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CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion
Vol. 5 No. 3 pp. 498-509
October 2024
ISSN 2639-4928

DOI: 10.26812/caste.v5i3.676

The Visible 'Caste Gaps' amid an 'Invisible' Caste System in West Bengal, India: A Study of Discrimination in Bengali Society

Manas Patra[1]

Abstract

The invisibility of the caste system in Bengal is so firmly ingrained in the psyche of the upper-caste Bengali Hindu population that any acknowledgement of the same by the bhadralok class appears to be a pipe dream. This moral high ground of the bhadralok directly stands antithetical to the rampant cases of caste-based discrimination in the aforementioned state on a regular basis. However, this very inconspicuous nature of the caste system in Bengal has been hogging the centre stage of academic attention in recent years and has become a well-studied phenomenon in the process. Several scholars have catapulted fresh discussions on the visibly strong undercurrents of the caste system in Bengal and accorded a new legitimacy to the different ways in which caste caters to exclusion and discrimination on socioeconomic lines. Still, Bengal's caste system remains relatively mild and lenient in popular perceptions compared to other states, owing to its strong pedigree as a cultural hotbed. Amid this invisibility of caste in public understanding, the economic (and occupational), religious, ideological and cultural gaps exuding from the allegedly 'invisible' caste system between the 'bhadralok' class and the marginalised communities are ironically very visible. Nevertheless, such existing caste gaps in several fields have remained relatively unexplored as there is not a great deal of scholarship acknowledging the tangible presence of these gaps. Therefore, I have, in my article, attempted to analyse these patent apertures and the lack of reciprocity in occupational, cultural and ideological transactions between the bhadralok and the so-called 'chotolok' as the byproducts of the deeply ossified caste hierarchy in Bengal that has gradually whittled away the human agency of the state's severely disadvantaged marginalised groups.

Keywords

Bengal, Caste System, Discrimination, Bhadralok, Intelligentsia, Marginalised, Chatur-varna, Occupation, Functional Specialisation, Graded Hierarchy, Culture

[1]PhD Scholar, Indian Institute of Technology, Palaj, Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India
Email: manas.patra@iitgn.ac.in

Introduction

The caste system in Bengal is a compelling discourse since, unlike the cow belt or certain South Indian states, caste-based division is not overtly conspicuous in Bengal, especially in the 'discourse of Bengali Bhadralok/Intelligentsia' (Chandra & Nielsen, 2012) or in the politics of 'Bengali pharaohs' (Mukharji, 2017). Contrary to other states, 'where caste violence and caste-based political parties have a high visibility' (Bandopadhyay, 2016), Bengal appears comparatively calm. This has, with time, given birth to the idea that the caste system is largely absent in Bengal and has no palpable effects on the regular life of the Bengali middle class, who are mostly seen as casteless. It is also generally perceived that caste does not exhort prodigious control over the politics of Bengal, and over thirty-four years of Communist rule, the influence of caste in the Bengali political spectrum was virtually inconsequential. However, contrary to popular perceptions, the strong undercurrents of the caste system and its visibility in Bengal have been provided with a new legitimacy through the back-and-forth debates from a plethora of social scientists with renewed vigour and enthusiasm such as Uday Chandra, Kenneth Bo Nielsen, Praskanva Sinharay, Sarbani Bandyopadhyay, Partha Chatterjee, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, Dwaipayan Sen, Dayabati Roy, etc. Nevertheless, instead of focusing on the much-hackneyed question of the unobtrusiveness of caste in Bengal, which has been the subject of contention among the academicians for many years, I have tried to highlight the burgeoning 'caste gaps' between the Bengali bhadralok community and the so-called 'chotolok' classes (the marginalised groups). The reason for focusing on the existing caste gaps is due to their strange absence in modern historical and literary discussions and an eerie silence in acknowledging them even in the face of mounting evidence, especially by the bhadralok class. In an interview with 'The Wire', Sekhar Bandopadhyay, while discussing the Bengali bhadralok class and their apparent discomfort in accepting the Bengali Hindu caste system, quotes John Bloomfield and mentions that the 'bhadralok stood for the liberal, democratic society as long as their own privileges were not touched' (Gupta, 2019). Although the gaps between Bengali literati and the Scheduled Communities are well-known and obvious phenomena, documentation of these apparent lacunae in mainstream literature is limited and sporadic. Regardless of their nature and origin, societies around the world prototypically function through an elite/non-elite binary, and Bengal is no exception to this customary rule. However, Bengal makes a captivating case owing to its middle class wielding limitless and unbounded political hegemony and socioeconomic ascendancy. We must look into four fundamental factors that played a pivotal role in creating and carefully maintaining these evident gaps. Some of these elements may come across as dull and run-of-the-mill for their wonted and platitudinous nature. However, these factors are imperative to understand how deep-rooted the gaps have become over the years through a series of developments and transitions. These are as follows a) the metropolitan/peripheral socioeconomic division, b) a graded hierarchy, c) the consumption of culture and the inherent dissimilarities, and d) the disparity of the Communist movement in theory and praxis. For this topic, notably, I have excluded the

relationship between the Bengali bhadralok class and the Scheduled Communities in the colonial period. One of the reasons for such exclusion is that the British Raj and the concomitant colonial factors made this phenomenon more convoluted than it appears now, with the Britishers at the apex of the social order and the Bengalis, irrespective of class or caste, at the very nadir. While the caste system was operating vigorously in every nook and corner of colonial Bengal, this entire caste rhetoric amid an alien rule deserves a separate discussion. Regardless, I have attempted to highlight the birth and steady progress of the bhadralok class, considering colonial developments and how their rise was intrinsically linked to the proliferation of the urban economy and the formation of the comprador class in Bengal's biggest metropolis, Calcutta.

The Birth and the Development of the Bhadralok Class: A Short Overview

To begin with, one needs to be familiar with the working of the Bengali middle-class intelligentsia. Although the districts are heavily invested in the process of generating seemingly dominant traditional upper-caste figures, this Bengali Intelligentsia, I believe, is more of a Calcutta / Kolkata intelligentsia due to Kolkata being the hotbed of the 'babu culture' and its imposing socio-cultural influence over other districts. The real reason behind the unstructured formation of Bengali literati was probably a British attempt to formulate a class of Bengali people who could work as a medium of communication between the Raj and the rest of the Bengali population. Apart from this possible 'safety valve' to dissuade potential revolts and counter-offences, other factors that played their part in the making of this massive politico-social behemoth are 1) the internal trade between the 'Bengali Zaibatsus' and the East India Company, and 2) the occidental influence of education, customs and culture. 'Zaibatsu', or conglomerate, is a term that gained prominence during the Meiji Restoration in Japan under the emperor Mutsuhito. Zaibatsus such as 'Mitsubishi', 'Mitsui', 'Sumitomo', and 'Yasuda' acted as 'holding companies' and 'introduced organisational innovation to deal with the problems attendant on growth and diversification' (Okazaki, 2000, p. 1). Although not as prodigious, potent and efficient to introduce widespread national reforms as the Zaibatsus, several Bengali large-scale family-owned businesses gradually developed that diversified the business sectors, introduced limited structural changes and increased the open cash flow in the market. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, several upper-class and upper-caste Bengal families began to get involved in trades like banking, finance, construction business, the manufacturing industry, the shipping industry, etc. The Tagore family based in Jorasanko, Calcutta, was one such example. I would like to call these families 'Bengali Zaibatsus' due to their evident economic and largely overlooked cultural significance. They established a cordial relationship with the British for the smooth operation of their businesses, and colonial officials positively reciprocated with the intention of gaining revenue and not disrupting the business equilibrium. This reciprocity between the British and certain Bengali families facilitated the transaction of ideas and cultures on both ends, with the

Bengali bhadralok being influenced significantly greater than the British. Although unofficial, the entry into the bhadralok domain always warranted the upper-caste tag. Any upper-caste Bengali with significant social and economic footing could become a member of the bhadralok community (Sharma, 2013). Most members of this middle-class bourgeois group were compradors involved in investment, trade, and other means of accumulating wealth and power through socio-political exploitation. Moreover, their politico-social hegemony was further petrified through their dominance over literature and the print media. Anindita Ghosh argues that the 'language' produced through these mentioned mediums carved out a separate cultural identity for the middle class, known as the 'new Bengali'. Subsequently, the urban literati used this 'new Bengali' identity as a tool of dominance to clamp down on the 'less privileged' classes, including women and Muslims (Ghosh, 2002).

This elite territory was predominantly a male domain laden with abject patriarchy. Female transgression into this territory was an overwhelming task since it was perceived illogical and outlandish to mention women in the same breath as their upper-caste male counterparts. Kadambini Ganguly is the most striking example in this regard, as she was singled out for her aspiration to become an MBBS graduate by her male bhadralok colleagues. 'Maintenance of female virtues were incompatible with their social liberties' for the bhadralok as they perceived 'a vast majority of women as unchaste' (Karlekar, 1986, p. WS-27).

The rise of the Bengali bhadralok class does not adhere to a particular time frame. However, Raja Ram Mohan Roy was typically considered the one of the first members of this bhadralok tradition in Bengal. Roy mediated between the declining 'Persianized nobility' of Bengal (that somehow survived as the relic of the Bengal Sultanate) and an upstart group of petty bourgeoises (predominantly Hindu Bengalis). The sudden rise and development of this nouveau riche group around Kolkata (Calcutta) during the nineteenth century changed the dynamics and outlooks of Bengali/Kolkata (Calcutta) literati. Such development of the Bhadralok class in the wake of British rule in Bengal is an exciting phenomenon and needs a separate discussion. Below is a brief timeline of events that birthed, shaped, and reshaped the Bengali literati to a significant extent.

The downfall of the Muslim nobility

The decline of the 'persianized' Muslim aristocracy in the last half of the eighteenth century took place for two reasons: 1) with the establishment of the Supreme Court, Urdu and Persian were replaced with English, and many Muslim nobles abruptly lost their jobs. Their place was gradually taken up by the English-educated and Western-cultured Bengali Hindu upper-caste groups (Bhattacharya, 2021). As the Hindu population adapted to this drastic change more swiftly and maturely than their Muslim counterparts, they multiplied their power by grabbing important government posts under British rule. This covert usurpation, I believe, was the bureaucratisation of the upper castes at the time of need. 2) With the permanent settlement of 1793, the diminishing influence of the wealthy Muslim groups was snuffed out entirely. They gradually lost their land, and correspondingly their hold over rural villages plummeted

rapidly (Bhattacharya, 2021). The upper caste Bengali Hindus promptly capitalised on this steady death of the Muslim nobility and took great strides in terms of social position and economic advancement.

Brahmo Samaj-Young Bengal Movement-Pandit Vidyasagar

The chain of radical and reformist undertakings by Bengali and foreign influencers created a significant ruckus over the rigid Hindu social structure and wreaked havoc on the 'true blue dyed-in-the-wool conservative' who openly promoted antiquated Hindu traditions. Spearheaded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the Brahmo Samaj (1828), the earliest Bengali Hindu intellectuals discarded outmoded traditions, polarising maxims, and rampant discrimination. They, however, emphasised reinventing the positives of Vedic culture. The organisation was later splintered between traditionalists (Dwarkanath Tagore, Debendranath Tagore) and radicals (Keshab Chandra Sen, Ananda Mohan Bose). As a result, the 'New Brahmo Samaj' (1863) and the 'Sadharan Brahmo Samaj' (1878) popped up, and the bhadralok went to and fro with their ideas and principles.

Amid this Civil War among the Bengali nationalists, the 'Young Bengal Movement' (in the 1820s) arrived on the scene with new-found enthusiasm. Founded by Henry Louis Vivian Derozio and his Bengali acolytes such as Rasik Krishna Mallik, Krishna Mohan Banerjee, Ramgopal Ghosh, Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee, Ramtanu Lahiri, and Peary Chand Mitra, the movement brought forth rationale into the dogma-stricken Hindu society. The Young Bengal was perhaps one of the first radical outfits across the Indian subcontinent. Their influence, although short-lived, was strong enough to instruct the young literati not to follow divisive customs religiously and be pragmatic in their general endeavours. The disciples of Derozio, who were upper-caste Hindu elite, became the primary ingredients of a newly emerging English-cultured Bengali 'babu' class. Derozio's principles behoved them with the task of carrying the ideal of pragmatism forward even after their teacher's death.

While socially as charged as Derozio and the members of the Brahmo Samaj, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's case hangs alone from the rest. Despite being part of the newly emerging enlightened stream of the Bengali youth, it would be a gross misjudgment to classify Vidyasagar as an archetypal bhadralok. He dwelled less on the politics of Calcutta and more on the reconstruction of the fringes and margins of Bengal. Vidyasagar's most significant achievement was advancing the 'Widow Remarriage Act' (1856) 'to remove all legal obstacles to the marriage of Hindu widows' (Vidya, 1885, p. 2 as quoted in Bhattacharya, 2019, p. 90). For its revolutionary nature, the act dealt a mighty blow to the outmoded Hindu customs. Apart from its historical and social significance, the act considerably impacted the discourse of the steadily expanding intelligentsia because of its reformist and liberal connotations. Being 'both a social elite and a man of the people' (Hatcher, 2020), Vidyasagar acted as an agent between the rural masses of Bengal and the debonair 'babu class' of Calcutta. Although Vidyasagar transitioned into an elite later in his life, he never adhered to the 'babu' way of life. He went back and forth between the elitism of Calcutta and the egalitarianism of the villages and consequently established himself as more of a trans-cultural figure.

Vidyasagar showed how the elite should behave even with the accumulation of social, economic and educational capital in two contrasting social settings: one that is guided by wealth and prestige and the other that is regulated by poverty and misery.

The counter-revolution (Dharma Sabha)

Organisational, structural and ideological rifts slowly emerged in the newly formed literati as intellectuals like Raja Radhakanta Deb began drifting apart from the radical movement and invested their undivided attention in the re-identification of Hindu culture and religion. Deb (a Hindu College student) founded the 'Dharma Sabha' (1830) and initiated a counter-revolution to withstand ultra-revisionist onslaughts. Though he was one of the pioneers of women's education in British India, he condoned and advocated the religious dogmatism of Hindu culture. Deb was one among many influential Hindu personalities in Bengal 'who stood against the Widow Remarriage Bill' and argued that the 'Hindu Shastras strongly prohibit the remarriage of widows' (Bhattacharya, 2019, p. 90). Regardless, by the 1830s, the struggle for reforms and reinvention was solely concentrated between two Hindu groups (traditional and reformist) as the Muslims were no longer in their picture. Hindus became their biggest supporters as well as their biggest enemies in Bengal's cultural revival.

Nascent Bengali Nationalism and its effects on the intelligentsia (Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay - Aurobindo Ghosh - Abanindranath Tagore)

Bengalis were the first to indulge in the idea and practice of nationalism in its art and craft. This development took place at a much later stage in the evolution of the Bengali bhadralok groups. Bankim Chandra, in his writings (Ananda Math, 1882), Aurobindo in his political campaigns and activities (Alipore Bomb Case, 1908), and Abanindranath in his paintings (Bharat Mata painting, 1905), spread the nascent nationalism across Bengal. Several revolutionary outfits, such as 'Anushilan Samiti' (1902) and 'Jugantar' (1906), were established to launch counter-strikes on the oppressive British machinery. Soon after, other states, such as Punjab and Maharashtra, partook in underground revolutionary activities and helped shape the movement further. A very curious development in the rhetoric of nationalism was that, in many instances, the traditional upper-class bourgeois bhadralok figures, emboldened with a largely unchallenged socioeconomic preponderance, became interchangeable with their middle-class counterparts. Notwithstanding the certain Bengali Zaibatsus', a significant chunk of the upper and middle-class intelligentsia, infused with the spirit of revolution against the British, were diluted with each other and often fought as a collective. Thus, the rigid definition of the Bengali intelligentsia was shattered, and the hardline approach of the sophisticated and high-class 'gentlefolk' against other classes was significantly softened.

Consequently, this curious and continued growth of the Bengali bhadralok class in fragmented pieces amid occasional blips and turmoils turned into a movement: a vastly unostentatious movement but a movement nonetheless! With the gains of social capital, political space, and a virtually unabated economic paramountcy, Bengali

literati soon became a force to be reckoned with! They gradually assumed the role of a new aristocratic class in the modern Bengali cultural framework through their snobbish 'Westernism' and elitist exhibitionism. Further, with the development of two distinct occupational streams, as well as the petrification and the standardisation of professions in cities and villages, labour and labour services began getting distinguished in terms of prestige, respect, and monetary value.

The (Metropolitan/Peripheral) Occupational Divisions

In the nineteenth century a solidified division of labour in both cities and villages came into being through the construction businesses and the creation of petty bourgeoisie. metropolitan spaces, especially Calcutta, had their own streams of occupations such as dealership, banking, finance, teaching and medical professions, bureaucracy, media, etc. On the other hand, peripheries were involved in traditional agriculture and other 'lowly' disciplines. Although the birth of these professions is a natural phenomenon given the solidification of urban and rural spaces, the monopolisation of such urban-centric professions by the Bengali 'babu class' created a division of labours between the 'high ranks' and the 'low ranks'. Such a division gave birth to discrimination on socioeconomic lines through the disparity of capital distribution. This drastic difference in occupations engendered two contrasting economies: the so called 'stagnant' village economy and the robust city economy. Furthermore, these occupational divisions were further ironed out through a graded/positional hierarchy promoted by the Bengali Hindu caste system, which still remains thoroughly functional throughout peripheral Bengal.

The Graded Hierarchy

Although not sui generis to Bengal, the society here predominantly functions in and through a system called the graded hierarchy, where specific jobs are assigned to particular groups of people without the possibility of outside intervention in this established framework of occupational divisions. To be more precise, each occupation has its designated function(s), and according to the Bengali Hindu Society, it must be carried out by a systematic hierarchy of professions. Although ludicrous in a modern democracy, this system is firmly ingrained in and functions through the concept of functional specialisation. The functional specialisation requires each community to be associated with its workforce area and excel in its art and craft. According to the Bengali Hindu Chatur-Varna practice (four-fold division), hierarchical structure and social order are maintained, stability and prosperity are ensured, and people forswear abhorrent practices such as avarice and jealousy by following this system. Through this established hierarchy, restrictions in the choice of professions and employment came into existence and had been indurated in the process due to the lack of occupational mobility, visibility, and fluidity. Certain services have gradually become conjugal acts with no likelihood of moving to other professions and climbing the social ladder. For instance, professions like weaving, pottery, and blacksmithing have traditionally been practised by specific Bengali (Hindu) communities such as Karmakar, Tati, Kumor (Pal), and their artisanship skill and the accumulated know-

how are typically transferred from one generation to another. Despite not being as socially petrified as the professions mentioned above, there are communities in Bengal that can be identified with their specified areas of the workforce. These communities and their professions are Mali (Gardener), Swarnakar/Poddar (goldsmith), Kaibarta (fishermen), Kulu (oil extractors), Nishad (hunters), Methor (cleaners), Dom/Domba (performers of the last rite), etc.

These professional differences are etched in stone predominantly due to unequal opportunities in education in the urban and rural spaces. Education, especially higher education for these communities, is a distant dream. The young population is encouraged to carry the family legacy forward in specified 'low-ranked' services instead of indulging in education. Unlike the cities, educational aspiration, for the most part, is deemed preposterous for not being a conventional choice in the peripheries of Bengal. Excluding the politically and economically progressive and prosperous communities such as the Namasudras and the Rajbanshis, the basic literacy rate of the marginalised population of Bengal is 48 per cent (2011 West Bengal Data Highlights). Compared to them, the upper-caste literacy rate is a staggering 90.9 per cent (Dutta & Bisai, 2020). This graded hierarchy is not specifically a Bengali phenomenon but an innate trait of the Indian caste system. A pan-Indian graded hierarchy was first vehemently advocated by Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, who wanted the caste system to remain unscathed because of its functional specialisation (Golwalkar, 1939, pp. 61-62). Nevertheless, this occupational hierarchy has given birth to numerous professions and communities in Bengal that are generally inconspicuous in other parts of India. Such a solidified occupational division has restricted the communication and transaction of social and cultural capital between the Scheduled Communities and the Bengali Hindu literati. Moreover migration to cities does not help these plebeians in terms of vocational amelioration as migrant labourers are quintessentially involved in unskilled and supposedly ignoble professions and, thereby, can not infiltrate the elite space.

Cultural Dissimilarities

Culture always comes with the baggage of intellectual properties with inherent dichotomies although culture is created, shaped and reinforced by humans and societies in time. It generally follows two different streams of development and enforcement: organic and forced or imposed. Organic cultural developments are willingly consumed and slowly embedded into societal roots in the fundamental unfolding of nature. It is a long and hectic process, and it may take decades or even centuries for a cultural phenomenon to be accepted among people irrespective of class, caste, wealth, or geographical location. Forced cultural developments are introduced or indoctrinated through manipulation and coercion by authoritative machinery and are naturally not received well. However, cultures in a post-modern society are extraordinarily plastic and have become more pliable in a globalised world, especially in India. Through liberalisation of the economy and the privatisation of the space, hybrid cultures of Indian and imported variants of the West are absorbed by moderately wealthy upper castes and, to a meagre extent, the Scheduled Communities (educated creamy-layer and those who frequent the cities for menial labour services). The consumption of

culture in Bengali villages is drastically different from that in the cities. In the spheres of society, economy, education, occupation, multimedia, way of life and mode of thinking, the urban and rural cultures and their subsequent consumption patterns can not be more different. I will provide a very limited example of the electronic and digital aspects of multimedia culture. To cite an example devotional Bhakti is the most popular genre among the villagers in digital media as their ultimate means of solace. The implausible action genre that gained prominence during the early 90s can also monetarily take them away from the challenging reality. On the other hand, the suave occident and the glitz of modern orient in art-house-oriented digital mediums of expression have been dominating the metropolitan spaces for decades. I am not trying to argue that the village and city cultures are not undergoing changes, as it is an onerous task not to get regulated by the fusion of cultures in the midst of an increasingly malleable byproduct of twenty-first-century globalisation. For instance, as a pan-Indian genre, action has a massive urban crowd. Likewise, villages are slowly developing their art-house audience in limited capacities, too. However, villages are, in many cases, unknown and uncharted territories and far more difficult to infiltrate than the cities. The consumption of culture in cities is an amalgamation of Indian and Western conventions where the internal practices are blended with imported foreign traditions in multifaceted fashions. The villagers easily do not soak in the hybrid cultures promoted by liberalisation and globalisation. They in most cases prefer uniformity; hence their culture does not come across as hybrid as the cities. Among the marginalised population across villages in India, digital media is not as popular as commonly perceived since the daily usage of social platforms is severely restricted. There are obvious exceptions, but the majority of the Scheduled Communities prefer radio over television because of financial instability, the absence of electricity, and maintenance issues. These massive cultural gaps and non-identical consumption patterns have severely limited and even downgraded the daily interaction between the ‘elite’ and the ‘non-elite’. As a ripple effect of this exclusion from mainstream society, these scheduled communities have now developed their own literature, including books, magazines, newspapers, and pamphlets that are mostly seen as meaningless propaganda or devoid of scholarship and academic integrity by the literati. Such cultural mismatch and the resultant mutual distrust unknowingly advance discrimination between the ‘high-ranked’ and the ‘low-ranked’ communities (specifically Hindu communities) instead of promoting diversity amalgamation and fusion.

The Disparity of the Bengali Communist Movement between Theory and Praxis

Despite the limited success of the land reform movement, ‘Operation Barga’ (1978), in its initial years to alleviate the collective socio-economic condition of Scheduled Communities, the Left’s reactionary and exclusionary policies towards the Dalits in Bengal is a crucial narrative in the ‘Left Political’ that we often tend to ignore. Touted as the *Shramik Srenir Sarkar* (Government of/by/for the proletariats), the Left’s arrival in power in 1977 caused significant disruption and thoroughly altered the Bengali

power dynamics. The Bengal Congress dwindled, and the idea of a separate TMC (from the INC) was not even impregnated by then. Moreover, the presence of the BJP was virtually non-existent. CPI(M) and its allies (CPI, RSP, FB) had a clear path of decade-long political hegemony. With absolute power at the helm and no peer pressure or resistance from the dilapidated oppositions, the undeterred communists, at a point, became megalomaniacs, and their sense of entitlement replaced their sense of responsibility. On January 26, 1979, West Bengal Police patrol boats and BSF streamers enclosed the 'Marichjhapi' island in the Sundarbans and imposed an economic blockade on the locals. The struggling islanders, without access to food, water, and medicine, staged a protest. As soon as they protested, the police opened fire and went on a killing spree for several days. With an estimated death of 5000-10000 people, the then Information Minister of Jyoti Basu, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, remarked that 'the island had been cleared of illegal immigrants' (Mandal, 2019). The Marichjhapi massacre, although mostly unheard of, was the biggest state-sponsored massacre in the history of independent India. Yet, this was not a one-off incident. The Left Government in Bengal, in their three decades of rule, instigated several massacres, encroached upon people's land, and carried out large-scale political persecutions. The grassroots-level CPI(M) leadership was a living-breathing propaganda machine designed to terrify the peripheral masses and conduct extermination programmes for those who refused to budge. The victims of the unregulated communist persecutions in Bengal were primarily the Namasudras. They did not have adequate socioeconomic privileges and political importance due to being early refugees. These Namasudras were chiefly used as trump cards for vote bank politics. However, they were casually but promptly discarded once deemed unnecessary by the state. The other identical incidents that showcase the left intolerance towards the 'marginalised' are the 'Nanoor Massacre' (Communist mercenaries maimed eleven landless agricultural labourers in 2000), the 'Sainbari Killings' (1970, two brothers and alleged Congress supporters, Pranab Sain and Malay Sain were hacked to death by a Communist outfit allegedly influenced by CPI(M) leader Nirupam Sen), the 'Nandigram Massacre' (2007, on a dispute over land acquisition for a Special Economic Zone, the locals of Nandigram fulminated. In response, police and some unidentified men wearing police uniforms killed fourteen people), and the 'Singur Revolt' (2008, 'aboriginals' were dispossessed of their land without 'adequate compensation' in the wake of the construction of a Tata Nano automobile factory at Singur). The movement gained prominence when the main opposition leader, Mamata Banerjee, joined hands with the protestors and embarked on a fast-unto-death programme. The campaign initially became a success when the Tata group had to leave Singur amid an inflammatory political environment. Notwithstanding Tata's departure, the disputes over land are still not resolved even in TMC's regime). These examples are well documented in popular literature and indicate the most important missing element in the Bengali Communist movement: the organic inclusion of the Dalits in the political process that CPI(M) purposefully overlooked for

many decades. The party ruled for thirty-four years in Bengal axiomatically with both widespread support and state oppression. But at what cost?

Conclusion

These Leftist reactionary measures were not received positively by the Dalits. The intelligentsia, surprisingly, remained aloof and inactive. Further, the Left also facilitated the rise of soft Hindutva (Gupta, 2021) with back-handed support from the bhadralok class. When the RSS was working silently to build its base and growing leaps and bounds insidiously, the Left, instead of halting the process of Hindutva or stopping the RSS altogether, adopted a policy of persuasion towards its Bengali Hindu population and tried to attend to their deep psychic wounds owing to partition (Narayan, 2021). Generally speaking Scheduled Communities did not reciprocate this soft Hindutva in Bengal as they openly viewed (and still view) the politics of Hindutva as one of the potent weapons of discrimination that ceaselessly attempts to create a bastion of discordant schemes against the marginalised castes. For Dalits, Hindutva always facilitates coveted upper-caste superiority. Moreover, many Scheduled Communities do not identify themselves as Hindus; instead, they either identify then with other religions such as Buddhism or call themselves animistic people with no traditional religion. Therefore, any religious underpinning for the Dalits is tantamount to manufacturing a ritualistic hegemony they vehemently denounce. Thus, to recapitulate, it can be argued that the transactional, ideological and communication gaps that had long existed since the establishment of British rule in Bengal were further dilated between the literati and their beggarly counterparts in a post-colonial framework. The Bengali bhadralok class surprisingly made no attempts to bridge these apparent lacunae. Instead, they wallowed in their self-created egotism, blithe and inertia and wherefore perpetuated the 'us and them' binary in Bengal's variegated socio-political spectrums.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest

The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my doctoral supervisor, Prof. Madhumita Sengupta, for her constant support and encouragement in terms of ideas, suggestions and feedback for this article.

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