
Rezensiert von: Chandra Bhanu Murthy Nalamala, Centre for Modern Indian Studies, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

Dalits in India were (and are) treated by upper castes as untouchables, forcing them to live outside villages. They form the bulk of agricultural labourers and smallholding tenants. Dalit movements began to overcome the caste oppression across the country in the late nineteenth century. *The Decline of the Caste Question* is one of a number of Dalit studies published in the past quarter of a century. In this well-researched book, Dwaipayan Sen unpacks the history of Dalit politics and of silencing the caste question in Bengal, India, over the transition from colonial to post-colonial times, focusing particularly on Jogendranath Mandal.

The central argument of the book is that „Dalit politics connoted struggle over the very grammar of social justice, and articulated demands concerning matters of both political identity and economy“ (p. 12). Therefore, Sen argues, „these were politics simultaneously of recognition and redistribution“ (p. 12). Necessarily, his book counters narratives that have portrayed caste hierarchy as not static and that have suggested that Dalit movements of the 1940s merged with other identities such as Hinduism, class, and nation. Sen also explains the seemingly peculiar case of Bengal, where one finds a complete absence of the questions of caste and Dalit autonomous politics during post-colonial times. „The almost exclusively Dalit expulsion from the territory of West Bengal was critical to the post-independence decline of the caste question. By removing predominantly Namasudra [Dalits who lived in Bengal] refugees from the territory of West Bengal, the policies of Congress and, later, Communist governments effectively struck at the very possibility of the Namasudras‘ political reconsolidation in that state“ (p. 212). „Despite the significant accomplishments born of Mandal‘s efforts to propagate an Ambedkarite agenda in eastern India, these were repeatedly met with and ultimately overwhelmed by practices of coercion and dissuasion rooted in the complex of attitudes.“ Sen calls this „caste Hindu misrecognition“.

The book contains seven chapters. It starts by examining the Communal Award, announced by the British government in 1932. The award included separate electorates for Dalits, which had been a longstanding demand from Dalit leaders across the country, such as B. R. Ambedkar. Gandhi reacted to this concession with a „fast unto death“ threat, thus forcing Ambedkar to accept an agreement called the Poona Pact, according to which the separate electorates awarded to the Dalits by the British were given up. Instead, the Poona Pact provided reserved seats for Dalits within a joint electorate. Since, in the joint electorate system, all Hindus cast votes to Dalit candidates, the Dalit members thus elected would not necessarily serve Dalit interests. In Bengal, Sen argues, upper-caste politicians opposed not only the Communal Award but also the Poona Pact, since the latter reduced the number of seats available for them in the legislative bodies. The first chapter emphasises „the explicit opposition between upper-caste and Dalit politicians with respect to every single measure – the Communal Award, tenancy reform, the Poona Pact, or the proposal to enable Dalit temple entry“ in Bengal (p. 60). Sen shows that the upper-caste politicians unanimously opposed all efforts of Dalit politicians to democratise politics and society. The next chapter introduces Jogendranath Mandal and his struggle for the liberation of Dalits in the spheres of education, agriculture, and politics. Sen stresses that „Mandal and several among his legislative colleagues were keenly attuned to matters of agrarian distress, alongside, no doubt, their demands for representation and education“ (p. 63). The third chapter elaborates on the expansion of the Bengal branch of the All-India Scheduled Castes Federation (the first political party of Dalits at the all-India level, funded by Ambedkar). Sen unravels how it struggled for the right to represent Dalits and for recognition as „a distinct and separate element in the national political life“ (p. 102).
during the last few years of the colonial period.

The next chapter brings forth the core argument of the book. It traces Mandal’s emergence as the most successful Dalit politician in Bengal, as well as in colonial India, and stresses his role in the election of Ambedkar to the Constituent Assembly of India despite strong upper-caste opposition. In the mid-1940s, upper-caste leaders, in their efforts to defeat Dalit politicians, accepted a speedy partition of Bengal and British India. They hoped that Mandal would not stay in India, but would rather live in Pakistan, as his native place was in newly emerged East Pakistan. In the final three chapters, Sen shows how the upper-caste parties in India consistently worked to defeat Mandal’s politics for Dalits in Bengal. After partition, Mandal indeed settled in Pakistan and became the first speaker of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan. Dalits in East Bengal, however, were persecuted by Pakistani Muslims. Since the state remained a spectator, the persecution led to their migration to West Bengal, India. Here, the Indian National Congress, which was hardly ready to address Dalit issues, held the state’s government after independence. Sen summarises the new situation aptly: „In West Bengal, the Congress proclaimed their reluctance to support the reservations policies soon to be established in the constitution; in East Pakistan, Dalits were increasingly apprehended to be but a part of the Hindu minority and subjected to a systematic persecution seemingly condoned by their state“ (p. 184). The situation for Dalits hardly changed when the Communist Party came to power in West Bengal in the 1960s. Both political entities (Congress and the Communist Party) neglected Dalit welfare programmes, including providing shelter to the Dalit refugees from East Bengal. Mandal, as Sen shows, continued his struggle for Dalit rights after independence. He fought for the implementation of constitutional provisions aimed for Dalit upliftment and also for setting up necessary facilities for the refugees. His efforts yielded little success, as the state remained deaf to his requests. Sen concludes the book by calling Bengal „The Most Casteist Society in India“, which contradicts the widespread belief that in Bengal it is class, not caste, that matters.

This book fills two critical gaps in the history of Dalit politics. First, it looks at the mechanism employed and the exertions sustained by elite political parties to prevent emancipatory Dalit politics in late colonial Bengal. Second, it analyses the process through which Dalit movements and the caste question were silenced in post-colonial times in the region. Using a vast amount of archival sources, Sen brilliantly establishes his arguments. With this book, he joins the cohort of scholars, such as Ronki Ram, Anupama Rao, Ramnarayan Rawat, Rupa Viswanath, Sanal Mohan and Jangam Cinnaiah, whose works unravel Dalits „attempt to liberate themselves“ – works that changed the course of the historiography on colonial India and the caste question.1
