



NETAJI SUBHAS OPEN UNIVERSITY
School of Social Sciences
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Website: www.wbnsou.ac.in

Report of the Two-Days National Seminar on Caste, Social Formation and Political Mobilization

Introduction

The Two-Day National Seminar, sponsored by the Department of Higher Education, Science & Technology and Bio-Technology, Government of West Bengal, on Caste, Social Formation and Political Mobilization: Modern Bengal in Historical Context, jointly organized by the School of Social Sciences, Netaji Subhas Open University, Kolkata, in association with NSOU Centre for Social Studies that was held on 15th and 16th March, 2019 in the presence of a handsome group of dignitaries and participants. The deliberations of the stalwarts who had graced our seminar do have a bearing on the precise dispensation of our book. Their addresses must be briefly mentioned as a preamble to the making of our august book.

Professor Chandan Basu, Director, School of Social Sciences, NSOU, gave us the preliminary blocks which shaped the foundations of the seminar as well as the nut-and bolts of the book in making. He interpreted caste as a historically pre-ordained phenomenon of the Indian society with deeply ingrained social identifications and socio-cultural attributions. He showed, how in the pre-modern era, caste had played an important role in making of the social structure of India as well as that of Bengal. He asserted that the introduction of the British rule, had led the emergence of a modern type of economy and education along with the rise of the new class structures like the middle class or the quintessential working class. This in turn resulted in the articulation of new kinds of social reform movements in modern Bengal under the colonial rulers that championed the rise of a new type of caste society in 19th century. He said it with conviction that in a socio-culturally layered society of Bengal, the ideological stand-points, strategies and policies would create a complex algorithm of caste question that undoubtedly would be heterogeneous and rigid. The phrase 'algorithm' became a catch-phrase which was then taken up by the other stalwarts present on the dais and it became the 'talking point' of the seminar as well as the point of initiation for the book in question.

The address of the Chief Guest, Prof. (Retired) Amal Das, Department of History, University of Kalyani threw a new light on the relevance of the caste in the modern-times and illustrated on how it had changed the socio-political ambience to set up the stage for a new kind of socio-political over-hauling.

Professor Swaraj Basu, Director, School of Social Sciences, IGNOU, delivered the Key Note Address that delved on the significance of the title of the concerned book. Basu opined that we live in a mental world where caste identity influences our socio-cultural behaviour. Since the turn of the 19th Century, there was a growing propensity among the various lower and especially, intermediary castes to re-design their social standing and to find a footing as one of the twice born castes. This search for new social identity especially among the caste groups had consolidated with time. He vouched for a study of the social mobility movements, which he believed gives momentum to the dynamics of indigenous society. Professor Basu reinstated the evils of the caste system at the same time and reminded us of Ambedkar's *Annihilation of the Caste System*, which truly was a gem in the ambit of caste based malevolence encountered in the social lives.



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The Presidential Address rendered by Prof Debal Singharoy, Professor of Sociology, School of Social Sciences, IGNOU harped on the dynamism of the topic that the book grew on. The lectures must not be seen in isolation but they have gone a long way in chiselling a deep anchorage for the book in question. He elaborated on the process of construction of caste identities and its transmogrification through vivid articulation of the identities of class, peasants, indigenous groups, ethnicization, nationalism and citizenship. He intermittently showed how these identities entangled with the processes of social movements, colonization, globalization, Mcdonaldization and the emergence of a robust knowledge society. He gave an idea of how these processes were taking shape in West Bengal and its vicinity. Professor Singharoy explored the emergent caste identities as the revived entities of individual and collective consciousness that govern one's self perception, remain critical in forming one's perception about significant others, and at the same time function as radical agents for refurbishing the structured entities.

Coming to the authors who contributed to this book, it is undeniable that each one of them had done justice to the theme of the seminar, which definitely was proposed keeping in mind the vast scope and the relevance it held in the contemporary pluralist society. Authors perceiving the problem of caste and its paraphernalia catered to its diverse ambits thus providing snapshots from the cracks and crevices of Bengal that truly made the book eclectic and intersectional, which truly is the order of the day. Somnath Paul's paper on The Problematic of Caste in Syed Mujtafa Siraj's "The Guest" eschews the changing concept of caste. The meanings and materiality of caste in Post-Independence India have changed in a very subtle way. Caste groups survive by demonstrating their cultural difference and often challenge the system that gave rise to it. Consequently, in their challenge to various practices of identity formation in India, they all crave for equality in socio-eco-political way. The production, organization and naturalization of caste groups, having a history, are still maintained and are being maintained by members of communities. Obviously, there is a lack of homogeneity even in the members of a particular caste and as often than not, hierarchies of economic condition and gender predetermine their position in society. The contours of concepts like 'jati' and 'samaj' similarly keep on changing. The veritable crucible of the notion of 'progress' often leave questions like 'why are there differences in caste groups with respect to obtaining the benefits of social and economic reforms?' unanswered. The political trope of 'modernized caste', the economic trope of 'productive caste' and the cultural trope of 'ethicized caste' overlap and contribute further in the volatility of the practices of identity formation.

The takeaway from the seminar:

The seminar left behind an indelible academic and interactive footprint by the scholars, and presenters by their rich rendition as well as by the thoughtful audience who provoked the speakers and brought out their best by posing constructive critiques. The seminar truly served its purpose in presenting a dialogue on caste issues and especially its pertinence in the present turbulent society with its stout scholastic contributions and suggested interventions. The seminar was a success not only because of its academic



repertoire but also because of its timely mediations to grasp a cumulative issue like this with a deft approach.

It has been unanimously agreed upon by the House that our caste system remains one of the most heinous forms of hierarchical social structure and caste-based prejudice affecting a large chunk of people in Asia and all across the globe. Dalits still now remain on the lowest rung of the Hindu social organization all throughout the Asian societies. Despite legal aids and protections offered in caste-affected countries, the Dalit community continues to writhe under indignities spanning from daily assaults, to extreme impoverishments, to violence and heart-chilling crimes. These humiliations must be seen dispensations of understandings and practices of religion and implied notions of purity and impurity as popped by the birth factor and deteriorated even further by gender, class, ethnicity, race and geographical boundaries. The seminar vouched to give an open space to all the victims, especially where the entrenched caste system approves a ruthless denial of citizenship and more so defies the fundamental rights which otherwise should be ensured for all.

A few questions thrown by the seminar which can invite discursive interactions in the future are:

1. How can we rethink and renovate the entrenched and emergent points of contentions concerning these morphed issues on research methodologies, praxis, policies, and transnational collaborations?
2. How have the hierarchies of race, gender and sexuality been negotiated by Dalit women and men?
3. What are the socio-political actions that the outcastes have taken to wilt the powers of patriarchy?
4. How do we engage with the everyday lives of the brutalised men and women to ease their life-courses at the intersections of gender, caste, class, ethnicity and religion?
5. How have the lower –castes used faith and action to claim dignified solidarity and obliterate servitude? How have they expressed their anguishes and aspirations in literary as well as other art forms to fight doggedly against insolence and impertinence?
6. In what ways can we build a new transmogrified political space to imagine an illuminated future?
7. How can we analyse the intersections of the different attributes to encourage an alternative discourse as a mandate for the democracy beyond the popular denominations?
8. How can caste alliances form newer types of social formations to act as catalysts for political mobilizations across cross-sections in Bengal?

Herein lied the justification of the stated seminar, which we think will go a long way in creating interpolative ripples that shall show the path for further ameliorations and peace building in Bengal and beyond.

Manoj Halder
Srabanti Choudhuri
Organizing Secretaries, Seminar Committee, NSOU



Details of the paper-presentations for the seminar held on 15-16th March, 2019

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| Date : 15.03.19 | Technical Session-I |
| Indrashish Mukherjee | <i>An empirical exploration of early girl child marriage and its influence on postnatal death of children in West Bengal</i> |
| Srideep Mukherjee | Activism to artistry: reading dalit subalternity in Mahasweta Devi's "water" |
| Sharmishtha Basu | Social inclusion of backward castes through comprehensive empowerment programme |
| Date : 16.03.19 | technical session-II |
| Milan Roy | Socio-cultural changes of Bagdi caste in rural West Bengal |
| Mrityunjoy Paul | Caste dynamics in Muslim society of Bengal in the context of Ashraf and Atraf. |
| Soumen Biswas | Caste struggle and educational development in modern Bengal: a case study on Poundras (pods). |
| Date : 16.03.19 | Technical Session-III |
| Krishnakoli Hazra | The racial theory of caste: H.H. Risley and the Census of 1901 |
| Arunima Roy Choudhuri | The sweet makers of colonial Calcutta: a socio-cultural history |
| Srabanti Choudhuri | Nirmal Kumar Bose's understanding of the caste system through his civilizational algorithm: trailing along the civilizational perspective |



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| Prasenjit Mukherjee | caste system and traditional unorganized sector of Bengal: a history of transformation |
| Sutanuka Ghosh Roy | The difference that matters: representation of caste, community, identity in manoranjan bypari's my chandal life: an autobiography of a dalit. |