

Babu

The title '*babu*' (also spelt '*baboo*') was a "badge of *bhadralok* status carried with its connotations of Hindu, frequently upper caste exclusiveness of landed wealth, of being master (as opposed to servants) and latterly possessing the goods of education, culture and anglicisation. The prefix '*babu*' derived its origin from a Persian word which was 'always used as term of respect for Bengali Hindus of higher caste'. S.N. Mukherjee points out that the word '*babu*' was used by the British as a reverential form of address to Hindu zamindars and it acquired its disparaging connotation at the end of the nineteenth century. Initially, the term *babu* was conferred by the Mughal rulers of Bengal as honorific titles. Later during the eighteenth century, it acquired the pejorative meaning of an arrogant Bengali attempting to emulate the manners of his Western superiors. Rudyard Kipling's unforgettable Hurree Babu in *Kim* is an ambivalent character, both liked and made fun of by his British superiors. In Mutty Lall Seal's time, however, *Baboo* was a much sought-after honorific. Dana Ripley's *New American Cyclopaedia* (1858) provides a very different picture and one that was relevant in Mutty Lall Seal's times:

The Baboos are distinguished by their generosity hospitality public spirit and family pride by their liberality in religion politics and social intercourse and their progressive tendencies Most of them take an active part in commercial affairs and thus largely add to their considerable inheritances Among them are to be found all men of mark in the merchant caste the banyans or bankers and confidential brokers men of large and ready capital whose means for the most part constitute the immediate resources of the foreign trade.

Ripley goes on to name Mutty Lall Seal, Asutosh Dey and Dwarkanath Tagore as ideal examples of *babus* and there is no pejorative streak in this description.

Babu emerged as a form of address through the process of socio-cultural and economic changes that accompanied the British rule. The social recognition of the '*babu*' as a landed aristocracy owed much to the property relations of Permanent Settlement. Their relative prosperity was due to the possession of land. They were essentially a rentier class who derived their incomes from financial titles to property. They also played a significant role in the nationalist movement in the late nineteenth century. The '*babus*' continued their dominance in administration, economy and politics of Bengal until the early twentieth century when this class suffered a setback due to the legislature introduced under Act of 1919. This gradually robbed the '*babu*' of their traditional supremacy in politics.

The *Babu* has been variously depicted in literature, particularly in the works of Bhabani Charan Bandhopadhyay and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. Bhabani Charan's dramatic work *Nabababubilas* involved a characterization of the '*babu*' as someone who could barely manage to write a few words in Bengali but considered it satisfactory to spatter his Bengali conversation liberally with English swear words to make himself sound like his British masters. Bankim Chandra in his satirical essay, '*Baboo*' and his short story '*Hanumadbabu Sambad*', poked fun at the '*babus*' for their aping of Western fashion. Though Bankim believed in the Western forms of knowledge that the *babu* embraced, but their adaption out of a desire for personal advancement and approval from the colonial master robbed the '*babu*' of authenticity.

