

Abstract

This thesis examines the question of caste and politics in West Bengal through an ethnographic study of Matuas and their organisation, the Matua Mahasangha. Compared to other states, the politics of caste here has been different. Despite having one of the largest Scheduled Caste populations in the country, West Bengal, unlike other states, did not witness any major Dalit movement until the recent past. The hegemony of the urban, upper-caste *bhadralok* in all arenas of public life invisibilised caste from the mainstream public discourse for decades. Based on multi-sited ethnography of the processes of consolidation of the Matuas, their political and cultural assertions, and participation in electoral politics under the Matua Mahasangha, the thesis shows that the silence on caste has finally been broken. The thesis argues that the collective assertions of the Matuas, particularly since the mid-2000s, have introduced a new politics of caste in West Bengal.

To explore how the assertions of the Matuas are changing the relationship between caste and politics in the state, the thesis begins by exploring Matua Dharma, an anti-caste popular religion that serves as the ideological impetus behind the political activism of the Matuas. Thereafter, I show how the symbolic assertions of the Matuas for recognition of their distinct cultural identity in the public sphere, coupled with their movement for unconditional citizenship rights of Bengali Dalit migrants in India, have led to the making of what I call the Matua political public. Finally, the thesis looks at the new practices of representation that have emerged over the last decade, both at the level of electoral contest and in popular politics, because of the effective negotiations of the Matua Mahasangha with political parties, and engagement with the state. In short, the emerging assertions of the Matuas in West Bengal, the thesis asserts, have made a dent in the hitherto unchallenged hegemony of the upper castes and have created possibilities of democratisation from below.