

HAS THE BHADRALOK CULTURE IN BENGAL FADED?

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A grab of the CP(M)'s poll song Tumpa Sona. The text says 'vote for the alliance fearlessly

The intellectual class of West Bengal, euphemistically termed the Bhadrakok, has long held a pivotal role in shaping culture, politics and policy in the State. From producing timeless cinema to dominating political power to setting policies on welfare, reforms and state interventions, this segment of Bengali society performed an outsized role. But all indications are that its influence is fading quickly in the State and beyond. Surajit Chandra Mukhopadhyay and Sandip Roy ponder the relevance of the Bhadrakok in a discussion moderated by **Shiv Sahay Singh**. Edited excerpts:

What is the Bhadrakok culture in West Bengal and has it faded?

Surajit Chandra Mukhopadhyay: The Bhadrakok, historically, was composed of three castes: Brahmins, Baidyas, and Kayasthas. It evolved through colonial intervention in the sense that the caste could transform into a status group. So, people from other castes could, theoretically speaking, gain Bhadrakok status if they had certain kinds of attributes. Now, if you take it literally, it (Bhadrakok) just means being gentlemanly. The opposite of this is 'Chhotok'. If you look at the caste combination of the Chhotok, there are Shudras and Namoshudras and the so-called outcastes. On an everyday basis, when we say 'you're not behaving like a Bhadrakok', it means you are not conforming to certain normative ideals. And these ideals are applicable both in the public and private sphere.

SR: Bhadrakok is about caste but not limited to caste. You can have people from the upper castes who are not Bhadrakok, and other people can aspire to become more Bhadrakok. It is a very Bengali and, you could say, elitist construct. We don't often think that when we are calling ourselves Bhadrakok that we are, by default, calling people who are not part of our class and do not have a similar educational background as Chhotok. The writer Manoranjan Byapari used to always complain that he was never read because he was Chhotok, which you could translate as subaltern. He would say, 'they see me with a gamcha around my neck and wonder how can someone like me write books'. It is a colonial construct because 'bhadrak' (Bengali for gentle) is about manners and it was the Babu (elite Bengalis) who had proper manners and could engage with the colonial masters.

Now, with the way politics has evolved in this State, all the others actually count for much more electorally than the Bhadrakok in Kolkata. Thirty years ago, most Bhadrakok in Kolkata would

have no idea that there were groups like Koch, Rajbangshi and Matuas who politicians are catering to. Even though they (Bhadralok) culturally still maintain a kind of monopoly in real terms, they don't (count electorally now). Their relevance has obviously changed. And it's worth noticing that when Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee first came onto the scene, one thing held against her by some was that she was not Bhadralok or 'Bhadramahila' (feminine form of Bhadralok) enough compared to her predecessor Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, who was translating Russian poetry and was therefore like a quintessential Bhadralok.

So, what triggered the slide of the Bhadralok? There is a perceived slide in the quality of cinema and books being produced in Bengal.

SCM: I think the demographics have overtaken the Bhadralok. Joya Chatterji, an important historian of our times, has a very definitive work on the Bhadralok and says that their era is over. If you look at Bengali societal power, maybe the Bhadraloks still have some political power, but they have never enjoyed economic power.

We have also moved from the elite concept of what democracy is to the rough and tumble of democracy. The subaltern, and others who relate to the subaltern, have found their place, and rightly so. And we have become a market society where everything is transactional. And therefore, people with much more money power obviously overwhelm the Bengali Bhadralok, because the Bengali Bhadralok never had money to begin with. They had cultural capital. When we talk about films, for example, we talk about Satyajit Ray whose films have a distinct Bhadralok imagery.

SR: The Bhadralok were supposed to have turned up their noses at money. And there was always the accusation that the Bhadralok came from a class of people who had been trained by the British to become managers and were better at executing things than in making money. I think a lot of people thought of someone like (former President) Pranab Mukherjee as the quintessential Bhadralok who had a long and illustrious career in politics and managed to have the ear of many different dispensations.

Now, in terms of the cultural slide that you speak of, there is still enormous nostalgia and romanticisation of, say, Satyajit Roy and maybe Rituparno Ghosh. People keep looking for another Satyajit Ray-type person even though it's up for debate as to whether that someone with Ray-like sensibilities would even be popular because society has moved on. This is evident from the fact that during the last Assembly election campaign in 2021, the communists, who had sneered at Ms. Banerjee's lack of Bhadralok skills and her 'Epang, Jhapang'-type poems, selected this very raunchy song called 'Tumpa Sona' as their anthem.

Does Bengal still have some cultural capital or is it a thing of the past and merely exists as an aspirational idea?

SCM: Whether we want to do away with it (the image of a Bhadralok society) or not doesn't depend on us. The cultural capital that the Bhadralok had has stretched on for the last century or so. They had hegemony, but hegemony without power, because today, the epicentre of power is the economy, the people who are becoming entrepreneurs. I think the goalposts have changed. You see a decline of one kind of social hegemony, and I'm quite sure that will be replaced by another kind of a social hegemony.

SR: That kind of cultural power that has lasted for such a long period is never going to vanish overnight. For other people too, the cultural power that the Bhadralok had remains aspirational. I think that power has definitely diminished in real terms, but the hold that it has over people's minds is still very much there.

SCM: Yes, I agree. Ms. Banerjee too would like to be seen as someone having that social capital. So, she says, 'Look, I have written so many books'.

What is at the core of this identity? Politics?

SCM: Of course. Everything in this world is political. It is very difficult to say what the core of this identity is. One of the major sources of the Bhadrakol discourse comes from its political sense, and its political sensibilities about equality, inequality, the idea of living life.

Do you see the Bhadrakol evolving in any way in the near future?

SR: Identity is very important as the BJP learned in the last election in West Bengal (2021), but the party sort of miscalculated the amount of attachment people have to this identity. I think the Bhadrakol played, for better or for worse, an enormous role in shaping that identity. The identity of what it means to be a Bengali today has largely been created, formulated, shaped and articulated by the Bhadrakol. So, when Ms. Banerjee rises up to defend Bengal, she uses icons who were very much part of this Bhadrakol milieu. Now, as we said, if change is the only constant, that's where it'll be the test to see if the Bhadrakol identity is itself stuck in time. Or if there can be a Bhadrakol which will evolve with the time and will include others and it will all not necessarily be about a Bhadrakol-Chhotokol divide.

We think the Bhadrakol as fossil. It doesn't necessarily have to be so, because they were the agents of enormous change that happened in Bengal. You know, it's funny, because in some ways, when you look at the 19th century and early 20th century, the enormous change that came about here was because of the Bhadrakol and now, because of the way times have changed, the Bhadrakol is often seen as the conservative person who is clinging on to the past and refusing to change.

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