

Piety and Politics: Caste, Self-cultivation and Mobilization in Late Colonial Bengal

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In my doctoral research, I look into how the meanings of ‘doing politics’ evolved in India from late-nineteenth-early-twentieth-century colonial times to the present. Mine is thus a study of the associational forms of early twentieth century Bengal (in eastern India) – their shifting spiritual, ideological and strategic emphases – through which colonial subjects got socialised and politicised into ‘modern’ forms of civic and political life. By the early twentieth century patriotic activity had become religion. The contours of the community to which this patriotism would be directed remained indeterminate and elusive. Until a little before, young men (middle-class, often upper-caste) often cultivated the self of the crazed spiritual wanderer who many a time left their homes in search of a spiritual mentor. This spiritual craze and impulse of self-sacrifice found itself channelized into the impulse of ‘doing good’ to one’s ‘own’ people (*samaj-seva*), of serving the community as a matter of pious duty. The concern for community, importance of society and love of one ‘own’ people came to be glorified by this time as defining the specific quality of the ‘Eastern traditions’ of life and its spiritual culture. So the virtues on ‘man-making’, character-building and self-reliance that characterised modes of ‘political’ association in early twentieth century Bengal were conceptualised as precepts of duty and piety rooted in an inherited cultural ‘tradition’ of community solidarity or ties of birth.

The early twentieth century also saw the extension of literacy and social orders so far excluded from the public space of reasoned debate now began to participate in the public sphere to give expression to their community-subjectivities and aspirations for community self-improvement. This spiritually-charged patriotic allegiance to *samaj* (society/community) was structured around concentric circles, as it were. The innermost circle was the *jati-samaj* or allegiance to one’s own caste, the outer circles could be respectively constituted by language, religion and finally the Indian nation. My interest is specifically in the modes of political-cum-spiritual articulation invested for the caste-community for it was particularly an institution like caste with its associated social oppressions that was supposed, in a different register, to be one of the most unjust, freedom-constraining, parochial institutions of ‘traditional’ community life. How did lower-castes talk about autonomy, representation, socio-political consciousness and improvement for their communities in the public sphere without proclaiming complete freedom from the ‘relic of the past’? How did they invoke ‘tradition’ or talk about ‘traditional’ binds of

society and community? If middle-to-low castes aspiring to join the ranks of the middle class specifically articulated the virtues of 'free thinking', 'the spirit of adventure' and resistance to established practice in their mobilization for self-improvement, how did they reclaim these virtues culturally and spiritually as the community's very own in terms of 'tradition'?

The SRA award enabled me to look at primary source material located in the British Library, London. The copyright regulations of the colonial period accounted for the fact that every published tract, pamphlet or book in late colonial India found its way to the India Office Library in Britain whose collections later became part of the British Library. SYLFF enabled me to look at more than a hundred vernacular tracts, located here, addressing specific communities, mainly caste-groups, and articulating visions of moral and social improvement as well as political consciousness and protest against social oppressions. These vernacular (Bengali) tracts produced in early twentieth century Bengal, most of them quite unavailable in Bengal now, brought out extensively the ways in which different castes and religious communities articulated their ideals of self-cultivation: the material provided invaluable resources for tracing historical movements from cultural perceptions of values and moral imperatives - from domains of the sacred, of faith and belief - to the realms of political practice, identities and contestations.

In this short article, I can only hint at the directions opened up by a study of these tracts. The nature of claims expressed in these were political ones in so far as these spoke on behalf of and to a community, emphasised on organisation and associational forms and demanded recognition of their community-claims from beyond their community. But instead of insisting on either abstract, equal citizenly rights or concrete, unequal special privileges, say of 'reservations' from the state, these claims were claims of social status though they were articulated almost in the language of a manifesto of rights in the early twentieth century. A depressed *jati* would thus demand the social right (*adbhikar*) to profess Vaishyahood or Kshatriyahood (the four *varnas* in hierarchical order being Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya, Sudra) and engage in rituals prescribed for these *varnas* instead of living like the Sudra which they asserted was a false identity vindictively ascribed to them in relatively recent historical times. These tracts showed how creatively meanings were woven into traditional vocabulary and age-old concepts of purity/pollution. Ritual purity was substantiated in terms of claims to spiritual purity: in this era spiritual purity could no more be justified as being the monopoly of the high-born and the discursive emphasis on decent individual conduct, community discipline and ethical reflection legitimised for the lower castes the right to claim high spiritual-ethical attainments and thereby high ritual status. In order to wrest this social status, these addresses to caste-communities often highlighted the

importance of the political modes of social-boycott and non-cooperation to be unleashed on the upper-castes who were in all only a microscopic minority. Thus it was not only a social protest but a political impulse towards autonomy and democratization which took full notice of the importance of numbers in a political movement. Still it was ritual status predicated on an 'authentic' tradition and its recognition from society or *samaj* that mattered even to these castes who resented the oppressions of *samaj*. In a little more time, however, politics of castes would be geared to prove their age-old depressed status (the exact opposite of a claim to high ritual status) in order to wrest concessions from the state. The early twentieth century vernacular tracts trace the steps of this historical transition in the modes and meanings of the 'political' in modern India.

In the UK, I had to spend almost all my time in the British Library, London. I did also go to the Bodleian Library in Oxford and the South Asian Studies Library in Cambridge. My mentor in the UK, Professor Rosalind O' Hanlon of Oxford, herself an expert in the field, spent her time generously with me, gave me some very good new ideas comparing the case of Bengal with Maharashtra and sent me a good deal of secondary literature. It is very good for me that she has taken an interest in my work and I will now be able to keep her in touch with my work. I have also discussed my work briefly with Professor Joya Chatterji in Cambridge. I was able to attend a number of important seminars and conferences in the UK during my stay. The SYLFF Research Abroad program has made possible this invaluable exposure for me.