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# The Importance of Caste in Bengal

UDAY CHANDRA, KENNETH BO NIELSEN

Whether caste emerges as a relevant category in the politics of West Bengal depends crucially on how one defines “politics” and how one studies it. A response to Praskanva Sinharay, “A New Politics of Caste”, *EPW*, 25 August 2012.

**P**raskanva Sinharay (2012: 26) restates the oft-heard proposition that caste does not matter much in West Bengal politics:

The politics of West Bengal, compared to other states of India, had been truly unique, particularly with regard to the caste question. Caste was considered antagonistic to ‘modern’ politics; it never had been a determinant category in the electoral politics of the province.

That is, at least not until the Matuas recently stormed the political scene and changed that. This “long-held political myth” (Roy 2012: 948) about the irrelevance of caste in West Bengal derives its potency from the apparent lack of aggregation of caste interests in state elections (Sinharay 2012: 26) and the ostensible “depth of class feeling” and strength of the Left parties “cutting across divisions of caste and community” (Chatterjee 1997: 69).

## Nationalist Myth

However, there are good reasons to rethink the proposition that caste did not matter to politics in West Bengal, electorally or otherwise. As Partha Chatterjee (1997: 83, 86) rightly notes, 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. This is not so different from other states where political parties have coalesced diverse communities along caste lines, and where the impact of caste on organised politics is obvious. In states like West Bengal, where the caste question does not formally dominate party politics, we may be mistaken to conclude that caste loyalties have disappeared from popular consciousness (Chatterjee

1997: 84). There may, indeed, be a contrast between politics in West Bengal and in other north Indian states, which arises primarily from the dominance of the upper-caste Hindu middle-classes, the *bhadralok*. But this contrast does not necessarily extend to the level of popular ideology or consciousness (Chatterjee 1997: 86).

This disjuncture between the *bhadralok* and its others is neither new nor irrelevant to understanding politics and society in West Bengal today. As early as the 1880s, subordinated caste groups such as the *Namasudras* organised themselves in ritual and economic spheres against the upper-caste *bhadralok* (Bandyopadhyay 2011: 35-48). The conscious materialism of the *Matua* cult contrasted starkly with Ramakrishna’s other-worldly exhortations against work (*kaaj*) and wealth (*kanchan*) (Sarkar 1992). Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (2011: xi), author of a magisterial history of social protest by the *Namasudras* of Bengal, thus attacks “the powerful political myth that caste did not matter in this part of the subcontinent”. Even during the *swadeshi* and nationalist movements in late colonial Bengal, lower-caste and *adivasi* groups did not make common cause with the *bhadralok*. Hence

[t]hat the whole of Bengal Presidency supported the *Bhadralok*-sponsored renaissance and the subsequent phenomenon of *Swadeshi* nationalism is a myth perpetrated by many writers (Aloysius 1998: 69).

## Bhadralok Blinds

Demythologising dominant *bhadralok* discourses in and outside academia, it is worth recognising that caste in West Bengal, just as elsewhere in India, is as much a political-economic reality as a ritual one. If anything, the situation in West Bengal is worse than elsewhere in India where caste-based political movements have posed a significant challenge to the traditional dominance of *brahmins* and other upper castes over the 20th century. Unlike in neighbouring Bihar or far-away Tamil Nadu, the “domination of the modern liberal *bhadralok* over the public life of [West] Bengal” remains intact today (Sinharay 2012: 26).

The authors would like to thank Nate Roberts, Alpa Shah, Stig Toft Madsen, Dilip Menon, Akshay Mangla, and Lipika Kamra for discussing the ideas in this essay with them. Alpa Shah, Stig Toft Madsen, Mridu Rai and Nate Roberts read this essay carefully and suggested improvements that have spared us some egregious errors.

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In postcolonial West Bengal, even groups such as the Namasudras have been compelled to play by bhadralok rules governing emulation, acculturation and assimilation, albeit in pursuit of their own socio-economic ends (Bandyopadhyay 2011: 240-46). Because caste has always been a matter of agrarian political-economic relations, standard upper-caste complaints about the “politicisation of caste” in the democratic public sphere must be recognised as “every bit as political and socially locatable as the Dalit activism they decry” (Roberts 2008: 463). Given the extremely limited scope of caste mobilisation in West Bengal, bhadralok complaints about caste politics reveal a curiously reactionary stance.

The social implications of this stance, within which we must contextualise the recent resurgence of the Matua Mahasangha, are compounded by the preponderance of the bhadralok in academia and politics. As Aloysius (1998: 69) explains, “upper caste consciousness is so dominant among the intelligentsia that little research has been done on the egalitarian aspirations emanating from

the traditionally depressed communities”. Just as the upper-caste character of the Indian middle classes renders it a taboo for them to undertake manual labour, bhadralok intellectuals conducting rigorous field research in West Bengal are few and far between.

### **Dominant Ideology, Dominant Caste**

The few bhadralok anthropologists with considerable fieldwork experience in rural West Bengal are, of course, well aware of the persistence of caste in local power relations, even under the Left Front. For instance, Dayabati Roy’s (2012) recent fieldwork finds caste hierarchies widespread in village society and demonstrates the entrenchment of a caste consciousness among the upper- and middle-caste leaders and cronies of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)]. Similarly, Mukulika Banerjee’s (2010) case-study of the CPI(M)’s “Comrades” in Birbhum shows how a local party boss from the dominant Syed caste in the village commands the loyalty of lower-caste Muslims such as Sheikhs

and Pathans. This is hardly surprising given the social origins of bhadralok or *madhyabitta* Marxism in the early 20th century Bengal (Dasgupta 2005).

Since the 1930s, the politics of bhadralok Marxism was, as much as that of the right-wing Hindu Mahasabha, an upper-caste Hindu alternative to a weak, declining Congress in the province (Gallagher 1973). It is in this political scenario that we must locate the accommodationist turn in Namasudra and other lower-caste politics before decolonisation and under Congress, United Front, and CPI(M) governments in postcolonial West Bengal.

Beyond bhadralok circles, too, anthropologists of rural West Bengal have repeatedly underscored the limited social transformation wrought by the CPI(M) in a society where caste remains an everyday reality. Arild Ruud has, for example, examined in great detail how the Marxist penetration of rural Bengal did not lead to any deeper revolution in local perceptions of power and influence as in, say, postcolonial Bihar (Kunnath 2012). Ruud (1994) suggests that, although the Marxist movement may have mobilised the

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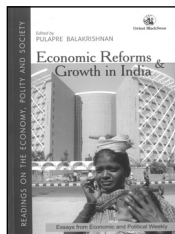
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masses, particularly lower-caste groups, it nonetheless behaved and was perceived as a traditional patron (albeit a more just and potent one than older patrons). Elsewhere, Ruud (2003: 146) has demonstrated that local rural responses to the Marxist message were generally influenced by local histories and experiences, inflected by caste relations and stereotypes. Hence, the dominant ideology of village society in West Bengal remains one of inequality, hierarchy and rank, separateness and distinction (Davis 1983).

It is in this light that we can appreciate Kenneth Bo Nielsen's (forthcoming) recent study of the Singur movement, which demonstrates how pre-existing hierarchical relations between middle-caste *chasi* – with positions of influence in the local Trinamool Congress – and scheduled caste agricultural labourers (*khet majur*) transplanted themselves into the movement's structure and leadership. We cannot, therefore, treat the apparent resurgence of Matua mobilisation in isolation from both older and more recent sociopolitical trends in rural West Bengal. Neither should we discount the significant ethnographic evidence that shows that caste was and remains significant in village politics, though its workings may have changed during the decades of Communist rule.

## Myopia

The myth that caste does not matter in state politics can only be sustained if one insists, myopically, on seeing aggregate election data – where major parties do not have identifiable caste bases – as the only bona fide indicator of popular political behaviour. But, even here, the preponderance of *bhadralok* in the leadership structures of all major parties should set alarm bells ringing. If West Bengal is, in any sense, an exception to wider Indian realities of caste, it is in the continued dominance of the upper-caste *bhadralok* over the rest of the society.

Caste remains, if not an *issue*, then certainly a *political resource* in West Bengal politics (Lama-Rewal 2009: 377). This is less widely acknowledged than it ought to be for both methodological and political reasons. In situ, party cadres, leaders, and legislators across the ideological

spectrum typically pretend not to know the caste of their colleagues, nor even their own, beyond lump categories such as upper caste or scheduled caste (Lama-Rewal 2009: 363). If one's study of politics relies heavily on interviews of this kind, one may indeed infer that caste matters little in state politics. If, however, one adopts a critical ethnographic approach, caste is likely to figure much more prominently as a category that shapes local relations of power and influence. While the former approach dominates the study of West Bengal politics, the latter looks far more promising to us.

Partha Chatterjee (2012: 49) has recently claimed that Subaltern Studies spearheaded an ethnographic turn in Indian historiography. But, to date, none of the overwhelmingly upper-caste Hindu *bhadralok* who founded the collective has undertaken serious ethnographic research, confining their writings to impressionistic claims about subaltern world views (Chakrabarty 1992; Kaviraj 1997; cf Rodrigues 2009). If anthropology is still the science that chases myth, it certainly seems to have its work cut out in West Bengal.

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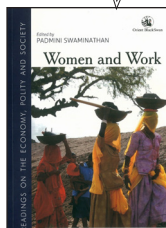
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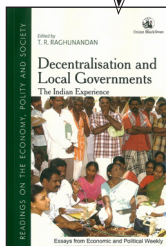
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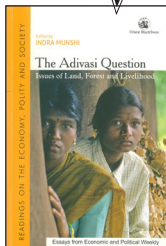
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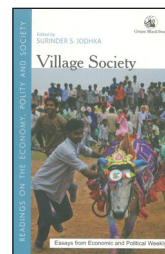
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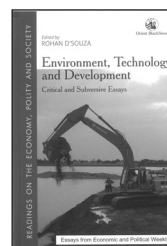
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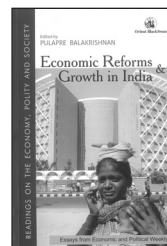
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