

THE POLITICS OF CASTE IN WEST BENGAL

This important volume . . . imaginatively unravels heterogeneous, subterranean, and formative histories.

– **Saurabh Dube**, Center for Asian and African Studies,
El Colegio de México

This timely, provocative and scholarly book takes on decades of elite leftist scholarship . . . With its rich ethnography and fine-tuned political sense, it challenges the comfortable assumptions of Bengal as a society . . . the authors put caste centrally on the agenda of social theory in South Asia.

– **Dilip Menon**, Centre for Indian Studies in Africa,
University of Witwatersrand

This volume offers – for the first time – a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the making and maintenance of a modern caste society in colonial and postcolonial West Bengal in India. Drawing on cutting-edge multidisciplinary scholarship, it explains why caste continues to be neglected in the politics of and scholarship on West Bengal, and how caste relations have permeated the politics of the region until today. The chapters presented here dispel the myth that caste does not matter in Bengali society and politics and make possible meaningful comparisons and contrasts with other regions in South Asia.

The work will interest scholars and researchers in sociology, social anthropology, politics, modern Indian history, and cultural studies.

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FOREWORD

‘Caste is not important in Bengal’ is an often-repeated phrase in discussions of contemporary India. It is used when comparing West Bengal with other states, where caste is considered a more determining factor in many issues. What is, of course, meant by this remark is that the democratic upsurge that India has witnessed in large parts of the country since the 1990s, which mobilised lower castes into active political participation and gave them an unprecedented visibility in electoral politics, did not happen in Bengal in the same way. This argument of the relative lack of importance of caste in Bengal is further supported by the lack of any of Bengal’s major political parties being associated with any particular caste or cluster of castes; it has been dominated first by the Congress, and then, by the Left Front for the most of its postcolonial history and neither party has advocated a caste-based identity or interest.

But this leads to the crucial question whether the absence of caste as a mobilisation strategy in electoral politics justifies its dismissal in shaping the politics of Bengal? Or indeed, does the very dismissal indicate a nascent upper-caste bias in how the narrative of the politics of Bengal is told? Given the importance of Bengal’s intellectual and cultural leadership in shaping India’s social renaissance and the nationalist movement, this question has salience not just for an understanding of Bengal, but that of India as a whole.

This volume addresses this important issue head-on and does it with academic thoroughness. The editors have been driven by the urgency of this question through observing the politics of contemporary Bengal, which each of them do in their individual capacity. But they also recognise that it is impossible (like so many other issues in understanding the political in South Asia) to gain any understanding of it without going back at least 200 years in the region. Thus, in this volume,

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historians first provide fine-grained case studies of particular castes and place them within the wider canvas of the hugely innovative and exciting politics of nineteenth-century Bengal. Their sociologist and anthropologist colleagues are then able to do the same with more contemporary examples by placing particular incidents of caste mobilisations, displacements and changing hierarchies within the wider politics of Communism and its challengers.

This volume shows that whatever the time period examined or the disciplinary lens through which it is examined, the puzzle of how a tiny majority of upper castes (about 10 per cent in the early twentieth century) were able to exercise a remarkable hegemonic hold over the rest of the population. There have been no bahujan political parties in West Bengal, as in north India, nor has there been an anti-Brahmin movement, as in south India. It begs the question why Bengal is so different, and predictably, the answer is complex. It has to be first recognised that the distinguishing feature of the Bengal elite, the *bhadralok* – a group that had otherwise caste ramifications within it – is their collective complete disavowal of manual work. The aspiration for any of the lower castes to become a member of the *bhadralok* required, therefore, first and foremost, their ability to give up manual work. But as the accounts in this book show, the elites deployed a number of strategies to keep this from happening. A wide variety of governance strategies such as stereotyping of lower castes and indigenous peoples, determining the settlement destinations of refugee populations from the east during and just after Partition and their mastery of electoral strategies in independent India maintained their dominance. Also, as the scholars in this volume and beyond have pointed out, factors such as Partition also made the sort of alliance between Muslims and lower-caste peasants, which we have seen in other parts of India, difficult. Further, the lower castes themselves – 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.

In addition, the dominance first of Congress politics and then the alliance of the Left Front parties for much of postcolonial Bengal has been no small factor. Caste was not the determining factor in the electoral strategy for either political formation and the thirty-four-year period of communist rule gave rise to the notion that ‘class’ was

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the more important variable for determining electoral fortunes than 'caste'. Furthermore, vote share figures at each election gave rise to the notion of the 'Muslim block vote', similar to those elsewhere in India, and one which the winning party got. The lack of precision of these ideas is no more evident than in the villages, where my own research has been based for the past fifteen years. There, among the Muslims who form the majority of paddy cultivators, there are four castes – Syeds, Shekhs, Mughals, and Pathans. The Syeds own the land, the rest work as sharecroppers or daily wage labourers. The land reforms of the 1980s changed this scenario and led to new dynamics of ownership, income and mutuality. The local village comrade, as perfect reflection of the membership of the CPI(M)'s politburo, is an upper-caste Syed and formed his fiefdom by mobilising the labouring castes. However, his machinations also alienated most of the other upper caste Syeds, but not all. In addition, his uneven dealings had also alienated some of the Shekhs and Pathans. During elections, people tended to vote on the basis of which party they felt most attachment for and on the basis of kinship links. Thus, both the Congress and Left Front vote contained many upper- and lower-caste votes, each formed according to a complex algorithm of loyalty, caste and class identities. This changed further with the rise of Trinamul Congress. Thus, the dynamics of caste in a Muslim setting – and a quarter of West Bengal's population is Muslim – is far from predictable, certainly not replaced by class and upper-caste hegemony has been enhanced by the long years of the Left Front.

And yet, as some of the studies in this volume show, the hegemony of the upper castes as well as the case for West Bengal 'exceptionalism', is less secure than is supposed. Challenges by organised caste organisations, the defiance of bhadrak norms by the grassroots Congress leader, Mamata Banerjee, herself an upper caste by birth but one who questioned the patrician manners of communist leaders, the eastward aspirations of Hindutva politics are all contributing factors. The next ten years in West Bengal will be very unlike the previous ten.

A volume such as this had been long overdue. But at least it has arrived in good time.

Mukulika Banerjee
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This anthology grew out of a scholarly exchange on the political life of caste in West Bengal in the pages of *Economic and Political Weekly* in the latter half of 2012. Praskanva Sinharay, who is also a contributor to this volume, started the debate when he published a short piece on the politics of the Matua Mahasangha in contemporary West Bengal. Sinharay's article elicited a critical commentary from Uday Chandra and Kenneth Bo Nielsen, and later, from Sarbani Bandyopadhyay and Partha Chatterjee. Chandra and Nielsen subsequently received an email from Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, the pioneering historian of caste politics in 20th-century Bengal, suggesting that we organise a workshop on this neglected topic, which, all of us felt, was in need of greater and more substantial scholarly attention. Several of the contributors to this volume then met in the Norwegian capital, Oslo in September 2013 for a day-long discussion on how to make sense of the role of caste in social and political life in West Bengal. This volume is based on many of the papers presented at the Oslo workshop, the spirit of which we seek to convey in the pages that follow.

The editors would like to thank the Nordic Forum for South Asia; the Centre for Development and the Environment and the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, University of Oslo; and the University Grants Commission (India), for their kind support. Thanks also to Amalie Meling Vikse and Jin Kathrine Fosli, who worked hard to make the Oslo workshop a success. Special thanks are due to those authors who joined us later in the process, enabling us to secure a broader thematic coverage. The editors would also like to thank series editor Mukulika Banerjee for her encouragement; and Routledge India for opening its press for us.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AISCF	All India Scheduled Castes Federation
BAMCEF	All India Backward and Minority Communities Employee Federation
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BJS	Bangiya Jana Sangha
BPL	Below the Poverty Line
BPSCF	Bengal Provincial Scheduled Castes Federation
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI(M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
EIRC	East India Refugee Council
INR	Indian Rupee
KMC	Kolkata Municipal Corporation
KMDA	Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority
KRRS	Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha
LF	Left Front
MM	Matua Mahasangha
NREGA	National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
OBC	Other Backward Classes
PSP	Praja Socialist Party
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
SBBS	Sara Bangla Bastuhara Samiti
SC	Scheduled Caste
SKJRC	The Committee to Save the Farmland of Singur
ST	Scheduled Tribe
TMC	Trinamul Congress
UCRC	United Central Refugee Committee

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INTRODUCTION

*Uday Chandra, Geir Heierstad and
Kenneth Bo Nielsen*

This anthology explores a much-neglected theme in South Asian history and politics – namely, the politics of caste in colonial and post-colonial West Bengal. Caste in West Bengal has been notoriously understudied for at least three reasons. First, the political culture of postcolonial West Bengal has tended to make all talk of caste a taboo. Second, West Bengal, unlike many other regions in India, has not experienced major caste-based social movements since 1947. Third, the ruling elites of this eastern Indian region, the *bhadralok*, though internally differentiated along many axes, have exercised a virtually uncontested social dominance that is rather unique, even in a country where the reproduction of power relations is anything but uncommon. In *The Politics of Caste in West Bengal*, we address each of these intellectual and political concerns by taking an interdisciplinary perspective that draws on scholarship in the fields of history, anthropology, sociology, political science, and cultural studies. Our purpose is to not only interrogate why caste continues to be neglected in the politics of and scholarship on West Bengal, but also how caste relations have, in fact, permeated the politics of the region in the colonial and postcolonial eras.

Caste in West Bengal, as our contributors show, has overt and covert aspects. On the one hand, there is the obvious issue of upper-caste dominance in the domain of formal politics despite the sway of communism for more than three decades. On the other hand, there are hidden, even insidious, ways in which a modern caste society has flourished since colonial times and shaped academic, journalistic and popular understandings of Bengali society, culture, history, and politics. This volume explores both the overt and covert workings of caste as it interrogates the ‘long-held political myth’ (Roy 2012: 948) about its irrelevance in West Bengal. Our endeavour in this anthology is not

to offer the final word on the politics of caste in West Bengal, nor do we purport to offer an exhaustive account of the career of caste in West Bengal across the colonial–postcolonial divide. Instead, we aim to provide the reader with a collection of stimulating chapters that identify key events, processes and issues so as to sustain an intellectual conversation that is both timely and relevant for those interested in understanding the nature of politics in contemporary South Asia. In this brief introduction, we situate the complex question of caste in West Bengal in a broader context and provide an overview of the topics that the book’s four sections engage with. The individual chapters engage with topics ranging from caste and the colonial encounter; Dalit political assertion in the colonial context; the consequences of Partition; the construction of bhadrakalok hegemony; the impact of the class-based politics of the Left parties; the effect of commodification and economic transformation; and the changing dynamics of caste in contemporary popular politics.

Situating West Bengal exceptionalism

Caste used to be India, and vice versa, as an India dominated by ‘caste hierarchy fulfils the need for a single and powerful organising image which enables people in the west to think about a particular non-western society’ (Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma 1994: 2). Moreover, caste ‘capture(s) internal realities in terms that serve the discursive needs of general theory’ (Appadurai 1992: 45). As such, caste, or its traits, has appeared both perpetual and ephemeral, as founded in structure and practice, providing both emancipation and subjugation. Debating the origins of caste as a system, or a set of systems, its ideological foundation or how it is embedded in practice has a long history beyond the politics of West Bengal (Lewis 1958; Beidelman 1959; Pocock 1962; Nicholas 1965; Dumont 1980; Dirks 1987; 2001; Gupta 2004) that the contributors to this volume are well aware of. However, in this volume, we seek not to engage directly in defining what caste (*jati*, *varna*) really is or used to be. Instead, we recognise that caste implies different things to different people at different times, and that caste is used politically in numerous ways. Inelegantly speaking, the contributors to this volume approach caste as something (groups of) people in India – and in West Bengal, in particular – do to each other in a more or less systematic manner.

The impetus for putting together this volume came in the wake of the publication of a short paper by Praskanva Sinharay (2012) in

the pages of *Economic and Political Weekly* in 2012. Sinharay, who is also a contributor to this volume, wrote that the politics of West Bengal had historically been ‘truly unique’ when compared to other Indian states with regard to the caste question because in that state, caste had never been a relevant political category. Now, however, massive changes were underway, spearheaded by the assertive voice of the Namasudra, as channelled through the Matua Mahasangha. The emergence of the strong, organised voice of the Matuas, Sinharay argued, signalled the coming of an entirely *new* politics of caste in a state otherwise inhospitable to what Rajni Kothari (1970: 5) long ago called ‘the politicisation of caste’.

Sinharay’s (2012: 26) claim that West Bengal is (or was until recently) a ‘truly unique’ case when set in the broader Indian context is indicative of what is often labelled ‘West Bengal exceptionalism’. Several chapters in this volume detail the historical trajectory of the making and consolidation of this ‘exceptionalism’, and we refer the reader to the contributions by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury and Partha Chatterjee, in particular, for a more detailed overview and analysis. But, put briefly, the impact of Partition; the general mainstreaming of caste groups and religious minorities around large, secular parties (first the Congress, later, the CPI(M)) in the post-colonial period; the ideological subsumption of caste by class under prolonged Left Front hegemony; the almost complete dominance of rural Bengal’s ‘party society’ (Bhattacharya 2011) by the Left parties, ostensibly underpinned by loyalties forged ‘across divisions of caste and community’ (Chatterjee 1997: 69); and the conspicuous – if often under rug swept – sociopolitical dominance of the self-professed ‘casteless’ upper-caste bhadralok (Lama-Rewal 2009) have combined to render the language of caste illegitimate in political discourse (Bandyopadhyay 2012). As a result, the politics of caste in West Bengal has rarely been foregrounded in scholarly work as being of any particular significance in shaping struggles over power, influence and the distribution of resources, whether material or symbolic. This has been most clearly the case when such work has focussed on the aggregate level of state politics, where none of the major parties champion the cause of any singular caste group or conglomerate of caste groups, and where the said parties attract voters from all castes and communities, albeit to varying degrees. This scenario, of course, contrasts starkly with the recent rapid ‘rise of the plebeians’ (Jaffrelot and Kumar 2009) – the SCs and OBCs – to power and influence across north India (see, e.g. Jaffrelot 2003; Michelutti 2008). In Uttar Pradesh, for instance,

the Yadav-dominated Samajwadi Party competes with the Chamar-dominated *bahujan/sarvajan* alliance of the Bahujan Samaj Party for power and influence in a patronage democracy (Chandra 2004); while in Bihar, the Yadav-dominated Rashtriya Lok Dal of Lalu Prasad has, until very recently, battled it out against the Kurmi-Mahadalit vote bank of Nitish Kumar. And on the sidelines, both the Jats of Uttar Pradesh, led by Ajit Singh, and the Dusadhs of Bihar, led by Ram Vilas Paswan, have caste-based ‘parties of their own’. In West Bengal, by contrast, organised and sustained Dalit assertion has been negligible; no dominant OBC has emerged as a political force post-Mandal; the electorate has not been polarised along communal lines; and attempts at forming a broader bahujan political identity out of a conglomerate of castes and communities have been largely unsuccessful.

Sinharay’s article elicited a critical commentary from Uday Chandra and Kenneth Bo Nielsen (2012), and later, from Sarbani Bandyopadhyay (2012) and Partha Chatterjee (2012), all of whom are contributors to this volume. While sympathetic to Sinharay’s analysis of the ‘new caste politics’ of the Matua Mahasangha, the commentaries pointed out the need for situating emerging forms of caste politics in a broader ethnographic and historical context. From such a contextualised perspective, one would be led to question both the ontological standing of ‘West Bengal exceptionalism’ and Sinharay’s claim to ‘newness’ on behalf of the Matua mobilisation. Both Bandyopadhyay and Chatterjee shared the trained historian’s scepticism towards such claims to ‘newness’, speculating instead that ‘the structures of *bhadralok* dominance are too well-fortified for one assembly election to bring about a dent in those structures’ (Bandyopadhyay 2012: 73).

Yet, rather than simply debunking the ‘exceptionalism’ of the Bengal situation as pure myth, the critiques encouraged us to scrutinise it more carefully – an argument recently echoed by Ranabir Samadhar (2013). All the chapters in the present volume have taken this task seriously as they grapple with the constitution, reproduction and transformation of specific forms of politics and contestation in which caste is operative. Importantly, our authors are sensitive to the fact that 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. 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 such as Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra or Bihar, where political parties have coalesced diverse communities along caste lines, and where the impact of caste on organised politics is obvious (see, e.g. Gorringe 2005; Waghmore 2013; Witsoe 2013). In states such as 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 an exceptional contrast between the politics of caste 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).

Critically interrogating the standard 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 20th century. That the politics of caste was obviously central to the political life of the province at the time can be gleaned from how, from as early as the 1880s, subordinated caste groups such as the Namasudras had organised themselves in ritual and economic spheres against the upper-caste *bhadralok* (Bandyopadhyay 2011: 35–48). The conscious materialism of the Matua cult, a phenomenon addressed in this volume by both Praskanva Sinharay and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, contrasted starkly with Ramakrishna's other-worldly exhortations against work (*kaaj*) and wealth (*kanchan*) (Sarkar 1992). Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (2011: xi), in his magisterial history of social protest by the Namasudras of Bengal, thus attacked '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, 'that the whole of Bengal Presidency supported the *bhadralok*-sponsored renaissance and the subsequent phenomenon of Swadeshi nationalism is a myth' (Aloysius 1998: 69), and one that has been perpetrated by a great many writers at that. In this context, Sarbani Bandyopadhyay's article on Dalit assertion is a timely and detailed reminder of the 'hyper-visibility of caste' (Bandyopadhyay 2012: 71) in the domain of institutionalised politics in the late colonial period.

If caste in West Bengal was thus 'hyper-visible' right up to the time of Independence, how and why did it disappear so rapidly from popular political discourse and action? The articles by Bandyopadhyay and Ray Chaudhury, and Chatterjee offer two stimulating answers to the puzzle of this strange disappearance of the caste question that centre on the long history of Partition and its aftermath. The spatial displacement, massive migration and sometimes violent intimidation associated with Partition, they argue, diluted in many respects the politics of Dalit assertion in the postcolonial context. Since migration patterns, the degree of spatial rupture, and the modalities of postcolonial governance were refracted through the prism of caste, certain caste groups were favoured over others. For complex and contested reasons, this effectively undermined the potential for the formation of strong 'Dalit counter publics' (Hardtmann 2009) and a concomitant caste-based Dalit counter-politics in the postcolonial era. Yet, while Bandyopadhyay and Ray Chaudhury, and Chatterjee, in effect, offer a perspective of the *longue durée*, centred on the event of Partition, to explain the decline of Dalit assertion and the consolidation of bhadraklok hegemony in the postcolonial context, Dwaipayan Sen's refreshing article in the same section cautions against an overly structuralist reading of the aftermath of Partition. Sen argues that the 'silencing' of caste was *also*, albeit not exclusively, the outcome of the exercise of social agency on the part of the bhadraklok. Rather than deciding which of these two interpretations is more accurate, we find it fruitful to keep the inherent productive tension of this exchange alive throughout this volume. As Uditi Sen (2013) has shown recently, careful study of the structural transformations wrought by Partition-enforced migration to West Bengal is hardly incompatible with a fine-grained understanding of how bhadraklok domination came to be re-asserted in the postcolonial era.

'Post-Communism' and the normalisation of West Bengal politics?

Anthropologists with fieldwork experience in rural West Bengal have, of course, for long been well aware of the persistence of caste in popular consciousness and social and political life, both under Congress rule and the prolonged hegemony of the Left Front. Moving beneath the radar screen of aggregate state-level electoral politics, Dayabati Roy's (2012; 2014) 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

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the 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 may not come across as very surprising, given the social origins of bhadrakok or *madhy-abitta* Marxism in early-20th-century Bengal (Dasgupta 2005). Since the 1930s, the politics of bhadrakok 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). In effect, the politics of caste tended to remain a key organising principle of everyday rural life.

Anthropologists of rural West Bengal have similarly underscored the limited social transformation wrought by the CPI(M) in a society where caste remained an everyday reality. Arild Ruud's pioneering ethnographic work 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, post-colonial Bihar (Kunnath 2012). Ruud (1994) suggests that, although the Marxist movement may have mobilised the 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). And 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 remained one of inequality, hierarchy and rank, separateness and distinction, as Marvin Davis' (1983) ethnographic work also brings out. While Ruud's contribution to this volume suggests that caste hierarchies in rural Bengal may now, in fact, be in the process of partly withering away, Kenneth Bo Nielsen's chapter brings to light the continued ability of caste hierarchies to structure political action, even within contexts in which caste is upheld as irrelevant. That the politics of caste in rural West Bengal has thus led a healthy life, casts considerable doubt on just how deep West Bengal exceptionalism ran in the first place.

Yet, in spite of these deeper continuities, there has been a growing sense in recent years that something radically new is underway with regards to the role of caste in the politics of the state. This growing common sense has been spawned by a series of interrelated developments that have combined to propel communal and caste questions to the top of the political agenda. The cumulative dissatisfaction with

Left Front rule; the CPI(M)'s heavy-handed land acquisitions in Singur and Nandigram (Sarkar and Sarkar 2008; Jones 2009; Nielsen 2010); its alienation of Muslim voters (Nielsen 2011); and the unexpected ability of Mamata Banerjee to project herself as the new champion of the peasantry and the poor and downtrodden, finally dislodged the Left Front from power in the state in 2011. And in contrast to her 'secular' communist counterparts, Mamata Banerjee has no scruples about appealing overtly to caste and communal sentiments. Her 'post-bhadralok' (Gupta 2012, 132) style of politics has, in turn, opened up new spaces for articulating a plurality of communal identities in political forums – something which, for instance, the Muslim electorate has made good use of (Nielsen 2011; 2012). So, too, have the numerically strong Matuas, as Sinharay demonstrates in this volume; and there have even been attempts at forging a more inclusive Mulnibasi political identity among marginalised groups, as Indrajit Roy's chapter shows. At the same time, Hindu nationalist sentiments promulgated by the Sangh Parivar – most notably, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – have now gained a foothold in a state where they were, for long, considered a non-entity. At the recently concluded 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP polled a full 17 per cent of the popular vote whereas the once undefeatable electoral machinery of the CPI(M) managed just over 22 per cent. The surge of the BJP has drawn nourishment from long-standing concerns among Bengali Hindu voters over illegal migration of Muslims from Bangladesh, whom the BJP calls 'Muslim infiltrators', and the discontent with what the BJP projects as Mamata Banerjee's pro-Muslim politics. Yet, apart from thus seeking to consolidate and add to whatever support the party has traditionally had among upper-caste Hindus, the BJP, in fact, appears to have expanded the most in the southern SC, ST and OBC-dominated areas of the state. The party has successfully organised SC and ST communities against Muslim infiltrators in some of the border areas; and more generally, the fact that the BJP has focussed on the living conditions of backward Hindu communities means that nearly three out of four of the party's local leaders hail from the backward castes. The irony that a party that is, for very good reasons, conventionally seen as a bastion of conservative and patriarchal upper-caste values may be capable of denting bhadralok hegemony by effecting a genuine transformation in the social composition of political leadership in the state is, perhaps, obvious.

At another level, these 'post-communist' transformations in the state's political culture have, in many respects, brought West Bengal

closer to the general north Indian pattern, where caste and communal identities are politically salient, competitive populism is deeply embedded in electoral politics and cycles, and a considerable level of political violence is the order of the day (Nielsen 2014). At the same time, it is, as Ranabir Samaddar (2013) has reiterated, surely too early to proclaim the dawn of an entirely new politics of caste in West Bengal: Mamata Banerjee's Trinamul Congress may yet assume its place as the new king of 'party society', thereby closing off competing channels of mediation and transactions, and thus, once again gloss over the operations of the politics of caste in everyday social and political life.

The chapters

The chapters in *The Politics of Caste in West Bengal* are structured around four key topics: (1) caste and colonialism; (2) Partition and the making of a modern caste society; (3) caste and popular politics; and (4) caste, stratification and the economy.

Uday Chandra's opening chapter probes the limits of recent academic writing that treats modern articulations of caste as a direct or indirect consequence of colonial governmentality. The example of the Kols of Chotanagpur in the westernmost fringe of 19th-century Bengal, he explains, points to an alternative theoretical perspective on how caste relations were transformed as the social relations of production under colonial conditions. The Kols migrated from their homes to work as construction workers and sweepers in colonial Calcutta, as forest-clearers in the Sundarbans and Assam, and as plantation labourers in the tea gardens of North Bengal and Assam. Despite being classified in late-19th-century ethnographic accounts as a 'tribe', the Kols became the labouring caste par excellence in the political economy of colonial eastern India. The hard and dirty labour they performed placed the Kols as the lowest of the low at the bottom of the emerging social hierarchies of modern Bengal. The winners in the new capitalist economy were not only European plantation owners and representatives of the Raj, but also the Bengali landowners, managers and better off labouring groups in the same social field. Power and domination were thus diffused across economy and society. The historical processes that led to this reordering of Bengali society have been obscured to a great extent, and this chapter goes some distance towards unravelling these processes.

Sarbani Bandyopadhyay's contribution is an examination of the dialectics between Dalit political assertion and bhadralok responses

in the first half of the 20th century. In this period, the alienation of a large section of the Bengali population from mainstream bhadralok society became visible when the Hindu bhadralok failed to draw the 'untouchable' and some 'lower castes' in adequate numbers into the Swadeshi movement that began in 1905. These castes opposed it, and most allied with the Muslims and the colonial government to thwart the Swadeshi programme. To the lowest castes, Swadeshi was little more than a conspiracy to further bhadralok dominance. To contain this and similar forms of Dalit assertion, influential sections of bhadralok society actively sought to appropriate this assertion to serve nationalist goals. They did so, Bandyopadhyay shows, by embarking on a programme of building 'Hindu unity' through caste reforms – a process which also entailed the communalisation of identities. By drawing on consolidated and influential networks among caste Hindus, and by discursively subsuming caste into the larger question of class, independent forms of Dalit mobility and mobilisation were effectively blocked.

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury's article proceed from the pertinent observation that the Scheduled Caste movement before 1947 was most powerful in east and north Bengal: For both the Namasudras and Rajbansis, their close geographical location in these areas offered them a crucial spatial capacity for social mobilisation. Therefore, the loss of that spatial anchorage as a result of Partition and the consequent physical displacement and dispersal of a large section of the Dalit peasant population of Bengal had an adverse impact on their social and political movements, which were, from then on, overshadowed by their struggle for resettlement. From 1950, Scheduled Caste peasants migrated on a large scale from East to West Bengal. The presence of these Dalit peasant refugees changed the texture of politics in postcolonial West Bengal as the displaced Dalits acquired the new identification of being 'refugees' – the only publicly identifiable oppressed group in a new post-Partition discourse of victimhood. As refugees defined by the experience of migration and the camp life, they faced a different kind of struggle – the struggle for resettlement. While the refugees were never a homogenous category, in the interest of a united struggle, their left-liberal and predominantly high-caste leadership deliberately purged the vocabulary of caste from their language of protest, which could then be more easily appropriated into the modern tropes of social justice deployed by the mainstream political parties and the state. This did not imply that the caste

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question was resolved; it only meant that caste became less conspicuous, though not non-existent, in the public discourse of social justice and political protest.

Partha Chatterjee's chapter similarly grapples with the consequences of Partition for the politics of caste in postcolonial West Bengal. Chatterjee is in agreement with Sarbani Bandyopadhyay's argument that, as in other regions of India, the initial dominance of upper-caste Hindus in middle-class occupations during the colonial period came under severe challenge in Bengal in the last two decades before independence. The rise of a new educated middle class from among the superior peasantry and popular political mobilisation led to an assault on the institutions of upper-caste privilege. But the consequence of independence and the partition of the province was that the erstwhile dominance of upper castes was re-established in West Bengal. The reversal happened during the lifetime of a single generation without anyone talking about it. To Chatterjee, this is nothing less than 'a social counter-revolution' that took place behind a veil of silence. Breaking this counter-revolution down to its constituent parts, Chatterjee offers an historical account of eight features of 'the new middle-class formation' that successfully constituted itself as a dominant culture that was, in Gramsci's sense, hegemonic. This dominance is not – even today – in any serious danger, Chatterjee suggests, not least because of the immensely superior control exercised by the upper castes over the mechanisms of electoral democracy through their dominance of the party system, from left to right.

Dwaipayan Sen's article explore the analytically vexed problem of agency with respect to the following anomaly: The domination of West Bengal's political, social and cultural domains by the upper castes, even as it was surely proclaimed that caste did not matter – the perpetuation of caste inequality by those who disavowed the salience of caste, as it were. But who, or what, was the agent of this domination? Sen asks. This question requires consideration because, Sen argues, the resumption of upper-caste domination and concomitant decline of the political visibility of caste have been explained primarily as a consequence of social structure in the first case, and acquiescence and accommodation in the latter. In contrast, Sen encourages us to consider upper-caste domination as far more willed and coercive than we are usually given to believe. The disproportionate influence commanded by the upper castes of West Bengal and the related 'silence' about the caste question, Sen argues, was *also* the outcome of their

exercise of social agency. Sen's article also focuses on contemporary activist discourse about upper-caste domination and Dalit inequality, and the prospects for alliances between Dalit and Muslim communities. The excursion into those fields leads Sen to argue – and in contrast to what Chatterjee's chapter suggests – that the presumed *bhadralok* hegemony is far less secure than we might think.

Kenneth Bo Nielsen's article portrays one of the most talked-about rural movements in West Bengal in recent years – namely, that against the Tata Motors car factory in Singur. The movement of Singur's unwilling farmers to resist forced land acquisition was instrumental in turning the rural mood against the incumbent Left Front government, and pried open new political spaces for Mamata Banerjee's assertive populism (Banerjee 2004). While much has been written on the implications of the Singur movement for political change and development in West Bengal, the role of caste in it has, as Nielsen (forthcoming) has argued elsewhere, remained a neglected issue. While the scant attention generally accorded to the politics of caste in West Bengal may form part of the explanation for why this should be the case, another part of the explanation is that support for the Singur movement (or lack thereof) on the ground did not neatly follow caste lines. Yet, as Nielsen's detailed ethnography shows, the everyday politics of caste was effectively operative in shaping both the local organisation of the Singur movement and the articulation of its agenda. Nielsen's contribution is, thus, further evidence of the continued salience of caste hierarchies in forms of popular politics that operate beneath the level of the aggregate.

Praskanva Sinharay's contribution is a study of the political mobilisation of the Matuas, constituted almost entirely by the lower-caste Namasudras on the grounds of caste loyalty, under the banner of Matua Mahasangha. Over the past few elections held in the state – the panchayat polls in 2008; the Lok Sabha elections in 2009 and 2014; the Legislative Assembly elections in 2011 – all political parties engaged in a tug-of-war to ensure en bloc electoral support from the Matuas in the around 35 state assembly constituencies, where their votes are believed to be decisive. By detailing three crucial aspects of the politics of Matua Mahasangha – its organisational history and contemporary structure, its role in the Dalit literary movement and its political activism as the community organisation of the Matuas – Sinharay argues that the politics of Matua Mahasangha has introduced 'a new politics of caste' in West Bengal. By carving out an autonomous

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political position outside the ambit of *bhadralokism*, and by declaring itself the vanguard of the Dalits and the underprivileged people, the Matua Mahasangha is, Sinharay suggests, in the process of creating a counter-discourse that can stand outside and at the same time efficiently challenge *bhadralok* dominance.

Indrajit Roy's contribution analyses the work and writings of the Mulnibasi Samiti, the West Bengal State body of the Rashtriya Mulnivasi Sangh (National Mulnibasi Organisation), which, again, functions as the cultural wing of the All India Backward and Minority Communities Employee Federation (BAMCEF). BAMCEF was founded in 1983 by the charismatic Kanshi Ram, and BAMCEF and the National Mulnibasi Organisation share the same political slogans: 'Jai Mulnivasi', or victory to Mulnibasi. In its imagination, the figure of the Mulnibasi refers to the autochthonous inhabitants of India, that is, the members of the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and religious minorities. Its 'Other' is the Aryans: the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas, with Eurasian antecedents. To the supporters of the Mulnibasi Samiti, the historical experience of West Bengal had been uniquely unfortunate. Despite the language of modernity permeating the state's cultural and political spaces for nearly two centuries, caste remained a central idiom of a social life characterised by relations of exploitation and inequality between the Mulnibasis and their tormentors. In a telling quotation from one of Roy's informants, the oppressed in West Bengal are upheld as being worse off than 'our people in Bihar', who at least 'enjoyed some respect'. To Roy, the negotiations, conversations and agonisms attending to transforming identifications towards the figure of the Mulnibasi are indicative of the transformative politics being advanced by a new political generation in rural West Bengal. Just how far this project is able to go remains to be seen.

Arild Ruud's chapter is a historical study of the transformations occurring in caste and the economy in a Bengali village. Although West Bengal is often portrayed as somewhat of a laggard state when compared to, say, Gujarat or the Punjab, the economic transformations that have occurred in the Bengali countryside over the past five decades have been nothing short of spectacular. The stark inequalities and agrarian impasse that had characterised rural West Bengal for a very long time (Bhattacharyya and Bhattacharyya 2007) gave way, from the 1970s, to pro-poor land reforms and a period of sustained and high agricultural growth. Living standards improved

considerably, and later, many rural Bengalis – almost from across the caste spectrum – have successfully diversified out of agriculture and now derive their livelihoods from a variety of sources. As a result, the very hierarchical land-based patronage relations of old between upper-caste landlords and lower-caste dependents have crumbled. Today, the core of patron–client relationships is neither caste, jati nor labour, but rather ‘politics’ – that is, the distribution of protection and access to state resources and programmes, mediated by political parties. In this radically changed economic and political context, the sociopolitical salience of caste identities is both transformed and increasingly withering away.

Moumita Sen’s contribution is a historical study of how the Kumbhakar, the potter caste of West Bengal, has negotiated with questions of identity, hierarchy, power, and status through the practice of its craft. Tracing the evolution of different art styles over time, Sen analyses the construction of hierarchies within the caste-based artisanal community centred on their capacity to appropriate different ways of moulding reality. By tying together shifting forms of patronage and alternating regimes of art, aesthetics and taste, Sen presents a compelling account of how the changing nature of a craft can lead to significant changes in individual and collective status and identity.

Geir Heierstad’s contribution builds on the chapters by Ruud and Sen. Like Sen, Heierstad too writes about the Kumars of Kolkata’s Kumartuli, the last of the city’s larger caste-based neighbourhoods. And like Ruud, he examines the impact of economic transformations on the meaning and practice of caste. Caste identity among the Kumars has, Heierstad demonstrates, increasingly been turned into an emblem under which a craft is practised, products sold, markets monopolised, and political battles fought. This, to Heierstad, amounts to a ‘commodification of caste’. Today, the Kumars see themselves, and are seen by society at large, as bearers of Bengali tradition and history, who have, at the same time, skilfully adapted to the demands of contemporary consumers and clients. This ‘commodified’ caste identity may, in turn, be leveraged as a political resource to bring development and other benefits to Kumartuli. By thus analytically integrating changing self-understandings and art practices among the Kumars with broader patterns of socio-economic change, Heierstad brings to light crucial aspects of the historical transformations in the politics of caste among this particular caste group.

In combination, the 11 chapters in *The Politics of Caste in West Bengal* offer rich and stimulating accounts of the making and remaking

of caste relations and identities in a diversity of sociopolitical settings. While we have aimed for a broad thematic coverage, we do not aspire to offer the final word on the politics of caste in West Bengal. Indeed, there are several crucial areas of discussion that the book does not address. This includes, crucially, the politics of caste among Christian and Muslim communities, and the complex intersections between caste and gender. We, therefore, hope the reader will see this book as an invitation to further comparative research on different dimensions of caste in West Bengal.

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