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Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay

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It is widely believed that, because of its exceptional social development, the caste system in colonial Bengal differed considerably from the rest of India. Through a study of the complex interplay between caste, culture and power, this book convincingly demonstrates that Bengali Hindu society preserved the essentials of caste discrimination in colonial times, even while giving the outward appearance of having changed.

Using empirical data combined with an impressive array of secondary sources, Dr Bandyopadhyay delineates the manner in which Hindu caste society maintained its cultural hegemony and structural cohesion. Starting with an examination of the relationship between caste and power, the book examines early cultural encounters between `high` Brahmanical tradition and the more egalitarian `popular` religious cults of the lower castes. It moves on to take a close look at the relationship between caste and gender showing the reasons why the reform movement for widow remarriage failed. It ends with an examination of the Hindu `partition` campaign, which appropriated dalit autonomous politics and made Hinduism the foundation of an emergent Indian national identity.

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay breaks with many of the assumptions of two important schools of thought—the Dumontian and the subaltern—and takes instead a more nuanced approach to show how high caste hegemony has been able to perpetuate itself. He thus takes up issues which go to the heart of contemporary problems in India`s social and political fabric.

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