

Suman Nath. *Democracy and Social Cleavage in India: Ethnography of riots, everyday politics and communalism in West Bengal c. 2012-2021*. New York: Routledge (2022). ISBN 978-1-032-42573-3 (hard bound). Pages xv+149. Price: Hard Bound ₹1295 (South Asia edition)

The book under review deals with an intriguing phase of Bengal politics – a phase which has been characterized by an unprecedented rise of identity politics as a way of life in West Bengal. Prior to and during the Partition of India the issue of identity had played a decisive role in the political life of the country and also that of undivided Bengal. Yet, with the establishment of the Left Front rule much of it was relegated to the background, with particular focus being placed on mobilization of the masses primarily on development-related issues like land, food security, employment and the like. The electoral battle was fought along ideological lines with these issues taking the centre stage. However, much of this has changed during the past decade and the fight for the ballot box has begun to pivot on divisive agendas and communal narratives thereby giving rise to the so-called 'polarisation' debate in the politics of the state.

Such tendencies being dangerous portents for the state's socio-political fabric, it seems quite necessary, rather urgent, to look into the dynamics of such change. The book *Democracy and Social Cleavage in India* by Suman Nath has, quite systematically, looked into the issue by addressing two fundamental questions: firstly, what is it that has caused the issue of identity politics to predominate political discourses of the state for the past decade or so and secondly, what are the mechanisms that have helped in sustaining and strengthening the politics-identity interface. In doing so the author has not only unraveled the way in which the inclusive liberal space is being encroached upon by exclusive primordial constructs but has also challenged the idea of 'party-society' as propounded by scholars like Dwaipayan Bhattacharya. On the basis of his field-based study conducted during the last decade of the left rule, Bhattacharya (2009) concluded that party became the most visible form of social structure that superseded all other 'competing channels of public transaction...political parties in rural West Bengal largely transcended caste, religion, ethnicity-based organizations,' thereby giving rise to a particular form of sociability called 'party-society.' In other words, the perpetuation of the so-called party society during the Left Front era strengthened the party organization, made party the moral custodian of public life and pushed all other forms of primordial identity-based organizations to the backburner. However, as the author argues, with the onset of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) regime the grip of the party over public life has loosened to a great extent and 'Bengal is now well within post-party regime' (p. 109). This does not, necessarily, mean that the idea of

'party society' itself has become an obsolete one, rather its operational dynamics have undergone vast changes. Today various primordial identity-based organizations have cropped up which have successfully supplanted the strong party machinery in defining and determining the political landscape of contemporary Bengal. The author has sought to judge recent political events, in terms of increasing number of riots and incidents of communalism, in the light of this transformed reality. He has attempted to explain the recent turn of events in West Bengal politics by using the concept of 'cultural misrecognition' and the way it has fomented communal violence time and again during the past decade or so.

Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of 'misrecognition' the author states that though the phenomenon has existed even during the Left Front rule, the TMC rule has brought in a variation in its nature. The Left Front Government (LFG) perpetuated, according to the author, a kind of 'systemic misrecognition' whereby the entire political system was under the rigid control of the party and where people found the party to be an extension of the government that was easily accessible. On the contrary, the TMC deliberately attempted to 'free the public sphere from the party grid' (p. 109) and 'reinvented various traditional cultural forms' (p.17) in order to legitimize the various policy decisions taken by it from time to time, a phenomenon he conceptualizes as 'cultural misrecognition.' It was through such a mechanism that primordial identity issues gradually came to occupy a significant place in the mainstream politics of Bengal. West Bengal being a state where identity consolidation was mostly on a very minor scale, the sudden upsurge of the same in the recent past quite naturally demands an intensive engagement with the issue.

On the basis of longitudinal and multi-site ethnographic study, the author has made a brilliant attempt to decode the various mechanisms through which religious polarization is being manufactured in the state. The book has been structured into eight chapters including an introduction and a conclusion which focusses on the ways in which misrecognition-based politics has been steering West Bengal towards the path of communal violence, the organizational bases perpetuating such divisiveness and its subsequent manifestations and how the state is slowly turning into a breeding ground for competitive communalism in the light of the policies pursued by the TMC as well as the BJP which, quite recently, has made significant inroads into Bengal politics.

Contemporary politics is witnessing a great deal of interaction and interrelation between power and culture thereby giving rise to a complex patchwork of power-culture interface. It is this 'power-culture' interface that best addresses the issue of identity polarization. But how? In order to address this question, the author begins with an understanding of the construction of *bhadralok* culture during the LF rule in Bengal. This *bhadralok* culture mainly

revolved round the elites in the cities and upper- and middle-class peasantry in the villages. The peripheral sections of the populace, or more precisely the 'subalterns', continued to thrive on the fringes of the society with their culture, their practices and their traditions receiving little or no attention. It was this cultural exclusion that was systematically taken advantage of by the TMC for consolidating its support base when it came to power. In other words, TMC used the 'power of culture' as a political weapon in its favour.

The author makes the point that the TMC regime has capitalized on various, hitherto, neglected cultural mechanisms to divert people's attention away from the effective delivery of public goods and services. His fieldwork data shows how, unlike the LFG, conflict resolution and the process of decision-making at the village level during the TMC regime was facilitated by invoking traditional structures like *sholoana* and traditional tribal community leaders namely the *majhis* and how these instruments were used for legitimizing the party's decisions. Again, a jump in the number of government-sponsored fairs and festivals, the introduction of various populist policies like providing monetary benefits to the Imams and Muezzins and the frequent use of religious symbols to mobilize religious identities are all illustrative of the kind of identity politics that TMC uses and how it is impregnated with the possibility of segmenting the population of the state. In addition, instances of the government's policy of favouring one community over the other in the event of overlapping of dates of processions and festivals also seemed to be a bit murky resulting not only in a sense of disquiet among a section of the Hindus but also facilitating, to a large extent, the rise of Hindutva forces and the consequent construction of the idea of Hindu victimhood. All these developments, over the years, have made communal issues to gradually seep into the political consciousness of the people of Bengal. The greatest manifestation of this is the number of riots that Bengal has been witnessing since 2016.

While documenting the communal clashes that broke out in various parts of West Bengal, the author seeks to draw attention to the factors that conduce towards identity consolidation and the ways in which a trivial incident can flare up a large-scale violence. A unique feature of the author's ethnographic inquiry constitutes his focus on the politics-religious interface at the micro-level and the way it is cultivating religious schism in West Bengal. In doing so, he has not only emphasized the process of inter-community identity consolidation but also the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. He, in fact, dedicates an entire chapter to the issue of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Bengal. He argues that the rise of Islamic fundamentalism is concurrent with that of Hindutva organizations. Using his ethnographic study at Rejinagar, the author examines the percolation of fundamentalist ideas among the Muslims of Bengal and also exposes its stereotyping of ideal Muslims. Such an attempt of civilizing along identity lines have been further strengthened with the mushrooming of various Islamic organizations which have

made their presence felt quite decisively in the political landscape of the state. Further, situating the phenomenon in the context of growing Islamic insurgency and crackdown of jihadi organizations in neighboring Bangladesh, the author shows the symbiotic relationship between cross-border operation of the sectarian organizations and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Bengal.

That the state has been transformed into a potential tinderbox becomes evident from the book's ethnographic vignettes of the riots. The author's narratives and the consequent analysis of the riots seems to highlight the following factors that fuel communal passions in various contexts:

- a) promotion of certain 'invented traditions' and festivals aided with fierce slogans and brazen display of violence becoming strategic fulcrums of polarization. Examples of this include Hanuman Jayanti, aggressive rallies organized on the occasion of festivals like Ram Navami and the like where even figures like Ram and Hanuman are losing their divinity to religious and political contestations.
- b) spread of fake and inflammatory news via social media that easily taps into the identity sentiments of the people.
- c) inaction and even complicity on part of the state administration as a possible mechanism for avoiding culpability.
- d) systematic engineering of the attacks by the powerful local groups working hand in glove with outsiders.

The author in his narratives has also provided certain compelling evidence to show how divisions are being forged between various religious communities on the basis of their attires, food habits and their lifestyles thereby, further, facilitating the process of, what may be termed as, 'identity recognition.' This, however, has been placed in a much larger context of what the entire country is grappling with since 2014 which inaugurated the rule of the saffron party under the stewardship of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. With its overarching theme mostly centering round the idea of 'Hindu nationalism', the party has sought to shape the entire political landscape in terms of the same. The party is relentlessly seeking to create a space for 'populism, (Hindu) nationalism, authoritarianism and majoritarianism' (p.110) to thrive. BJP's majoritarian sentiments, in the author's own words, is based on 'two major pillars: first, constant demonization of the “others”—primarily the Muslims and Dalits and second, popularization of invented traditions and materializing the long-drawn dream of Hindutva.” (p.112) which the author labels as tools of 'cultural misrecognitions.' This process of reinforcement of cultural identity and its concomitant usage for political/electoral dividends is in tandem with what the

TMC is doing in Bengal. In fact, the identity-based mobilization as initiated by the TMC, in contrast to the class-based mobilization of the left regime, has further made the ground fertile for the BJP, which for quite long had occupied a back seat, to emerge as substantial political force in the state (Vincent, 2022). This claim has been substantiated by the author himself by using data from the Election Commission of India to show the progressive rise in the vote share of the BJP in the state's elections since 2016. However, the vote bank politics not only pivots around communal sentiments but also regional sentiments as portrayed by the Bengali/non-Bengali or the insider/outsider debate as evident from the catchy slogans like '*bangla nijer meye kei chay*' (Bengal wants its own daughter) and '*bobirago toder dao biday*' (bid farewell to the outsiders). However, as the author notes, in the run-up to the assembly elections of 2021, the TMC embarked upon a journey of course correction whereby it started re-engaging with the more inclusive public-service delivery-based model to satisfy the wishes of the electorate. According to political analysts, the aggressive promotion of programmes like *Duare Sarkar*, *Swasthya Sathi* have, indeed, helped the party in holding ground in the 2021 elections. However, as the author cautions, how far such catapulting of welfare programmes into the political rhetoric of the state can actually divert people's attention away from identity fault lines that have been carefully cultivated, remains quite doubtful. Hence the author ends with an ominous note that 'identity issues is not going to go backstage anytime soon.'

The author's style of presentation is very lucid and his explanation of facts with analytical rigor is quite commendable. The book definitely has a potential to add a new dimension to the existing literature on Bengal politics by viewing current state policies through the lens of 'cultural misrecognition.' This book is a fantastic read for those who would like to ruminate the trajectory of identity politics in Bengal and its consequential impact on the political discourse of the state over the past few years.

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