

A REVIEW OF AYAN GUHA, *THE CURIOUS TRAJECTORY OF CASTE IN WEST BENGAL POLITICS: CHRONICLING THE CONTINUITY AND CHANGE*

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Caste and Indian politics are inextricably linked, even after 77 years of Independence. Often ticket distribution in election is a careful dance of pandering to caste dynamics of that constituency. However, West Bengal's politics is often perceived to be different from the dominant strand of Indian politics in this regard. It is widely believed by pundits that caste plays very little role in electoral politics of the state. West Bengal is unique for giving lengthy mandates to the incumbents. A long period of Congress rule gave way to the Left and now Trinamool Congress (TMC) is the number one party of the state. But the caste factor (or the lack of it) has almost remained the same.

Post 2009, after the electoral decline of the Left, this caste “exceptionalism” has received ample scholarly attention. Ayan Guha’s *The Curious Trajectory of Caste in West Bengal Politics: Chronicling the Continuity and Change* is a timely addition to the existing literature. In this book, Ayan Guha, a political scientist, who has worked as an Assistant Professor of political science in Jamia Hamdard University, New Delhi. is on a quest to find the causes behind the limited role of caste in Bengal as compared to other states of India and also explores if the ground is fertile for the evolution of caste-based politics in the future. In the first of eight chapters, Guha deftly analyses the existing literature on caste and politics of West Bengal. However, what catches Guha’s attention is the “rise of caste” thesis by Praskanva Sinharay, who argues that caste will play a significant role in the politics due to the organised force of the Matua- Namasudra community in the districts of Nadia and North 24 Parganas. After the

humbling of the Left in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, the Matua-Namasudra¹ movement gained sufficient momentum in the state. In the run up to the 2011 assembly elections, TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee tried wholeheartedly to become an insider to the community. A Brahmin by birth, Mamata had no qualms in embracing the subaltern Matuas, who till then had not received much media attention. Mamata had figured out that the Left has almost complete dominance over the SC/ST reserved seats in the state. She needed to break that stranglehold if she harboured any hopes of reaching higher office. Thus, she warmed up to the Matuas. Trinamool Congress supremo's camaraderie with the Matua matriarch Binapani Debi (Baro Maa) ensured they voted en masse in favour of TMC.

However, before the 2014 general elections, fault lines developed within the community or more specifically inside Baro Ma's (matriarch of the Matua community) immediate family as Matua leaders like Subrata Thakur (Baro Maa's grandson) and Manjul Krishna Thakur (Baro Maa's son) joined the BJP. According to Guha, BJP, in order to build a vote base among the Matuas, mobilised the community invoking past traumas faced by them due to religious persecution in East Pakistan (modern day Bangladesh). Guha terms this as “politics of memory” which resonates with BJP’s Hindutva ideology through “Hinduisation of the Dalits”. Therefore, Guha argues that caste had no role to play either in TMC’s endeavour to mobilise the Matuas or in BJP’s efforts to subsume this subaltern community inside its larger Hindutva fold. Thus, according to the author, what apparently seemed like caste-based mobilisation was identity politics using religious fault lines where Matuas are primarily seen as Hindus pitted against the other - the Muslims.

In the following chapter, Guha further scrutinises the “rise of caste” thesis through the lens of political representation. Guha argues that in post-colonial Bengal, descriptive representation (a form of representation where a representative stands for a particular group by virtue of sharing similar characteristics like race, ethnicity, sex etc) took a backseat and substantive representation (where a representative seeks to advance the interests and preferences of a group as an outsider) became the order of the day. As descriptive representation is the preferred form of representation for identity politics, West Bengal had not witnessed major caste based political mobilisation to date according to the author. Guha, through his meticulous analysis of

¹ Namasudras are the second largest Schedule Castes of West Bengal who have mostly imbibed the Matua faith which vehemently rejects the Vedic rituals and believes that true salvation comes through love and devotion

election data, demonstrates the lack of adequate representation of the Dalits in the Cabinet of Ministers. So, they never got a seat at the high table even if caste remained an issue on the backburner. Even after the decline of the Left, it has been observed that very few Schedule Caste's have contested from unreserved seats. According to noted historian Sekhar Bandopadhyay, "the upper echelons of the power structure in Bengal society remain unchallenged" (Gupta, 2019).

Guha next moves on to analyse the demography of West Bengal which is an important structural factor behind no mass political assertion by the Dalits against upper caste supremacy. It is revealed through Guha's research that in Bengal there is no dominant caste which is geographically spread throughout the state. It is further revealed that the two major lower castes of the state who have mobilised themselves; the Rajbanshis and Namasudras have opposing interests. While the Namasudras are pro CAA ²as their main demand is refugee rehabilitation and to get citizenship, the Rajbanshis demand autonomy as they fear that CAA will lead to the infiltration of Hindu refugees. Therefore, in Bengal the North Indian model cannot be replicated due to lack of a dominant caste and due to conflicting interests between the two major lower castes of the state.

While analysing the lack of Dalit assertion in the state through the lens of political economy, Guha analyses the land holding pattern of the Dalits. It is brought to our notice that there is a lower level of relative deprivation faced by lower and middle castes viz-à-viz the upper castes as compared to many other states. Guha's attempt to find out the reason behind no major Dalit assertion in the state through the lens of political economy is quite unique and path breaking.

In the penultimate chapter Guha tries to find out the role of caste in the micro politics of Bengal. He tries to understand why caste as an institution, being very much present in the micro politics, fails to have a larger impact on the macro politics of the state. After studying a Namasudra and Bagdi (the second and third largest Schedule castes of West Bengal) dominated village of West Bengal's Nadia district, Guha concludes that social values have an important role behind non politicisation of caste identity. It is observed by the author that caste-based prejudices do play a significant role in everyday grassroots level politics. However, once the lower castes achieve

² CAA refers to the Citizenship Amendment Act which promises citizenship to a group of migrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan who have faced religious persecution and are members of the Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain, Parsi or Christian communities

considerable upward mobility, they tend to embrace the *Bhadralok*³ way of life. Guha argues that in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra the middle class upwardly mobile Dalits tried to uplift the socially backward Dalits and as a result generated greater political mobilisation. Guha attributes the *Bhadralok* value system behind post-colonial Bengal's shying away from caste-based identity politics in macro politics. In Guha's micro study of Mekhlapur village of Nadia district it is clearly reflected that the Namasudras, after achieving a higher status in the society through education and affirmative action government policies, started emulating the *Bhadralok* norms which prevented the emergence of a counter Dalit culture as witnessed in other states of India.

Guha effortlessly in his final chapter shows the role of an intangible factor i.e political culture in relegating the importance of caste in institutional politics. He argues that despite the left leanings of *Bhadraloks* (the city bred elites), there has been no structural change as regards to political culture after TMC came to power. Although some argue that the *Bhadralok* values have become adulterated to a certain extent, but the *Bhadralok* hegemony still very much exists. Therefore, to talk about caste openly is still a taboo due to this value system. In some ways, Bengalis like to live in caste denial.

After analysing several factors behind the curious trajectory of caste in West Bengal's politics, Guha comes to the conclusion that even though the electoral defeat of the Left in 2009 opened some space for identity-based politics, religion became the primary totem pole and not caste.

The uniqueness of this book lies in Guha's meticulous analysis of several structural factors that have resulted in the marginal role of caste in the electoral politics unlike other scholars who have focussed on this exceptionalism solely through the lens of partition and class-based politics of the Left. The book is exceptionally well researched along with theoretical insights and has received scholarly attention from all over the world. Guha's effort will surely be a treasure trove to scholars who are currently researching on the caste question of Bengal.

³ Bhadralok is a social category formed primarily by the members of the 3 upper castes of Bengal i.e the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. They are known for their allegiance to the Britishers and their common disdain for manual labour

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