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Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 15 – CASTE POLITICS AND THE BENGAL CHAPTER

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- 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.

- Pakistan's military leadership was culturally and inherently West Pakistani. They would not perceive that the desire to be Bengali and to trade with India was compatible with the desire to be Muslim and independent of India.
- The movement for an independent Bangladesh was marked by charges of economic exploitation of East Pakistan against West Pakistan, during the 1950s and 1960s.
- Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the leader of Pakistan People's Party that had swept the polls in West Pakistan in the 1970 elections, had his political discourse anchored in socialism, decentralisation and restoration of democracy.
- While analysing the political developments leading to the cataclysmic events in the eastern wing, Bhutto blamed overarching centralisation and 'cold blooded exploitation' of the people : 'The tragedy of Pakistan lies in the fact that...[it] has been a federation in name only...The spirit of federalism and the rules of co-existence were sacrificed at the altar of ambition. In the name of "strong centres" the power of the provinces were weakened to the point of being extinguished' (Syed 1992;18)

- Between 1950 and 1958, five different constitutional proposals emerged. Only one of these gave equal representation to East Pakistan in the National Legislature in spite of the fact that the province had a majority of the population of Pakistan.
- The 1962 Constitution of Ayub Khan maintained the principle of parity between the two wings and gave East Pakistan 50 percent of the total seats in the National Legislature.
- Later on, denial of an opportunity to form a government despite the Awami League winning majority number of seats was the beginning of the end of united Pakistan.

- The road towards separation began when the session of the assembly, scheduled to be held on 3 March 1971, was postponed.
- Instead, military crackdown began on 25 March 1971, with the acquiescence of Lieutenant General Yaquob Ali Khan, Commanding Officer of the Eastern Command (later martial law administrator from 7 March 1971 to 6 April 1971), and the Governor, Admiral Ahsan.

Migration of Bengali Immigrants

- A major difference in handling Punjab and Bengal Partition was that while in the former case there was a mutual agreement of virtual exchange of population, in the case of Bengal, the Centre took measure to limit the transfer of population.
- Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury - migration of East Bengalis from East Pakistan to West Bengal happened in phases, primarily shaped by three basic imperatives - dhan or property, man or honor/prestige, Pran or life.
- “Old migrants” - those entering West Bengal between October 1946 and 1958; they were eligible for minimum government dole and assistance, and were mainly the upper-caste and upper-class elite Hindu migrants who were hardly seen to impose any economic burden on the government. Even as property was immovable they could exchange/sell it. Many of them had influential relatives in the metropolises or smaller towns of what was carved out as “West Bengal”.

- “In-between migrants” - the government identified this group as economic rather than political migrants that was motivated by the doles offered by the government. The government did not recognise them as “displaced persons” and did not give any financial benefits. In fact, by 1958, the Central Government was urging West Bengal to wind up its Rehabilitation Ministry.
- “In-between migrants” chiefly comprised the service-oriented middle-class who even if not moneyed, had the benefits of proper social networking and education. Although not officially registered as displaced persons, this group greatly added to the population of West Bengal, Tripura and Assam. Due to class-caste pride, many of them refrained from seeking government help.
- “New Migrants” - comprised the lowest castes of Bengal - the Namasudras, the Sadgops and the Poundras, and their only presumable reason to move was pran. For e.g., with the initiation of the Passport system in April 1952, the borders of the two adjacent nation-states tightened and took on deeper religious tones, which rendered a further marginalised status to the existing minority in East Pakistan.



- As the “new migrants” were losing their ancestral jobs (farming, fishing, boatmen), they moved to West Bengal without any secure alternate vocation, stepping into an unsure, destitute life in a new nation-state.
- There were three modes of settlement - rehabilitation made by government, exchange of properties between Hindus and Muslims, and purchase of lands by the immigrants without any government support.
- The Bengali immigrants trickled in at various periods against different historical backdrops in the immediate decades abutting the Partition— Direct Action Day in August 1946, after the Muslims forced the Two-Nation concept, in 1948 after the annexation of the Muslim princely state of Hyderabad, in 1949-1950 with the anti-Hindu riots in Khulna and Barisal, mid-1950s with the national language issue and adaptation of the Islamic Constitution, 1964 mass exodus after the theft of the holy hair from the Hazrat Ball mosque in Kashmir, and during the War of Liberation and formation of Bangladesh on 1971.



Partition of Bengal - Role of Subalterns

- Ashis Nandy - H.S. Suhrawardy did not want bloodbath but his constituency comprised immigrant labourers and proletarian section. While this support base was a potential political force, it was a volatile and uncontrollable group easily hijacked for violent causes.
- While the poor as a class may not be prone to bigotry, urban slums are liable to be hired as bastions of fanatic leaders. Their loyalties are systematically endorsed by influential members of the same community.
- The upper-class influential populace do not risk their own lives, but are willing to risk those of slum-dwellers.



- Profulla Roychoudhury - the post-Partition new generation in West Bengal had mostly become dissolute through the impact of famine and the Second World War, and witnessed lofty ideas and old values being misutilized for acquisition of power, as in the case of vote-catching. New social laws justified getting hold of money without commanding respect, such that people who chose questionable means of earning were not only not looked down upon, but had access to all social privileges in the society.
- In the final days of communal riots prior to the Partition, Bengal had witnessed change in the definition of goondas (antisocial thugs), whose alliance with the rich made them socially acceptable, even respectable and men of great influence. As they offered protection of lives, properties and localities, they turned from socially boycotted to important elements, who determined the course of socio-political developments in West Bengal. Mastans, on the other hand, were offshoots of the bhadralok educated middle-class families.
- Roychoudhury states: “It is not perhaps too much to say that the ways of the new-rich were the ways of the goondas” (31). The lack of job availability pushed youths into crime, hooliganism, corruption.



- According to W.W.Hunter (*The Indian Mussalman*,1871) there are two kinds of Muslims in India - foreign-born aristocratic ashraf (elite) and the lower-caste Hindu converts atrap (poorer section). Atrap majorly constitute the Muslims in the subcontinent.
- 19th C Bengal's revivalist – reformist movements like Faraizi and Tariqah-i-Muhammadiya are explicit attempts at purification of Islam with socio-economic programmes by drawing support from the poorest and most exploited peasants.
- Rafiuddin Ahmed: the nature of the reforms' propaganda alienated landlords, merchants, moneylenders and urban educated Muslims.
- Last quarter of 19 C - militant impulses replaced by more moderate forms of “reform from within” among Bengali Muslims.

- Reforms by educated Muslims aimed at revival of “ancient glory of Islam” with a “modern spirit” and “cooperation with the West”.
- Census report 1872- majority of Muslims from Bengal of Indian origin, who were educated urban Muslims did not wish to be associated with the British version of “Indian” and “low caste/class” Muslim converts. They reinvented themselves as “foreign-born” ashrafs. This was an attitude especially among the lower or middle-class Muslims, who wanted to escape inauthentic identity.
- 1901 census - There was an increase in the number of Shaikhs, Syeds, Mughals and Pathans and corresponding decrease in the ranks of occupational caste groups.
- Derogatory representation of Muslims by British and Hindus in the late 19th and 20th Century Bengali writings as foreign invaders, ex-Hindu converts, traitors, abductors, but ostensibly liberal Hindus and women from 19th Century did not participate in this popular discourse prominently.



- Muslim women's private stories cannot be disentangled from the records about Muslim men. Some women criticized male privilege and challenged dominant histories by oral accounts.
- Jehan Ara- she is asked if she is Bengali because of her name. Brought up in Bengali ambience, parents were nationalist Muslims- went to a Brahmo school in North Calcutta, namely "Victoria Institution."
- Unlike 'ashraf' class Muslims who would alienate from Bengali nationalist movement spearheaded by Hindu middle- and upper-middle classes in early 20th C, Bengali identity is important for some Bengali Muslims in appropriating a "nationalist" Muslim familial belongingness. Yet for Jehan Ara Persian name and religion also situate her firmly to the moral/cultural universe of Islam.
- Jehan Era establishes her family's upper middle-class status. Her story of a generous amiable father challenges representation of Muslims as treacherous and displaces the destructive agency of Muslims as those from "outside Bengal".

- Zohra Sultana - brought up under broad outlook of international community without ghettos, an Indian Bengali who happens to be Muslim. She downplays relational ties unlike Jehan Ara, and prefers a cosmopolitan casting for herself and her family. Her “happenstance” with Islam is a dialogic response towards the pejorative stock image of the Muslims etched by the reactionary Hindus in the 1990s India.
- A desire for Bengali-ness betrays a certain tension. For instance, Mehrunnisa’s points how despite being originally from Ahmedabad she adapted to Bengali-ness, and that her maternal grandfather was converted to Islam. “He was Bengali” on the one hand, and on the other, she refers to the loyalty, integrity and courage of Muslim men.
- The grown up generation from among middle-class Muslims during Partition remember their preoccupation with Bengali cult, language and identity. Cultivation of Bengali relation important to “progressive” middle-class Muslim intellectuals in Bengal.
- However, the wealthy Muslim families spoke Urdu at home. This led to cultivate national movement between Urdu-speaking West Pakistan and Bengali-dominated East Pakistan which culminated in Bangladesh in 1971.



- Meherunnisa Begum openly criticizes Muslim men for their conservative attitude, lack of understanding for “changing times.” She belongs to relatively affluent family of Muslim businessmen in Calcutta, speaks clear English and Bengali but with an accent of Urdu. She seems to echo the “lagging behind” colonial discourse about Muslim men since the last quarter of 19 C.
- Meherunnisa condemns the easy life that dwindled away the fortune of many Muslims, not able to “let go of the past”. Muslims saw government scholarships as “kharyats” or charity. Hindu middle class stayed as the implicit referent throughout these comparisons.
- Meherunnisa adopts a voice of imagined Hindu middle-class when she delineates what ought to be proper parental attitude to children’s education.
- Yet her oblique implication that being descendants of Mughal kings, the attitude of Muslim men was to live off selling ancestral properties than become British government’s servant by “chakri”/”naukri”, i.e. to start with modest beginnings (typical of *bhadralok* mentality). So they would live lavish lives off big business, but hold no educational degree.

- Here there is valuing of entrepreneurship over servility of chakri, grand ideas over following instructions, as well as the voices of Muslim men who arrogate themselves of right to rule. This leads to the question regarding Meherunnisa's stance when she refers to Hindu's ability to adapt to change.
- Yet, she clearly contrasts naivety of Muslim women To Hindu women's resourcefulness. Talks of pre- WW II Hindu women's foresight who hoarded silver coins, knowing they will be soon replaced by bills.
- In succinct terms Meherunnisa considered Hindu women to be better than Muslim women but Muslim men to be better than Hindu bhadralok.
- These comparisons raise many questions as to Meherunnisa's using the word "hoard" implies amass, conceal, withhold from others, presumably for one's own welfare aspirations. Does this lead to a moral change of selfishness on Hindu women or garnering unfair advantage for one's own benefit, in exclusion of others? In accusative tone points out the difference between Hindu's hoarding/thriftiness in comparison to Muslim's spending/largesse.



- Muslim's assertion of particular backgrounds surfaces in tandem with their assertions of Bengali-ness.
- Mumtaz Waheeda points out to immense wealth, aristocracy from both her parents' sides, as well as "high posts" held by her relatives both in Calcutta and Bangladesh. On the other hand, Mehrun asserts her family's "ashraf" identification through their "wastefulness" and the disdain of her male kin for social mobility/security as signified by government schools.
- Jehan Ara's assertion to Bengali-ness was by tracing high-caste Hindu ancestry for her family. This incident whose verity she bolsters by referring to different researches on their family. These "proofs" help construct her family's sense of itself.
- She also says Mussalmans in Bengal were converts thereby suggesting that any number of Bengali Muslim families can lay claims to a high caste origin and how she in particular would like to be seen(conforms to the ashraf-atrap dominant discourse).

- By carving out a different location from which she creates her own identity, even if it is the realm of lore, the Muslim women challenge a whole set of meanings and associations, which inhere in the term “convert”.
- Sufia Kamal - “One crucial source of bitterness between the two communities was access to jobs. Jobs with the British administration that created an important division between ‘bhadralok’ and ‘chhotolok.’ Muslims were essentially the non-bhadralok according to popular Hindu perception, and a signifier of “fanatical masses” as defined by Hunter.
- Stock images of Muslim men with caps and lungis, and women with burqua opposed to all that is aligned to Reason and Progress.
- Jehan Ara Begum’s class pride differentiates low class Muslims that an average Hindu cannot recognize. Enduring lower class/caste Hindu convert image of Muslims renders middle-class Muslims as invisible in contemporary India.
- Yet voices from within the community also express the predicament that the anti-modern stance of Muslim religiosity poses for “educated” middle-class Muslims.



- The middle-class Muslims' ability to pass, or be accepted as normalized citizen-subjects depends on their willingness and ability to distance themselves from the tell-tale signs of Muslimness.
- Hindu women friends of Jehan Ara were conscious in expressing their depth of friendship with her and expressed pride in being accepted closeness to “liberal” Muslims as her.
- Jehan Ara faced the burden of “being acceptable” based on Hindu-designed parameters. She in the end confesses keeping friendship with these Hindu women through effort on her part, by trying to “fit in”, and that Hindus take it for granted, they don't realize what it is to be a minority.
- Her abrupt departure for azaan, that she had never done before - asserts her Muslim-ness that she had downplayed upto a point for the benefit of her secular, liberal Hindu friends.



THANK YOU

