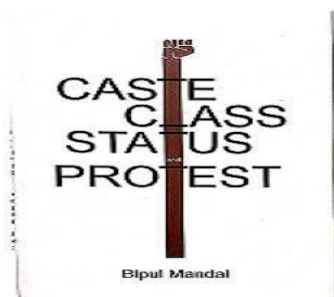


BOOK REVIEW



Bipul Mandal : *Caste Class, Status and Protest*, (Kolkata: SOPAN, 2021,
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The historiography of *Bengal* has long been suffered from what *Prof. Partha Chatterjee* termed as "*Bhadralok Hegemony*" where the narrative of '*Bengal Renaissance*', nationalism and modernity has been written almost exclusively through the lens of upper caste Brahmin, Kayastha and Vaidya elites. In such a context, the book under review, titled '*Caste, Class, Status and Protest*' penned by *Dr. Bipul Mandal* makes a significant departure in this realm. Even in this 21st century '*Caste is not a rumour!*'. Caste is a blunt, visceral experience that creates

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roadblocks, friction and violence among human beings. It is a human being laying bare all As the author states in the Preface, *"I have made an attempt to give my views or findings on the history and the origin of the caste-system as it was in the past and contemporary among the Hindus of Bengal."* The study is self-consciously anthropological yet deeply historical as well as analytical. Dr. Mandal utilizes WBSA, Proceedings of the Govt. of West Bengal, Records of Reforms office, GOI, colonial census reports from 1872 to 1971, contemporary news papers, district gazetteers, caste association petitions, and ethnographic data, research books, theses etc. and henceforth this book becomes a comprehensive study in knowing caste, class and protest history of Bengal.

The book has been structured into two substantive chapters which are as follows

1. *Caste, Class and Status in Bengal: Change and Continuity &*
2. *Upward Mobility: Caste and Class*; supported by 13 statistical tables, sub topics, an Appendices: explaining surnames and their genealogical or professional history, 17 pages of vibrant bibliography, Index and of course detailed contents on societal life, education, economy, women, marriage and religion of each community so preciously and written in a systematic way.

The theoretical innovation of the book lies in its opening discussion on inequality. Drawing upon Rousseau's distinction between natural and social inequality, the author makes a critical sociological intervention and gradually Bengal's society moved from the principle of hierarchy to the principle of stratification Author writes, *"According to the sociologists hierarchy prevailed in societies based on castes or estates and social-inequalities were legitimated as naturally given. Stratification, on the other hand, is a feature of modern industrial societies in which inequalities do exist but are not considered as a part of natural or divine order."* And unfortunately this is an important framework to understand colonial Bengal. Under colonial modernity, caste did not disappear but changed its nature through socio-political issues. Class boundaries became more porous, individual mobility became possible through education and government jobs and the normative order shifted to formal equality under law, even as substantive inequality continued. The author further engages with three types of societies identified by anthropologists: egalitarian, rank and class societies and locates colonial bengal as a

complex class society with unequal access to economic resources, power and status though legitimized by the idiom of ritual purity. Another crucial theoretical debate addressed is Caste and Class Correlation. The author rightly observes and it rightly radiated in his work that is “the core features of caste are: endogamy or marriage within caste, occupational differentiation and hereditary specialization of occupations, notion of pollution and a ritual hierarchy in which Brahmins are generally at the top. Classes, on the other hand, broadly refer to economic basis of ownership or non-ownership relation to the means of production. Then how does caste and class correlate to each other even in the 21st Century?”. The book argues and empirically demonstrates that Brahmanical ritual hierarchy is not universally applicable. In Bengal, the prosperous Mahishyas of Midnapore and Rajbansis of North Bengal enjoyed social and political dominance without equivalent ritual status. This contextuality of hierarchy is a major contribution that breaks away from **Louis Dumont's** ‘*Homo Hierarchicus Model*’ which is over emphasized ritual hierarchy from a Brahmanical viewpoint. The author notes that sometimes caste works as a discrete community without hierarchical relationship and conceptual categories like ‘sharecropper’ and ‘agricultural labourer’ often overlap in lived reality which is a nuanced observation that reflects the methodological caution advocated by *Andre Beteille*.

This book begins with conceptual clarifications such as What is Caste, Varna, Jati or Zat? The discussion on the social environment and demography of Bengal is important because the author shows how the riverine, agrarian ecology of Bengal shaped its caste formation differently from peninsular India.

The sections on Percentage of literacy rate among the various castes (Table no . 4) p. 57, Common surnames with caste affiliation (Table no. 1) p. 40 District wise and sex wise Tiayar population (Table no. 10) p.146 and identity by profession (Table-5) shows the professions adopted by various castes are pedagogically very useful. They show how surnames like Roy, Barman, Sharma , Chaudhury, Poddar, Kanjilal, Majumdar, Das, Sarkar, Mandal, Dhali, Bairagi, Singha, Nath etc., cut across castes and how colonial enumeration created fixed identities out of fluid occupations.

The engagement with **Prof. M.N. Srinivas's** concept of ‘*Sanskritization*’ or symbolic justification is critical. The author does not accept it uncritically as termed ‘*symbolic justification*’. He shows that while Rajbansis claimed Kshatriya status, Jogi caste people claimed themselves as Priests

(p. 303) and Namasudras claimed Brahmin origin status through thread wearing and altering customs. Their movement was not mere imitation. Rather it was a protest for self respect and political representation.

The sections on Percentage of married women and widows among all castes and engagement with agriculture (Table-6, 13) proves that Dr. *Mandal* immensely studied it from the lens of women studies to *Krishaks* of the society and trace how the colonial state classified communities or how communities themselves negotiated that classification. The data on literacy rate (Table-4), No. of literates among Rajbansis, pods and Namasudras (Table-9) : and Professions in Government and others in Table-5 demonstrates that education and government employment became new avenues for status mobility which is replacing ritual purity. Thus, this book us a nuanced example of micro ethnography which forms the soul of the book and the author *Dr. Mandal* has systematically written it in the view of reliable documents and sources.

The Rajbansis: Spread across Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and Rangpur, their economy p.91 marriage practices p.97 educational attainment p.99 and religious belief and practices p.104 show a process of *Kshatriyaization* led by *Raysaheb Panchanan Barma* and the Kshatriya Samiti. The data on Rajbansi women p.97 is particularly insightful, showing their relatively higher work participation but lower literacy.

The Namasudras: The second largest scheduled caste of Bengal, their history is traced from eastern Bengal. The discussion on economy p.114, position of women p.120, marriage practices p.121 and socio-cultural practices is comprehensive. The analysis of Matuaism p.129 as the path of living with loving all founded by *Harichand* and *Guruchand Thakur* is treated not just as a religious reform but as a *Dalit* protest movement creating an alternative sacred universe against *Brahmanical Hinduism*.

The Chasi Kaibarttas or Mahishyas: The author shows how this agrarian caste of Midnapore and 24 Parganas transformed itself from fishermen to settled agriculturists and became one of the most educationally advanced backward communities p.141

The Tiyars, Bauries and Pods: These communities are almost absent in standard textbooks. But the present book provides their demographic profile from 1872-1911 and 1931-1971 (Table no.- 10, 11(a), 11(b), and 12), social structure, religious beliefs, inter-community relations and status

of women, Education , Economy etc. pp.165,178. The Bauri population growth tables and the Pod's presence in *Presidency Division* show their importance as agricultural labouring castes whose protest was both caste and class based and gradually highlight themselves through various. Journals , organizations etc. p. 310

If, Chapter- 1 is about structure, status and social life Chapter- 2 is about mobilization, upliftment and protest of those Caste and Class. It details upward mobility movements among both upper castes (Vaidyas, Kayasthas and Brahmanas, p.228) and lower castes (Namasudras p.232, Rajbansis p.269, Jogis p.302, Bauris p. 306). The author shows multiple strategies like petitioning census officers to be recorded as Kshatriya or Vaidya and Chandal to Namasudra. They're forming caste associations, establishing schools and hostels or adopting vegetarianism and sacred thread and later on conversion and political mobilization as well. This chapter directly justifies the "Protest" in the title of the book .

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE: DIALOGUE WITH SOME MAJOR HISTORIANS

The book's significance becomes clearer when it'll placed in dialogue with major historians of caste and protest in Bengal and India. Viz.

1. **Prof. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay:** The most authoritative historian of caste in Bengal, in his seminal work "*Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial Bengal: The Namasudras and Rajbansis of Bengal 1872-1947*", argued that lower-caste movements in Bengal cannot be reduced to Sanskritization. They were anti-caste protest movements demanding social dignity, economic opportunity and political power within colonial modernity. The present book is in direct continuity with Bandyopadhyay but expands the canvas. While Bandyopadhyay focused mainly on two major communities, this book brings in Mahishya, Tiya, Bauri, Pod and Jogi, thus offering a more comprehensive social map of Bengal's lower strata. It empirically proves Bandyopadhyay's book that "*caste identity became a tool for contesting upper caste dominance.*"[1997][2011]

2. **Prof. Partha Chatterjee and Gautam Bhadra:** In "*The Nation and Its Fragments*" and in "*Subaltern Studies writings*", Prof. Chatterjee argued that nationalist thought in Bengal created a "*middle-class hegemony*" that excluded lower castes, who in turn created their own modernity

through Matua Mahasangha, Rajbansi Samiti etc. This book provides the ethnographic substance to Chatterjee's theoretical claim by showing how Namasudras built a parallel religious and educational infrastructure completely outside bhadralok control.

3. **Prof. Ranajit Guha and Subaltern Studies Collective:** Guha's "*Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*" emphasized the autonomous consciousness of lower-caste peasants. The description of Bauris and Pods as agricultural labourers who participated in Tebhaga and other agrarian movements shows where caste and class protest merged; where untouchability and landlord exploitation were experienced as one. This resonates with Guha's argument that subaltern protest cannot be separated into caste vs. class.

4. **Prof. Nirmal Kumar Bose and Andre Beteille:** Bose in "*Structure of Hindu Society*" showed how Bengal's caste system was more fluid due to absence of a strong Kshatriya and Vaishya varna, leading to Kayastha dominance. Beteille in "*Caste, Class and Power*" argued that in Bengal, class has often overridden caste. This book negotiates between Bose and Beteille - showing both fluidity and rigidity, both ritual and economic dimensions.

5. **Ambedkarite Perspective:** Though focused on Bengal the book's conclusion that constitutional equality has not removed jati-varna-class discrimination resonates with Babasaheb Dr B.R. Ambedkar's warning in "*Annihilation of Caste*" that political democracy cannot succeed without social democracy. The post-colonial persistence of inequality discussed in the preface directly echoes Ambedkar. Thus, If one read it out "*Caste, Class, Status and Protest*" she/he would aligns with the new historiography that views lower-caste protest not as "false consciousness" but as rational, modern political action.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

a) **Archival and Statistical Depth:** Use of census data from 1872 to 1971 across 13 tables, strong and bold reference in each chapter, list of surnames (Alphabetically) is commendable and gives longitudinal depth and radiates his hard work.

b) **Decentralized History:** Shifting focus from Calcutta bhadralok to North Bengal, Eastern Bengal and Jungle Mahal regions is a major decolonial move.

c) **Interdisciplinary Method:** Combining anthropology, sociology and history avoids the pitfalls of both textual and purely economic histories.

d) **Gender Dimension:** Separate sections on Rajbansi women, Namasudra women and Bauri women's status, family structure of the Tiwars added a gendered lens to caste studies.

However, the role of colonial knowledge production itself how Risley, Dalton showed census operations hardened caste identities as argued by Bernard Cohn in *"An Anthropologist Among Historians"* and Nicholas Dirks in *"Castes of Mind"* could be elaborated in this book. A more explicit engagement with contemporary Dalit Studies and Reservation politics would make the link between colonial protest and post-colonial affirmative action clearer.

To conclude, the book titled ***"Caste, Class, Status and Protest"*** is more than a community history rather it is a social history of Bengal from below. It convincingly argues that Bengal's society is far from being casteless and had a definite hierarchical scheme but that hierarchy was continuously contested, negotiated and reimagined through protest, Sanskritization, education and political mobilization. The book restores historical agency to Rajbansis, Namasudras, Mahishyas, Tiwars, Bauris, Pods and Jogis communities who were labourers of Bengal's agrarian economy but were made invisible in its cultural history. For researchers of social stratification, for students of Bengal's history and for policymakers understanding the roots of backward class politics in West Bengal today, this book is an indispensable resource.

It fulfills the author's hope stated in the preface: *"This book will generate some new innovations in the study of caste history and definitely help the researchers to enquire into every corner of this Study."* And thus the book truly becomes an Anthropological-Historical study of Dalit and 'Backward Castes of Bengal'. The book titled ***"Caste, Class, Status and Protest"*** is a valuable, timely and much-needed study. It successfully shows that Bengal, often projected as *"casteless"* compared to South or North India; had a deep and rigid scheme of social precedence but also had powerful, continuous movements of protest and upward mobility from below. The book does not merely narrate the history of castes it actually restores agency to those who were treated as objects of hierarchy. In doing so, it generates, as the author hopes, *"new innovations in the study of caste history."* The book is immensely useful for academicians, policy makers, researchers,

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students of history, anthropology, sociology and for any reader who wants to understand the roots of social inequality and democratic assertion in Bengal as well as India.