

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF CASTE DISCOURSE IN BENGAL

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Abstract:

It is a myth that caste does not matter in the state politics of West Bengal, rather caste, as a social phenomenon remained a genuine reality. However, the absence of caste-based identity politics at the macro level of politics did not mean the complete absence of caste at the grassroots level in the rural social and political structures. Caste was never absent but remained suppressed by an upper caste doctrine of class. The absence of caste in the organized politics was contingent on the adherence to the dictates of this doctrine. In post-colonial Bengal, caste has been a victim of circumstances which have privileged discourses such as religion, nation and class over that of caste. Now, it seems that politics of the state is finally prepared to embrace the discourse of caste. The hangover of a secular leftist political culture and overall dominance of the upper caste intelligentsia over the socio-cultural domain are likely to impose debilitating constraints on the caste-based identity politics.

Keywords: Caste, Refugee, Partition, Bengal, Bhadrak

This research paper seeks to ground the question of caste in present-day West Bengal in the history of caste movements and politics in late 19th and 20th centuries of undivided Bengal. A history of social organisation and lower caste assertions in Bengal is likely to help us locate the prominence or lack of caste in Bengal today. Dalit assertion against caste discrimination started in Bengal from the 1870s and was spearheaded by two distinct caste groups, the Rajbanshis of North Bengal and Namasudra of East Bengal (Bandyopadhyay 2009). But this organised Dalit movement was ruptured by the physical dispersal and displacement of a large section of SCs due to the traumatic event of the partition (Bandyopadhyay and Ray Chaudhury 2014; Chatterjee 2015). The historic shift in the life trajectories of these two large Dalit communities, the organised scheduled caste movements declined in strength in post-partition West Bengal. The Dalit in Bengal has never been a homogenous community and the partition enhanced their internal division. The crude experience of migration and the camp life turned them into refugees, with more struggle for resettlement. The caste issue receded to the background as their leaders got embroiled in that struggle. The specific dynamics and the left-liberal ideologies of the refugee movement worked to suppress the caste question, as the refugee became the new Dalit in West Bengal's social and political life. The caste Hindu political elite, the so called bhadrak in West Bengal sought to dominate public space and monopolise political power, and they preferred to see an internally homogenised nation. It is this difference that needs historical explanation. The standard critical interrogative narrative about West Bengal exceptionalism, the historically informed contributions by Uday Chandra and Sarbani Bandyopadhyay bring out the importance of caste as a crucial political category in undivided colonial Bengal.

Chandra scrutinises the remaking of caste relations in an emerging capitalist political economy over the 19th century, while Bandyopadhyay analyses caste as a centre of gravity for collective political action in the first half of the twentieth century. Praskanva Sinharay has argued that caste has never been important or relevant category in the electoral process in West Bengal and that the situation has now changed with the political assertion of the Matua Mahasangha. This has to be accepted that caste has always been a relevant category in Bengal, including Bengal politics. Caste was not only relevant in everyday life and "the apparently uninstitutionalised world of what may be called politics among the people" (Chandra and Nielsen 2012: 59) but very importantly in the world of institutionalised, formal politics. Thereby, caste acts as an important factor in terms of marriage practices, public sector employment, social network formation and the political encashment. If caste does act as the basis of social, economic and political functioning of the state, then why is caste invisible in the state's politics.

However, the absence of caste-based identity politics at the macro level of politics did not mean the complete absence of caste at the grassroots level in the rural social and political structures. Dayabati Roy's (2012) fieldwork finds caste hierarchies widespread in village society among the upper- and middle-caste leaders. The replacement of the zamindari order by the panchayati raj institutions the real power is still wielded by the higher castes due to a strong undercurrent of caste feeling. This also validates by Partha Chatterjee's contention that the absence of caste articulation of political demands does not mean that caste authority and caste linkages have not proved useful to various political parties as instruments of gathering electoral support in the relatively un-mobilized areas. But the considerable fragmentation among the middle castes, and the overall dominance of modes of culture and thought of the urban intelligentsia, have prevented any successful aggregation of caste interests in the state election scene. One needs to study the dynamics of partition politics in undivided Bengal to understand why caste suddenly seemed to disappear from the political lexicon of West Bengal. The electoral process in colonial Bengal clearly shows that the Hindu bhadralok could not come to power in a Bengal where the Muslims were a majority. The large dalit population of Bengal which, in turn, was suspicious of caste Hindu organisations like the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha. The dalit population and leaders of Bengal consider this moment as the most unfortunate in the dalit political history. Partition only kept a huge dalit population away from West Bengal. The dalit refugees primary concern was not assertion politics but survival. Thus, even if dalits were to come in large numbers but being dispersed over different parts of the country which were mostly ethnically, politically and environmentally hostile and lacking an effective dalit leadership base. The people were unlikely to pose a threat toward bhadralok social order in West Bengal. The partition thereby, itself solved the question of caste and related dynamics in Bengal politics.

Scheduled Castes of West Bengal are divided into sixty sub-castes with wide ranging diversity; while five major sub-castes are the Rajbanshis, the Namasudras, the Bagdis, the Poundras and the Bauris. They are equally diverse in terms of their education, economic and social status. From occupation point of view, agricultural works, fishing, bamboo and wood works, scavenging, sweeping, making country liquor, weaving and washing clothes, tailoring, leather works and other menial works, etc, were traditional professions of the SCs of West Bengal in pre-colonial, colonial times and even today. Politically, there is no homogeneity among the Scheduled Castes of West Bengal.

The Namasudras, Rajbanshis, Bagdis, Bauris, and Pods are dispersed in terms of their spatial location, and their developmental levels are markedly different (Guha 2017). The colonial literatures have recorded more miserable social identity of the lower caste communities of Bengal. Ethnographic surveys, gazetteers, census and official records show that the agriculturist Scheduled Castes such as the Namasudras, Paliyas, Poundras, Rajbanshis, Bhuiyans, etc. did not have social respect as 'caste group' like other upper caste agriculturists. The Rajbanshis, in spite of being agriculturist and even after being educated and competent enough used to be humiliated by the upper caste Hindus solely for their lower social status. Bengali novels composed in the colonial and early post-colonial period have frequently recorded the marginalized location of the Scheduled Castes. Bankim Chanda's novel *Debi Choudhurani* (1882) and Bhimbhuti Bhusan Bandyopadhyay's classics like *Pather Panchali* (1929) and *Ichhamati* (1950) are although not based on the marginal people but they occasionally reflected the casteist attitude of the upper castes. They have used the term Bagdi, Dom, Hari, etc. as slang terms although they are the names of numerically prominent Scheduled Caste community. Similarly, Rabindra Nath Tagore's *Gora* (1910) and Ghare Baire (1916) and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's stories have contained a few sentences about the marginalized social lives of the Scheduled Castes. Hasulibaker Upakatha (1947) of Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay, Padma Nadir Majhi (1936) of Manik Bandyopadhyay, Dhorai Charit Manas (1949-51) of Satinath Bhaduri. In these writings, the Scheduled Caste communities have been invariably constructed as sub-standard, uncivilized, non-Aryan, and indigenous people who deserve no respect because of their unclean professions.

'Caste' has been transformed into a matter of official records with the beginning of census since 1871-72. The first census classified the people of India on the basis of varna (caste) and race. In regards to Bengal, H. Beverley (Inspector General of Registration) recorded that the fourfold caste-based parameter was accepted as the basis of social stratification. adoption of the Government of India

Act (1919) and creation of a new concept called 'Depressed Castes' in the 1920s had placed the list of the lower castes of Bengal. The Census of 1921 and 1931 had maintained the Depressed Castes and Depressed Class identity of the lower castes of Bengal. But with the adoption of the Government of India Act 1935 and the Government of India (Scheduled Caste) Order 1936 have eventually classified the Depressed Castes as Scheduled Castes. Mr. Rajendra Lal Mitra; a reputed scholars of Bengal with considerable knowledge on Sanskrit, had prepared a list of caste communities in 1881 according to their position in the caste hierarchy. The demand for higher caste position in the official record became a common trend till 1931. In order to materialise the demand for respectable caste identity most of the Scheduled Caste communities had developed a sense of self-respect by rejecting the imposed dictums of the traditional Hindu scriptures (as interpreted by the Brahmins) and attempting to create a notion of respectable caste identity. In most cases, they asserted for 'Kshatriya' caste identity (such as the Rajbanshi Kshatriya, Poundra, Malla Kshatriya, etc.) while some castes claimed for Vaishya (such as Dhobas, Sunris, Bhuinmalis, Jelia Kaibartyas) and respectable Sudra (like the Namasudras) identity. These demands of standard caste identity were translated into practice in the first quarter of the twentieth century through the construction of self-history, adoption of respectable rituals and social reforms. However, by the 1930s when religious identities were getting hardened, this claim for a Hindu identity possibly created problems for an autonomous dalit politics.

Most of these castes simultaneously pressed for higher varna status and "Depressed Classes" status from the government. They claimed their loyalty to the colonial government and the latter adopted a position that was in some ways favourable to the dalit castes. It created considerable number of problems for the bhadralok whose hegemony stood to be contested by the very sections it despised. The dalits have made their political presence felt and were there to stay had Bengal not been partitioned since the time of the Swadeshi movement. The bhadralok caste Hindu enthusiasm behind the second partition of Bengal begs a question. One of the popular discourses among the Bengali bhadralok is that West Bengal is "casteless" society as compared to other state. Bhadrakok is an indigenous Bengali term that cannot merely be equated with the middleclass. As a group it refers to an urban populace associated with trade, entrepreneurship and salaried professions. The bhadraloks were harbingers of the 'Bengal Renaissance' through their direct contact with the British Raj. They were proponents of progress, modernity and ideas of enlightenment that were definitely inspired by the anglicized tradition. The etymological meaning of 'bhadrakok,' which is a Sanskrit term, it carries connotations of 'shishta' or cultured 'sabhyakok' or civilized. Bhadrakok is a variable social marker and it shifted historically and politically from aristocracy of wealth and rentier economy to a pride in Western education and inheritance of the "Renaissance tradition in Bengal". According to Barun De, India's colonialism operated not only at the level of British bureaucrats, planters and professionals, but also the white-collar brown sahibs, the merchants and the landed or upper-class peasants. Rather than the elite, the petite bourgeoisie, the middle-classes were the actual proponents of bhadralok politics in the context of nationalism. It is a term that dedicates the educated Bengali Hindus from rural as well as urban spaces. In fact, historically, 'the bhadralok status was not ascribable; it had to be achieved' and 'caste did not play an important role in selecting bhadralok'.

The upper castes were generally recognized as bhadralok because the educated section of people was mainly coming from higher castes. Now, the counter term which is also popular among the masses to designate certain types of categories termed as 'chhotokok'. It basically means the 'lowly' people, 'Chhotokok' or low caste, a category that derives directly from the system of varna and jati in the Bengali Hindu society. The existential division between the bhadralok and the chhotokok provides the detail of cultural pattern and mode of intergroup behaviour of people in West Bengal. This social categorization was actually defined in terms of attitude towards manual labour or menial job rather than to caste itself; those who were educated and refrained from carrying out manual labour were known as the bhadralok. In reality, however, there was a caste dimension too: the bhadralok overwhelmingly belonged to the three upper castes, whilst the Scheduled Caste groups were predominantly involved in low-paid manual jobs and considered to be 'chhotokok'. These terms are of course used by the educated higher caste people who regard themselves as bhadralok, or gentlemen,

and others as chhotoloks in the derogatory sense. The term chhotolok is also used by higher castes to abuse somebody of their own caste only something derogatory behaviours shown. In the contemporary rural power structure, based on the practices of grassroots democracy and caste-wise reservations, the traditional social hierarchical order seems to be largely continuing in new forms. The Anthropological Survey of India recorded similar observations in its 'People of India' project where it noted 'better control over land and other resources' as one of the characteristic features of higher castes in India.

Modern education, preferably in English language, cultural values, and a sense of social propriety, as well as landownership, have been the characteristic features of higher castes in Bengal since the middle of the nineteenth century. In the early decades of 20th century, Manindranath Mandal, who was a Pundra Kshatriya leader, put in his efforts to build counter-hegemony to bhadrak politics and dominance through formation of the Bangiya Jana Sangh. Bangiya Jana Sangh was short-lived; it was a milestone in terms of Dalits seeking rights in the history of Dalit politics in Bengal. The Dalit's demands for high ritual status got combined with their efforts to seek benefits in the secular fields of politics, education and employment. In response to the Dalit's demand for greater visibility, Congress and Hindu organizations actually worked in tandem. There are Dalit leaders, SC leaders such as Jogendranath Mandal and members belonging to different Schedule Castes who founded the Bengal Provincial Schedule Castes Federation, which was a branch of BR Ambedkar's All India Scheduled Castes Federation.

The Scheduled Castes in Bengal where 11 percent of the Bengal population during communal award and the Poona pact agreement. So, the initiative was to include the SC population under the Hindus, within the larger category of the Hindus, and thereby broaden the Hindu political base. This actually helps to proactive process of social upliftment of the Dalits. So, 1940s onward Bharat Sevashram Sangh actually starts attracting bhadrak support and even the Congress party starts taking part in the Sangh's programmes. Pre-partition Bengal was described as a symbiotic culture between landlords, money lenders, traders on the one hand and the peasants, farmers and sharecroppers on the other. The nature of relationship among the sharecroppers, the peasants from different communities was actually changing. However, the Dalit masses would get sucked into communalist politics and they started supporting the cause of partition, which was being fanned by the extremist political parties. The communal affairs greatly changed as Muslim landowning classes came to dominate in place of the bhadrak Hindus in East Pakistan, which is now Bangladesh because of maximum agricultural lands. So, the question of Dalit Bengali Hindu and Dalit Muslim staying back. The Hindu-Muslim compatibility or syncretic culture was disrupted, the peasant class unity beyond communal barrier was disrupted and it was replaced by a newly growing upmanship among the Muslim peasants towards their Hindu counterparts. This would ultimately propel the Dalit Hindus to move, to enter India in destitute conditions. Even the Namasudras and Rajbanshis are alienated in terms of their demands—one is focused on reclaiming territorial autonomy and the other is fighting for citizenship rights, reservation and education (Rana 2013). On the other hand, the Bagdis, Bauris and Chamars follow mainstream state politics as they lack distinctive caste-based political demands and mobilisation. This fragmentation disincentivises the formation of a common front along caste lines on the basis of collective agenda.

It is often argued that the political culture of West Bengal is significantly different from that of the rest of the country. Caste matters in the socio-economic and political landscape of West Bengal but it rarely acts as the basis for political mobilisation. upper-caste hegemony has become so strong that Dalits cannot even imagine their autonomous political existence. The question of caste was very much present in the society and politics as well. The real form of social organisation for the Marxists is "class" that provides a modern basis for classifying, organising and mobilising people.

After partition, "the discourse of caste was overpowered by politically more important discourses of nation and religion" (Bandyopadhyay 2011), the environment of communal consciousness collapsed the difference between outcastes and caste Hindus in the dalit consciousness. As a result of this ideological compulsion, the left never overtly supported the relevance of caste in the struggle for the downtrodden and did not consider caste as a political category in their organised electoral mobilisation (Guha 2016). The Left Front government made the language of caste and

religion illegitimate as in the Marxist theoretical scheme they fall within the realm of superstructure only (Bandyopadhyay 2012).

Though the Left Front leadership almost exclusively belongs to the upper castes of Bengal, the communists received uninterrupted support from the dalits who never felt the need for an independent political platform. Therefore, it would not be out of place to employ a hegemony paradigm in a Gramscian sense, where a careful management of consensus building capacity through the moral force of an ideological discourse in the sociopolitical superstructure creates a legitimate order of veiled under-representation, inequality and discrimination. This hegemony had its roots in the landmark land reform initiatives which facilitated the replacement of the old order of landlords by the new institutional mechanism of the panchayats in rural society. As a consequence of this ideological difference, the leadership of the left parties exclusively came from the Brahmin, Kayastha and Baidya castes (Guha 2016). Even the vocabulary of caste was deliberately purged from the discourse of movements for the greater interest of united struggle (Bandyopadhyay and Chaudhury 2017). After partition, the question of caste was subsumed under “partition victim” or “refugees,” which were more easily absorbed into the left-liberal ideologies under the dominant discourse of class. Moreover, the dispersed and fragmented nature of Dalit constituencies were unable to challenge the hegemony of the upper-caste bhadralok (Rana 2013).

Most importantly, due to the operation of this caste dominance with hegemony, the language of marginalisation was completely hijacked by the discourse of class, relegating caste into irrelevance. the possibility of caste-based mobilisation never fully evaporated in postcolonial Bengal due to the inability of society to completely free itself from caste sentiments. Several village studies have pointed out that caste often determines local power equations despite having no significant effect on the organised politics at the macro level (Chandra and Nielsen 2012). Despite the absence of caste politics “in the apparently uninstitutionalised world of what may be called politics among the people caste categories have continued to provide many of the basic signifying terms through which collective identities and social relations are still perceived” (Chatterjee 1997). Thus, in Bengal, caste was never absent but remained suppressed by an upper-caste doctrine of “class”. The migration of Scheduled Caste peasant community from East to West Bengal started from 1950 and has continued even since. The large scale of Scheduled Caste peasants’ refugees changed the texture of politics in Postcolonial West Bengal, where the partition had led to a rephrasing of the idioms of victimhood and protest. This new discourse focused exclusively on the displacement and the challenges of resettlement of the refugees. Within this political context, the Dalit became the ‘refugees’ or the refugees became the new Dalit.

As the ‘refugees’ were never a homogenous category, but in the interest of a united struggle, the vocabulary of caste was purged from the discourse of this movement. The rights of refugees more easily absorbed into the modern tropes of social justice deployed by the left -liberal ideologies of the mainstream political parties and the state. Therefore, the question of caste became less relevant in the public discourse of social and political protest. To understand why caste suddenly seemed to disappear from the political lexicon of West Bengal one needs to study the dynamics of partition politics in undivided Bengal. Partition was a complex phenomenon and had a long history in Bengal caste politics. The trauma of partition and the consequent physical displacement and dispersal of a large section of the Scheduled Castes in Bengal ruptured and destabilised their organised social movement in such a way that their identities were to redefined and strategies of survival rescripted in a different language. The social movement of Dalit Identities in Bengal started in the 1870s with two identifiable geographical locations and two communities were at the forefront of these movements. The Namasudra and Rajbansis provided the majority of its leaders and supplied its main support base during Scheduled Caste political movement started in Bengal in the early 20th century. Their geographical location was the major factor behind successful mobilisation but both of them lost the base because of partition. Dalit refugees had a markedly different experience of resettlement. The first wave of migration consists with mainly high caste Hindu Bhadraklok refugees who had their own resources and kin-group support. The second wave, mainly for Dalit peasant refugees without any resources arrived by train in thousands at the Sealdah station after 1950. They were first dispatched to various refugee camps in different

districts like 24-parganas, Nadia, Burdwan, Midnapur and Cooch Bihar. Refugees would prefer to go camp where they knew they would find their relatives, village acquaintances or community member who had migrated earlier, as a result, the refugee camps became none other than community camps. For example, Coopers camp, Dhubulia camp of Nadia and Bagjola camp in 24 parganas, the Namasudra constituted more than 70 percent percent of the residents. Caste was very much present all the time yet officially and apparently had no place in this camp life which sought to democratize poverty and suffering in a strange way. Caste was certainly taken into consideration in allocating space within the camps.

The upper caste Hindu migrants were allowed to settle in Calcutta, while the Namasudra refugees were mostly sent outside the state of West Bengal, mainly to Dandakaranya in Chattisgarh and Andaman and Nicobar Islands and few of them were resettled in districts far away from Calcutta. Some form of caste segregation was maintained in the camps so that caste mattered in governance and in everyday social relations, despite levelling discourse of victimhood, appropriating all those displaced and destitute people into a new collective category called the 'refugees. These refugees had little opportunity to agitate about caste. The electoral process in colonial Bengal clearly shows that the Hindu bhadrakal could not come to power in a Bengal where the Muslims were a majority and there was a large dalit population which, in turn, was suspicious of caste Hindu organisations like the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha. One of the planks on which these castes claimed higher varna status was their "authentic Hinduness" that was shown to be clearly established in their ritual and social practices (Ray 1916). In order to understand the hegemonic dominance of the upper caste left rule in West Bengal, the importance of land reforms needs to be highlighted.

Dwaipayana Bhattacharya's analysis focuses on the link between the hegemonic character of the left rule and its landmark land reform initiatives. He has pointed out that the success of land reforms was achieved not only through legislative measures but also through the use of 'lathi, guns and flags' against the powerful landlords at the behest of the communist cadres at the grass-root level. The old order of the landlords was replaced by the new institutional mechanism of the panchayats but this did not enable the poor Dalit farmers to the position of leadership.

Caste has played insignificant role in the politics of West Bengal since independence. Rather caste has been a victim of circumstances which have privileged discourses such as religion, nation. The electoral decline of the left has created favourable situation for caste-based mobilization. However, caste politics is still in an embryonic stage and need to overcome practical, ideological and intellectual opposition. In the rural polity of West Bengal, party-politics seems to have a vital role to play in the 'movement of assertion' of the lower castes as it may facilitate in some situations the movement of the lower castes and oppose the same in another situation. The panchayati raj institutions has a dual effect on the social mobility of the lower caste's population in rural Bengal. On the one hand, it has increased political aspiration amongst the lower castes to a certain extent through reservation of panchayat seats and posts; and on the other hand, it has created differentiation and competition amongst equivalent lower caste groups by inculcating the politics of benefit distribution in them. However, the process of democratization seems to be continuing to awaken the lower castes. Further, the lower castes like Rajbanshi, Namshudra, Bagdi, and Pandra, do not share many commonalities to unite under a single banner.

Thus, the combination of post-Partition dynamics, the advent of electoral politics and the lack of a single mobilising caste identity together created conditions under which lower-caste politics of the sort we have seen elsewhere in India, is well-nigh impossible in Bengal. The decline of the left front apparently creates a favourable condition for identity politics. But it is quite unlikely that parties will be completely dependent on communities as Bhattacharya and Sinharay claim since open electoral mobilisation on the lines of caste and community by the mainstream parties will be limited by their commitment to the largely leftist political culture of Bengal. Given the existence of a well-entrenched and overtly dominant leftist political culture in Bengal, no mainstream political party can afford to denounce leftist ideology both in policy and rhetoric. The possibility and scope of identity-based political mobilisation will definitely increase. It is also possible that in the near future some caste-based political groups may operate on the periphery of the polity but the mainstream political parties

may only afford to accommodate them up to some extent, owing to a deep hangover of a secular-leftist-political culture in the state. Therefore, this limited scope of caste-based mobilisation will continue to distinguish Bengal from other north Indian states where caste as a political phenomenon does not face any real legitimacy crisis.

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