan (now, East and West), etc., are very poor. They are mostly vegetable-traders and sellers of *muri*<sup>4</sup>. Most of the womenfolk are engaged in 'muri selling'. The Tilis of Kolkata, Howrah, Hooghly are relatively well-off. But, they are a minority. The entire condition of the Tilis in West Bengal cannot be judged solely on the basis of the condition of this tiny wealthier section of the Tilis. In order to uplift the socio-economic and educational conditions of the majority of the Tilis, they should get OBC reservation. A section of the caste leaders appeared to have their fingers crossed on this issue. Apart from extending caste-based reservation benefits, they think that importance should be given on qualification. In spite of this, they come to support the demand of OBC status of their community, just to prevent the deprivation of the community of various governmental privileges, which other enlisted communities enjoy.

Another small portion of the caste leaders exhibit a very different approach to the policy of protective discrimination. However, divergences of opinion can be traced among this section also. One segment of this section supports the movement of the Tilis for getting recognition as OBC in this state to uplift their socio-economic and educational conditions, but, opposes the reservation mechanism in the fields of medical and engineering. To them, the competition needs to be open and 'merit' should be given due importance here. They firmly believe that the Tili people have enough potential to improve their condition by their own effort. The other segment although supports the movement of the Tilis, but is of the opinion that reservation for backward communities should be extended for a particular time-period. To them, without a specified time limit, reservation benefits can hamper the potentialities of any given community by making it dependent on such benefits. There is still another segment of the Tili community, which is strongly opposed to its demand for identification as OBC. They consider themselves to be enough self-sufficient as a caste. They usually help their backward caste fellows in many ways in order to improve their condition. They firmly believe that the Tilis can progress according to their own capabilities. So, they neither need reservation benefits nor recognition as OBC for that matter.

So, the internal difference in opinion among the Tili people in the context of OBC reservation in this state as expressed before the West Bengal Commission for Backward Classes and the internal difference in opinion among the Tili caste leadership on this issue as revealed through the case studies and focus group discussion indicate the fact that any successful movement may take place if there is a consensus among the participants regarding the objective of that movement. Though majority of the Tili caste people have been supporting the movement, but lack of well-organized effort is a serious weakness of the movement.

The role of the caste organization of the Tilis is also important for the purpose of OBC recognition in this state. It has already been mentioned that Maharaja Manindrachandra Nandi formed the *Bangiya Tili Jati Sammilani* in order to integrate the potential members into a separate 'Tili' caste. But the information obtained through case studies of the leadership reveals that this organization became non-functioning since long. After that, for the smooth functioning of the caste organization, *Tili Samaj Seva Pratisthan* was formed with several branches in different districts of West Bengal. The name of the caste organization of Kolkata is *Kolkata Tili Samaj Seva Pratisthan*. When the Tilis were actively demanding OBC recognition in this state, then *Kolkata Tili Samaj Seva Pratisthan* along with the caste organizations of the Tilis of Howrah, Bankura, Nadia, West Dinajpore etc., participated in it.

<sup>4</sup> A kind of food made by parching rice on hot sand.



Following the directives of the West Bengal Commission for Backward Classes, different branches of *Tili Samaj Seva Pratisthan* have conducted surveys regarding the socio-economic and educational conditions of the Tilis and have submitted the report to the said Commission. The representatives of the Tili community also submitted the deed where the Tili caste was mentioned. But, still now, no positive response has come from the side of the Commission. The caste organizations have organized meetings for OBC recognition and have also submitted memoranda to the then Minister of the concerned department and the then Governor of West Bengal from time to time. The process is still going on.

In this context, a focus group discussion with the leaders and members of *Bankura Zilla Tili Samaj Seva Pratisthan* needs special mention. According to them, overall, the Tili organization in West Bengal has been originated from North Bankura. The Parganas are Surbhum, Sikharbhum and Maliyara and the police stations are Mejia, Saltora, Barjora, Gangajalghati and some parts of Chhatna. Through these areas, the organization of the Tilis in North Bankura was operative before *Bangiya Tili Sammilani* which was primarily Kolkata-centric. Initially, there was an organization at Ramsagar, Bankura and the name of it was *Solo-Ana Tili Samaj*. This organization existed before *Paschimbanga Tili Samaj*. But, a protest came from the Tilis of East Bengal regarding the term *Paschimbanga*. So, for this reason and in order to spread the caste organization district-wise, *Bankura Zilla Tili Samaj Seva Pratisthan* was formed. The term *Seva Pratisthan* was given because of obtaining NGO-related benefits. The Tilis of Bankura realized the importance of getting recognition as OBC because most of the Tilis in Bankura are socially, economically and educationally backward. They are primarily cultivators. So, they felt the need of reservation very much. The Tilis also appeared before the National Commission for Backward Classes, but, due to shortage of time, they could not properly represent their case and submit the detailed reports pertaining to their backwardness. The Commission informed that they had seen the report which the Tili community had submitted already to the State Commission. After long period of time, the caste organization gave a writ petition at Kolkata High Court and the State Commission and Government of West Bengal appeared. However, appearing before the court, the State Commission as well as the Government of West Bengal argued that the decision of the Commission cannot be challenged. Again, the Tili community appeared before the Commission. They started to organize the movement in a new shape with the Tili people of Bankura leading from the front. Along with them, the Tili community of Kolkata, Burdwan (now, East and West), Howrah, Hooghly, North and South 24 Parganas and North Bengal appeared before the Commission. But, the Commission has rejected their petition without showing any reason. One can guess that the hidden reason may be that if the Tilis get OBC recognition, then the percentage of reservation may exceed the stipulated quota. The Commission has rejected their demand by citing some references of well-established Tilis. When the Tilis appeared before the National Commission, then the Commission cited the instance of the Dean of a department in Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi who was Tili by caste and Maharaja Manindrachandra Nandi of Kasimbazar who was also a Tili. The Commission has questioned the backwardness of the Tili people while citing all those references. Representatives of the Tili community have stated that the two personalities are urbanites and they are the minority. The condition of the Tilis in the countryside is very poor. Sometimes, they are also socially harassed. So, the entire discussion reveals the apolitical nature of mobilization of the Tili community. This insulation of caste mobilization from politics, as has been mentioned before, is indeed the unique social scenario in West Bengal.

In the study of the problem of identification of the Tili community as OBC in West Bengal, no strong nexus between caste and political party has been noticed. Along with the secondary information, the case studies and focus group discussion also corroborate this view. From one of the case studies, it is revealed that a political leader of this caste supported the Tili leadership in their OBC movement in many ways, but neither his political party nor any other political party of this state has actively supported or is supporting the demand of the Tili community for inclusion within the OBC list of the

state.

Strikingly, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in their 'Sonar Bangla Sankalpa Patra (2021)', its election manifesto for the West Bengal Assembly Election 2021, has promised to include Tili and other Hindu communities within the OBC list of the state if they come to power after winning the Election. Similarly, in the West Bengal Assembly Election Manifesto of All-India Trinamool Congress (2021), it is declared that a special task force will be formed for the communities, like Tili and others, which are not recognized as OBCs in this state, but already within the list of Mandal Commission in order to evaluate their socio-economic and educational conditions and to come up with recommendations accordingly. Time will say whether such electoral promises of the political parties are really aimed at the socio-economic and cultural development of the caste in question or a mere promise often made before any election to consolidate their respective constituencies among the members of the caste.

### Concluding Comments

From this study, it is evident that the Tilis tried to build up a superior caste identity by distancing themselves from the Telis as was manifested through their movement for centuries to be regarded as a distinct caste. This sanskritizing drive of the community ultimately was successful in the 1931 Census when they could record them as a separate caste detached from the Teli caste on the claim of their superior socio-economic status. Paradoxically enough, with the passage of time, in the 1990s the same community is aspiring for getting OBC status on the ground of their socio-economic and educational backwardness. But, an internal difference is noticed from the relevant documents and statements of various leaders of this caste regarding the justification of the demand for OBC recognition. Difference in opinion is also noticed among them regarding the reservation issues. All these differences in opinion may create obstacles to their united effort for OBC recognition in this state. In the background of the traditional caste neutral political culture of West Bengal, such internal fragmentation of the Tilis might be an explanation for the perceived reluctance of the political parties to take up their issue on a serious political note. Not only the Tilis, the case is also almost true for all other OBC-aspirant communities in present day West Bengal. The relative insulation of caste from politics in West Bengal compared to some other states like Maharashtra, Gujarat, Haryana, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu etc. can also explain the over-all absence of strong caste mobilization and absence of politics of inclusion on caste related issues here. The study, hence, raises a serious concern regarding the whole process of identification of backwardness along the dimension of caste in India. Precisely, the question is whether, the socio-economic and educational status itself should be a marker of backwardness of a caste or the obligation of democratic politics involving, if not appropriating, the backwardness of caste should assume critical significance in the process.

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