

## Book Reviews

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মনোশান্ত বিশ্বাস, বাংলার মতুয়া আন্দোলন :  
সমাজ সংস্কৃতি রাজনীতি, সেতু প্রকাশনী,  
কলকাতা, ২০১৬, পৃঃ ৩৬৬, দাম : ৪৫০/-

The recent publication of Dr. Manosanta Biswas's বাংলার মতুয়া আন্দোলন : সমাজ সংস্কৃতি রাজনীতি (কলকাতা : সেতু প্রকাশনী ২০১৬) is a significant contribution in the understanding of the history of social protest of the subaltern masses in general and of a very specific marginal religious groups in particular. This research has been successful in developing two basic formulations: firstly, Dr Biswas places the question of oppression and protest of the subaltern masses in the larger trajectory of socio-religious identity formation; secondly, he, however, is also successful in restraining himself from the *supposedly logical fall* into the trap of the static contours of the subaltern consciousness. As a matter of fact, it is with the rise of the *Subaltern Studies* in the academic circle of south Asia, the entire gamut of the study of not only of communities or sects, but also of the society at large has come to be solely dependent on the binary relationships of oppression and protest. The strict division of society into two broad categories, that is, the elite and the subaltern in the theoretical formulation of the *Subaltern Studies*, minimizes the scope of further or fresh analysis of any new dimension which does not belong to the binary opposition of elite (oppression and exploitation) and the subaltern (protest and resistance). The present research is a perfect example of interpreting the community orientation and distinct identity formation not only as a result of community consciousness itself but also as an integral part of broader socio-political developments under colonial as well as post-colonial conditions.

The present book is divided into eight chapters apart from 'Introduction' and 'Conclusion'. The author has also provided a valuable 'Postscript' on the revival of the Matua Mahasangha and new equations of dalit politics in West Bengal. The Matua movement emerged in colonial Bengal as an alternative social and

religious space for the oppressed social castes like the Namasudras and the other. The researcher aptly shows that it was the first of its kind that challenged the cultural domination of the English educated upper caste bhadraloks. The hegemony of the bhadraloks over the Bengali society was the fruit of two different factors. On the one hand, the bhadraloks were the inheritors of the brahmonical domination and cultural legacy of pre-modern era. They imbibed the caste hierarchy; they believed in social and cultural exclusion; and they also provided sustenance to the deep inequality and socio-economic discrimination existing in the society. These inequitable practices were however not manifested in a straight forward manner in the social-historical paradigm of society. Unlike the other parts of India, the caste conflict did not take the form of open conflict within the very foundation of the Hindu society. The continuation of caste based discrimination on the one hand and the absence of open conflict on the issues of social justice characterized the structure of so-called Hindu society in colonial and postcolonial Bengal. The Bengali bhadraloks were the greatest beneficiaries of this development. On the other hand, the Bhadrlok domination was reinforced by the power of languages – both townie Bengali and cosmopolitan English. It was a new command of the *Bhadrlok* as a sect over the rest of the Bengali society.

The Matua movement was successful in posing challenge to this dual domination of the Hindu upper caste bhadraloks. Firstly, they challenged the Hindu upper caste orthodox values and socio-cultural norms by developing alternative socio-religious and cultural propositions. It was a fresh outlook that stood beyond the matrix of

Brahmonical ideology. It was the first fundamental contribution of the Matua leadership in the consciousness of not only of the Matuas, but also of the other depressed castes. Secondly, the Matua leadership also undertook the mission of spreading the modern education system for the deprived, exploited and marginal social communities. It aimed to infuse the message of emancipation in the collective consciousness of the Namasudras and others depressed castes through education and cultural regeneration. These two developments created the ultimate condition for the growth of a political community during the period under review. Therefore, this attempt to transform the religious group into an organized political bloc on behalf of the Matua leadership was the central dynamics of the entire history of the Matua community. No other community, group, or sect was as focused and articulate in this sense of the term as the Matua community was in the caste hierarchy of Bengal.

The strength of the Dr Biswas's research is that he has appropriately analyzed the story of this development of a marginal community on the basis of all available data and facts. A reading of this book shows that how the Matua community was able to expand the sphere of influence of its own in the domain of public perception and policy formulation. It was the uninterrupted engagement of the Matua leadership and their organic relationship with the community members created a distinct identity

over the years, the basis of which was the emancipatory ideology. The Matua movement was able to achieve its own identity because it was never preoccupied unnecessarily with the hegemonic values of the Brahmonical ideology. From the very beginning of this movement it was truly engaged in offering an alternative of this upper caste ideology as a social protest. Even the catastrophic effect of partition of India in 1947 did not entirely break the caste and religion based solidarity though it definitively weakened the movement to some extent. But the recent re-emergence of the Matua movement in the political structure of West Bengal shows the inner strength of this ideology. All the political parties are trying to establish contact with the Matuas for electoral gains. The Matua leadership is also trying to appropriate the benefits of the competitive political democracy of parliamentary electoral politics in their own way for the welfare of the community. It may initiate new political trajectory in the state of West Bengal on the basis of new social dynamism and political equation. The research of Dr Biswas gives us this hint clearly. Finally the merit of this work is revealed as follows the standard procedure of historical research and data validation. It makes the research free from any partisan flavor and thereby makes it distinct from other such contemporary work.

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