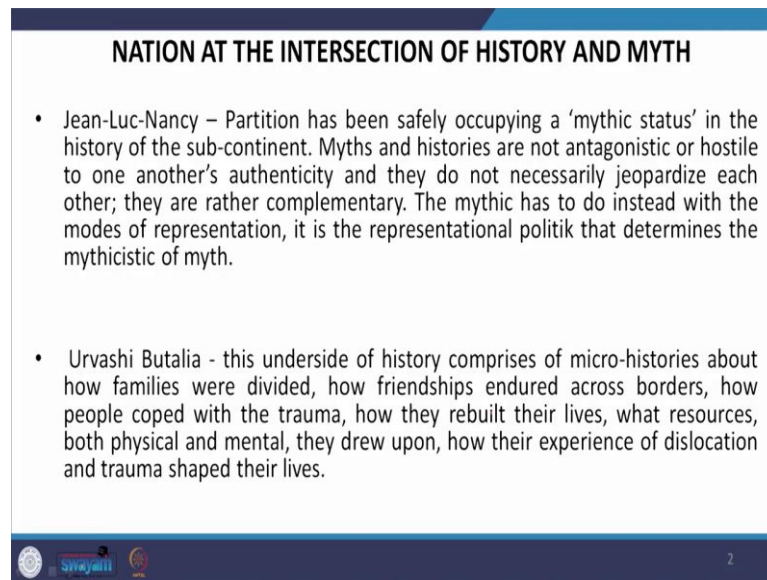


**Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema**  
**Prof. Sarbani Banerjee**  
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**Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee**




**Lecture - 13**  
**Caste Politics and the Bengal Chapter – I**

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema. So, today we are going to talk about caste politics and the Bengal partition chapter. How caste politics played a momentous role in the cracking of Bengal. (Refer Slide Time: 00:59)



**NATION AT THE INTERSECTION OF HISTORY AND MYTH**

- Jean-Luc-Nancy – Partition has been safely occupying a ‘mythic status’ in the history of the sub-continent. Myths and histories are not antagonistic or hostile to one another’s authenticity and they do not necessarily jeopardize each other; they are rather complementary. The mythic has to do instead with the modes of representation, it is the representational politik that determines the mythicistic of myth.
- Urvashi Butalia - this underside of history comprises of micro-histories about how families were divided, how friendships endured across borders, how people coped with the trauma, how they rebuilt their lives, what resources, both physical and mental, they drew upon, how their experience of dislocation and trauma shaped their lives.

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So, when we talk of nation and how there is a mainstream history being formed, we also a need to consider parallel myths - myths, that simultaneously exist in localized smaller circles, in the micro-cosmos.

We see that the nation reaches the villages, the remote areas in the form of a simulacrum. So, there are tell-tales, there are half-brewed truths, half-baked truths [as information reaches these remote areas]. National events [and] images or the figures of the national heroes are understood and they are transmitted to the local societies through misplaced understandings. So, the question of nation being shaped through an intersection of history and myth remains. Jean-Luc-Nancy talks about partition safely occupying a 'mythic status' in the history of the sub-continent.

Myths and histories are not antagonistic, but they actually reinforce one another, they complement one another. The mythic has to do with the modes of a representation. When we talk about the myth, we are talking about the representational politics - how, for example, the image of a Gandhi and Nehru travel to a remote village in Bengal or Bihar or UP, what happens in the course of the slogans or the speeches by the high flying leaders reaching a village; how it is actually interpreted [by the rural population].

The quality of fairy-tale or folk-tale or folklores and these high flying heroes being seen, being perceived as quasi-mythical figures [is common]. A very important work by Satinath Bhaduri is called Dhorai Charit Manas. So, Dhorai Charit Manas actually parodies Ram Charit Manas. Dhorai belongs to the sweeper's community, the ones that clean, and how they mention Gandhi as Gandhi Bawa and they consider him as the demigod, right.

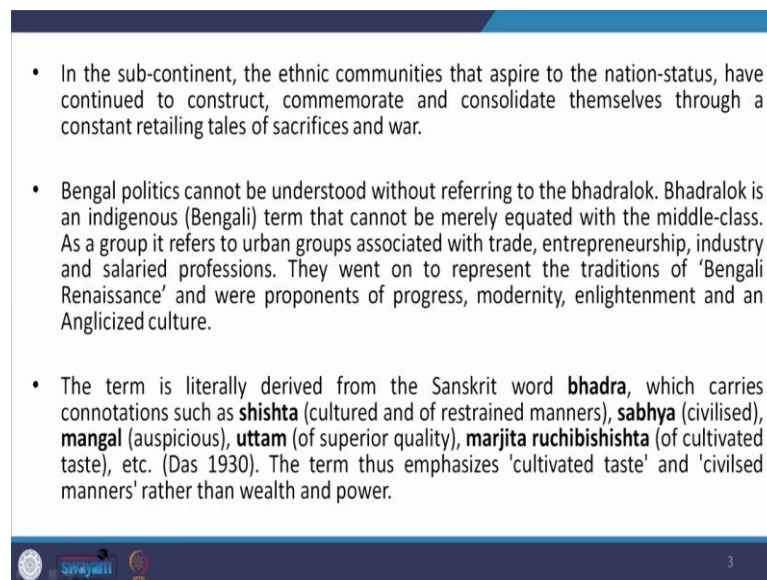
And so, the figure of Gandhi, the figure of Ram, they are almost conflated in the production of meanings at the level of a village, where most of the members are from the Dalit class. So, we have facts being intermingled with the masses' faith. There is a kind of a religious attitude, there is a kind of hero worship that these people from below actually extend to the leaders, whom they have never seen.

The quasi-mythical or the demigod's status comes in. It is a very curious kind of juncture, where what Gandhi is trying to say about something that could be understood as political astuteness by an urban audience or urban public is seen as axiom, in terms of truism. So,

the unverified facts, how they travel and how facts actually merge with superstitions in making any sense to a sweeper community that Dhorai belongs to.

Urvashi Butalia says that this underside of history comprises micro-histories about how families were divided, friendships endured across borders, how people coped with the trauma and rebuilt their lives, resources both physical and mental. So, how the experience of dislocation and trauma shaped the lives of the peoples that all of a sudden acquired the new status of refugees. When we talk of Bengal politics, it needs explanation of the category of bhadralok.

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- In the sub-continent, the ethnic communities that aspire to the nation-status, have continued to construct, commemorate and consolidate themselves through a constant retailing tales of sacrifices and war.
- Bengal politics cannot be understood without referring to the bhadralok. Bhadrakok is an indigenous (Bengali) term that cannot be merely equated with the middle-class. As a group it refers to urban groups associated with trade, entrepreneurship, industry and salaried professions. They went on to represent the traditions of 'Bengali Renaissance' and were proponents of progress, modernity, enlightenment and an Anglicized culture.
- The term is literally derived from the Sanskrit word **bhadra**, which carries connotations such as **shishhta** (cultured and of restrained manners), **sabhya** (civilised), **mangal** (auspicious), **uttam** (of superior quality), **marjita ruchibishishta** (of cultivated taste), etc. (Das 1930). The term thus emphasizes 'cultivated taste' and 'civilised manners' rather than wealth and power.

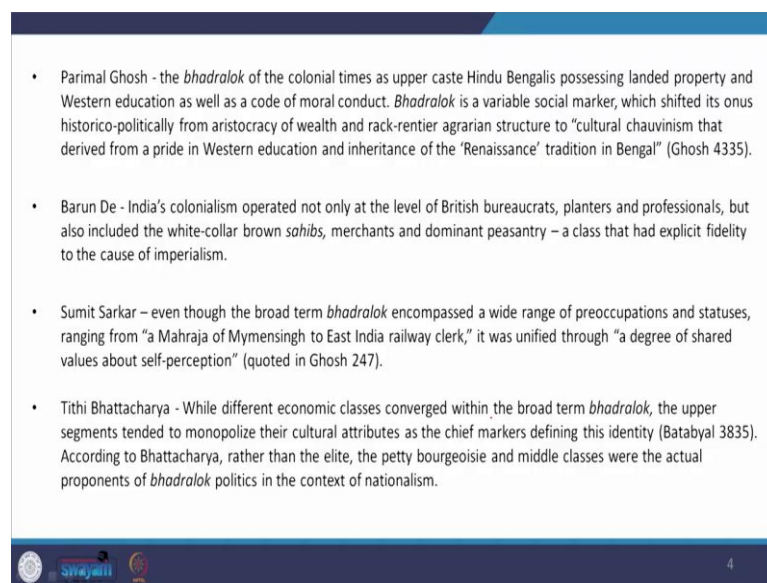
Bhadralok is an indigenous Bengali term that cannot merely be equated with the middle-class. As a group it refers to an urban populace associated with trade, entrepreneurship and salaried professions. The bhadraloks were harbingers of the 'Bengal Renaissance' through their direct contact with the British Raj. They were proponents of progress, modernity and ideas of enlightenment that were definitely inspired by the anglicized tradition.

When we look at the etymological route 'bhadra,' which is a Sanskrit term, it carries connotations of 'shishhta' or cultured 'sabhya' or civilized. And also, tacitly bring in references to mangal or auspicious and then uttam and marjita or the ones with cultivated taste. In terms of education ah bhadralok would be a group that were well read. They

would read the prominent authors from Bengal, such as Bankim Chandra, Sarat Chandra, Rabindranath Tagore.

There were certain cultural benchmarks that were associated with this group. Unless one met these yardsticks, one would not be subsumed within the social group that the *bhadralok* constituted. Parimal Ghosh would say that the *bhadralok* of the colonial times were the upper-caste Hindu Bengalis possessing landed property, western education and a code of moral conduct.

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- Parimal Ghosh - the *bhadralok* of the colonial times as upper caste Hindu Bengalis possessing landed property and Western education as well as a code of moral conduct. *Bhadralok* is a variable social marker, which shifted its onus historico-politically from aristocracy of wealth and rack-rentier agrarian structure to "cultural chauvinism that derived from a pride in Western education and inheritance of the 'Renaissance' tradition in Bengal" (Ghosh 4335).
- Barun De - India's colonialism operated not only at the level of British bureaucrats, planters and professionals, but also included the white-collar brown *sahibs*, merchants and dominant peasantry – a class that had explicit fidelity to the cause of imperialism.
- Sumit Sarkar – even though the broad term *bhadralok* encompassed a wide range of preoccupations and statuses, ranging from "a Maharaja of Mymensingh to East India railway clerk," it was unified through "a degree of shared values about self-perception" (quoted in Ghosh 247).
- Tithi Bhattacharya - While different economic classes converged within the broad term *bhadralok*, the upper segments tended to monopolize their cultural attributes as the chief markers defining this identity (Batabyal 3835). According to Bhattacharya, rather than the elite, the petty bourgeoisie and middle classes were the actual proponents of *bhadralok* politics in the context of nationalism.

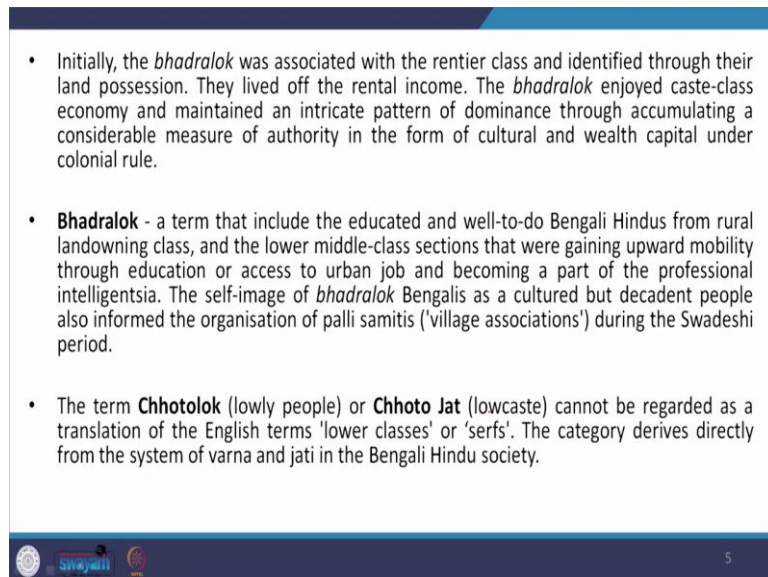
*Bhadralok* is a variable social marker and it shifted historically and politically from aristocracy of wealth and rentier economy to a pride in Western education and inheritance of the "Renaissance tradition in Bengal". According to Barun De, India's colonialism operated not only at the level of British bureaucrats, planters and professionals, but also the white-collar brown *sahibs*, the merchants and the landed or upper-class peasants.

There was a class of brown *sahibs* that had explicit fidelity to the cause of imperialism. Similarly, Sumit Sarkar describes the broad term *bhadralok* as encompassing a wide range of statuses, ranging from "Maharaja of Mymensingh to East India railway clerk." And so, they were all unified. What are the basic parameters that unify this wide range "a degree of shared values about self perception"?

It is actually an identity formation in differentiation from the other, and so when we talk about *bhadralok*, we cannot not talk about the *chhotolok*. *Bhadralok*, simply put, is not a *chhotolok*. Tithi Bhattacharya talks about this term further, how the upper segments tended to monopolize certain cultural attributes as chief markers defining the identity of the *bhadralok*.

Rather than the elite, the *petite bourgeoisie*, the middle-classes were the actual proponents of *bhadralok* politics in the context of nationalism. It is a term that includes the educated and well-to-do Bengali Hindus from rural as well as urban spaces as well as from the rural landowning classes.

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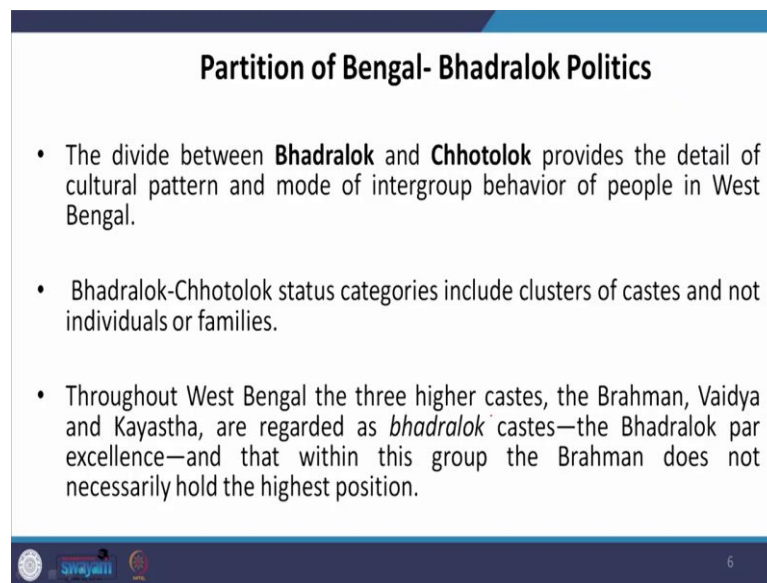


- Initially, the *bhadralok* was associated with the rentier class and identified through their land possession. They lived off the rental income. The *bhadralok* enjoyed caste-class economy and maintained an intricate pattern of dominance through accumulating a considerable measure of authority in the form of cultural and wealth capital under colonial rule.
- **Bhadralok** - a term that include the educated and well-to-do Bengali Hindus from rural landowning class, and the lower middle-class sections that were gaining upward mobility through education or access to urban job and becoming a part of the professional intelligentsia. The self-image of *bhadralok* Bengalis as a cultured but decadent people also informed the organisation of *palli samitis* ('village associations') during the Swadeshi period.
- The term **Chhotolok** (lowly people) or **Chhoto Jat** (lowcaste) cannot be regarded as a translation of the English terms 'lower classes' or 'serfs'. The category derives directly from the system of *varna* and *jati* in the Bengali Hindu society.

There would be also a section of Bengalis that were originally upper-caste lower middle-class people and they were gaining upward mobility within the fold of the social group through education and access to urban job.

They were part of the professional intelligentsia. Now, talking about the contradistinction we have in the term Chhotolok, the 'lowly' people, 'Chhoto Jat' low caste, a category that derives directly from the system of varna and jati in the Bengali Hindu society.

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**Partition of Bengal- Bhadrlok Politics**

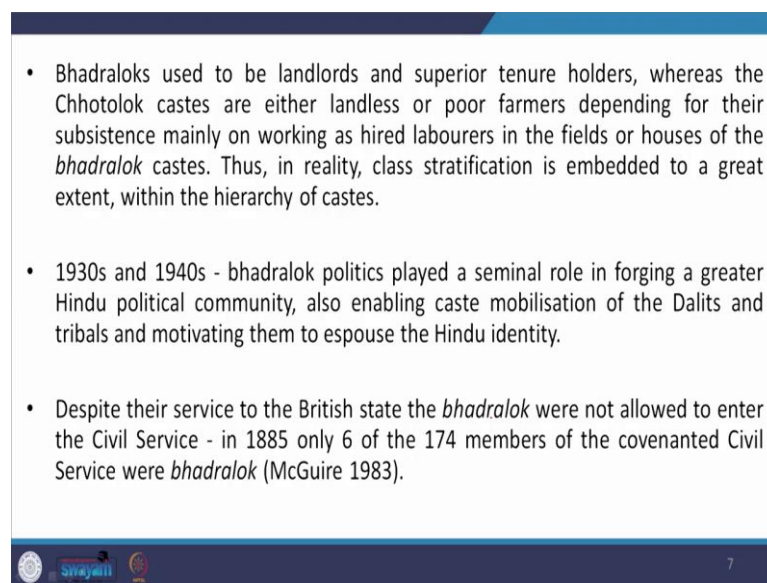
- The divide between **Bhadrlok** and **Chhotolok** provides the detail of cultural pattern and mode of intergroup behavior of people in West Bengal.
- Bhadrlok-Chhotolok status categories include clusters of castes and not individuals or families.
- Throughout West Bengal the three higher castes, the Brahman, Vaidya and Kayastha, are regarded as *bhadrlok* castes—the Bhadrlok par excellence—and that within this group the Brahman does not necessarily hold the highest position.

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This time immemorial divide between the *bhadralok* and the *chhotolok* provides the detail of cultural pattern and mode of intergroup behavior of people in West Bengal. When we talk of upper-castes among the Bengalis, there would be three groups that were understood as higher-castes - the Brahmins, Vaidyas and the Kayasthas, and members from these castes would be regarded as the *bhadralok*.

By 1930s and 1940s, the *bhadralok* politics plays a seminal role in forging a greater Hindu political community.

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- *Bhadraloks* used to be landlords and superior tenure holders, whereas the *Chhotolok* castes are either landless or poor farmers depending for their subsistence mainly on working as hired labourers in the fields or houses of the *bhadralok* castes. Thus, in reality, class stratification is embedded to a great extent, within the hierarchy of castes.
- 1930s and 1940s - *bhadralok* politics played a seminal role in forging a greater Hindu political community, also enabling caste mobilisation of the Dalits and tribals and motivating them to espouse the Hindu identity.
- Despite their service to the British state the *bhadralok* were not allowed to enter the Civil Service - in 1885 only 6 of the 174 members of the covenanted Civil Service were *bhadralok* (McGuire 1983).

And as the Hindus want to survive in terms of numbers, there is a caste mobilisation of the Dalits, there is mass Brahminizing of the Dalits and the tribals and they are indoctrinated and encouraged to espouse the Hindu identity.

The Hindus can maintain their stronghold in terms of sheer numbers [through Brahminization]. However, we see that the *bhadraloks* were... their position viz-a-viz the British Raj was not very strong because their positions viz-a-viz British Raj was not very prominent. They were not allowed to enter the civil service, [for example] when we look into the data of 1885, only 6 out of 174 members of the *bhadralok* could actually crack the civil service.

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- In early decades of 20th century, Manindranath Mandal, Pundra Kshatriya Leader made strenuous efforts to build counter-hegemony to *bhadralok* politics and dominance, leading to the formation of Bangiya Jana Sabha (BJS) in 1922. Even-though short-lived, BJS was important in the history of Dalit politics in Bengal.
- C.R.Das seized control of Congress Party in the early 1920s and in 1923. Das had won the Presidency of the Bengal Congress Party with the support of *bhadralok* populace comprising the traders and commercial classes.
- The Congress and Hindu organisations, like the Hindu Mahasabha and the Hindu Mission, co-opt the different caste movements, especially when their demands for high ritual status got combined with their efforts to seek benefits in the secular field of politics, education and employment.
- Jogendranath Mandal and the members belonging to different Scheduled Castes founded Bengal Provincial Scheduled Castes Federation (BPSCF) in 1943. It was a branch of Ambedkar's All India Scheduled Castes Federation.



On the other hand, we see a consolidation among the Dalits. In the early decades of 20th century, Manindranath Mandal, who was a Pundra Kshatriya leader, put in his efforts to build counter-hegemony to *bhadralok* politics and dominance through formation of the Bangiya Jana Sangh. Bangiya Jana Sangh was short-lived; it was a milestone in terms of Dalits seeking rights in the history of Dalit politics in Bengal.

So, BJS was important, it was a step forward, it was a milestone achieved by the Dalits in the history of Bengal. We look at C.R.Das's constituency, and Chittaranjan Das mainly won the Presidency of Bengal Congress with the support of the *bhadralok* populace. He represented the Bengal Congress. He had the support of chiefly the rich traders, commercial classes and in many instances in Bengal, we see the Congress and Hindu Mahasabha actually co-opting the different caste movements.

The Dalit's demands for high ritual status got combined with their efforts to seek benefits in the secular fields of politics, education and employment. In response to the Dalit's demand for greater visibility, Congress and Hindu organizations actually worked in tandem. There are Dalit leaders, SC leaders such as Jogendranath Mandal and members belonging to different Schedule Castes who founded the Bengal Provincial Schedule Castes Federation, which was a branch of BR Ambedkar's All India Scheduled Castes Federation.

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- The Communal Award of 1932 was the result of London's decision to divide power in the provinces among the rival communities and social groups which, in its view, constituted Indian society. British administrators saw India as 'essentially a congeries of widely separated classes, races and communities with divergences of interests and hereditary sentiment which for ages have precluded common action or local unanimity'.
- The most important feature of Communal Award is the distribution of Hindu and Muslim seats.

I have already spoken about the Communal Award and I would very briefly like to touch on this topic again - how the Communal Award facilitated rival relationships. And it stratified the Indian society at different levels, the chief division was the Hindu-Muslim division and other categories were coming up and asking for separate electorate, separate representation.

The Sikhs, the Anglo Indians and then there were separate electorates in terms of the trader's communities and the Dalits, of course. So, British administrators essentially saw India as a group of widely [variegated] classes, races and communities with divergences of interests and hereditary sentiments, which for ages have precluded any common action or local unanimity. That is, in other words, legitimizing split in terms of communal representation in politics.

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- Zetland, Governor of Bengal had listed his objections to Communal Award which includes, i) It puts advanced people in the position of subordination to backward people; ii) it increases communal bitterness iii) sense of injustice will be created that can neither be forgiven nor forgotten.
- The Indian National Congress which was identified with the middle class high caste Hindus. The early Congress policy was to give no place to the question of social reform.

Zetland, Governor of Bengal, had objected to this idea of Communal Award. He could envision that it would put advanced people - the upper-caste people in a position of subordination and disadvantage compared to the backward people. And it would lead to communal strife and heighten communal bitterness, and further such an award would provoke sense of injustice among different sections in the society.

It would engender a sense of injustice at different levels of the society. The Indian National Congress was an outfit or an organization that primarily identified with the middle-class upper-caste Hindus. And early Congress policies would not give much importance to the question of social reform or to the Dalit question, the women's question, to the question of protection of minority rights.

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- Ambedkar and Rao Bahadur Srinivasan jointly drew up a memorandum embodying the Depressed Classes' demand. It demanded among other things :
  - (1) "Right to adequate representation in the legislature of the Country-Provincial and Central
  - (2) Right to elect their own men as their representatives (a) by adult suffrage and (b) by separate electorates for the first 10 years and thereafter by joint electorate and reserved seats, it being understood that joint electorates shall not be forced upon the Depressed Classes against their will unless such joint electorates are accompanied by adult suffrage.
- Following the Communal Award and the Poona Pact, the Scheduled Castes in Bengal constituted about 11% of the Bengal population. The idea was to include the SC population under the Hindus and broaden the Hindu political base and draw the fringes to a common cause through social upliftment of the Dalits.



So, Ambedkar and Rao Bahadur Srinivasan together drew up a memorandum embodying the Depressed Classes' demands. These would voice for right to adequate representation and right to elect Dalit leaders as representatives from within the communities. They would seek adult suffrage and separate electorates for the first 10 years, and thereafter joint electorates and reserved seats.

The question of quota for the Scheduled Castes, I have actually discussed [by now]. Following the Communal Award and the Poona Pact, the Scheduled Castes in Bengal were 11 percent of the Bengal population. So, the idea was to include the SC population under the Hindus, within the larger category of the Hindus, the larger Hindu community, and thereby broaden the Hindu political base.

This actually led to a proactive process of social upliftment of the Dalits.

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## Partition of Bengal – Bhadrak Politics

- In 1945-46 elections, Congress won 80% of the SC seats. Even the leaders that had earlier fought independent elections came under the banner of Congress. 1946 Elections were the first to be held after the enactment of Poona Pact. The effect was to bring down further the number of caste Hindu seats to 70 in a house of 250, that is, a mere 28 per cent.
- The Communal Award in effect reduced the Bengali bhadralok to being a minority in a Legislative Assembly which they had hoped to dominate in the new era of provincial autonomy. By contrast, for the first time in the history of Bengal's legislatures, Muslims were placed in a position of strength relative to the Hindus.
- Congress vouched that with over 90% Bengali Hindu voters' support, the party was ready to address the interests of the Bengali Hindu electorates. Joya Chatterji notes that the elite Hindu Bengalis from interest groups and the Muslim politics were responsible for Partition — the elite political groups were the active enactors of the Partition.

We see that in 1945-46 elections, [we have already spoken about these things in our introductory lectures,] Congress won 80 percent of the SC votes. So Communal Award reduced the Bengali bhadralok to being a minority in the Legislative Assembly, which they had hoped to dominate.

The dream of provincial autonomy by the Bengali bhadralok was actually shattered. Joya Chatterji would go on to say that Hindu Bengalis from interest groups and Muslim politics were together responsible for the partition. The elite political groups were chiefly the enactors of partition.

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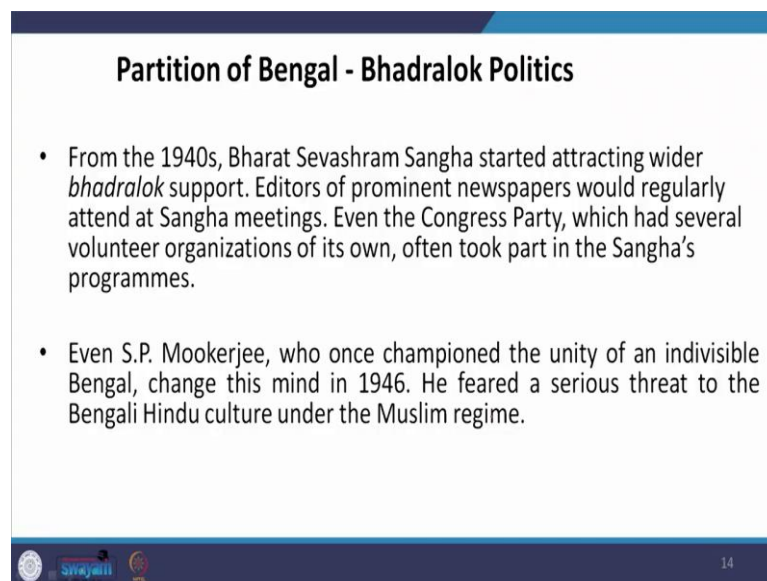
- Muslim politicians of Eastern Bengal had a long standing disjunction with *bhadralok* nationalist politics. Going back beyond the First Partition of Bengal to the late 19th century, Muslim identity politics of Nawab Abdul Latif and Sir Saiyid Ameer Ali were in affinity with colonialism.
- The link of caste and communalism went back to official sponsorship of Depressed Classes in the Imperial Census of 1911, the year in which the imperial capital shifted from Calcutta to New Delhi as a counterblast against Bengal.
- Besides the Communal Award (1932) and the Government of India Act (1935), the Calcutta Municipality Amendment Act (1939) and the Secondary Education Bill (1940) took away the Congressman *bhadralok's* supremacy in the Calcutta Corporation and in the Secondary Education Board (originally controlled by Calcutta University) respectively.

We see the major Muslim leaders, such as Nawab Abdul Latif and Sir Saiyid Ameer Ali that had affinity with colonialism and a long-standing disjunction with *bhadralok* nationalist politics.

The link of caste and communalism went back to official sponsorship of Depressed Classes in the Imperial Census of 1911. The greatest setback for Bengal was in the same year [in 1911], when the imperial capital was shifted from Calcutta to New Delhi, and it was taken as a counterblast against Bengal. So, besides Communal Award in 1932 and the Government of India Act in 1935, there were other acts that played a major role towards further disadvantaging the position of the *bhadralok*.

For example, the Calcutta Municipality Amendment Act in 1939, the Secondary Education Bill in 1940 took away the Congressman *bhadralok*'s supremacy in the Calcutta Corporation and in the secondary education board. Till a long time in Calcutta, higher education would be synonymous with upper-caste Hindu Bengalis.

The name of a college, such as Hindu College, actually subscribes to this fact that the community that was mainly influenced by western education or the group that was mainly influenced by western education in Bengal were the upper-caste Hindus. They benefited the most through coming in contact with the British Raj or the colonizers. (Refer Slide Time: 22:47)



**Partition of Bengal - Bhadrakok Politics**

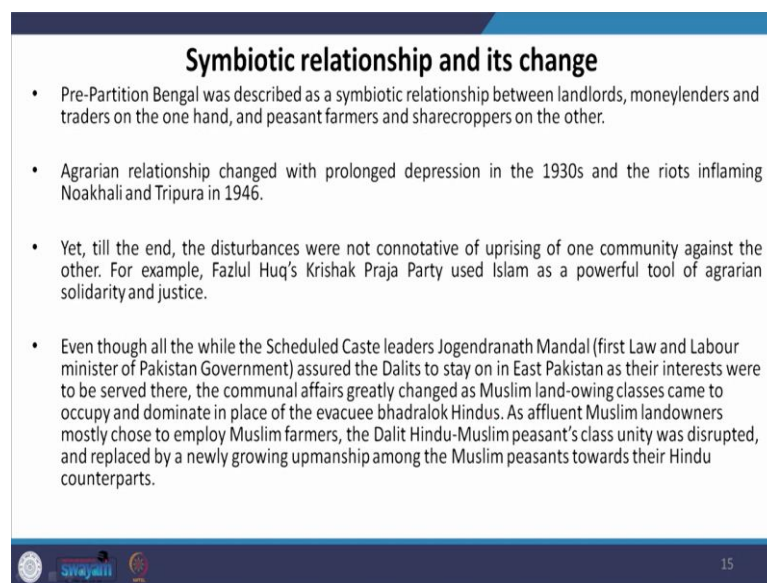
- From the 1940s, Bharat Sevashram Sangha started attracting wider *bhadralok* support. Editors of prominent newspapers would regularly attend at Sangha meetings. Even the Congress Party, which had several volunteer organizations of its own, often took part in the Sangha's programmes.
- Even S.P. Mookerjee, who once championed the unity of an indivisible Bengal, change this mind in 1946. He feared a serious threat to the Bengali Hindu culture under the Muslim regime.

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So, 1940s onward Bharat Sevashram Sangh actually starts attracting bhadralok support and even the Congress party starts taking part in the Sangh's programmes.

A figure like Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, who had once championed the unity of an indivisible Bengal, starts changing his mind 1946 onward. He fears a serious threat to the Bengali Hindu culture, if the Bengali Hindus are to stay within an undivided Bengal, under the Muslim regime. So, we see that there is a symbiotic relationship among the Dalit.

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**Symbiotic relationship and its change**

- Pre-Partition Bengal was described as a symbiotic relationship between landlords, moneylenders and traders on the one hand, and peasant farmers and sharecroppers on the other.
- Agrarian relationship changed with prolonged depression in the 1930s and the riots inflaming Noakhali and Tripura in 1946.
- Yet, till the end, the disturbances were not connotative of uprising of one community against the other. For example, Fazlul Huq's Krishak Praja Party used Islam as a powerful tool of agrarian solidarity and justice.
- Even though all the while the Scheduled Caste leaders Jogendranath Mandal (first Law and Labour minister of Pakistan Government) assured the Dalits to stay on in East Pakistan as their interests were to be served there, the communal affairs greatly changed as Muslim land-owning classes came to occupy and dominate in place of the evacuee bhadralok Hindus. As affluent Muslim landowners mostly chose to employ Muslim farmers, the Dalit Hindu-Muslim peasant's class unity was disrupted, and replaced by a newly growing upmanship among the Muslim peasants towards their Hindu counterparts.

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The symbiotic relation, the syncretic culture changes in Bengal. Pre-partition Bengal was described as a symbiotic culture between landlords, money lenders, traders on the one hand and the peasants, farmers and sharecroppers on the other. The nature of relationship among the sharecroppers, the peasants from different communities was actually changing.

The disturbances did not acquire communal colors till the very end. For example, Fazlul Huq's Krishak Praja Party was using Islam as a powerful tool of agrarian solidarity and justice. So, it was the question of Krishak, the question of peasant that Huq sought to actually address and resolve, but the agrarian relationship, the relation between the peasant farmers and sharecroppers across communities changed with the prolonged depressions, [during] the prolonged depression in the 1930s and following the riots in Noakhali and Tripura in 1946.

To put the entire thing in a nutshell, Scheduled Caste leaders that were more educated, such as Jogendranath Mandal, who became the first Law and Labour Minister of Pakistan Government would ask the Dalits to stay back in East Pakistan. They were anti-partition, they were more aware of the larger politics and they did not support partition. However, the Dalit masses would get sucked into communalist politics and they started supporting the cause of partition, which was being fanned by the extremist political parties.

What happened as a result was that the communal affairs greatly changed as Muslim landowning classes came to dominate in place of the evacuee bhadralok Hindus in East Pakistan. East Pakistan, which is Bangladesh now, would have the maximum agricultural lands. So, the question of the Dalit [Hindu] Bengalis staying back... there was a difficulty being posed as the Muslim landowners mostly chose to employ the Muslim farmers.

Competition was generated, which was never there in the past between the Dalit Hindus and the Dalit Muslims, and the Dalit Muslims being preferred by the Muslim landlords. The Hindu-Muslim compatibility or syncretic culture was disrupted, the peasant class unity beyond communal barrier was disrupted and it was replaced by a newly growing upmanship among the Muslim peasants towards their Hindu counterparts.

This would ultimately propel the Dalit Hindus to move, to enter India in destitute conditions. We will talk more about this in our ensuing lectures.

Thank you so much.