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NPTEL ONLINE
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Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 14 – CASTE POLITICS AND THE BENGAL CHAPTER

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Partition of Bengal - Bhadraklok Politics

- In the pre-Partition phase, Bengal became the bone of contention. Besides religious factors, power struggle at play among different political groups to rule over the territory of Bengal invoked class-centric as well as caste-related concerns. Separate electorate for Hindus and Muslims after the foundation of the Muslim League had resulted in a communal rift without so much as paying attention to the different layers constituting each community.
- M.A. Jinnah claimed the whole of the Bengal province to Pakistan owing to its Muslim majority population. The Nazimuddin-Akram Khan school, backed by leading Islamic newspapers like *Azad*, *Morning News* and *Star of India*, was rooted to the Muslim League and its demand for a single state of Pakistan as the future home for all Indian Muslims.
- On the other hand, as a counter-effect to the idea of the Muslim League's Two Nation Theory, the patrons of Bengal nationalist cause demanded a separate Bengal Union. Bengal Union fortified the idea of a collective Bengali *jati* (race), focussing on linguistic and cultural unity of Bengalis over and above their religion-based difference.



Partition of Bengal - Bhadraklok Politics

- The main proponents of an independent United Bengal were Sarat Bose and Kiron Shankar Ray among the Hindu organizers, and Abul Hashim, Secretary of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League, Fazlul Huq and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, the Premiers of Bengal, from among the Muslim leaders.
- They encouraged a departure from communalist politics and instead stressed on a unified Bengali identity. Their emphasis was the Bengali language as a shared identity than the Islamic community/religion. Supporters of Suhrawardy, such as Mohammad Ali Bogra and Tafazzal Ali wanted United Bengal and emphasized the language movement.
- When the United Bengal Plan for a Sovereign Bengal was put forward, it not only met with strong opposition from the Congress High Command but also from Jinnah's followers, Akram Khan and Khwaja Nazimuddin, who wanted Bengal as a whole entity to be part of Pakistan or its close constitutional ally. There was no enthusiasm for a united Bengal amongst the Hindu Bengalis. In 1952 - Introduction of passport system introduced fresh exodus from the Hindu minorities who tried to migrate before the implementation of the system.



Partition of Bengal - Bhadraklok Politics

- Bengali Muslim leaders such as the Hashim-Suhrawardy group fought for an integrated Bengal in segregation from the Pakistan of the north-western frontier. This is because by including Bengal within its domination, the central Muslim League wanted to commercially exploit Bengal's topography as well as reinforce the Ashraf-Atraf hierarchy within the Muslim community. Formation of a unified "Pakistan" would set up political, cultural and economic supremacy of the Urdu-speaking and more affluent Muslims over the peasant and Dalit Bengali Muslim counterparts.
- The Hashim-Suhrawardy schools' proposal for the Union of Bengal aimed at a twofold advantage – rule by the quantitatively major Bengali Muslims over the entire province of Bengal, and not having to bow before the North Indian Muslim counterparts.



Partition of Bengal

- While there were proponents of a Bengal Union such as the Hindu Congressmen like Kiron Shankar Ray and Dharendra Nath Dutta, Sardar Patel intervened and refrained them from supporting the idea of a United Bengal
- By May 1947, there was a survey made among Bengali Hindus by the Amrita Bazar Patrika, which supported the idea of Partition of Bengal. Similarly, Islamic newspapers such as Azad, Morning News, and Star of India following Jinnah's will for a single Pakistan state, indiscriminately opposed the Hashim- Suhrawardy faction for United Bengal and developed allegiance to Muslim League.
- In the same way, Jinnah's demand for one Pakistan was protested by Abul Hashim, Secretary of Bengal Provincial Muslim League and a proponent of United Bengal
- While tabling the Lahore Resolution with Jinnah, A K Fazlul Huq criticised Jinnah's Two-Nation Theory on religious terms
- During Huq's Chief Minister position, Hindu-Muslim unity was encouraged and accentuated in Bengal politics to promote the cause of Bengali nationalism. Afterwards, the secular objectives of Huq's Krishak Praja Party in 1937 was drowned by communal politics.



Partition of Bengal

- In W.H.J Christie's words (Note by Mr. Christie: Mountbatten Papers 483): "So long as the Bengal Hindus have Partition *and* Calcutta, they have all they want. Reunion with East Bengal would only put them again in a position of numerical inferiority to the Muslims".
- Even as Jinnah eyed Bengal as a bargaining counter, his relation with the Bengali Muslims was ambiguous. So it was not likely that Jinnah would place the Bengali Muslim's interests and demands above his own plans and ambitions at the centre.
- Bengal Congress strongly supported the Congress High Commission's opting for Partition and formation of Pakistan. Post-1946-47, there was a resolution by the Bengali Hindu elites that Bengal be divided and a Hindu-majority province be carved out rather than the united Bengal be ruled by the Muslim leaders.
- Earlier, in the 1946 elections Husseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy had become the new Prime Minister of Bengal —> the Hindu Bhadrakalok were disillusioned. Suhrawardy is generally vilified for his corruption and held as personally culpable for a huge number of deaths due to starvation in the Bengal Famine, which is largely seen as man-made.



East Pakistan and West Pakistan

- Jinnah's emphasis on a single language, i.e. Urdu, was a pointer towards a single frame of nation which is defined in terms of totalitarianism. According to Jinnah, singularity of civilisation could be shown through singularity of language. Urdu claimed for national language monopoly, as it was a language of the majority, and forcefully defined a single frame of nation.
- According to Jinnah's imagination, Bengali Muslim was not patriotic or authentic, and they were defined as defectors/traitors for betraying the idea of Pakistan.
- The idea of Pakistan did not mean the same thing for the Muslims already located in East/West Pakistan, and the ones that acquired a refugee status (called as Mohajirs), moving base from East Punjab or West Bengal

- The Centre of Pakistan was dominated by the ruling elite—Punjabi and aristocrats.
- Mushirul Hassan: The parties' development on non-communal lines could not be possible as different political parties sought exploiting sectarian and religious issues for short-term political gains.
- The overarching religious-political discourse had suppressed other configurations of power— these alternate groupings could put to question the known boundaries of nation-state. E.g. There was a claim of a united Bengal by a faction of Hindu and Muslim leaders.

- Owing to a Muslim majority population and a ML government, Jinnah claimed the whole of the province to Pakistan. Yet initially, Jinnah said that one was first identified by one's regional marker - Bengali or Punjabi and later by one's community. Afterwards, for his Pakistan's vision, he compromised his own theory.
- The two groups of elites try to establish their power over a given territory. In the case of Bangladesh, the clash was between Bhutto and Mujib, in other words, West Pakistan's political establishment versus the leader of East Pakistan. The power conflict between them created a political pandemonium, which caused the separation of East Pakistan from West Pakistan.

Partition of Bengal - Bhadrakalok Politics

- The Fazlul Huq's regime in Bengal set a trend of political awareness and high cultural practices among the Bengali Muslim middle-class with writers like Nazrul Islam. However, it largely failed to draw appreciation from the Urdu Muslim counterparts or the Hindus. The formation of Bangladesh is a response to the need of an autonomous space that could contain the unique Bengali Muslim populace.
- Sekhar Bandopadhyay - The multiple layers within the agricultural peasant communities of East Bengal obviated any blanket categorization of Dalit-ness, as Dalits were further divided in terms of class. While the poverty-stricken Dalits were more concerned with economic upliftment and abolition of social hierarchies, many among them who had already availed upward mobility presented regressive views, willing to be institutionally accepted among traditional upper caste Hindus. So while on the one hand, most of the Dalits faced subordination by the Hindu *bhadrakalok* and the elite Muslims, on the other, the interest groups bargained with mainstream political leaders.



Partition of Bengal - Bhadraklok Politics

- While Dalit leaders opposed Partition, a majority of Dalits collaborated with the Hindu Mahasabha's faction and voted for Partition. Targeting to politically mobilize the peasants, the Hindu Mahasabha tagged local agrarian disputes with wider political conflicts, and initiated riots between peasants of the two communities. By the 1940s, the Hindu-Muslim atrocity no longer remained a high-caste political affair.
- The poor Scheduled Caste masses mostly supported the mainstream Hindu sentiments. Influenced by Congress and Hindu Mahasabha politicians, they proposed integrationist positions, by agreeing to see themselves chiefly as citizens of a Hindu majority nation-state. However, to their betrayal, the Partition had not resulted in the inclusion of Namasudra (Dalit) provinces within India. They became part of East Pakistan (Bakarganj, Faridpur, Jessore and Khulna, and the Rajbansi areas of Rangpur and Dinajpur).
- Dalits were not prepared with socio-economic capital to resettle themselves in a new land. The political decision, which misused their ignorant support, resulted in undoing their social mobility and caste-based unity, causing them to migrate in destitute conditions to India. Starting from the scratch, they could possibly gain foothold in West Bengal only by fighting with the local *Goalas* (milkman community) and Muslims in West Bengal.

- It is popularly believed that Sir Cyril Radcliffe imposed the Boundary Award on Bengal 'from above'.
- With the senior police officers being selected by the Muslim League government, West Bengal suffered a critical sense of insecurity.
- Joya Chatterji - The Boundary Commission of Bengal and Punjab comprised a four-judge panel who were political appointees by the Congress and the Muslim League.
- While Congress High Command New Delhi stayed away from the details involved in making the new borders of Bengal and Punjab, B.R. Ambedkar warned of the grave dangers of the Centre in treating the border decisions as 'local problems' to be left for the people of Punjab and Bengal to fight out for themselves .



Caste Politics in Bengal Partition

- Sekhar Bandopadhyay delves into the possibility of Dalit opposition at local levels within some of the Congress movements under Gandhian leadership. The isolation of such subordinate movements is understood from cases, such as the self-ascription of caste nationality by the Namasudra jati.
- The bhadralok squatters' indifference towards the non-bhadralok refugees is further proven in their withdrawal from the movement called for the rehabilitation of Bettiah deserters, which had ultimately become a failure. In Dipesh Chakrabarty's words: "the petty bourgeoisie squatters who had very little relationship with the lowly Namasudra peasant before migration felt no real concern for the fate of these agriculturalists" (The Marginal Men 178-179).



- The camp-dwellers of Bettiah in Bihar had launched a peaceful movement in May 1958, for the fulfilment of their demands of improved living and better economic conditions in camp-settlements, as well as for their rehabilitation. It had influenced the Dalit Bengali refugees, who refused to go outside West Bengal. Like the Bettiah rebels, the Bengalis demonstrated massive civil disobedience in a Gandhian way, which resulted in more than 30,000 camp refugees being arrested (Basu Raychaudhury, “Life After Partition” 11).
- Regarding the hierarchy within the Netaji Nagar colony where he grew up, Manas Ray comments: “The vast majority of those who came were middle-class people with some urban exposure. Those who did not fall in this bracket...tended to concentrate in two adjacent wards lying at one end of the locality...In retrospect, it seems amazing how little I knew of that world, how subtle and comprehensive was the process of normalization of divisions” (quoted in Sen 70).
- In another context, Ray reflects: “...Today...the refugees present a sharply variegated scenario – from those powerfully entrenched in the bureaucracy and professions to the emaciate vendors at busy market sections or the near-pauper rag-pickers in the eastern flanks of the city” (“Growing Up Refugee” 151-152).



- Leaders of Namasudra caste politics such as Mukunda Mallick or Jogen Mandal lost their autonomy - by the time of a second Partition of Bengal in 1947.
- The Partition left the Namasudras in East-Pakistan as second-class citizen in a Muslim and Punjabi-dominated state.
- There was a geopolitical special circumstance in the East Pakistan, where the Awami League was able to act as the vanguard of a movement for autonomy in reaction to West Pakistani repression.
- East Pakistan had visible and perceptive differences from West Pakistan, which made the former imagine itself differently and also re-form a nation on a set of different identity markers. The first tension between the two wings emerged over the issue of giving national language status to Bengali in 1952, which was granted in 1955. The dress code, especially of women—who, in a patriarchal society, are considered as the preservers of society's culture—also played an important role.
- Women in Bangladesh dress similarly to that of the Hindu women in the Indian state of West Bengal.



- East Pakistan was facing both political and economic disparities, which led Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to come out with six-point demands in 1967
- i) The Constitution of Pakistan must be federal, with parliamentary form of government and a legislature directly elected on the basis of adult franchise;
- ii) There should be separate currencies for the two wings, freely convertible into each other;
- iii) Or, alternatively, there can be one currency subject to statutory safeguards against flight of capital from the east to the west wing;
- iv) Power of taxation and revenue collection to be vested in the federating states; the centre to be financed by allocation of a share in state's taxes;
- v) Separate foreign exchange accounts to be kept for East and West Pakistan
- vi) Self-sufficiency of East Pakistan in defense matters, an ordinance factory and a military academy to be set up in the eastern wing, the federal naval headquarters to be located in East Pakistan.



- When Bengal was partitioned, 42 per cent of its non-Muslim population remained in East Pakistan and by June 1948, according to Prafulla Chakrabarti's reckoning, about 1,100,000 of them had migrated to West Bengal.
- Statistics of the Relief Department of the Government of West Bengal - About 66 per cent of the refugees settled in Calcutta, while the rest were scattered in the 13 districts of the province, the majority of them being in Nadia. Of those who remained in the city of Calcutta, about 95 per cent were of the *bhadralok* class, while the rest were peasants and artisans.
- When anti-Partition sentiments started to boost up, Ashutosh Lahiry tried to convince Jawaharlal Nehru that war and military action against Pakistan were the only solution to the problem. Nehru rejected the suggestion and invited strong criticism for his 'misconceived Gandhian pacifism and perverted democratic secularism'. The results of a Gallup Poll in Calcutta in March 1950 revealed that 87 per cent of the respondents favoured an armed intervention by India in East Pakistan.

- During the last days of the Partition agitation, the projection of a more threatening 'Other' – the Muslims – had led to the appropriation of another minority, the Dalits, by the dominant Congress–Mahasabha politics. By addressing the question of social justice, the Nehru government sought to appropriate Dalit dissidence.
- Dr. Ambedkar resigned from his cabinet position in frustration over the orthodox opposition to his proposed Hindu Code Bill. The mainstream media depicted it as strategic grandstanding for the election. Most of the prominent Dalit leaders by then had either joined the Congress or became ministers, or remained in East Pakistan.
- Following the riots of 1950, the Congress in West Bengal, as elsewhere in India, had been seriously trying to win over the Muslim political elites and Muslim voters. This strategy helped the grand secularist posturing of the Congress leaders; in West Bengal it also strengthened the B.C. Roy–Atulya Ghosh group against their factional rivals.

- Partition not only kept a huge Dalit population away from West Bengal; when they fled East Pakistan and came to West Bengal they did so as refugees whose primary concern could not have been politics but survival.
- During the 1970 election - the right-wing political parties which emphasized Islam as the bond of unity and which went to the polls with programs based on "Islamic ideology" did not fare well. In the East wing, the Awami League won with an overwhelming majority, on the basis of a program of regional autonomy, and in the West, the People's Party of Pakistan won an absolute majority on a socialist program.
- Historically, East Pakistan enjoyed a higher rate of gross enrolment in primary and secondary education compared to West Pakistan. Such regional difference in the demand for schooling primarily reflected the difference in demographic composition of East and West Pakistan.



- Post 1950s, schools became excessively overcrowded in East Pakistan compared to the West. By 1970, primary class size had increased by 61 per cent in East Pakistan against 36 per cent in West Pakistan.
- Pakistan emerged as an independent nation in 1947 breaking apart from India on the basis of a two-nation theory. The Muslim majority province of East Pakistan joined Punjab, North-West Frontier Province, Baluchistan to form the undivided Pakistan. However, after a quarter-century union with West Pakistan, the Eastern part of Pakistan broke away in 1971.
- East Pakistan was put at a severe disadvantage by the political structures established in Pakistan, particularly after Field Marshal Ayub Khan imposed a Martial Law regime, followed by a Presidential, system which gave significant authority to the bureaucracy and little to elected political legislators.

Thank You

