

## Book Review

**Guha, A. 2022 *The Curious Trajectory of Caste in West Bengal Politics: Chronicling the Continuity and Change*** ISBN: 978-90-04-51456-0 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022), x + 309 pp. ISBN: 978-90-04-51181-1

**-Shubhalaksmi Raychowdhury**

Khandra College

Caste and Indian politics are inextricably linked to each other, even after 76 years of Indian politics. However, the trajectory of West Bengal politics is often argued to be different from mainstream Indian politics, as it is believed that caste plays absolutely no role in the electoral politics of Bengal. Post 2009, after the electoral decline of the Left, this "exceptionalism" has received ample scholarly attention. Ayan Guha's *The Curious Trajectory of Caste in West Bengal Politics: Chronicling the Continuity and Change* is a timely addition to the existing literature. In this book, Guha is on a quest to find out the causes behind the marginal role of caste in Bengal as compared to other states of India and also to find out the possibilities of caste-based politics in Bengal.

At the very outset, Guha deftly analyses the existing literature on caste and politics of West Bengal. However, what catches Guha's attention is the "rise of caste" thesis by Praskanva Sinha Roy, who argues that caste will play a significant role in politics due to the organised force of the Matua-Namasudra community in the districts of Nadia and North 24 Parganas. After the defeat of the Left in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, the Matua-Namasudra movement gained sufficient momentum in the state. In the run-up to the 2011 assembly elections, Mamata Banerjee tried wholeheartedly to become an insider to the community by embracing the Matua faith despite being a Brahmin by birth. Trinamool Congress's camaraderie with the Matua matriarch *Baro Maa* ensured their vote en masse in favour of TMC. However, before the 2014 general elections, a fault line developed within the community as Matua leaders like Subrata Thakur and Manjul Krishna Thakur joined the BJP. According to Guha, the BJP, to build a vote base among the Matuas, mobilised the community through invoking the past traumas faced by them due to religious persecution in East Pakistan (modern-day Bangladesh). Guha terms this as "politics of memory," which showcases the BJP's Hindutva ideology through the Hinduisation of the Dalits. Therefore, Guha argues that caste has no role to play in TMC's sporadic attempts to mobilise the *Matuas*, nor in BJP's efforts in politicising the collective memory of the community through their Hindutva ideology. Thus, according to the author, what seems to be a caste-based mobilisation is an identity politics based on religion where Matuas are primarily seen to be as Hindus pitted against the other, the Muslims. In the following chapter, Guha further scrutinises the "rise of caste" theory through the lens of political representation. Guha concludes that in post-colonial Bengal, substantive representation has not transformed into descriptive representation, which is a preferred form of representation in identity politics due to various factors such as shared memory, common experiences, etc. Guha, through his meticulous analysis of election data, demonstrates the lack of adequate representation of the Dalits in the

Cabinet of Ministers. Even after the decline of the Left, it has been observed that very few Scheduled castes have contested from unreserved seats. According to noted historian Sekhar Bandopadhyay, "the upper echelons of the power structure in Bengal society remain unchallenged"<sup>1</sup>

Guha next moves on to the analysis of the demography of West Bengal, which is an important structural factor behind no mass political assertion by the Dalits against upper caste supremacy. It is revealed through Guha's research that in Bengal, there is no dominant caste that is geographically spread throughout the state. It is further revealed that the two major lower castes of the state, who have mobilised themselves, the Rajbanshis and Namasudras, have opposing interests. While the Namasudras are pro-CAA<sup>2</sup> As their main demand is refugee rehabilitation and to get citizenship, the Rajbanshis demand autonomy as they fear that CAA will lead to the infiltration of Hindu refugees. Therefore, in Bengal, the North Indian model cannot be replicated due to a lack of a dominant caste and also due to conflicting interests among the two major lower castes of the state.

While analysing the lack of Dalit assertion in the state through the lens of political economy, Guha analyses the land holding pattern of the Dalits. It has been divulged that there is a lower level of relative deprivation faced by lower and middle castes viz a viz the upper castes as compared to the other states. Guha's attempt to find out the reason behind no major Dalit assertion in the state through the lens of political economy is unique and path-breaking.

In the penultimate chapter, Guha tries to find out the role of caste in the micro politics of Bengal. He tries to understand why caste as an institution, being very much present in the micro politics, fails to have a larger impact on the micro politics of the state. After studying a Matua-dominated village of West Bengal, Guha concludes that social values have an important role in the non-politicisation of caste identity. Guha attributes the *Bhadralok*<sup>3</sup> value system behind post-colonial Bengal's shying away from caste-based identity politics in macro politics.

Guha effortlessly, in his final chapter, shows the role of an intangible factor, i.e, political culture, in relegating the importance of caste in institutional politics. He argues that despite the left-leaning of the *Bhadraloks*, there has been no structural change as regards political culture after TMC came to power. Although some argue that the *Bhadralok* values have become adulterated to a certain extent, the *Bhadralok* hegemony still very much exists. Therefore, to talk about caste openly will still be taboo due to this value system.

After analysing several factors behind the curious trajectory of caste in West

---

<sup>1</sup> Interview of Sekhar Bandhyopadhyay titled, "Understanding Bengal's Namasudras, Who are Divided between TMC and BJP", taken by Manibina Gupta, The Wire, Feb 28, 2019, <https://thewire.in/caste/understanding-the-history-of-bengals-namasudras-who-are-divided-between-tmc-and-bjp>

<sup>2</sup> CAA refers to the Citizenship Amendment Act which promises citizenship to a group of migrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan who have faced religious persecution and are members of the Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain, Parsi or Christian communities.

<sup>3</sup> Bhadralok is a social category formed primarily by the members of the 3 upper castes of Bengal i.e the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. They are known for their allegiance to the Britishers and their common disdain for manual labour.

Bengal's politics, Guha concludes that even though the electoral defeat of the Left in 2009 opened some space for identity-based politics, it has been occupied by religion instead of caste.

The uniqueness of this book lies in Guha's meticulous analysis of several structural factors that have resulted in the marginal role of caste in electoral politics, unlike other scholars who have focused on this exceptionalism solely through the lens of partition and class-based politics of the Left. The book is exceptionally well-researched, along with theoretical insights, and has received scholarly attention from all over the world. Guha's effort will surely be a treasure trove to scholars who are currently researching the caste question of Bengal.