

Review Article

OF CASTE AND COLONIALISM

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Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal*, Sage, New Delhi, 2004, 252 pp. ISBN: 81-7829-316-1.

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India*, Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2004, xx + 523 pp. ISBN: 81-250-2596-0.

The question of caste stands at the centre of scholarship on South Asia and continues to be a potent force in Indian politics. Over the past two decades, historians, anthropologists and post-colonial scholars have debated the role of colonialism in shaping, even 'inventing', caste. This body of work has been driven by a series of exchanges over the nature of colonial knowledge in South Asia and by the desire of many South Asianists to fashion a 'post-Orientalist' approach to the study of the region, creating a new body of knowledge that interrogates the basic analytical categories received from European Indology, the British colonial state, and the imperialism that is now seen as being a defining characteristic of the area studies approach.¹ A connected body of historical work has worked hard at examining how caste operated within specific local or regional communities and in the process

¹ Key contributions to this debate include Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge, 1999); Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of mind: colonialism and the making of modern India* (Princeton, 2001); Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford, 1990) and *Text and practice: essays on South Asian history* (Delhi, 2005); Norbert Peabody, 'Cents, Sense, Census: Human Inventories in Late Precolonial and Early Colonial India', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 43:4 (2001): 819-850.

have revealed an enormously complex pattern.² These studies have exposed the limitations of the classic anthropological works on caste by Louis Dumont and Edmund Leach.³ Dumont's archetypal opposition between purity and pollution and Leach's more elastic taxonomy of caste have been reassessed by a range of local studies that have reaffirmed the centrality of caste in South Asian cultural formations and which have highlighted the diversity of caste formations found in India's various linguistic and cultural regions. More importantly, caste remains powerfully embedded in the post-colonial political system. It remains a potent tool for governance, as caste categories are routinely used by numerous government agencies to measure 'social advancement' and to guide the formulation of policy (which frequently targets specific caste groups).⁴ And, of course, in contemporary India caste consciousness both reinforces and is reinforced by party politics, at local, regional and national levels, as particular political parties are closely associated with the interests of specific caste groups.⁵

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's *Caste, Culture and Hegemony* addresses both the status of caste as an analytical category and caste politics, as it stresses the centrality of caste in Bengali Hindu social formations and reconstructs the ways in which caste has shaped the operation of power in Bengal. The keystone to the volume is the body of argument developed in chapter one. Ostensibly, this chapter surveys the development of the power structures that shaped Hindu society in colonial Bengal, but in reality this chapter offers a reading of the production of hierarchy that roams from the Gupta period through to late twentieth century politics. Bandyopadhyay shows that the hegemony of high caste groups was remarkably durable throughout this period and that political reform, social change, or the

² Recent examples include: Brian P. Caton, 'Social Categories and Colonisation in Panjab, 1849-1920', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 41:1 (2004): 33-50; Prachi Deshpande, 'Caste as Maratha: Social Categories, Colonial Policy and Identity in Early Twentieth-Century Maharashtra', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 41:1 (2004): 7-32; Michael Katten, 'From Jati to Caste in Nineteenth-Century India: Velama Identity and the Telling of the Bobbili Katha', *South Asia*, 22:2 (1999): 1-36; Anshu Malhotra, *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities: Restructuring Class in Colonial Punjab* (Delhi, 2002); John D. Rogers, 'Caste as a Social Category and Identity in Colonial Lanka', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 41:1 (2004): 51-77, and Awadhendra Sharan, 'From Caste to Category: Colonial Knowledge Practices and the Depressed/Scheduled castes of Bihar', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 40:3 (2003): 279-310.

³ Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: an Essay on the Caste System*, Mark Sainsbury trans. (Chicago, 1970); E. R. Leach ed. *Aspects of caste in South India, Ceylon and North-West Pakistan* (Cambridge, 1960). Leach's definition identified five key elements that distinguished caste: hierarchy, endogamy, occupation defined by hereditary, untouchability, and rules governing commensality.

⁴ Debjani Ganguly, 'Can the Dalit Speak: Caste, Postcoloniality, and the New Humanities?', *South Asia*, 23 (2000): 43-62.

⁵ This is made clear, for example, in Ian Duncan, 'Dalits and Politics in Rural North India: the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 27:1 (1999): 35-60.

discursive domain of culture did not radically change this uneven distribution of status and power. He acknowledges that 'traditional' caste structures were put under pressure by social mobility and by advocates of modernising social reform. However, these pressures never wrought deep-seated change. When occupational mobility did occur it was limited and even in the mid-twentieth century many Bengalis still carried out the socio-economic function traditionally associated with their caste identity (47-8). And defenders of 'tradition' deftly appropriated the language of science – wielded so enthusiastically by reformists across South Asia during the nineteenth century – to argue that the distinctions found within the caste system was akin to the variety and differentiation found in the natural world (54-5). In this chapter the caste order at the heart of Bengali social life emerges as flexible and adaptable; it was able to incorporate those groups whose social and ritual status did rise, deflect the challenges of reformist groups who pursued the construction of a rationalist and egalitarian modernity, while continuously reproducing a social vision that legitimated the hierarchies implicit within the caste system. These debates in effect affirmed caste as the organizing principle of the Bengali Hindu world and by the early twentieth century, 'the idea of the uniqueness of caste as a signifier of the cultural superiority of Hindus and the notion of its organic connection with Hindu unity and identity' was 'Bengali common sense' (56).

Bandyopadhyay further fleshes out this argument in chapter two, which focuses on popular religion and Dalit protest movements, forces which potentially posed a radical challenge to high caste dominance. Bandyopadhyay argues that oppositional movements were unable to overthrow the system for three reasons. First, the Bengali caste system actually allowed subordinate groups to enjoy a degree of autonomy and they had sufficient social space to allow them to follow practices that violated regulations relating to ritual practices, commensality, and cleanliness. Second, many reform movements and marginal social groups mounted critiques that drew heavily on the language and symbols of caste. Bandyopadhyay shows that in grounding their critiques of caste within the cultural repertoire of the system, these groups ultimately came to reproduce the very notions of social distinction and hierarchy that they set out to attack. Third, and most importantly, Bandyopadhyay underscores the ability of elite groups to absorb these critiques and to subtly reconfigure the operation of caste. Out of this dialectic between oppositional groups and the dominant order based in *varnashrama dharma* (the belief that social function and religious duty were defined by the four-fold varna model of caste and the four stages of life ('ashrama')), Brahmanical authority was tempered and softened, but ultimately persisted (106-7).

Chapters three and four examine the intersections between caste and gender. Although this issue has received some attention within Bengali historiography, which has been concerned with the politics of middle-class domesticity in the colonial period, Bandyopadhyay's treatment of gender

ranges over a wider terrain.⁶ Chapter three examines nineteenth century debates over marriage and the ultimate failure of reformers such as Isvar Chandra Vidyasagar to 'modernise' Bengali culture by removing the sanctions applying to widow remarriage. Although the colonial state encouraged remarriage with the passing of the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act in 1856, even those elite Bengalis who had a deep investment in the developing social order of the colonial state did not embrace this innovation. Where earlier scholars have attributed the failure of this reforming impulse to the shortcomings of the reformers themselves, Bandyopadhyay suggests that insufficient attention has been paid to the 'power of tradition' and its capacity to reproduce its authority (109). He shows that not only did these attempts to reform the domestic realm founder, but, in fact, the ideal of ascetic widowhood became increasingly widespread in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The ideal of the pure and pious widow was, Bandyopadhyay shows, a crucial marker of respectability and a symbol that was increasingly deployed by Hindu nationalists as a key marker of the particular moral purity of their community.

This gender ideology became increasingly widespread amongst subordinate groups who embraced the restrictions on the sexuality of widows as a means of giving substance to their own growing claims to respectable status. Even Dalit groups who previously practised widow remarriage, like the Namasudras who abandoned their traditional existence on the marshes in the vicinity of Faridpur to become the pioneering cultivators of reclaimed lands in the eastern districts of Bengal, embraced this elite ideal. By the start of the twentieth century, Namasudras and other Dalits began to uphold the veiled widow, whose body was disciplined by celibacy and an ascetic vegetarian diet, as an ideal type (135). Thus Brahmanical norms of *varnashrama dharma* and female purity were actually extended, rather than retreating, in the face of the challenge of 'modernising' reform.

Chapter 4 extends this discussion of gender as it examines the impact of these gender ideologies on lower caste groups and their particular consequences for women. The diffusion of the elite emphasis on the celibate widow and female sanctity had a particularly restrictive effect on women belonging to aspirational caste groups. These groups sought to redefine their standing by embracing models of elite ritual practice and social norms – a process famously dubbed 'Sanskritisation' by M. N. Srinivas.⁷ Women became the chief carriers of this burden because the domestic realm was

⁶ E.g. Samita Sen, 'Gendered Exclusion: Domesticity and Dependence in Bengal', *International Review of Social History*, 42: Supplement 5 (1997): 65-86; Indira Chowdhury-Sengupta, 'The Return of the Sati: a Note on Heroism and Domesticity in Colonial Bengal', *Resources for Feminist Research*, 22:3-4 (1993): 41-50; Ranajit Guha, 'The Difference-Deferral of (a) Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal', *History Workshop Journal*, 36 (1993): 1-34; Tanika Sarkar, 'The Hindu Wife and the Hindu Nation: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal', *Studies in History*, 8:2 (1992): 213-235.

⁷ See M. N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (Berkeley, 1963).

central in the articulation of a ritually pure status and mothers were seen as carrying a particular responsibility the reproduction of culture. In this chapter Bandyopadhyay adds further texture to the arguments developed in chapter 3. Where much of the work on the place of gender in the culture of colonial Bengal has focused on elite forms of sociability and utilised sources drawn from high culture (most notably, poetry and literary novels), Bandyopadhyay draws on popular texts and caste-based journals to demonstrate that this extension of elite gender ideologies was never uncontested nor complete. He emphasises the ‘multivocality’ of these sources, stressing that these shifts in understandings of gender were subject to sustained debate. The extension of certain elite practices, such as *purdah*, to non-élite groups were contested by literate women, while other women from these upwardly mobile groups sought empowerment not in the domestic realm but rather in local and national political movements (188-9).

The final chapter in *Caste, Culture and Hegemony* turns to the relationships between caste and nationalism. Its particular context is Dalit politics in the lead up to Partition and the realignment of political affiliations during the struggle for independence. The historical gulf between Dalit political behaviour and the politics of high caste Hindus was eroded during the 1930s and 1940s. In this period Hindu-dominated political parties, primarily the Hindu Mahasabha, sought to mobilise Dalit support in their struggle against the Muslim League. This process not only required Bengali Dalits to set aside the political alliances that they had often forged with Muslims against the Hindu elite, but also required Dalits to prioritise ‘religion’ over ‘caste’ as a form of identification. Here Bandyopadhyay is expanding on his important 1994 essay that highlighted shifts in Dalit politics in decade before Partition and traced the growing integration of Dalits into an imagined political community defined by religion.⁸ This process of ‘Hinduisation’ had profound consequences. Dalit communities such as the Namasudras began to mobilise the language and symbols of Hinduism in their conflicts with Muslims, Dalits became embroiled in intercommunal violence and riots (such as the Dhaka riot of 1941) as they saw their political destiny as being hitched to a territorial nation defined by its religious identity, a Hindu India.

This reading of Bengali politics is a very significant contribution to the scholarship on Partition as it reveals that the political struggles of the 1940s were not the sole domain of the respectable and educated *bhadralok* of Bengal, but that Dalits assumed a new political significance and prominence. More broadly still, this chapter casts significant light on contemporary Indian politics. Despite their clear protection of elite interests, over the past two decades Hindu nationalist groups have worked hard to forge links with Dalits and ‘Other Backward Castes’. These connections have functioned as both a safeguard against the potential threat that caste-based Dalit politics pose and

⁸ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, ‘From Alienation to Integration: Changes in the Politics of Caste in Bengal 1937-1947’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 31:3 (1994): 349-91.

as a powerful instrument for shoring up a broad-based Hindu collective that is defined against the 'other' of India's Muslim population. Bandyopadhyay allows us to see the historical roots of this process and have a clearer insight into the development of these important cross-caste political alliances.

Bandyopadhyay reflects on these political issues in the volume's conclusion, which returns to the distinctiveness of Bengal's caste system. Of course, Bengal is well known for the strength of both its Marxist intellectual tradition and its communist political tradition. At one level, these cultural forces were and are deeply inimical to caste. Marxists are inclined to see caste legitimating hierarchy through the language of religion, a language which obfuscates the real nature of economic and political conflict. In his conclusion, however, Bandyopadhyay notes the extent to which even Marxist political strategists in the post-Partition Bengal have had to accept the potent weight of caste: the Communist Party's selection of candidates has had to recognise that long standing caste loyalties are absolutely central in shaping political allegiances and voting patterns (245). Class might dominate public political debate in Bengal, but Bandyopadhyay reminds that ultimately 'the concept of status based on caste and endogamy still pervades the mental world of Bengali Hindus' (246). Thus, the Bengal that emerges in this volume is defined by the remarkable persistence of caste in the region's social formations, albeit in a form that is both moderate and flexible, particularly in contrast to the more rigid forms of social distinction and untouchability that one might find in parts of South India or the Ganges valley. Even the most outwardly secular of Bengali *bhadralok* families retain a strong sensitivity to caste identities and high ritual status is made manifest in a wide variety of cultural exclusions and social practices (particularly those relating to the sharing of food and water, marriage, and life cycle rituals). At the same time, the *bhadralok*'s political and cultural power was intimately related to their caste status. In colonial Bengal, Brahman experienced considerable restrictions on their access to temporal power on the grounds of race, but they were nevertheless patronised by the colonial state because of their linguistic and textual expertise. *Caste, Culture and Hegemony* underscores that this close relationship was central in legitimisation of the authority of caste and reproducing caste hierarchies in colonial Bengal.

Most importantly, Bandyopadhyay's study shows the ways in which the challenges of groups at the margins of this system have been deflected and ultimately absorbed. Caste was continually subject to contestation, but generally Bengali debates over caste operated within the logic and language of the system; the ultimate goal of most upwardly mobile caste groups and social reformers was to be accommodated into the system, rather than overthrowing it. Bandyopadhyay also highlights the importance of the spaces that the caste system left for disempowered groups to exercise a degree of autonomy, effectively providing a safety-valve that forestalled radical disruptions to the social order. All of this means that while Bengal, like the rest of India, is now undergoing significant economic and cultural change as the nation is increasing enmeshed in both Asian and global

networks, the underpinnings of the region's social formations exhibit significant continuities with the 'traditional' social order. Recently, in September 2005, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the Marxist Chief Minister of West Bengal, stated that his party accepted the 'inevitability of globalization' and recognised the need for the acceleration of economic reforms.⁹ This growing embrace of the global is sure to have far-reaching social consequences, but on the basis of Bandyopadhyay's study there is every reason to think that Bengali caste hierarchies are likely to find ways of adapting themselves to this new social order.

In this regard, Bandyopadhyay's work can be fruitfully read alongside other recent studies that have examined the ways in which elite caste groups have worked to secure their social dominance within particular locales. The work of John Harriss on Chennai, for example, springs to mind. Harriss' reading of the cultural politics of business in Tamil Nadu reveals that Brahman continue to dominate Chennai's industrial and commercial sectors and that even within a globalised framework, family businesses remain pivotal to the city's socio-economic structure. These high caste families work within what Harriss terms the 'persistent religiosity' of a distinctively Tamil culture, while at the same time the increased authority they attach to the supremacy of Vedantic Hinduism reflects the growing connection between this Tamil elite and the chauvinistic reading of Hinduism forwarded by the Bharatiya Janata Party at an all-India level. Here religion, caste and class are interwoven, meaning that global forces – such as Tamil Nadu's incorporation into the global labour networks connected to software development – play out in unexpected ways, as NRIs support the emergence of new god-men and fund the construction of temples in their efforts to fortify their 'heritage'.¹⁰

This kind of work reminds us of the complex enmeshment of religion, caste and politics in South Asia. Although Bandyopadhyay's study of caste in Bengal is framed as a kind of post-Marxist social history and works within a regional historiography heavily influenced by the materialism of the Marxian tradition, religious structures, mentalities, and rituals occupy a central position in his vision of the social order of Bengal. Bandyopadhyay does not dismiss caste and religion as categories promulgated by the colonial state and internalised by a colonised society; his sensitivity to the importance of the region's long cultural history, the importance of pre-colonial texts, and the power hierarchies fashioned long before the onset of British rule precludes such a reductionist reading of social change. Nor does he suggest that these phenomena can be read as simple manifestation of class interest. Rather Bandyopadhyay's study reminds us of the complex intersections between the public and private, politics and religion, caste and class. The richness and sophistication of this volume means that it will stand as an

⁹ *India Daily*, 25 September 2005.

¹⁰ John Harriss, 'The Great Tradition Globalizes: Reflections on Two Studies of 'The Industrial Leaders' of Madras', *Modern Asian Studies*, 7:2 (2003): 327-362. Quotes are at 360.

important work of scholarship for all South Asianists to read, enjoy, and grapple with.

Some of the key concerns that run through *Caste, Culture and Hegemony* shape the perspectives on modern Indian history developed in Bandyopadhyay's *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India*. This survey of Indian history charts the development of Indian society from the rise of the East India Company in the middle of the eighteenth century through to the Partition of India in 1947. While the chronology and framework of the eight chapters that make up the volume are quite conventional, even old-fashioned, the analysis they offer is sensitive and textured.

The history produced here transcends the old Anglocentric challenge-response model, as Bandyopadhyay conveys the richness and complexity of Indian history. While Bandyopadhyay is aware of the significant changes wrought by India's incorporation into a global imperial economic system and social pressures unleashed by British rule, he places considerable emphasis on the power of key cultural forms – caste, religious identity, and language – inherited from pre-colonial South Asian society. Bandyopadhyay presents these structures as operating with a significant degree of autonomy under colonial rule. That is to say, Bandyopadhyay does not present colonialism as marking a fundamental cultural rupture where cultural hegemony suddenly shifted from South Asian to European hands. Thus, this is a history of British India which places considerable emphasis on local developments and the Indian-ness of India. This allows Bandyopadhyay to avoid a fundamental problem that has arisen out scholarship that posits colonialism as marking a radical cultural break: how do we explain the remarkable persistence of key aspects of South Asian civilization from the Mughal period through to contemporary moment? In my view, this volume strikes the best balance of any synthetic history of modern India in conveying the nature and extent of cultural change, while communicating the importance of cultural persistence. Here, of course, we can see strong connections between the arguments that provide the framework for the narrative of this general history and Bandyopadhyay's reading of dynamism and flexibility of tradition in his work on caste in Bengal.

From Plassey to Partition has two other real strengths. Firstly, throughout the volume Bandyopadhyay places emphasis on complexity, noting the differential experiences of various social groups, highlighting variations at the local and regional levels, and reminding readers of the power of caste and gender. He communicates the 'diversities within unity' that characterise colonial India and successfully narrates the development of a 'polyphonic nationalism where different voices converged in a common struggle against an authoritarian colonial rule' (xi). This perspective is particularly well developed in chapter 7, entitled "Many Voices of a Nation", which rematerialises a range of Muslim and Dalit perspectives with particular sensitivity. Secondly, this general history is also marked by the depth and sophistication of its treatment of historiography. At a purely practical level,

the circumscribed timeframe of this volume means that two centuries are treated in around 475 pages, whereas competing texts have significantly fewer words to cover broader chronological sweeps. This greater scope allows Bandyopadhyay to offer considered sketches of the historiography relating to many key issues. In comparison to the rather idiosyncratic and often polemic treatment of historiography in Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal's general history, Bandyopadhyay's gloss on various historiographical debates is more judicious, if less entertainingly dyspeptic.

From Plassey to Partition is directed primarily at a South Asian audience and some teachers may find it too detailed for use as a primary teaching text in the western classroom. If this is the case, it would be a great shame because this text stands out as the very best of the recent batch of general histories of modern India. When these two volumes are seen in tandem, one can only be struck by the impressive range and depth of Bandyopadhyay's scholarship. They confirm his position not just as an expert on the history of caste and a leading authority on Bengali history, but a leading social historian of South Asia as a whole. Historians of colonialism in Asia and scholars interested in thinking through encounters between tradition and modernity will find much of value in these texts.