

Book Review

Dr. Nandini Basistha, Politics of Separatism, New Delhi, Vaibhav Publications, 2017, pp xiv + 296

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The book under review, '*Politics of Separatism*' is an anthology, which explores a much-neglected theme in South Asian history and politics, namely, the politics for separate '*statehood*'. This is also a kind of '*separatism*', which generates continuous disturbance in everyday life. The author tries to make a holistic study of this '*problem*' with two case studies – viz. Rajbanshi-led movement and Gorkha-led movement. Thus this Study tries to theorize the evolution of identity politics leading to separatist mentalities in India. This is the first comparative study of this kind, where two separate but parallel ethnic movements are discussed in detail with their cause, magnitude and fall-outs.

In different chapters how the author has elaborately discussed the issue of intermingling self-interest with separatist mentality is really appreciable. The writer has done a commendable task of bringing together primary sources and secondary sources with overlapping data and contradictory view-points.

With a bias-free manner, this Study revolves around hundred years' (1910-2010) history of movement of two most prominent groups of identity seekers of Northern part of West Bengal – viz. Gorkhas and Rajbanshis. The Study elaborates how it took various forms with changing scenario & circumstances, and submerged with favourable governmental approaches. But every time phoenix-rise of their movement can be seen. Thus, in different chapters, the author tried to analyse the actual condition of the '*activism*' and tries to validate the question of '*marginality*'.

Chapter 1 basically theorise the scope and eruption of politics for statehood in the India's federalist structure and how Indian Government tries to cope up with these separatist mentalities with federal policies. With different case studies in the Indian scenario, this Chapter tries to point out the challenging nature of India's nation-building process and gravity of the situation.

Chapter 2 tries to establish a co-relation between multiculturalism and justice in Indian perspective and hiccups in creating a '*just society*'. Elaborating the debate between '*pluralism*' vis-à-vis '*multiculturalism*', here the uniqueness of Indian circumstances is located.

Chapter 3 is about historical separate identity, economic backwardness and changing demographic set up of North Bengal that can be supportive to

understand the notion of relative deprivation of this region and marginalization of minorities with the influx of Bengalese in every sphere.

Inhabited by a vast variety of tribes and nationalities, North Bengal is a place with a great variety as well as versatility. One may question on its integrity as a 'region'. But the author describes its uniqueness. North Bengal is a term used for the northern parts of Bangladesh and West Bengal. However, this Study deals with only the Northern part of West Bengal, comprising six districts – viz. Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Malda, Uttar (North) Dinajpur and Dakshin (South) Dinajpur. The landscape, history and cultures of each district have a distinguished character. The geographical area of North Bengal is 21855 square kilometers, which is 1/4th of West Bengal. This region attracts importance in both national and international sphere for its strategic location. It is bounded by three states (viz. Assam, Bihar and Sikkim), three countries (viz. Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal) and it is the only connecting link between Northeast India and the rest of India. How different socio-political and ethnic movements are becoming a threat to national security has also been discussed.

Chapter 4 illustrates why and how Rajbangshis got united on casteist line and ultimately took the path of separatist politics. Caste in West Bengal has been notoriously understudied for at least three reasons. Firstly, the political culture of postcolonial West Bengal has tended to make all talk of 'caste' a taboo. Secondly, West Bengal, unlike many other regions in India, has not experienced major caste-based social movements since 1947. Thirdly, the ruling elites of this eastern Indian region, the *bhadralok*, though internally differentiated along many axes, have exercised a virtually uncontested social dominance that is rather unique even in a country where the reproduction of power relations is anything but uncommon. In this Study, the author address each of these intellectual and political concerns by taking an interdisciplinary perspective that draws on cutting-edge scholarship in the fields of history, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies. She not only interrogates why caste continues to be neglected in the politics of and scholarship on West Bengal, but also discusses how caste relations have, in fact, permeated the politics of the region in the colonial and postcolonial eras. In fact, caste in West Bengal has overt and covert aspects. On the one hand, there is the obvious issue of upper-caste dominance in the domain of formal politics despite the sway of communism for more than three decades. On the other hand, there are hidden, even insidious, ways in which a modern caste society has flourished since colonial times and shaped academic, journalistic, and popular understandings of Bengali society, culture, history, and politics. This Chapter, instead, sustains an intellectual conversation that is both timely and relevant for those interested in understanding the nature of politics in contemporary South Asia.

This Chapter explores, in an interdisciplinary way, the making and maintenance of a modern caste society that has implications well beyond the case of West Bengal. It is divided into three sections, which correspond to the key arguments

we wish to make. The first examines caste formations and organised resistance to these in colonial Bengal. Hidden histories of caste come into conversation here with fine-grained studies of caste-based movements. The second probes the extent to which partition in 1947 served as a political watershed moment in the transformation of caste society in West Bengal. This section seeks causal connections between decolonisation, the physical displacement of populations, and *bhadralok* dominance in postcolonial West Bengal. The third and final section focuses on communist and post-communist political trajectories of the region. We see here how the ethnographic present is shaped by the many parts of a caste-ridden society, albeit in ways that are neither obvious nor pre-determined.

Chapter 5 underlines different identity of Rajbangshi/Kamtapuri language and importance of inclusion of this language in the education policy of West Bengal. Here the whole controversy regarding the Rajbangshi/Kamtapuri language and politicization of the matter have been discussed.

Chapter 6 focuses three major problems of Rajbangshi-led democratic movements – viz. overlapping territorial demands of statehood, confusion over ethnic origin and linguistic status of Rajbangshis, and conflict between leaders.

Chapter 7 underlined the Genesis of the Gorkhaland Movement where the Study explored different reasons for movement and also underlines how upliftment of leaders (viz. Subhash Ghising and Bimal Gurung) in socio-economic sphere diverted their mentality against the main spirit of the Gorkhaland movement and subsequently new personalities took leadership.

Thus, this collection of co-related essays can become a benchmark for the future as well as spur new research agendas and projects that will put the region into a much-needed conversation on the politics of separatism with the rest of India.