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Book Reviews

Vimal Kant, Caste Consciousness & Power Politics in Bihar (1937-1967), B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 2015. Pp. 258. ISBN:9789350502402. Price: Rs. 1500.

This book authored by Vimal Kant gives insights of not only the political history of modern Bihar and the role of caste leaders, but also explains the origin of caste consciousness amongst the Bihari masses and the quest for power among caste groups. The term ‘caste’ is derived from the Portuguese word *casta* which in the Indian context has been analysed from various perspectives by historians, sociologists, political scientists and others. Over the years, caste perhaps has been regarded as the most important constituent of ‘Hindu’ social structure in India. The caste system has been treated as an important aspect of Indian social history from ancient times till date. During colonial rule, changes in economic, political and administrative spheres have substantially influenced the Indian social make-up. This transformation affected the understanding of caste as well. As a result, traditional values and institutions were subjected to a great deal of criticism despite the fact that these were adapting themselves to the changing scenario. The colonial administration was interested in caste and religion in India partly out of curiosity to understand the social practices and institutions of a people and partly to use their knowledge for the purpose of colonial governance. They used caste and religion also to argue that India did not constitute an integrated, social, cultural, economic and political unit, and hence could not constitute a nation. Their analysis of caste and culture presented the Indian social profile as a fragmented and not as an organic whole. By exhibiting their concern for economic and social development of the lower castes, the British through legislation and administrative orders politicised caste, tribe and religious communities.

The interaction between traditional Hindu caste system and the modern institutions of British origin led to the emergence of different kinds of mass mobilisation and politics. Through the policies regarding social institutions and their administration the British rule activated the process of local and regional consciousness as never before in Indian history. This went contrary to the needs of national integration and is clearly manifested in the British

policy of divide and rule. The census enumeration on the basis of caste led to a sudden rise in caste consciousness and caste identity among people and allowed the communities to use census data as a tool for recognition of social status and access to privileges by the State. There was widespread movement among castes and sub-castes to get them enumerated and the census was seen as an opportunity to lay claim to higher caste status. It was assumed that once higher caste status was recognised through census enumeration, other social privileges would follow or could be claimed. Caste mobilization perhaps, became the most important factor in the game of power-politics in the post-Independence era.

The present study focuses on a short span of only three decades of the last century, i.e. from 1937 to 1967. The selection of the period is based on the argument that while, the year 1937 marks the beginning of the peasant participation in the electoral politics of the province of Bihar, the year 1967 comes to us as a landmark with the formation of the first non-Congress Government in the Province. It remains to be questioned whether or not the experiment of 1967 in the second largest parliamentary-seat state was the outcome of intensification of caste consciousness in the pre 1967 period. This issue has to be seen on the basis of the question whether in that period general erosion of the nationalist hegemony was there and if yes did it lead to organisation of groups on the basis of raised caste consciousness. The review of literature is quite detailed. In addition to available secondary sources, different primary sources including archival sources, private papers, contemporary news papers, Census operation reports etc., are also explored to make sense of the political history of modern Bihar from different angles.

The study is divided into seven chapters. The introduction comprises discussions on two main points - situating caste consciousness in pre 1937 Bihar, and review of literature. This chapter also includes discussions on caste structure in pre-modern Bihar, problem of peasantry and emergence of intermediary castes, Congress influence, political developments after independence, erosion of Congress and role of caste consciousness. The second chapter deals with the role of modern education in the evolution of caste consciousness from colonial times and the role of important individuals in colonial Bihar who contributed to the rise of caste consciousness. Caste and community efforts which contributed to the origin and development of caste consciousness have also been highlighted. While impact of modern

education provided ample opportunities to few sections, it also paved path for consciousness among other caste groups. The situation continued during the pre-independent and the post-independent eras of Congress ministries. The expansion of caste consciousness went along side the rise of national consciousness in the Bihari society. The third chapter deals with the formation of different caste associations. It includes discussion on formation of different caste associations in the pre and post 1937 Bihar, construction of mythologies and their claim for higher caste status, their activities and claim for power sharing and their impact on the power relations in Bihar. The fourth chapter explores the different social reform movements in Bihar and their role in the spread of a new awakening like the reformation movements of Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Theosophical Society etc. Though these were primarily the social reformation movements, the people who came in contact with these movements did not remain untouched with a broader sense of awakening. The nationalist movement and role of various castes in Bihar, creation of Bihar, caste census, the first general elections of 1937 and caste equations, Congress ministry and caste consciousness are the main themes which have been covered in this chapter. Chapter five deals with the changing facets of power relations in Bihar after independence. Changing political atmosphere and the first elections after independence in 1951, bipolar caste politics in Bihar, Zamindars and Congress, Kisan Sabha and Congress, factions in Congress, erosion of Congress support base in 1967 elections in Bihar, coalition government pattern started and other aspects have been examined in this chapter. Chapter six discusses different agrarian movements including the movements in Bihar in the post-Independence period, and the role of caste in their successes as well as failures. Besides, other issues condition of peasants in Bihar in pre-1947, zamindars and Bihar peasantry, rise of peasant consciousness due to nationalist movement, role of Kisan Sabha and Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, the abolition of zamindari, Bakasht problem, Congress and peasantry, counter attack by zamindars, etc., have been discussed. Major conclusions of the book summarized in the chapter are as follows: caste consciousness has its historical roots, British policy were responsible for caste consciousness and caste rivalries, education played a crucial role, caste is closely associated with the problem of peasantry, caste was a dominant factor in politics during the period of the study and caste politics has been largely influencing the course of Bihar politics and power equations among the castes in the post-Mandal period also.

The study is an interesting one as it presents an interesting preview of the configurations of politics in Bihar where caste continues to remain an important fulcrum for determination of political equations. In Bihar, icons turn into caste heroes: The process which has gained momentum in the wake of coming Assembly elections, has turned Emperor Ashoka into a Kushwaha king; Babu Kunwar Singh, freedom fighter of 1857, into a Thakur and famous Hindi poet Ramdhari Singh Dinkar a Bhumihar. Perhaps the most important element of the book is its engagement with rewriting history to serve modern political ends. Though this trend is not new or unique to Bihar, the book helps scholars to understand an interesting interface between politics, history and caste. Though there is no dearth of books on caste, studies on caste as a social phenomenon and as a political factor have undergone a steady transformation. In this context, though this is another book on caste consciousness, the book is worth reading to understand the articulation of caste in the social and political life of Bihar.

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Rekha Sarin and Rajan Kapoor, Chai: The Experience of Indian Tea, Niyogi Books, 2014. Pp. 288. ISBN: 9789381523919. Price: Rs. 1995

The book tells an intrinsic story of Indian tea cultivation since the nineteenth century British colonial rule. The tea gardens flourished not only in the eastern Himalayas but also other parts of the country, including the Nilgiris, Western Ghat and Kangra Valley. This book presents fascinating stories of natural grandeur of tea estates across the country in a lucid way to non-specialist readers. Of many varieties of Indian tea, Darjeeling Tea is the finest of all in terms of its superior aroma, flavor and taste. The authors describe their experience in visiting tea estates as the explorers: "Visit a tea

plantation and you are in the lap of natural beauty. Besides being refreshed by the finest teas from the gardens, enjoy the pristine environment with spectacular views, gurgling rivers, trekking trials and jungle wildlife” (p. 85). This book is systematically organized with four sections on diverse range of issues, namely, (i) Chai the Indian Way; (ii) Into the Heartlands of Tea; (iii) From the Leaf to the Sip; and (iv) Tea the Universal Brew. This book contains seventeen chapters covering history of the tea industry development in places such as Assam, Darjeeling, South India, the Himalayas, and North-East region.

In the chapter “How Tea Came to India”, Sarin and Kapoor elaborate the fascinating facts about history of Indian tea. The tea pioneers in India started the first phase of commercial cultivation of tea in Dibrugarh, the gateway of Upper Assam, during 1840s. The place was selected by the British tea planters due to its suitable climatic conditions for tea cultivation. This region became a host of the world’s first ever tea company – The Assam Company, which was established on 12th February 1939 with shareholders from both England and India. Another company, the Bengal Tea Association, was also established at the same time in Calcutta. However, the Bengal Tea Association merged with the Assam Company soon after its establishment. Since 1840s the tea companies started establishing proprietary tea gardens, each with a vast area, mainly in upper Assam surrounding Sibasagar and Dibrugarh. In Darjeeling, commercial tea cultivation started in 1850s with the establishment of several tea estates in different parts of Darjeeling district. By the end of nineteenth century, the Darjeeling Consolidated Tea Company had huge operations in the district.

In the chapter “Bounty of Assam”, the authors elaborate the fascinating facts about Assam tea. Assam is now “the single largest contiguous tea growing region in the world and credited with almost fifty-one percent of India’s output of tea” (p. 71). The Tocklai Experimental Station in Assam, established in 1911, is one of the finest tea research laboratories in the world. Tocklai is now managed by Tea Research Association (TRA) with funding from the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and the Tea Board of India.

In the chapter “Divine Boon of Darjeeling”, the authors elaborate fascinating facts about Darjeeling tea. In 2004-05, Government of India

¹<http://www.deccanherald.com/content/481627/in-bihar-icons-turn-caste.html#>

granted the first ever Geographical Indication (GI) status to Darjeeling Tea. The authors describe this achievement: “the exclusivity of Darjeeling Tea has earned it the distinction of being first product in India to be accredited with a Geographical Indication (GI) status. By this no other tea may be permitted to be labeled ‘Darjeeling’”, unless produced in Darjeeling district of West Bengal (p. 85).

The authors also depict picturesque natural grandeur of floras and faunas in the tea estates. In the last chapter the authors describe fifteen recipes with tea that include delicious desserts and mock-tails. This book is produced in a photo-documentation style to grasp basic understandings on the tea estates, planters and cultivation process. However, the book lacks a chronological Table depicting the history of tea cultivation in India. The authors also touch upon aspects of tea tourism and eco-tourism that can help in economic development of lives of planters and labourers. This book is a nice read for researchers, tea-lovers, and travelers visiting picturesque tea gardens in the Himalayas, Nilgiris, Western Ghat and North East India.

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