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NPTEL ONLINE
CERTIFICATION COURSE

Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 13 – CASTE POLITICS AND THE BENGAL CHAPTER

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NATION AT THE INTERSECTION OF HISTORY AND MYTH

- Jean-Luc-Nancy – Partition has been safely occupying a ‘mythic status’ in the history of the sub-continent. Myths and histories are not antagonistic or hostile to one another’s authenticity and they do not necessarily jeopardize each other; they are rather complementary. The mythic has to do instead with the modes of representation, it is the representational politik that determines the mythicistic of myth.
- Urvashi Butalia - this underside of history comprises of micro-histories about how families were divided, how friendships endured across borders, how people coped with the trauma, how they rebuilt their lives, what resources, both physical and mental, they drew upon, how their experience of dislocation and trauma shaped their lives.



- In the sub-continent, the ethnic communities that aspire to the nation-status, have continued to construct, commemorate and consolidate themselves through a constant retailing tales of sacrifices and war.
- Bengal politics cannot be understood without referring to the bhadralok. Bhadrlok is an indigenous (Bengali) term that cannot be merely equated with the middle-class. As a group it refers to urban groups associated with trade, entrepreneurship, industry and salaried professions. They went on to represent the traditions of 'Bengali Renaissance' and were proponents of progress, modernity, enlightenment and an Anglicized culture.
- The term is literally derived from the Sanskrit word **bhadra**, which carries connotations such as **shishta** (cultured and of restrained manners), **sabhya** (civilised), **mangal** (auspicious), **uttam** (of superior quality), **marjita ruchibishishta** (of cultivated taste), etc. (Das 1930). The term thus emphasizes 'cultivated taste' and 'civilised manners' rather than wealth and power.



- Parimal Ghosh - the *bhadralok* of the colonial times as upper caste Hindu Bengalis possessing landed property and Western education as well as a code of moral conduct. *Bhadralok* is a variable social marker, which shifted its onus historico-politically from aristocracy of wealth and rack-rentier agrarian structure to “cultural chauvinism that derived from a pride in Western education and inheritance of the ‘Renaissance’ tradition in Bengal” (Ghosh 4335).
- Barun De - India’s colonialism operated not only at the level of British bureaucrats, planters and professionals, but also included the white-collar brown *sahibs*, merchants and dominant peasantry – a class that had explicit fidelity to the cause of imperialism.
- Sumit Sarkar – even though the broad term *bhadralok* encompassed a wide range of preoccupations and statuses, ranging from “a Maharaja of Mymensingh to East India railway clerk,” it was unified through “a degree of shared values about self-perception” (quoted in Ghosh 247).
- Tithi Bhattacharya - While different economic classes converged within the broad term *bhadralok*, the upper segments tended to monopolize their cultural attributes as the chief markers defining this identity (Batabyal 3835). According to Bhattacharya, rather than the elite, the petty bourgeoisie and middle classes were the actual proponents of *bhadralok* politics in the context of nationalism.

- Initially, the *bhadralok* was associated with the rentier class and identified through their land possession. They lived off the rental income. The *bhadralok* enjoyed caste-class economy and maintained an intricate pattern of dominance through accumulating a considerable measure of authority in the form of cultural and wealth capital under colonial rule.
- Bhadralok** - a term that include the educated and well-to-do Bengali Hindus from rural landowning class, and the lower middle-class sections that were gaining upward mobility through education or access to urban job and becoming a part of the professional intelligentsia. The self-image of *bhadralok* Bengalis as a cultured but decadent people also informed the organisation of palli samitis ('village associations') during the Swadeshi period.
- The term **Chhotolok** (lowly people) or **Chhoto Jat** (lowcaste) cannot be regarded as a translation of the English terms 'lower classes' or 'serfs'. The category derives directly from the system of varna and jati in the Bengali Hindu society.

Partition of Bengal- Bhadraklok Politics

- The divide between **Bhadraklok** and **Chhotoklok** provides the detail of cultural pattern and mode of intergroup behavior of people in West Bengal.
- Bhadraklok-Chhotoklok status categories include clusters of castes and not individuals or families.
- Throughout West Bengal the three higher castes, the Brahman, Vaidya and Kayastha, are regarded as *bhadraklok* castes—the Bhadraklok par excellence—and that within this group the Brahman does not necessarily hold the highest position.



- Bhadraloks used to be landlords and superior tenure holders, whereas the Chhotolok castes are either landless or poor farmers depending for their subsistence mainly on working as hired labourers in the fields or houses of the *bhadralok* castes. Thus, in reality, class stratification is embedded to a great extent, within the hierarchy of castes.
- 1930s and 1940s - bhadralok politics played a seminal role in forging a greater Hindu political community, also enabling caste mobilisation of the Dalits and tribals and motivating them to espouse the Hindu identity.
- Despite their service to the British state the *bhadralok* were not allowed to enter the Civil Service - in 1885 only 6 of the 174 members of the covenanted Civil Service were *bhadralok* (McGuire 1983).

- In early decades of 20th century, Manindranath Mandal, Poundra Kshatriya Leader made strenuous efforts to build counter-hegemony to *bhadralok* politics and dominance, leading to the formation of Bangiya Jana Sabha (BJS) in 1922. Even-though short-lived, BJS was important in the history of Dalit politics in Bengal.
- C.R.Das seized control of Congress Party in the early 1920s and in 1923. Das had won the Presidency of the Bengal Congress Party with the support of *bhadralok* populace comprising the traders and commercial classes.
- The Congress and Hindu organisations, like the Hindu Mahasabha and the Hindu Mission, co-opt the different caste movements, especially when their demands for high ritual status got combined with their efforts to seek benefits in the secular field of politics, education and employment.
- Jogendranath Mandal and the members belonging to different Scheduled Castes founded Bengal Provincial Scheduled Castes Federation (BPSCF) in 1943. It was a branch of Ambedkar's All India Scheduled Castes Federation.



- The Communal Award of 1932 was the result of London's decision to divide power in the provinces among the rival communities and social groups which, in its view, constituted Indian society. British administrators saw India as 'essentially a congeries of widely separated classes, races and communities with divergences of interests and hereditary sentiment which for ages have precluded common action or local unanimity'.
- The most important feature of Communal Award is the distribution of Hindu and Muslim seats.

- Zetland, Governor of Bengal had listed his objections to Communal Award which includes, i) It puts advanced people in the position of subordination to backward people; ii) it increases communal bitterness iii) sense of injustice will be created that can neither be forgiven nor forgotten.
- The Indian National Congress which was identified with the middle class high caste Hindus. The early Congress policy was to give no place to the question of social reform.

- Ambedkar and Rao Bahadur Srinivasan jointly drew up a memorandum embodying the Depressed Classes' demand. It demanded among other things :
 - (1) "Right to adequate representation in the legislature of the Country-Provincial and Central
 - (2) Right to elect their own men as their representatives (a) by adult suffrage and (b) by separate electorates for the first 10 years and thereafter by joint electorate and reserved seats, it being understood that joint electorates shall not be forced upon the Depressed Classes against their will unless such joint electorates are accompanied by adult suffrage.
- Following the Communal Award and the Poona Pact, the Scheduled Castes in Bengal constituted about 11% of the Bengal population. The idea was to include the SC population under the Hindus and broaden the Hindu political base and draw the fringes to a common cause through social upliftment of the Dalits.

Partition of Bengal – Bhadrak Lok Politics

- In 1945-46 elections, Congress won 80% of the SC seats. Even the leaders that had earlier fought independent elections came under the banner of Congress. 1946 Elections were the first to be held after the enactment of Poona Pact. The effect was to bring down further the number of caste Hindu seats to 70 in a house of 250, that is, a mere 28 per cent.
- The Communal Award in effect reduced the Bengali bhadralok to being a minority in a Legislative Assembly which they had hoped to dominate in the new era of provincial autonomy. By contrast, for the first time in the history of Bengal's legislatures, Muslims were placed in a position of strength relative to the Hindus.
- Congress vouched that with over 90% Bengali Hindu voters' support, the party was ready to address the interests of the Bengali Hindu electorates. Joya Chatterji notes that the elite Hindu Bengalis from interest groups and the Muslim politics were responsible for Partition — the elite political groups were the active enactors of the Partition.



- Muslim politicians of Eastern Bengal had a long standing disjunction with *bhadralok* nationalist politics. Going back beyond the First Partition of Bengal to the late 19th century, Muslim identity politics of Nawab Abdul Latif and Sir Saiyid Ameer Ali were in affinity with colonialism.
- The link of caste and communalism went back to official sponsorship of Depressed Classes in the Imperial Census of 1911, the year in which the imperial capital shifted from Calcutta to New Delhi as a counterblast against Bengal.
- Besides the Communal Award (1932) and the Government of India Act (1935), the Calcutta Municipality Amendment Act (1939) and the Secondary Education Bill (1940) took away the Congressman *bhadralok's* supremacy in the Calcutta Corporation and in the Secondary Education Board (originally controlled by Calcutta University) respectively.

Partition of Bengal - Bhadraklok Politics

- From the 1940s, Bharat Sevashram Sangha started attracting wider *bhadraklok* support. Editors of prominent newspapers would regularly attend at Sangha meetings. Even the Congress Party, which had several volunteer organizations of its own, often took part in the Sangha's programmes.
- Even S.P. Mookerjee, who once championed the unity of an indivisible Bengal, change this mind in 1946. He feared a serious threat to the Bengali Hindu culture under the Muslim regime.

Symbiotic relationship and its change

- Pre-Partition Bengal was described as a symbiotic relationship between landlords, moneylenders and traders on the one hand, and peasant farmers and sharecroppers on the other.
- Agrarian relationship changed with prolonged depression in the 1930s and the riots inflaming Noakhali and Tripura in 1946.
- Yet, till the end, the disturbances were not connotative of uprising of one community against the other. For example, Fazlul Huq's Krishak Praja Party used Islam as a powerful tool of agrarian solidarity and justice.
- Even though all the while the Scheduled Caste leaders Jogendranath Mandal (first Law and Labour minister of Pakistan Government) assured the Dalits to stay on in East Pakistan as their interests were to be served there, the communal affairs greatly changed as Muslim land-owning classes came to occupy and dominate in place of the evacuee bhadralok Hindus. As affluent Muslim landowners mostly chose to employ Muslim farmers, the Dalit Hindu-Muslim peasant's class unity was disrupted, and replaced by a newly growing upmanship among the Muslim peasants towards their Hindu counterparts.



THANK YOU

