



Caste in the Politics of Post-Colonial West Bengal: A Study in Retrospect

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Available online at: www.isca.in, www.isca.me

Received 19th April 2014, revised 24th May 2014, accepted 12th June 2014

Abstract

Caste has played a very marginal role in the politics of West Bengal since independence. This article argues that in post-colonial West Bengal caste has been a victim of circumstances which have privileged discourses such as religion, nation and class over that of caste. Today, the electoral decline of the left seems to have finally 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 before it can actually claim political and electoral success.

Keywords: Caste, class, bengal, partition, left, Matua, Namsudra.

Introduction

Today the political observers are witnessing with enormous surprise the apparent resurgence of organized Dalit political assertion in the politics of West Bengal, a state that supposedly offered a decent farewell to the indecent phenomenon of caste a long time back. The Matuas, belonging mostly to lower caste Namsudras who crossed over to India as refugees in successive phases after partition made a grandiose entry under their organization Matua Mahasangha in the electoral battlefield of West Bengal and played a major role in influencing electoral outcomes in local, state and national level elections held in the state since 2008. This organization is now favourably placed to attract all the political parties by promising en bloc support of the entire Matua community. Mamta Banerjee's Trinamool Congress has gained much from the support that the Matuas have shown to her party in all the elections since 2008 and the party has reciprocated by appointing Saha-Sanghadipati of the Mahasangha, Manjul Krishna Thakur, as the Minister of State for Refugee Rehabilitation and Relief¹. On the other hand, Abdul Rezzak Mollah, a former CPI (M) Minister being expelled from the party has formed a combined political front of Dalits and Muslims named social justice front. This front aims to contest the 2016 assembly elections appealing to the Dalit and minority votes².

All these events pose two questions. First, why Caste politics was silent for so long and second what has made it reappear. Various explanations have been provided to answer these questions and many of them have raised pertinent points. However, I believe that any single, one-dimensional perspective will invariably fail to take into account the various complexities involved in the issue. Therefore, the best way to answer these questions is to place them in the context of history and try to analyse and understand the specific social, economic, moral and cultural contexts through which politics of the state has travelled so far.

Partition and Marginalization of Caste Identity

In the colonial Bengal caste made its presence felt both in the political and social life of Bengal. The Namsudras which constituted the largest caste group in colonial Bengal time and again resented the social and ritual superiority of the higher castes on the one hand and the elite upper caste character of the nationalist movement on the other³. But with growing communal polarization and frequent communal clashes Muslims replaced caste Hindus as the main adversary in the Namsudra consciousness. Thus began the process through which religious divisions continually frustrated and obscured caste divisions for a long period to come. After partition in 1947 when millions of Hindus migrated from the eastern part of Bengal to its western part, few lower caste people could manage to migrate since they lacked necessary means to cope with immediate dislocation. The Namsudras who mostly remained in Pakistan faced violence and discrimination and were ultimately forced to migrate. This changed their political and community perception. As they migrated from the eastern part of Bengal to escape religious persecution in the hands of a communal regime they now saw themselves primarily as Hindus, pitted against their projected other-the Muslims. This collapsed the difference between outcastes and caste Hindus in the Dalit consciousness⁴. This change in their political outlook is the key to understanding the absence of caste based interest and grievance articulation in the initial decades after partition in 1947 even when there was an enough hint of an upper caste conspiracy to dismantle the Dalit solidarity. While the upper caste Hindu migrants were allowed to settle in Calcutta and its thriving suburbs, the Namsudra 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, the seat of power and prosperity⁵. It is difficult to conclusively prove that the lower caste unity and political regrouping of the Namsudras were prevented at the behest of the upper caste dominated parties. However, what is important here is to stress

that the apparent impression of an upper caste conspiracy gave enough fodder to fire the canon of caste politics at this stage of history⁶. But caste politics showed enormous reluctance to revive itself as the specific historical context produced by the experiences of partition facilitated rise of an inclusive Hindu religious discourse into which the lower caste Namsudras found themselves to be incorporated by virtue of their traumatic experience of partition in the hands of their significant “other- the Muslims”. This according to Sekhar Bandyopadhyaya created a situation in which partition-violence and refugee influx had led to a rephrasing of the idioms of victimhood and resistance, placing less emphasis on caste and focusing more on the predicament of migration and the struggles of the refugees. As a result, the public domain rejected caste as a dominant language of marginalization in favour of the language of religion.

Politics of Class and the Final Retreat of Caste

When the lower caste Namsudras fled East Pakistan and came to West Bengal they did so as refugees whose primary concern could not have been politics but survival. As later events point out, this fact was probably best understood by none other than the left parties of Bengal. The left parties came out as the champions of the refugee cause and turned the grievances of the lower castes against their economic marginalization with a community unaffiliated agenda of social justice confined within the secular limits of Marxism. They provided an organized and efficient leadership to the refugee movements. The refugees, who organized themselves under the banner of the United Central Refugee Council, came under the controlling influence of the CPI (Communist Party of India).

When the Communists came to power they proved to be the loudest in proclaiming the irrelevance of caste in the struggles of the downtrodden. For a party whose leaders were bhadralok (upper caste), class was a more relevant, progressive and the only legitimate category. For them the question of caste was one of superstructure⁷. They made the language of caste irrelevant in order to create an order of upper caste dominance with hegemony. Under such circumstances the “Party” became the key institution to implement the new politics of class. Every other social institution such as caste council or religious assembly was either eliminated or subordinated to the overarching authority of the “Party”⁸ whose leadership exclusively belong to the three upper castes of Bengal, i.e. Brahmins, Kayasthas and Baidyas. Therefore, it is quite striking that the Communist party established such dominance without any opposition from the Dalits who neither attempted to create an independent political platform nor attempted to acquire leadership position within the party. Rather they voted for the left front time and again. Therefore, operation of an upper caste dominance with hegemony during the left rule to which the lower caste people seemingly accommodated and consented can’t be ruled out.

Caste Dominance with Hegemony-Origin, Nature and Form

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. As education was necessary to grasp the government rules and regulations in order to handle the newly set up rural institutional mechanism, an educated upper caste elite took over the new positions of leadership in the rural society. At the village level, this new elite mostly comprised of local school teachers who were trusted and respected by people belonging to different social segments by virtue of being endowed with cultural and moral capital. This new elite was drawn into the leftist politics due to the romantic appeal of an egalitarian ideology and they in turn brought diverse communities within the leftist support base creating a hegemonic leftist social order, to which Dalits like other social groups gave voluntary consent. This social order was dominated by the upper caste intelligentsia at all levels but its upper caste character was not considered a hindrance to realizing the goal of an egalitarian society by the Dalit masses as this new elite claimed their superiority on the basis of their education and ideology, not on the basis of their caste or wealth⁹. As a result, the poor landless farmers did not oppose the leftist agenda to gain control of the entire society in the name of the poorer class by foreshadowing the role and autonomy of the communities. Mukulika Banerjee’s case study of CPI (M) party’s modus operandi in the villages of Chisti and Madanpur in the Birbhum district of West Bengal gives evidence of the fact that the upper caste communist leader commands loyalty from the low caste people due to beneficial effects of land reforms and the overall appeal of an egalitarian ideology¹⁰.

Moreover, the fact this new elite of the upper caste intelligentsia had no ties with land in the countryside made them acceptable in the eyes of the landless agricultural labourers and sharecropper, many of whom were Dalits. According to Partha Chatterjee the upper caste educated Bengalis are mostly confined to Calcutta and its nearby regions with little landed property to develop any permanent and meaningful interests in land in the countryside. Being consumers of agricultural products they have remained immune from the effects of any political conflicts over issues related to land and its produce. Therefore, they found themselves in an apparent position of neutrality, which enabled them to arbitrate between diverse social and economic interests and as they carried out this function of social arbitration through the party, in ultimate

analysis the party came to exercise hegemonic control over all aspects of the society¹¹.

Furthermore, in the organized political domain the leftist rhetoric of electoral mobilization almost exclusively focused on the problems of the broad category of proletarian class within which the Dalits were accommodated either as landless labourers or poor workers. Former chief minister Jyoti Basu, in his reply to the Mandal Commission, stated that in West Bengal there were only two castes: the rich and the poor¹². As a result the, the Dalits also saw their problems as emanating not from their historically low social and ritual status but from poverty, ignorance and other hard economic realities faced by them. All these factors combined together to banish caste based identity politics from the matrix of probabilities at the macro level of organized political sphere.

Understanding Caste in the Non-institutionalized World

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, as a social phenomenon remained a genuine reality. 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 bonafide indicator of popular political behaviour. 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 influence¹³. Many anthropologists employing ethnographic approach have also drawn the conclusion that caste often shapes local relations of power and influence despite having no significant effect on the organized politics at the macro level. Dayabati Roy through her field study has shown that despite 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 feeling¹⁴. This validates 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. Therefore, in the apparently un-institutionalized 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 simply means that despite the absence of caste based interest articulation in the organized polity the necessary elements of caste based identity politics were always present in the rural society of Bengal. 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.

The Crisis of the Left and Political Revival of Caste

As the Left Front regime deviated from its traditional ideology and adopted a so-called anti poor industrialization policy, it faced a huge credibility crisis. This resulted in the fragmentation of its age-old support base, the lump category of "poor-class", giving impetus to identity based mobilization. Under these circumstances, there occurred resurgence of organized Dalit political assertion by the Matuas and caste came to be used as an instrument of electoral mobilization at the macro level of politics as well. In the light of these developments it has been argued that a new politics of caste has set its foot in the political scene of West Bengal¹⁵. Bhattacharya argues that we are going to witness in the coming decades the phenomenon of "identitarian politics of community" which aims to undermine the autonomy of all existing parties and bring them under the control of locally constituted networks of caste, ethnic, and religious associations, or form new community-based political parties to press for a larger share of state's resources. Roy has identified three major trends in the interaction between community and organized politics of West Bengal since the electoral decline of the left. One is seen in the efforts of the Matuas to articulate identity based demands by aligning with mainstream political parties. Another trend is to privilege community affiliation over party affiliation while working within a political party. This is evident from the greater importance given on the community identity of the candidates rather than their party identity in certain areas during the current election campaigns. Lastly, there is also an effort to establish independent identity based political platform. This can be seen from Abdul Rezzak Mollah's attempt to create an exclusive organization for the Dalits and minorities¹⁶.

Conclusion

In the final analysis it can be said that in the post-colonial Bengal caste has been a victim of circumstances which have privileged discourses such as religion, nation and class over that of caste. But caste has never been dumped into the dustbin of history. Now, it seems that politics of the state is finally prepared to embrace the discourse of caste. However, the fact remains that caste politics still has to triumph many more hurdles. 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. Therefore, the pattern of political mobilization in the near future needs to be seen and understood very closely before arriving at any sweeping generalization regarding the future of caste politics in West Bengal.

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