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Caste and the Politics of Knowledge Production in Bengal: Upper-Caste Hegemony in Literature, Cinema, and Consciousness

Angira Dhar

Presidency University, India

Abstract

Bengal's intellectual legacy, actively shaped by colonial modernity, reform movements, and the so-called Bengal Renaissance, is often celebrated as a story of progressive thought and cultural awakening. However, such narratives routinely obscure the structural role of caste in determining who could produce, access, and legitimise knowledge. This paper examines how caste hierarchies, particularly the dominance of the *bhadralok* (upper-caste Bengali Hindu elites), operated not only within educational and institutional knowledge systems but also through Bengali literature and cinema, shaping the social imagination and reinforcing the myth of a "casteless" Bengal. Focusing on educational institutions, print culture, films, and the literary public sphere, the study traces upper-caste control over knowledge systems and cultural consciousness that systematically excluded Dalit and marginalised caste communities while naturalising upper-caste worldviews as universal. Using a multidisciplinary methodology of archival research, textual and cinematic analysis, and engagement with oral histories and subaltern narratives, the paper explores how alternative epistemologies and lived realities were silenced, not merely in access, but in representation and recognition. By interrogating Bengal's caste-blind intellectual history, the research highlights how the para-state of Brahminical cultural authority curated public consciousness and continues to keep caste in Bengal alive even today. Ultimately, the paper argues that the *bhadralok* wielded their privilege of power of language, image, and narrative to be simultaneously progressive and casteist.

Keywords: *bhadralok*; brahminical; colonial; dalit; renaissance