SACRED CALLING, WORLDLY BARGAIN: CASTE, SELF-CULTIVATION AND MOBILIZATION IN LATE COLONIAL BENGAL

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for award of the degree of

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Declaration

I, Neha Chatterji, hereby declare that the thesis titled "***Sacred Calling, Worldly Bargain: Caste, Self-cultivation and Mobilisation in Late Colonial Bengal***", submitted by me to the Centre for Historical Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, has not been previously submitted for any degree to this or any other university, and is my original work.

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CERTIFICATE

It is hereby recommended that this thesis may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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The drawbacks and errors of the work, however, remain entirely mine.

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CONTENTS

Introduction:
The Making of Caste Radicalism in Early-Twentieth-Century Bengal

It was an academic common-sense for a long time that, even though "caste-associations were by no means uncommon" in Bengal, their political importance as radical movements was far less as compared to places like Maharashtra.[1] This was attributed to caste-rigidity being relatively less in Bengal, a point that Bengali (upper-caste) intellectuals had been making since the beginning of the twentieth century with a certain degree of relief and self-complacency. In some ways, it is factually not so incorrect: Sumit Sarkar, in this context, referred to 'lower castes' in Kerala, who were "supposed to pollute not only by touch but by sight".[2] From early-twentieth-century journalists and writers to later scholars like Niharranjan Ray, Bengalis have noted the distinctiveness of 'late-Aryanisation' and 'surface Aryanisation' of Bengal and her 'underlying liberal culture', which went against caste-rigidity.[3] In recent times, Dalit-bahujan intellectuals of other parts of India have taken a dig at Bengal's proverbial 'liberal' culture. Kancha Ilaiah asks whether the *assumed absence* of sustained caste-antagonism in West Bengal is not actually the sign of a greater domination of public life by upper castes, that has possibly thwarted caste-subalterns from asserting themselves or getting heard.[4]

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's pioneering studies of caste-conflict in late colonial Bengal first foregrounded the formidable nature of the political challenge posed by lower castes.[5] The Namasudras, an 'untouchable' caste-group of Bengal, became

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[1] Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885-1947*, New Delhi: Macmillan, 1983, Eighteenth Reprint, 2006, p. 158.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Panchkori Bandyopadhyay, 'Brahman Jati', *Prabahini*, Chaitra, 1320 BS, 1914, reprinted in Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay and Sajanikanta Das (eds.) *Panchkori Bandyopadhyayer Rachanabali, Vol. II*, Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishat, 1951, pp. 67-70; Matilal Ray, *Hindutver Punarutthan*, Calcutta: Prabartak, 1933, p. 4; Sri Sasadhar Ray, 'Asprishyata', *Prabashi*, Ashadh, 1341 BS, pp. 309-315; Mohitlal Majumdar, *Bangla O Bangali*, Calcutta: East Light Book House, 1358 BS, 1951, Niharranjan Ray, *Bangalir Itihas, Adi Parba, Vol. 1*, 3rd Edition, Calcutta, 1949, Reprint: 1980, pp. 267-280.

[4] Kancha Ilaiah, *The Weapon of the Other, Dalitbahujan Wtitings and the Remaking of Indian Nationalist Thought*, Delhi: Pearson, 2010, Preface, pp. vii, viii.

[5] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India, The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press (henceforth, OUP), first published in 1997, Second

adversaries not just to the upper-caste gentry's class interests but also national interests. They threw up a powerful challenge to projects of national and Hindu unity. Earlier sociological and historical studies of castes in Bengal concerned themselves mainly with exploring whether caste was traditionally static or dynamic; whether colonial institutions like the Census, new technologies, new media and a new political economy introduced an unprecedented dynamism to it. Within this framework, Hitesranjan Sanyal demonstrated rather the continuities of corporate social mobility of large caste-groups from the pre-colonial to the colonial.[6] These studies showed how ambitions of improving groups from the lower strata were traditionally accommodated by giving them higher places within the hierarchy, thus nullifying possible challenges to the system. Beyond this "dynamic equilibrium",[7] there were radical protests by very low caste groups through deviant, heterodox sects, but these operated on the fringes, without emerging forcefully within caste-society.[8] In the context of colonial times, caste-associational activity was read as case-studies of 'identity formation' stimulated by colonial enumerative initiatives that reified community identities, utilization of new opportunities of occupational/professional 'improvement' including English education, and upward mobility through 'Sanskritizing' tendencies – "*jatis* asserting a higher status for themselves through

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Edition, 2011. Lower caste distance from nationalism had been observed by Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, New Delhi, 1977; 'The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Co-operation, c1905-1922', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies III*, Delhi: OUP, 1984. Cambridge historians highlighted caste conflict as a failure of nationalist mobilization, and in terms of conflict within elites – entrenched elites and the ambitions of subaltern counter-elites. J. N. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968, Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal, 1875-1927*, Delhi: OUP, 1984.

[6] Hitesranjan Sanyal, 'Continuities of Social Mobility in Traditional and Modern Society in India: Two Caste Studies of Caste Mobility in Bengal', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2, (Feb., 1971), pp. 315-339; *Social Mobility in Bengal*, Calcutta: Papyrus, 1981; Jyotirmoyee Sarma, *Caste Dynamics among the Bengali Hindus*, Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1980. The caste-mobility frame of analysis roughly derived from M N Srinivas, 'Mobility in the Caste System' in Milton B Singer and Bernard S Cohn (eds.), *Structure and Change in Indian Society*, Chicago: Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, 1968. An older sociological study touching upon the change that colonialism brought upon society: N K Bose, *The Structure of Hindu Society*, translated from Bengali by Andre Beteille, New Delhi: Sangam Books, 1976.

[7] I borrow from Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's use of Owen Lynch's phrase. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, p. 11. Owen Lynch, *The Politics of Untouchability: Social Mobility and Social Change in a City of India*, New York and London, 1969.

[8] Ramakanta Chakrabarti, *Vaishnavaism in Bengal*, Calcutta: Sanskrita Pustak Bhandar, 1985, pp. 76-78; Sudhir Chakrabarti, *Balihadi Sampraday O Tader Gan*, Calcutta: Publisher- Anup Kumar Mahinder, 1986; Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nation and its Outcastes' in *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post-colonial Histories*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

borrowing customs, manners and taboos from groups traditionally superior to them."[9] 'Caste radicalism' would be a far cry from all these. At best, such ambitions would seek to re-order the hierarchy and become oppositional only when frustrated.

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, however, showed how the 'equilibrium' was unsettled by the determined assertiveness of caste-subalterns like Namasudras, who were moved by the emancipatory promise of modernity. Unlike the preceding historiographical commonsense, Bandyopadhyay's work brought out that Namasudra assertiveness was not merely the product of British divide-and-rule. He noted the ideological nature of their opposition, their awareness of the relations of power within Indian society. Yet, in the final analysis, he observed that, while he would not "minimize the historical importance of their protests", he would also ask "why in the end such contestation did not subvert the hegemony of the Brahmnaical culture, which set limits to the imagination of the dalit and backward castes".[10] In the specific case of the Namasudras, he showed that a powerful movement of protest happened when ambitions of elites matched with the socio-economic grievances of peasants within a caste. But when material ambitions no longer converged, or when the ambitions of lower-caste counter-elites were co-opted into the mainstream, the movement disappeared. This disappearance of the Namasudra movement, "and, also, the entire SC movement" becoming "nearly extinct in post-partition West Bengal", has been a major theme structuring Bandyopadhyay's argument about the transient nature of caste-identity and caste-protest.[11] If this disappearance/ 'integration' has been possible, it demonstrated, thought Bandyopadhyay, the fragility of caste-radicalism and the hegemony of a caste-Hindu world-view.

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[9] Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, pp. 54-55; 'Sanskritization' was a term introduced by M N Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 1995 (first published in 1966); Bernard Cohn's analysis of how colonial ethnographic endeavours like the Census 'objectified' community identities greatly influenced the format of caste-studies. 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia', in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and other Essays*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987. The most comprehensive study of caste identity formations in colonial Bengal is Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Politics and the Raj, Bengal 1872-1937*, Calcutta: K P Bagchi, 1990.

[10] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony*, New Delhi: Sage, 2004, p. 38.

[11] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, p. 248. Bandyopadhyay and others also explained the disappearance of the Dalit movement by referring to the Partition. As refugees in post-Partition West Bengal, the Namasudras lost the former organizational bases of their movement.

My proposal to draw attention to the 'making of caste-radicalism' in early twentieth century Bengal may, therefore, merit the criticism that 'caste radicalism' here – among the specific caste subjects whom I have selected for analysis – remains till the end "a myth, a construct of determined imagination…"[12] As it has been repeatedly pointed out, caste identity formations in late colonial Bengal predominantly championed status hierarchies. "It was the internecine configurations among shudras that emerged as the constitutive site for caste formation, not a brahman-non-brahman or high- and low-caste binary divide."[13] The Namasudras looked down upon the Chandals, the Rajbangshis denied any connection with the Koch, the Paundras argued that they were never fishermen, the Mahishyas distinguished themselves from the Kaibartas, the Tilis separated themselves from the Telis – the list is unending – all manifesting the hegemony of values of hierarchical caste-society. Had not E. A. Gait, the Census Commissioner in 1901, categorically stated that "claims to higher caste, or to new and more pretentious names" were almost "*confined* to Bengal proper"?[14]

Yet, if we take a leap abruptly into southern Bengal of today, we will come across Dalit groups which have resolutely given up Hindu rituals.[15] Of course, these are far from being entire communities but a tiny minority of particular Dalit communities. In a sense, these characterize early twenty-first century articulations of Dalit protest: the oldest recorded events of such rejection of priestly ritualism going back just a couple of decades. But the Dalit radicals, who have inspired this trend, recognize two sources of inspiration for their present anti-caste ideology – while one is certainly the Ambedkarite tradition, the other, more intimate one, is the pre-Ambedkarite assertion

[12] "Mr. Thompson's working class…remains, even after 850 pages, a myth, a construct of determined imagination and theoretical presuppositions", wrote a critic. E P Thompson, Postscript to *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin Edition, 1968 (first published by Vintage Books, United Kingdom in 1963), p. 937.

[13] Tanika Sarkar, 'Holy Infancy: Love and Power in a Low Caste Sect in Bengal', *South Asian History and Culture* 2, 3 (July), 341.

[14] *Bengal Census Report*, 1901, pp. 384, 378-84.

[15] Hindu rites of marriage and death (Shradh) have been rejected by some men and women of the Paundra (Dalit) caste in rural South 24 Parganas – in Baruipur, Sonarpur, Joynagar, Mathurapur, Mograhat, Bhangar and Canning. Some of these events have been recorded in Dilip Gayen, *Bauddha Darpan*, Calcutta: Paundra Mahasamgha (the current Association of the Paundras), January, 2017. It is said that over the years, many such events have passed unrecorded.

of ‘radical’ critique and self-respect by their own community-leaders of early twentieth century Bengal.[16]

If we look at contemporary issues of *Mahishya Samaj*, the journal of an intermediate caste-group in Bengal, a Dalit-bahujan identity often becomes unmistakable. The caste is not one of the ‘backward classes’ even though a formidable section of them today wants to be enlisted by the state as such. It is not uncommon today to find in the pages of *Mahishya Samaj* an account of the teachings of the Matua religion as a “protestant religion”, which asserted the “unnaturalness of caste-divisions”.[17] Matua belongs to the Namasudras and it is curious that a Mahishya (ritually superior caste) writer is writing a long, appreciative essay on it in a Mahishya journal. Now and then today, some Mahishya writer regrets that a united front of the Mahishyas and Namasudras could not happen due to the ‘divide-and-rule’ policy of Kayastha Congressmen of late colonial Bengal. But it “would have gone a long way to take on the ‘advanced classes’”.[18] A lot of this, doubtless, is the result of modern Dalit-bahujan ideologies. But it is also true that despite being enlisted as Caste-Hindu, Mahishyas have always felt alienated from and humiliated by Caste-Hindus. Any random sample of their articulated ideas – from the entire span of the twentieth century – will reveal that they were acutely aware of being at the receiving end of the moral and material violence of caste. A ‘bahujan’ identity, as we will show, was not so new after all. At least, by the middle of the twentieth century (the 1950s), the Mahishya caste-association, through its resolutions, was declaring the ‘abolition of caste’ as its ultimate goal and pledging solidarity with all who desired it.[19]

In the 1940s, the Namasudra movement, which articulated till then the most organized critique of the unrepresentativeness of the Congress and Hindu Mahasabha,

[16] Author’s interviews with leaders of the Paundra Mahasamgha on May 21, 2016. This is evident in the huge amount of publishing (in Bengali) that they engage in to commemorate the thoughts and writings of their early leaders, a lot of which, they say, was like “the sword unsheathed”. Sanat Kumar Naskar ed., *Paundra Manisha, Vol. II*, Calcutta: Paundra Mahasamgha, 2013, ‘Purbabhas’, p. 15. More in Chapter 4.

[17] Lokesh Chandra Biswas, ‘Matua Ek Pratibadi Dharmamat’, *Mahishya Samaj*, 2010, pp. 122-128.

[18] Nityagopal Mandal, ‘Bharater Sangbidhan O Anagrasar Sreni’, *Mahishya Samaj*, Vol. 96, no. 12, April, 2007, p. 1302.

[19] Resolutions adopted by the caste-association and printed in the 1959 issue of *Mahishya Samaj*, quoted along with parts of two other articles from the 1959 issue – all of which called for the abolition of caste as the ultimate goal – in Shyamadas Mallik, ‘Mahishya Samiti Keno? Itihaser Prekshapate Kichu Bhabna’, *Mahishya Samaj*, 2010.

apparently disappeared as a distinct political body and got integrated with these very organisations. But 'alienation' – and not 'integration' – continued to be expressed by lower castes, broadly speaking, in uninsitutionalized or weakly institutionalized forms. The 'Intermediate and Suppressed Castes' in 1942 and the 'All India Mahishya Mahasabha' in 1946 sent memorials to the British overlords. Among other things, they categorically stated their distrust in the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha: manned by upper-castes these party-organisations, they asserted, would neither remove "the bondage of the caste system", nor "wipe out the invidious distinctions", they would never guarantee "equal rights for all citizens".[20]

Caste-radicalism cannot be discerned in the trajectories of individual caste-movements in early twentieth century Bengal. But if we trace a history of ideas and sentiments – ideas that did not necessarily turn into conspicuous historical events – it was richly scattered everywhere. By the 1920s, Brahmans, Kayasthas and Baidyas – the '*ucchajati*' / '*abhijatasreni*' – were regarded as the Other by a range of lower castes, of varying ritual status. Their caste-journals reverberated with expectations that in a rejuvenated India, liberty, equality and fraternity would flourish.[21] Despite their considerably disparate locations, experiences, mutual competitiveness and status hierarchies, Dalits as well as Shudras (intermediate castes), as the humiliated 'productive classes of the nation', were ideologically putting themselves in a new stance in relation to the 'advanced' 'Caste Hindu'. A diffuse but palpable, and highly nuanced, structure of ideas was taking shape by the agency of Dalit-Shudra thinkers – from within "India's vast non-English speaking world"[22] – that tugged at the root concepts of caste, as theory, just as it remonstrated against the denial of equal citizenship that caste meant, in practice. The present study will explore the maze of

[20] 'Memorial from the Intermediate and Suppressed Castes (Hindu) Association', Government of India (GI), Reforms, File no. D. 709/42 – R, 1942, National Archives of India. The Association included Mahishyas, Tilis, Sahas, Sutradhars, Sadgops and a host of other castes. A roughly similarly-worded petition was the 'Memorial from the All India Mahishya Mahasabha regarding separate representation in political and economical organization of the country', GI, Reforms, File no. D-458/46-R, NAI.

[21] "The scriptures must be thrown away…God does not wish caste tyranny to last any longer…The flute of the age awakens the common man from his slumber…A new race will be born in a new India infused with the pure love of liberty, equality and fraternity", *Teli Bandhab* (a caste-journal of Telis/oilmen), 1338 BS, 1931, p. 10.

[22] To use Ashis Nandy's expression from D R Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet and other Essays*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2010. These continue to remain confined to these subaltern subjects' non-English speaking world today.

these heterogeneous-yet-cognizable patterns of critiques and analyze them. It will also ask why caste-radicalism never got institutionalized in Bengal as a sustained "alternative"[23] to 'mainstream' ideology and politics.

I

The 'Dalit vision' – which, as Gail Omvedt pointed out, must include the visions of not just 'Dalits' but other sufferers of caste-hierarchy, like 'Shudra' lower castes and, more generally, non-Brahmans[24] – rejected Hinduism and Aryanism ever since Jotiba Phule published *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) in 1885. At a time when European Indologists and upper-caste Indians were extolling the virtues of Aryanism, Phule, hailing from a moderately well-to-do Shudra family, denigrated Aryans as foreign invaders and ruthless exploiters, whose cruelties perpetrated on the original inhabitants of India was comparable only to those perpetrated by white settlers from Europe on the native people of America. To consolidate their domination, the "Irani Aryabhats" devised the "weird system of mythology, that ordination of caste, and the code of inhuman laws to which we can find no parallel among the other nations".[25] Phule worked among a range of middle-to-low castes in Maharashtra and the idea gained ground that Hinduism was "Brahman exploitation" and deception while the subjugated castes had a prior non-Aryan civilization of their own. The Tamil non-Brahman movement heavily propounded these non-Aryan, non-Vedic, anti-Sanskritic themes. The idea of racial and cultural difference from 'Aryan Hindus' was in line with the colonial theorization of caste.[26] In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution when the world

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[23] See Kancha Ilaiah's perspective about a real and potential political-cultural-civilizational "alternative" in 'Productive Labour, Consciousness and History: The Dalitbahujan Alternative', in Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (eds.), *Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

[24] Gail Omvedt, *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011, p. xi.

[25] *Ibid*., p. 23. Rosalind O' Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low-Caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Western India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

[26] Sumit Sarkar drew attention to an 1886 convocation address by the Governor of Madras: "You are a pure Dravidian race. I should like to see the pre-Sanskrit element amongst you asserting itself rather more…You have less to do with Sanskrit than we English have. Ruffianly Europeans have sometimes been known to speak of natives of India as "Niggers", but they did not, like the proud speakers or writers of Sanskrit, speak of the people of the South as legions of monkeys." Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 58.

was waking up to the cult of the common-man, "'*adi*'- movements with an ideological claim to be heirs of a 'non-Aryan' or 'original Indian' equalitarian tradition began to take off in many regions in India". The "Ad Dharm in Punjab, Adi-Hindu in UP and Hyderabad, Adi-Dravida, Adi-Andhra and Adi-Karnataka in south India" were launched by "Dalit radicals of the 1920s".[27]

Bengal gives a very different picture. Take a look at Chintamani Kundu, a fictional character in Tagore's 1886 satire *Arya O Anarya*. Kundu comes to the office of a journal-editor, Advaitacharan Chattopadhyay. To deduce caste from surnames, Kundu is supposed to belong to a middling trading caste. Chattopadhyay is a high-ranking Brahman. When asked his name and purpose of visit, Kundu perplexes Chattopadhyay by proclaiming that he is an 'Aryan' and would write in Chattopadhyay's journal about the many virtues of the 'Aryan Hindu' culture. If Kundu and his predecessors were Aryans, exclaimed Chattopadhyay, then he, a Brahman, must be non-Aryan! When Kundu suggested that perhaps they both descended from the 'prodigious' Aryans, he was cut short with a rebuff by an outraged Chattopadhyay: "You peasant rascal, heaven knows of what breed and what caste ("*kothakar ki jat*"), how dare you insinuate that I was born in the same lineage as your father?"[28]

"*Chasha*" (peasant), clearly, was no descriptive term but an expletive habitually applied to caste-subalterns of varying ranks by upper castes (Brahmans, Kayasthas and Baidyas). Two points emerge from the satire which are relevant for our purpose. First, the Chintamani Kundus were not meek. Even though Chattopadhyay initially insulted Kundu, it was Kundu, who finally had his way. Some upper-caste writers recognized Kundu as renowned in the literary milieu for *abusing the bhadralok*. A prolific vernacular public had already widened sufficiently to overturn the prevailing nature of public discourse. Kundu's claim of knowing much better about the history and culture of the Aryans than the Chattopadhyays, and his determined claim of carrying Aryan blood in his veins, had the potential to jeopardize upper-caste Indian

[27] Omvedt, *Understanding Caste*, p. 40. Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in Twentieth-Century Punjab*, California: University of California Press, 1982.

[28] Rabindranath Tagore, 'Arya O Anarya' (Chaitra, 1292 BS, 1886), (*Hasyakautuk*) *Rabindrarachanabali, Vol. 6*, Centenary Edition, Government of West Bengal, 1961, pp. 119-122.

claims to an exclusively 'Aryan' "white racial stock".[29] Second, if the satire mirrors reality at all, then lower castes in Bengal were making themselves ridiculous – objects of satire – by participating in the intellectual recovery of a 'pristine' Hinduism (and Aryanism), even if, only to variegate the nature of that discourse.

But there was this running thread in Bengal's subaltern caste discourse that persisted in nuanced forms even within forceful critiques of caste humiliation. Look at a poem by Saratchandra Majumdar, a Namasudra, in *Adhikar* (literally 'rights'), a cross-caste Dalit periodical of the 1920s, which a young, college-going Jogendranath Mandal had described as a "sharpened falchion raised by the dispossessed".[30] A cross-caste Dalit solidarity, as a distinct political formation aiming to secure the social and political rights of these classes, had been formed recently at the initiative of a Paundra (Dalit) leader, Manindranath Mandal. *Adhikar* expressed its militant mood. It warned its readers – the '*adhikarchyuta*'('dispossessed') peoples – not to acquiesce to the Hindu Mahasabha's embrace: "They are shedding oceans of crocodile tears to incite us against Muslims".[31] It satirized *Shuddhi*: "why should Christians and Muslims reconvert to Hinduism to invite humiliation all over again?"[32] It criticized Gandhi because he "approved of the sanctity of ancestral callings and defined caste by birth".[33] *Adhikar* frequently described Islam as a religion of *samya* or equality, and conversion to Islam as a respite from humiliation.[34] Keeping these in mind, let us read Saratchandra Majumdar's poem 'Patiter Utthan' ('The Rise of the Downtrodden'), which appeared in a 1927 issue of *Adhikar*.[35] The '*patita*', the poem says, has suddenly awakened to consciousness. 'Britain' has brought to his door the message of emancipation. He is filled with a thrill that he never knew before. The new light takes him to the depths of his civilizational memory. His birthplace was in central Asia,

[29] Omvedt, *Understanding Caste*, p. 3.

[30] Jogendranath Mandal was later to emerge as the preeminent Dalit leader of Bengal. '*Adhikar* Sambandhe Mat Prakash' in *Adhikar*, Jaishtha, 1334 BS, 1927.

[31] 'Bhishan Sharajantra', *Adhikar*, Jaishtha, p. 4, 'Meki 'Bondhu'der Utpat', *Adhikar*, Sravan, 1927, p. 1

[32] 'Shuddhi Andolaner Swarup', *Adhikar*, Jaishtha, 1927, p. 6.

[33] 'Mr. Gandhi O Asprishyata', *Adhikar*, Bhadra, 1927, p. 12.

[34] 'Meki 'Bondhu'der Utpat'.

[35] 'Patiter Utthan', *Adhikar*, (serialized in) Jaishtha, Sravan, Asvin-Kartik, Aghrahayan, 1927, pp. 6, 2, 29, 11 respectively.

amid the mountains, where Europe and Asia merged. His civilizational memory recalls the coming of the '*mahamanava*' Aryans to the plains of the Punjab and their chanting of the psalms of the Sama Veda. He recalls being part of the intellectual and material achievements of Aryans; he recalls having chanted the Sama hymns; then, he recalls having carried Aryan knowledge to Eastern India.[36]

Thus, the Dalit poet in the militant journal *Adhikar* laid claim to a Vedic heritage. However, there was a subtler argument that informed the poem and it was part of the general constellation of ideas that prevailed in Bengal. India, it said, was deluded by a series of religious and political revolutions which fused differences of blood and culture. The foreign hordes of Greeks, the Sakas, the Hunas were followed by the Arabs, the Mughals and the Pathans and finally the British. Universal love was proclaimed by the Buddha. Buddhism, like a grand deluge – the poem said – inundated India and Asia washing away differences of caste and race. In a subsequent revolution, Islam raised its flag. Chaitanya, Nanak, and other Bhakti and Sufi saints, through their religions of love, fused distinctions between men. The Brahman and Shudra, the Aryan and non-Aryan, the Saka, the Huna, the Arab and the Pathan – all merged, beyond recognition, in the great ocean of Indian humanity ("*apan apan satta haraye mishilo sagare ek*").[37] Yet, after having mingled in blood and culture with non-Aryan races for centuries, caste-elites humiliated, betrayed and ghettoized the '*patita*', drawing cruel – and completely unfounded – distinctions of 'pure' Aryanism.

When Dalits in other places of the country were declaring that "they were entirely separate and distinct from the followers of Vedic religion, called Hindus",[38] even the most politically assertive Bengali Dalits were drawing a 'civilizational connection' between Dalits and caste-Hindus.[39] But, the archetypal 'Dalit vision', since Jotiba Phule, fundamentally contested the notion of civilizational unity. 'Patiter Utthan', on the other hand, expressed a way of imagining the subcontinental past that was

[36] 'Patiter Utthan', Jaishtha, p. 6.

[37] 'Patiter Utthan', Sravan, p. 2.

[38] Omvedt, *Understanding Caste*, p. 41.

[39] Dalit studies, today, note that Dalit intellectuals and activists in twentieth century India have been wary of any import of a 'civilizational connection' between Dalit and caste Hindu societies. Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana (eds.), *Dalit Studies*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2016.

perilously close to the nationalist idea of India as an assimilative unity. In words and imageries, like the idea of ethnic communities losing themselves in the 'great Indian ocean of humanity', it resembled Tagore's 'Bharat Tirtha' (1910).[40] It shared the idea of racial/cultural synthesis[41], however, as a premise to state the poignancy of betrayal. It was as if the caste-subaltern was telling the caste-elite that: We have been part of you just as you have been part of us, and by pushing us to 'India's ghetto', you have ghettoized a part of yourself.

Note that the milieu from which the poem 'Patiter Utthan' emerged was well aware of Dalit political currents of the time. *Adhikar* was in full support of the rejection of the Hindu identity by Dalit groups and mentioned over and over again that the Hindu spiritual embrace was politically motivated to deny Dalits political rights.[42] Bengali elite public opinion of the time already felt threatened apprehending that Namasudras, and similar Dalit groups, were on the verge of leaving the Hindu community.[43] Even as 'Patiter Utthan' shared the historical perspective of 'Indian' synthesis with Tagore's 'Bharat Tirtha', it did not share its pledge. 'Bharat' or national harmony was not the destination of its pilgrimage. Rather, 'Patiter Utthan' thanked the 'enlightened' West and 'Britain' as it embarked on a journey solely for the Dalit's emancipation, seeking divine blessings for the purpose.

Bengal's 'Dalit vision', thus, contained a peculiar paradox. The basic premise of its argument – the emphasis on civilizational kinship – made it amenable to

[40] Compare with Tagore's lines: "*Keho nahi jane kar ahbane kata manusher dhara durbar srote elo kotha hote samudre holo hara/ hethay Arya hetha Anarya hethay Dravida Chin, Saka Huna dal, Pathan Mogol ek dehe holo lin/ Paschime aji khuliyache dvar/ setha hote sobe ane upohar/ dibe ar nibe, milabe milibe, jabe na phire/ ei Bharater mahamanaber sagaratire*". Roughly translated they mean: numerous streams of human races and civilizations have flown into India from time to time to ultimately lose themselves in a syncretic, composite and open Indian culture. The metaphor of the ocean connotes unboundedness. India was thus defined in 'Bharat Tirtha' as an essentially open civilization, constituted equally by the non-Aryan, the Dravidian, the Muslim and the Christian. *Rabindrarachanabali, Vol. 2*, Centenary edition, p. 280. Similarly, 'Patiter Utthan' laid claim not just to a Vedic heritage but to the heritage of universal love and equality propounded by the Buddha, the Prophet Muhammad, Chaitanya and Nanak.

[41] Ambedkar had a similar notion of synthesis: "As a matter of fact, the caste system came into being long after the different races of India had commingled in blood and culture". B R Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1*, Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1979, p. 49. Omvedt, *Understanding Caste*, p. 53.

[42] 'Asprishya Jatir Jagaran' (referring to a recent Dalit conference in Delhi), *Adhikar*, Aswin Kartik, 1334 BS, 1927, p. 35,

[43] Extract from *Bangabani*, an elite periodical, in a Dalit caste-journal, *Paundrakshatriya Samachar* in 1924. 'Aharan', *Paundrakshatriya Samachar*, Phalgun, 1331 BS, 1924.

integration within nationalist (including Hindu nationalist) frames. Yet it remained, at least during its peak in the 1920s, acutely vigilant and wary of such integrationist modes.

II

A major trait of Dalit activism in contemporary times has been its attempt to distinguish the Dalit from the Shudra in terms of ideology.[44] Parallelly, Dalit studies today draw a distinction between "Dalits and all others". Dalit difference, at least, in certain regions in India, has indeed been "irreducible to merely an extreme position on a continuum".[45] Located as s/he is "linguistically, socio-spatially, ritually…fundamentally outside society proper, a society consisting of all castes",[46] the insurgent Dalit becomes a radical menace to the system. Since Shudras are within the system of a 'graded hierarchy', they, barring exceptional rationalists like Phule and Periyar, are supposed to be indecisive about fundamentally challenging the system.[47] This search for the revolutionary subject within caste-movements is, itself, an important evolution within the study of social history. There was a time when Marxist social historians had a mixed approach to the study of caste-movements, even when it involved protestant consciousness in Dalit groups. Following Bernard Cohn's study of the Chamars of Eastern U. P., Sumit Sarkar had noted, more than three decades back, in his classic *Modern India* that the net result of some of these movements had been "the expression of socio-economic tensions through a kind of false consciousness of caste-solidarity, caste rivalry and movements for Sanskritization".[48] And yet, in some other places, Sarkar observed, caste movements radicalized the peasantry against feudalism, though – he quoted E.M.S.

[44] D. R. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 97; MSS Pandian discussed this in the 'Epilogue' of *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007.

[45] Rupa Vishwanath, *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion and the Social in Modern India*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014, pp. 8-9.

[46] *Ibid*., p. 8.

[47] See, for instance, Anupama Rao, 'Caste Radicalism and the Making of a New Political Subject' in *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009.

[48] Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 55.

Namboodripad – "the grip of these caste organizations on the peasantry has to be broken if they are to be organized as a class".[49] 'Radical potentialities' of caste-movements were located in those instances where there was a "sharper break with Hinduism" like "the burning of the *Manusmriti*, and outright atheism at times".[50] In recent years, with Dalit studies consolidating itself far more strongly, studies of 'the caste question' has emphasized more and more the 'revolutionary', rather than the 'ethnic', aspect of these movements. Thus, Anupama Rao's 2010 work, *The Caste Question*, declares that it is not a 'history of community' but the history of the emergence of "the revolutionary figure" of the caste radical. This 'revolutionary figure's' "remaking of the self challenged the colonialist-nationalist reification of community and anticipated a new political and ethical subject, the Dalit, and a new community of Buddhism".[51] What is the archetype of this revolutionary political subject? The Dalits' "struggle for rights and social recognition" utilized strategies that "produced the Dalit as a specific political subject, *a non-Hindu, a political minority, and, finally, as a suffering subject who required state protection*".[52]

In these works, because of the regions which have been studied, certain caste-groups are unambiguously Dalit. They act just as the Dalit ought to act, if "properly aware of its own position and real interests."[53] The politically aware Dalit, it is generally presumed, must certainly "face forward" and s/he chooses "modernity over the Hindu version of tradition"[54]: by rejecting the latter, s/he has nothing to lose but her/his chains. Ambedkar had called the "Gandhi age" the "dark age of Indian politics" because people were "returning to antiquity" when, as the most outstanding Dalit, he thought that people ought to "look for their ideals in the future".[55]

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[49] *Ibid*., p. 56.

[50] *Ibid*., p. 243-244.

[51] Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question*, p. 10.

[52] *Ibid*., 'Preface', p. xi. Emphasis mine.

[53] E. P. Thompson wrote that once the working-class becomes locatable, "it becomes possible to deduce the class-consciousness which 'it' ought to have (but seldom does have) if 'it' was properly aware of its own position and real interests". *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 9.

[54] Meera Nanda, 'A Prophet Facing Forward' in *Prophets Facing Backward: Postmodernism, Science and Hindu Nationalism*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2006, reprinted by Critical Quest. Omvedt, *Understanding Caste*, p. 6.

[55] *Ibid.*

In Bengal of the 1920s, images of a revolutionary war against Hindu society, in the name of universal human dignity, surfaced in a dramatic way in Dalit writings. The moment was charged with appeals from Dalit thinkers to launch a united battle against civic and political exclusions. They talked of an overturning – "*olotpalot*" – of existing society.[56] Their aesthetic creations like poetry – that best capture the flavour of a movement – invoked the rise of the Labour movement in Britain, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the rise of the black protest in America.[57] The "Hindu society" was warned that a raging battle would soon shake its walls; "the Puranas and Smritis", especially "*Manu*", should better be trashed.[58] Yet, even as they sought to undermine tradition, they also heavily drew from it like the *bricoleur*. They metaphorized the revolution as cosmic dissolution brought about by Siva's dancing fury. They saw the war as signaled by the sound of Vishnu's conch that announces the reinstatement of *dharma*.[59] Why, we might ask, did they evoke this metaphor of eternal return – restoration – while they looked forward expectantly to the "new light of the new age"?[60] The political subjectivity of the caste-subaltern, here, was "like the figure of a Paul Klee painting, whose face is set towards the past even though a storm propels him forward".[61]

Like some other studies on caste protest and identity, the present study seeks to understand what lends the oppositional consciousness of the caste subaltern, time and again, amenable to integration within dominant Hindu mores. It has been explained as "the ideological hegemony of the constituted order", which "set limits to their

[56] Manindranath Mandal, *Bange Digindranarayan*, Published by Sannyasicharan Pramanik (Teli, by caste) of Kalna, Bardhaman, 1927, p. 12.

[57] For one instance, 'Jatiya Sangeet', *Adhikar*, Jaishtha, 1334 BS, 1927, p. 11.

[58] "*Manur anusashan rekho astakunre dhulir majhe/ Akash ekhon aloy bhora bhandami ki aro saje*?" in 'Samjhe Chalo' (meaning: 'Beware'), *Paundrashatriya Samachar*, Ashadh, 1331 BS, 1924, compiled in Naskae ed., *Paundra Manisha*, Vol. 2, p. 231.

[59] Like those of *pralay*, the comet and the cyclone, the metaphor, derived from the Bhagavad Gita, of Vishnu's periodic incarnation in the form of war and revolution to cleanse Bharat of its sins is frequent in lower caste writings. To cite just one of several instances: Mahendranath Karan, 'Yatra Mangal' ("*Oi suna jay taba Panchajanya dhvani,/ Rath-er gharghar rab*") *Paundrashatriya Samachar*, Phalgun, 1330 BS, 1924, compiled in *Paundra Manisha*, Vol. 2, p. 216.

[60] "*Nabin yuger natun aloy sabai ebar egiye elo*/ *Ahankari garbi samaj ebar bujhe samjhe cholo*", 'Samjhe Cholo' (see fn. 58).

[61] Ranabir Samaddar described the emergent political subject thus. He borrowed the expression from Walter Benjamin. Samaddar, 'Introduction' in *Emergence of the Political Subject*, New Delhi: Sage, p. xvi.

imagination and ultimately led to the co-option of the more advanced section among these lower castes".[62] Thus, it is seen as a tendency running counter to, and weakening, 'protest'. Broadly speaking, the explanation is convincing. However, in this introduction, I have been giving the examples of some exceptional Dalits, not because they alone constitute my study, but to demonstrate that not all cases, where caste-subalterns lent themselves to ultimate integration, can be explained away by assuming "limits (set) to their imagination." Was it the hegemony of the notion of status within the Brahmanical order? But, Dalit and some lower caste writers of early twentieth century Bengal were full of praise for the Buddhist period in Indian history, which – they imagined – erased caste, and even gender, distinctions.[63] The *Bangiya Jana Samgha*, the first Dalit manifesto of Bengal, spoke eloquently of how senseless it was for subordinated peoples to enact between themselves the ranked hierarchies of caste.[64] Severely critical of paternalistic reformism, they were far from depending on the "shifting sands of sympathy" of even well-intentioned Hindu reformists like Gandhi.[65] They saw themselves as the sole agents of their emancipation and focused on organizational power to wrest rights of self-determination. They were close to the consciousness that they should better forsake Hinduism: they imagined themselves as on the verge of converting to Islam in their literary creations.[66]

In one of these, caste-subaltern protagonists tell one another that while they must certainly convert, they will never forget the reason for conversion: as 'iconoclasts'

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[62] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, p. 3.

[63] Manindranath Mandal, *Bangiya Jana Samgha, Bengal People's Association*, Medinipur, Khejuri, 1330 BS, 1923, p. 28; Anadicharan Tarafdar, *Hindu Samaj*, Pabna, 1320 BS, 1913, pp. 24-26.

[64] Mandal, *Bangiya Jana Samgha*, pp. 42-52.

[65] *Ibid*., p. 37. The English expression is Ambedkar's (from "Need for Political Power for the Depressed Classes", *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Maharashtra, 1982, 2: 503-9), cited in Vishwanath, *The Pariah Problem*, p. 256.

[66] Manindranath Mandal, 'Prayaschitta' (meaning, 'penance'), *Adhikar*, Asvin-Kartik, 1334 BS, 1927, p. 24. This was a play written by Manindranath. [Just to recall in this context Ambedkar's self-analysis from his speech in 1942: "I thought for long that we could rid the Hindu society of its evils and get the Depressed Classes incorporated into it on terms of equality…With that objective in mind, we burned the *Manusmriti* and performed mass thread ceremonies. Experience has taught me better. I stand today absolutely convinced that for the Depressed Classes there can be no equality among the Hindus because on inequality rests the foundations of Hinduism. We no longer want to be part of the Hindu society." Speech reported in *The Bombay Sentinel*, 28 April, 1942, cited in Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Analysing and Ethnicizing Caste to Eradicate it More Effectively' in Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar (eds.) *Caste in Modern India: A Reader, Vol. 2*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2014, p. 316.]

("*kalapahar*"), they must keep targeting the evils of Hindu society.[67] Here was an ambition of the caste-subaltern to be the rescuer of the Caste-Hindu. S/he was just one step short of that final stage of exasperation, reaching which Ambedkar told his followers: "If we can gain our freedom by conversion, why should we shoulder the responsibility of reforming Hindu society?"[68]

It was the ambition to speak for the good of the entire Hindu society and recover its "constitutive rules" – assuming, of course, that a blameless core could possibly be discovered in the religion – that drew the caste-subaltern in Bengal discursively and practically close to Hindu 'reformers'. Thus, we find in their writings repeated mentions of the 'life-and-death question of the Hindu'. An obstinate optimism in the possibility of Hinduism having a humane core led them to locate the triumphs of universal love and casteless-ness in the psalms of the Sama Veda (as if, they preached '*samya*' or equality). They located such triumphs of universal love equally in religions preached by Christ and Muhammad, the Buddha and Mahavira and, surprisingly, also in Sankaracharya! (Sankara's *Mayavad*, we know, is seen as one of the main planks of Hinduism, and is targeted by social-radicals for being wholly insensitive to the worldly suffering that caste ordains.) The list included Chaitanya and Guru Nanak.[69] In bringing the 'heterodox' and the 'orthodox', the 'Hindu' and the 'non-Hindu', tradition and modernity, under one common frame, the Dalit subaltern in Bengal seemed to take "the orthodox Hindu way of drawing equivalences between different and contradictory beliefs".[70] It was a fusion of categories and languages.[71]

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[67] Manindranath Mandal, 'Prayaschitta', p. 24.

[68] B R Ambedkar, *Which way to Emancipation?* (first published in May 1936), compiled in Narendra Jadhav ed., *Ambedkar Writes, Vol. II, Scholarly Writings*, New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 2014, p. 286.

[69] The list was common. For a few examples: Anadicharan Tarafdar, *Hindu Samaj*, p. 24; Manindranath Mandal, *Bange Digindranarayan*, p. 2; Mahendranath Karan, 'Yatra Mangal' ("*Bharater sei abichhed svarnamay adi juge rishir onkare sulolito samgane phuteche jhankare premer mohima sudhu*"), pp. 215-216.

[70] Meera Nanda would put it that way. *A Prophet Facing Forward* (Critical Quest reprint), p. 7.

[71] In an 'imaginary soliloquy', Ambedkar says (Nagaraj rather puts this in Ambedkar's lips): "This India makes unities out of all sorts and then creates myths. Blends differences, joins the Buddha with Krishna in worship." Nagaraj, 'Two Imaginary Soliloquies', *The Flaming Feet*, p. 83. True to this reading of India, the essay on 'Matua as a Protestant Religion' in the 2010 issue of the *Mahishya Samaj* does the same thing: Harichand Thakur, the founder of the Matua religion, becomes yet an addition to this list comprising Sankaracharya and the Buddha, who are all imagined as incarnations of Sri Krishna

As the primary concern of the present study is to understand how humiliated peoples have variously envisioned dignity – rather than judge these aspirations in terms of political prudence – it finds that the 'social', as a site of winning strength and respect, invariably occupies a far more important place in the mind of even the most 'politically' assertive caste-subaltern than is usually recognized within Dalit studies. We must make sense of the caste-subaltern's, sometimes obsessive, desire to speak as an insider-rebel/reformer of Hindu society and to get respectably integrated to Hindu society, both within and beyond assumptions of Brahmanical-ideological hegemony or the conceptual 'limits' that it set. It is not just Hindu society, per se, within which they have sought dignity, but within a larger society – be it Hindu, Indian or Bengali. The caste-radical, as an ethical subject, necessarily wishes to impress upon larger society, her/his social worth, righteousness and positive relevance. Kancha Ilaiah, who surely represents the 'Dalit-bahujan alternative' to Hindu society and ideology, talks about a caste civil-war; but he hastens to add its larger social-national relevance: "If a civil war washes the sins that got accumulated through history, as the American civil war did, it is better to work towards such a civil war to make India a nation and the brahmanic forces nationalist".[72] In evoking the metaphor of washing away India's sins, he echoes the early twentieth century subjects of my study. To seek to attach to the whole – the 'social' – is an enduring ambition. But Dalit studies are justifiably wary of the obsession with the 'social' for it can dangerously displace and silence the struggle for 'political' rights.[73]

In the 'proto-Dalit phase',[74] there was but a haunting doubt among Dalits about whether 'social strength' was more important than 'political safeguards' and whether

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(of the Bhagavad Gita imagery) intervening from time to time to rid Bharat from the evil of inequality and discrimination. Lokesh Chandra Biswas, 'Matua Ekti Pratibadi Dharmamat'.

[72] Kancha Ilaiah, 'Introduction', *Weapon of the Other*, p. xxvii.

[73] Rupa Vishwanath brings out sharply how the 'social' as a realm of reform was offered by elite Hindu society so as to stave off the political threat caused by the Dalit. Vishwanath, *The Pariah Problem*, Chapter 9 ('The Depressed Classes, Rights, and the Embrace of the Social'). The implication is that since the Hindu elite 'social'izes the problem of the Dalit for concerns entirely opposed to the Dalit getting political rights, the Dalit must stay wary of the elite's social embrace.

[74] I borrow this term from Nagaraj, who correctly says that the proto-Dalit phase is understudied in modern Indian history. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 96. 'Proto-Dalit phase' refers to the beginnings of modern Dalit consciousness and politics, a stage when "many other models of lower-caste revolt were active", which all "disappeared only after the decisive victory of Ambedkarism over other competing discourses to define and shape the identity of Dalit politics". *Ibid*. pp. 96-97.

the one needed to be sacrificed for the other. As the writings of some Bengali Dalits of the Paundra caste show, the confusion stemmed in the late colonial period partly from the thought that, after all, British rule would not last forever. What help would the colonial state's recognition do when the regime was foreign and temporary? Even Ambedkar, occasionally, expressed such apprehensions:

> But I feel it is not proper to depend solely on political rights. These political safeguards are not granted on the condition that they shall be everlasting…On the day when our political rights cease to exist, we will have to depend upon our social strength. To forget what is eternally beneficial and to be lured by temporary gains is bound to lead to suffering.[75]

Dalit and Shudra groups, without exception, welcomed colonial liberalism as it brought "new knowledge, new technology and production-processes" and, "more importantly, a new codified legal system",[76] making no distinction of caste – something which was "a definite improvement over the traditional rule of the discriminating high-caste Hindu *rajas*".[77] But apprehensions such as the above made some Dalits ambivalent towards reliance on special government patronage as the foremost means of community uplift.

In Bengal, the Namasudra leadership expressed a firm belief in "statist options"[78] and unambiguously embraced Scheduled Caste politics. But some of those who were among the earliest initiators of the Dalit movement in Bengal, who authored the first autonomous Dalit solidarity to create political visibility of Dalits and wrest rights of equal citizenship, curiously ended up turning back in time. They refused to have their communities enlisted in a separate schedule for state protection. They thought that special protection would seal the road to meaningful integration with society. Undoubtedly, some of them had been highly vocal about political rights and

[75] Ambedkar, *Which Way to Emancipation?*, p. 291.

[76] Rawat and Satyanarayana (eds.), *Dalit Studies*, p. 20.

[77] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, p. 240.

[78] This usage is again from Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, ('The Cultural Politics of the Dalit Movement') p. 97.

representation. They were protesting since 1917-1918 about "the oligarchy of a handful of limited castes" and the "antagonistic nature of interests" between the 'advanced' and the 'backward' classes.[79] But their idea of equal citizenship was roughly that each caste must have seats reserved in the legislatures in proportion to their respective populations. It was a sort of combination of the idea of the "*gram panchayat* of pre-modern times", where "*all* castes and communities would send their representatives to the village body"[80] with the modern democratic emphasis on numbers. But the thought of being classified as a separate schedule, congealing a stable distinction with the rest of Hindu society appeared revolting to them.

The road to dignity was still uncertain and the formulations were strange and hesitant. To borrow from E. P. Thompson's memorable words, their hostility to the new forces "may have been backward-looking", their ideals "may have been fantasies", their resolute refusals (to the point of filing court-cases) to being 'scheduled' "may have been foolhardy". But "their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience". "Only the successful (in the sense of those whose aspirations anticipated subsequent evolution) are remembered. The blind alleys, the lost causes, and the losers themselves are forgotten."[81] The present study seeks to "rescue" some of these losers "from the enormous condescension of posterity".[82]

The distinction between Dalit and Shudra 'perspectives' thus get a little smudged in Bengal. Dalits did not take a 'non-Hindu' identity, and some Dalits, who 'talked

[79] See the details of the 1918 conference, organized by Namasudras, but participated by important leaders of some other 'low castes' like the Paundras (some of whom later sought to be un-enlisted as Scheduled Castes), where it was observed that electorates must consist of "all the 190 castes of the Hindu society in proportion to their respective numbers". Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, p. 114. Manindranath Mandal, like his Namasudra colleagues, had been actively conceiving the foundation of a separate Dalit organization in Bengal, since 1917-18.

[80] The idea of the 'gram panchayat' I take from Nagaraj, who used it to argue a different thing. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 99. I find that for 'low castes' other than the Namasudras, who were dominating the province's Depressed Class politics from the start, the more appealing plan of securing equitable representation was the idea of separate electorates for each caste, rather than the idea of a separate electorate for Depressed Classes as a whole. Also, in the matter of reservation of seats in legislatures, the preferred idea was reservation of seats for each caste separately, proportioned to the respective populations.

[81] It is small wonder that Dalit ideologues like Manindranath Mandal, with a sustained commitment to interrogating caste-inequality, but little institutional base, do not figure in the list of early-twentieth century Dalit intellectuals like Swami Acchutanand, Bhagya Reddy Varma, Kusuma Dharmanna and Iyothee Thoss.

[82] Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 12.

about a revolution', even hesitated to constitute themselves as 'suffering subjects requiring state-protection'. Like the Shudra's, the history of the Dalit in Bengal is mostly the history of 'community'. There is the never-ceasing inspiration common to these groups to get respectably incorporated within mainstream Hindu society. Concomitantly, a Dalit caste like the Paundra and a Shudra caste like Mahishya continue to retain distinct identities but also a common identity as suffering subjects – odd combinations of a sense of injury and community-pride (presently claimed not in terms of Varna or ritual status, but that of accomplishments).

III

While I have sought to distinguish between their different experiences, the format of this study and the specificities of the Bengal situation requires the Dalit and Shudra to be brought under a common frame. This is not a study of how caste-protest happened in the case, for instance, of 'agrarian slaves'. One reason is the heterogenous form of land-ownership and the absence of any neat relationship between caste and class in Bengal. The other is to do with the particular nature of my sources. I have tried to represent voices and sentiments of humiliated peoples that have not received elite public attention. Those who have left their writings (for us to unearth) had been relatively privileged, after all. In one or two instances, I have sought to understand the nature of broader participation (the mass dimension) by studying public meetings of particular caste-communities, through the mediation of their periodicals. This is not a study of the landless Hari, Bagdi, Muchi, Dom, the bottom-most caste-groups in Bengal, who did not have the means to write at all. It is also difficult to trace, with any degree of certainty, the perspectives of the actual tillers of the soil, the masses within a caste. That requires ethnographic work of a different nature, something done brilliantly by Hitesranjan Sanyal, who explored the nature of nationalist consciousness among caste and class subalterns in south Bengal.[83]

My study is limited to south Bengal. Important caste-movements of north Bengal like the Rajbangshi movement have not been brought into the picture, though

[83] Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Swarajer Pathe*, Calcutta: Papyrus, 1993.

comparisons would have been very useful.[84] The two most important Dalit or *antyaja* groups of south-Bengal are the Namasudras and the Paundras. In one of my chapters, I study the movement by the Paundras. 'Untouchability' in Bengal, as Sekhar Bandyopadhyay observed about Namasudras, was but more of a "political metaphor to assert social authority of the higher castes, than a purely ritual concept".[85] The 'Dalit difference' was not so clear-cut here. This is not to say that upper castes were any less adversarial, but the categories of the Dalit and intermediate castes were far from stable, and their differences irregular. This is what I call the 'lower-middle indeterminacy' in the context of the status of caste-subalterns of late-nineteenth-early-twentieth century Bengal.

Paundras, called 'Pods' then, and Namasudras, called 'Chandals' – the "great cultivating castes"[86] – were 'degraded' in the sense that water touched by them was unacceptable to higher castes. Commensal restrictions were strictly observed by upper-castes against them. But water touched by the Saha and Subarnabanik, castes of prosperous merchants, was also unacceptable to upper-castes as well as to 'clean' Shudras like Sadgops. Ritually-observant ("*nishthaban*") Brahmans, Kayasthas and Baidyas, as evident from literary sources, had a revulsion for the '*sonar bene*' (Subarnabanik)[87] that was no less than their feeling of contempt for the *antyaja* castes. Above these *anacharaniya* or *ajalchal* castes were the 'intermediate castes', to use Hitesranjan Sanyal's terminology, including the Goala and the Chashi Kaibarta. (The Chashi Kaibartas claimed the name 'Mahishya' and an unambiguously 'clean' status through their early twentieth century movement.) Like the *ajalchal* castes, these castes would be ministered by 'degraded' Brahmans. But water used by these castes was acceptable to the higher castes, theoretically speaking. This did not mean that a ritually-observant Brahman, of whatever rank, would actually have food and water touched by these castes (even as, Brahmans themselves were diversely ranked and the status of 'degraded' Brahmans was as inferior as their '*anacharaniya*'/ '*antyaja*' clients). Above this group were the so-called respectable class of *satsudras* or 'clean'

[84] Swaraj Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement: The Rajbangshis of North Bengal, 1910-1947*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2003.

[85] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, p. 238.

[86] *Census of India, 1931, Vol. VI*, Calcutta, Parts 1 and 2, p. 108.

[87] Rabindranath Tagore, *Chaturanga*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, *Vol. 9*, Centenary Edition, p. 354.

Shudras, that is, the *Navasakha* category that included castes like the Sadgop and the Tili. According to Sanyal and other scholars of Bengal's caste-structure, Sadgops and Tilis originated from Gops/ Goalas and Telis respectively. Telis were 'unclean' Sudras. As Sanyal put is, "there is no concrete historical data to prove that it is really so and a Sadgop would invariably resent such a suggestion".[88] But even Sadgops and Tilis saw the 'Caste Hindu' *bhadralok* (Brahmans, Kayasthas and Baidyas) as the Other till the middle of the twentieth century.[89] It is another matter that even though Kayasthas and Baidyas were respectably entrenched as the *ucchajati* in practice, medieval Bengali scripture had consigned them to the rank of Shudras.[90]

As Sekhar Bandyopadhyay noted, in the late nineteenth century, Namasudras, for instance, were listed along with Sahas and Sutradhars in Faridpur and with Sahas, Sutradhars and Chasi Kaibartas in Dacca and Jessore.[91] All these other caste-groups, by the late 1930s, came to be finally classified as the 'general'/non-'scheduled' category. The Mahishya was *anacharaniya* in certain eastern districts like the Namasudra.[92] The Mahishyas usually resented this, alleging that this was arbitrary and an anomaly, rather than radically critiquing caste as such. But since upper-castes so often equated these different castes in terms of status and subjected them to roughly similar social-ritual distance, a potentiality of common grievance against caste-arrogance, even if it did not visibly unite them, could never be utterly absent.

The Paundras and Namasudras were mainly cultivating castes. While the majority actually performed the work of cultivation, a not inconsiderable section of these castes were occupancy or non-occupancy *raiyats*. Just as Namasudras were pioneer cultivators of the marshy tracts of the east, Paundras were, it is said, pioneer cultivators of the forested Sundarbans. If there were *raiyats* and under-*raiyats* in the

[88] Sanyal, 'Continuities of Social Mobility', p. 321.

[89] One instance from the early twentieth century is Sashibhushan Kundu, *Tili Jatir Vaishyatva Praman*, Calcutta: Bishnu Press, 1330 BS, 1923; 'Memorial from the Intermediate and Suppressed Castes (Hindu) Association', GI, Reforms, File no. D. 709/42 – R, 1942.

[90] Sanyal, 'Continuities of Social Mobility', p. 319.

[91] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, p. 16.

[92] Digindranarayan Bhattacharya, *Vaishya Tantubay Jatir Jagaran*, undated (1929: year of entry into the India Office Library), Medinipur, Khejuri. Just as Mahishyas were 'unclean' in Mymensingh, Kumilla and Noakhali, Tantubays or weavers, who were a 'clean' Shudra in most places in Bengal, were 'unclean' in Medinipur.

main, there were also a few zamindars among the Paundras.[93] Similarly, a Namasudra tract mentioned in 1911 that besides agriculturists, there were among them *jotdars*, *talukdars* and *haoladars* (different forms of intermediate tenure-holders) as well as traders, manufacturers and, recently, new professionals.[94] There was a relatively large number of *jotdars*, *talukdars* and landholders among intermediate castes like the Mahishyas, but even in Medinipur, where they were dominant, carving out kingdoms from an early date, the caste included not just 'proprietors' but also humble 'cultivators'.[95] The Mahishya movement did not exclude them; it rather tried to incorporate these groups through mobilization. Thus, ownership of land or lack of it could not uniformly define any of these castes.

To rise as farmers and traders was not new for the improving sections of even the *antyaja* castes. British rule had also facilitated inland trade. What was novel and seemed to them as particularly uplifting was the new sort of social promotion that English education offered. Look at the professions which Manindranath Mandal, the Dalit ideologue, referred to in 1926 while speaking about the new "confidence" that was vigorously stirring the 'depressed' castes.

> The repressed Namasudra, the Paundrakshatriya, the Sabhasundar (Dhoba), the Saha, the Subarnabanik and the Sutradhar are seeing men from their castes become members of the legislative council, renowned scientists, judges, magistrates, *munsefs*, doctors, *mukteurs*, lawyers and professors. They have thus realized that nobody is a Brahman or a Shudra by birth, nobody is inferior to the other…Their timidity is gone. With a new daring, they are beginning to stand up for themselves.[96]

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[93] H. H. Risley, *Tribes and Castes in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1891, Reprint, 1981, p. 176.

[94] Kaviraj Sashikumar Baroibiswas, *Namasudra Dwijatattva*, Barisal, 1911, p. 71, cited in Sumit Sarkar, 'Identities and Histories: Some Lower-caste Narratives from Early Twentieth-century Bengal', *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History*, New Delhi: Permaanent Black, 2002, p. 39.

[95] LSS O' Malley ed., *Midnapur District Gazetteer*, Calcutta, 1911, p. 58.

[96] Manindranath Mandal, *Bange Digindranarayan*, p. 12.

It was not scarcity that prompted the stirrings. Colonial rule permitted low-castes to adopt the functions of the intelligentsia, something impossible for both Dalit and Shudra groups under traditional regimes. The Shudra could now equal the Brahman. Coupled with these unprecedented opportunities was the continuation of "previous forms of disability and underdevelopment", which were sometimes "even aggravated".[97] It was this dual experience of the suppressed castes under colonial rule that made the caste-movements invariably something more than traditional upward mobility drives. Autobiographies frequently bring out that the first flickers of protest and self-respect were generated in the spaces of the school, the hostel or the 'mess', where low-caste students came in contact with high-caste students. The well-to-do Mahishya student would not be immune to it. There is, in fact, the autobiography of a Mahishya, who wrote that when he was growing up at home in Nadia, where Mahishyas were very prosperous, he had no idea that he belonged to a relatively low caste. It was while studying in Baharampur Krishnanath College around 1926 that he first faced humiliation.[98] The 'untouchable' caste student undeniably faced a greater degree of resistance in these spaces. But, on many occasions, students from 'untouchable' caste, intermediate caste and poor Muslim communities faced a roughly similar nature of resistance from Hindu upper-castes who reviled at the "*chasha*" becoming his equal.[99]

Humiliated and threatened with exclusion from civic/political spaces/rights as the "*chasha*", lower castes and so-called middle castes – however secluded in their respective community movements[100] and torn among themselves through status hierarchies – developed an identical discursive stance as persecuted subjects, and also as the flesh-and-blood of the country – the 'producers'. "*Chasha*" was a negative attribution to middling-to-low castes by upper-castes; but it generated a positive political potential of radicalization of the otherwise status-bound individual caste

[97] Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, pp. 97-98.

[98] Satyaranjan Biswas, *Mahishya Andolaner Itihas*, Calcutta: Bangiya Mahishya Samiti, 1984, 'Bhumika'.

[99] A report describing the resistance offered by upper castes to a high school being founded in Mograhat in the south Twenty-four Parganas district. Originally authored by Mahishyas in a journal named *Diamond Harbour Hitaishi*, cited in *Paundrakshatriya Samachar*, Kartik, 1331 BS, 1924, cited in *Paundra Manisha Vol. 2*, p. 236.

[100] Claims to high Varna status were ubiquitous in Bengal; even here Dalits cannot be distinguished from Shudras.

movements by the middle of the twentieth century. Caste, mediated through this ascribed '*chasha*' identity, metamorphosed into an idiom of emancipation. It articulated some elements, however inchoate, of a "politics of redistribution" to what was "one of recognition" and mobility.[101]

As already argued, it is difficult to earmark castes as Dalit or non-Dalit while exploring the proto-Dalit phase. The Telis and Sutradhars, contiguous to Dalits like the Paundras and Malis in terms of consciousness and status, went out of the list of Scheduled Castes by the late 1930s. But they could have remained. The Paundras remained in the list as they were divided on the issue. The Mahishyas were also originally included under the 'Depressed Classes'. All these castes were awakened to "the new flute of the new age" and to the ideals of "*samya, maitri, svadhinata*".[102] To borrow from E. P. Thompson, "it was partly a question of *morale*"[103] – the confidence Manindranath spoke of – to stand up against the moral and material resources of the Caste-Hindu, to critique the theories of the genesis of caste and deride the *Purusha Sukta*, to demand representation and rights to education and appointments.[104] The spirit that was brewing cannot be grasped by studying any single caste or layer in isolation from the others – the layers were profoundly intertwined.

IV

The present work is inspired by Sumit Sarkar's suggestion that "the caste literature of early-twentieth-century Bengal…often gives the impression of an open debate, with a

[101] I borrow the use of these phrases from Sumit Sarkar, 'Introduction', *Beyond nationalist Frames*, p. 7.

[102] *Teli-bandhab*, 1931, p. 10, see fn. 21.

[103] Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 938.

[104] Some of those like the author of the first Dalit autobiography of Bengal, Raicharan Sardar, who were even staunchly against getting 'scheduled' were, however, no less conscious of the monopoly of government appointments by upper-castes. When he was looking for an appointment, an upper-caste person had indignantly asked him why he did not take to the plough to make a living. Sardar wrote in his autobiography that while proudly stating that he knew to work the plough very well, he asserted his right to realize his class's legitimate share in the public services, conveying that caste-subalterns were now up and active to contest the prevailing secular exclusions and would no more tolerate infringement. Raicharan Sardar, *Deener Atmakahini*, Diamond Harbour, Twenty-four Parganas, posthumously published in 1959, pp. 39, 50.

considerable degree of intertextuality across caste lines."[105] He had proposed that a "more interactive and intertextual approach…juxtaposing high- and lower-caste movements and texts" might be helpful to explore the "language" of caste in early-twentieth-century Bengal.[106]

There is, by now, a nuanced and highly detailed historiography on the dialectics between caste-subalterns and the caste-elite in late colonial India. Let me recall it briefly. The caste-elite is variously described as the 'upper-caste gentry', 'upper-caste civil society', the 'nationalist' and the 'Hindu reformist'. It is portrayed in class-like terms – defined by its being "arrayed in opposition to the real interests of" the caste-subaltern.[107] While stressing the antagonistic nature of interests between the two classes, these works bring out how elites, who were also reformists and nationalists, sought a "willed embrace" of the subordinated social orders, while stopping short of securing them substantive citizenly rights. For Bengal, scholars had shown how by the late nineteenth century, land-holding was left as the only "solace and reprieve" of the gentry, all other avenues of enterprise and accumulation having failed. To save its "surviving bases of power", which were showing signs of being threatened by the insubordination of the lower-caste tenantry – now beginning to be favoured by the colonial state – the middle-classes became absolutely status-quoist and protective of traditional structures of authority like caste-power. At the same time, they sought to win over the dissenting orders and establish moral authority to preserve the "moral economy of paternalistic relationships", central to land-ownership, that masked "extraction and appropriation". There was thus the revivalism of an "ardent Vaishnavism" – "which denied the spiritual privileges of the Brahman without significantly questioning the social dimensions of *varnashram* or caste hierarchy" – in late nineteenth century Bengal.[108] If the Pabna riots of 1873 "made nationalists" out of Bengali gentlemen[109], lower castes were much the cause of the nationalist's anxiety as they were 'plague spots within the body politic'. Colonial officialdom posed as the

[105] Sumit Sarkar, 'Identities and Histories', *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, p. 51.

[106] *Ibid.*, p. 43.

[107] See Vishwanath, *The Pariah Problem*, 'Conclusion'.

[108] See Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalsim*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001, 'Introduction'.

[109] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

rescuers of the caste-subaltern especially during the high peak of Swadeshi nationalism, which "failed to make a dent among the lower castes".[110] Further, in 1910, E. A. Gait issued a circular that proposed to classify the 'untouchables' as a non-Hindu category. Caste elites henceforth sought the comradeship of the caste-subaltern with open arms. The colonial state's fascination with numbers (the Censuses) had made strident lower-caste identity formations. The same had also engendered an obsessive anxiety among upper-caste Hindus about their declining numbers vis-à-vis the Muslims.[111] They felt that 'Hindu interests' were threatened. While it reinvigorated a Hindu nationalism, it also generated a "confessional Hinduism".[112] In a mode of "self-purification",[113] the Caste Hindu sought to relinquish caste-arrogance, embrace the 'untouchable', and uplift the caste-subaltern. The latter's emancipation was made into a spiritual process.[114] Also, reformist sympathy for the lower castes acknowledged that Indians could no more ignore the caste question and that, "unless some reforms were effected in Hindu society, the Hindus could not hope to secure political rights, and would deprive their society of the means of their own conservation".[115] Hindu Indian social-reform initiatives were geared to "stave off the political threat"[116] caused by the caste-subaltern, and precisely to prevent the "active enforcement of legal rights".[117] Thus, existing historiography represents the ulterior motives and political anxieties of 'India's elite public' with great clarity.

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[110] Tanika Sarkar, 'Caste, Sect and Hagiography: The Balakdashis of Early Modern Bengal' in *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designing Selves and Nations in Colonial Times*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2009, p. 98.

[111] On U N Mukherjee and his *Hindus: A Dying Race* (1909), in particular, Pradip Kumar Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideologies in Early Twentieth-century Bengal*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

[112] Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question*, p. 6.

[113] Nagaraj, 'Self-Purification vs Self-Respect: On the Roots of the Dalit Movement', *The Flaming Feet*, pp. 21-60.

[114] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, p. 85.

[115] Vishwanath, *The Pariah Problem*, pp. 250-251.

[116] *Ibid.*, p. 239.

[117] *Ibid.*, 'Conclusion'.

The format of these works, as they harp on the 'real interests' – which are truly contradictory – of the elite 'reformist' and the caste-subaltern, has allowed little exploration of the 'intertextuality' that thrived across caste-lines. Ideas often have an uninhibited flow, even as they deflect and refigure themselves while they float across contradictory locations. The arguments become different in the hands of people from contrary locations; but the "meanings of concepts fundamental to arguments are established by studying linguistic conventions of a particular time".[118] It helps to illuminate a historical structure of thought.[119] If I am suggesting that we must disaggregate the several strands of the 'reformists', or proposing that they were not a solid, closed, homogeneous bloc, I do not imply that some 'genuine reformers' were better than others.[120] I believe that caste-elites, when they reflected on '*jatibhed*' were always primarily concerned about *unity*. They saw it as the poignant crisis of the nation. But the ideas and reflections of caste elites and caste subalterns operating in the same public co-constituted each other.

[118] Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Enchantment of Democracy and India: Politics and Ideas*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2011, pp. 26-27. Kaviraj develops from Quentin Skinner's reflections on 'meaning' and 'context' and proposes a 'historical semantic approach', something highly relevant to the present study. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

[119] *Ibid.*

[120] However, the possibility of some being more 'genuine' and 'determined' than others was not ignored by Sumit Sarkar, who distinguished Digindranarayan Bhattacharya, a Brahman reformer from Sirajganj, Pabna, as "undeservedly forgotten today": Digindranarayan "in his most radical phase in the 1920s", "tried to bring together caste and gender reform" and "at the same time expressed his reservations about narrow, purely Sanskritizing movements for being divisive and for imposing tighter restrictions on women in imitation of Brahmanical norms." Sumit Sarkar, 'Identities and Histories', p. 65. Digindranarayan exhorted the servile castes and classes to give up *golami* or slavery, to withdraw their services from the landlords. 'Nipirita Manaber Nidrabhanga' (Speech in a Mymensingh assembly of depressed castes), *Adhikar*, Bhadra, 1927, p. 1.
In this, he appears distinct from a typical nationalist like Ambikacharan Majumdar, the Swadeshi reformer of Faridpur, who, even while confessing that the question of the depressed classes merited serious attention, concluded by putting the blame on the caste-subaltern: "They want to retaliate by refusing to work for the other classes even for proper wages…they apparently forget that the more they dissociate from the upper classes the more they increase the distance and widen the gulf between them". Babu Ambikacharan Majumdar, essay in *The Indian Review*, January, 1910, reprinted in Rajendra Singh Vatsa (ed.), *The Depressed Classes of India, An Enquiry into their Conditions and Suggestions for their Uplift* (originally published under the name The Depressed Classes by G. A. Natesan in 1912), New Delhi: Gitanjali Prakashan, p. 22.
But, if Digindranarayan was genuinely concerned for the misery of the Hindu widow, it was also integrally connected with his anxiety that the persecuted Hindu widow ultimately contributed to the multiplication of Muslims. Bhattacharya, *Hindur Nabajagaran*, Published by Dinabandu Vedashastri, a prime office-bearer of Arya Samaj (in Bengal), 1338 BS, 1931. Interestingly, Digindranarayan dedicated the book to a Paundra leader, Annadaprasad Naskar.

'Vedic liberalism' and its dichotomy with 'prejudiced scriptures', 'Purana-Smriti',[121] was one such theme of consensus. Bengali lower caste writers would, at times, add that the Vedas, in its original simplicity, was no more retrievable. The opportunistic priestly class had fattened the Vedas by adding ritualistic sections like the 'Brahmana'.[122] Thus, the Brahmanical religion originated in opportunism, but not the Vedas. Some upper-caste reformers, worried about national unity, also asserted that 'arrogant Brahmans' made the real Vedas extinct to conveniently and falsely ascribe *chaturvarna* to the Vedas.[123]

This was a trend since the mid-nineteenth century when some liberal reformers made special efforts to propound and popularize the 'liberal message of the Vedas' ("*Veda-prachar*") through print. Some of them thought that social evils of child-marriage or patriarchal restrictions on female education could be cured by demonstrating that the spirit of the Vedas went against these. Obscure lower caste writings of early twentieth century Bengal cited many of these nineteenth century scholars' works.[124] Even in the late nineteenth century, when the upper-caste middle-classes were generally *fixing* an 'authentic' tradition, some important scholars, whom lower caste writers engaged with, were also *disaggregating tradition*. They were showing that there was no one Great Tradition but many traditions. Haraprasad Shastri observed that the authors of the Smriti Samhitas were against those who did not follow Brahmanical injunctions but the Atharva Veda admired these insubordinate

[121] The Puranas and the Smritis were represented not just as non-Vedic but anti-Vedic: common terms used during the time being '*veda-vahya*' and '*veda-birodhi*'.

[122] Anadicharan Tarafdar, *Hindu Samaj*.

[123] Dwijadas Datta, *Baidik Barna Ba Jati-tattva*, undated and without publishing details, entry into the India Office Library in 1929, p.13. Dwijadas was the father of Ullaskar Datta, the 'revolutionary' terrorist of Swadeshi Bengal. Like some others of his class in his time, he was concerned about the need to establish links with the soil and productive enterprise. He had gone to England to learn improved farming. He wrote extensively on Sankaracharya, on the Gita, on the Bible and the Koran.

[124] Satyabrata Samasrami (1846-1911), from Bardhaman, who edited the *Sama Veda Samhita* for the Bibliotheca Indica series on request from Rajendralal Mitra, was a reputed Vedic scholar and social reformer. He bought a press to propound the 'social message' of the Vedas. Subodhchandra Sengupta and Anjali Basu (eds.), *Samsad Bangali Charitabhidhan, Vol. 1*, Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, Reprint: 1994, p. 552. For one instance of citations from works of these scholars in lower-caste texts: Mahendranath Mallabarman, *Jhal-Mal Tattva*, Mymensingh, 1321 BS, 1914, p. 9. The Mal or Malo writer cited these scholars to argue that the *Purusha Sukta* had no literal value.

ones as "possessing divine strength".[125] This was the formative soil for early twentieth century reflections, spread out across diverse social locations, over the *political* nature of caste. Kayasthas, elite yet non-Brahman, popularized the themes of rivalry between the king and the Brahman.[126] How Brahmans came to guard their monopolies through brute force and how Brahmanahood became strictly hereditary only at a later period became a staple of early-twentieth century caste-literature.

It was part of the nationalist intellectual enterprise to 'know the people', the 'folk'. Rabindranath Tagore asked Kshitimohan Sen to collect, interpret and present to the world the aesthetic and philosophical creations of the 'little people of India'.[127] Many, from the intellectual elite, took to such projects; Dinesh Chandra Sen being among the more eminent ones. Their collective researches generated the common sense (in certain quarters) about a composite culture of Bengal (and also India): that classical/Aryan elements were persistently infiltrated and hybridized by the non-Aryan, the tribal and even the non-Hindu (Muslim Sufi). It was a matter of great enthusiasm among both 'liberal' caste-elites and caste-subalterns of early twentieth century Bengal that new researches were bringing out that non-Aryans and even *mlechhas* had often become Dwijas.[128] It was equally a matter of enthusiastic surprise, spanning caste-locations, that many of the practices and rituals that seemed so 'chastely Aryan' were revealed as non-Aryan and vice-versa.[129] On the one hand, as Sumit Sarkar observed about Dinesh Chandra Sen's work, these suggested that "the true repositories of Bengal's culture have been plebeian, low-caste people bound up with everyday material production, not the Brahman bearers of high Sanskrit learning".[130] We find Sen cited by lower caste writers.[131] They were receptive to these

[125] Haraprasad Shastri, 'Jatibhed', *Bibha*, Aswin, Kartik, 1294 BS, 1887, reprinted in Sukumar Sen, Satyajit Chowdhuri and Nikhileswar Sengupta (eds.) *Haraprasad Sastri Rachana Samghraha*, *Vol. IV*, Calcutta: Paschimbanga Rajya Pustak Parshad, Calcutta, 1989, p. 83.

[126] 'Barna-tattva', *Kayastha Patrika*, 1324 BS, 1917 (month not known), p. 7.

[127] Kshitimohan Sen, *Jatibhed*, Calcutta: Biswabharati Granthalay, 1353 BS, 1947, 'Nibedan'.

[128] *Ibid.*

[129] Saiyad Mujtaba Ali, 'Santiniketan', *Gurudeb O Santiniketan*, Calcutta: Mitra and Ghosh, Reprint, 2002, pp. 93-94.

[130] Sumit Sarkar, 'The Many Worlds of Indian History', *Writing Social History*, New Delhi: OUP, 1987, Reprint: 2006, p. 24.

[131] Manindranath Mandal, *Pallikabi Rashikchandra*, Medinipur, Khejuri, 1336 BS, 1929.

studies. An escalating sense of pride in being the true repositories of Bengal's civilization and culture made them averse to self-minoritizing modes. On the other, a vernacular self-identification as opposed to the Aryan/Sanskritic tradition did not develop in Bengal as it did in the Tamil country, the reason being that, here there was no denial of the Aryan element, which was assumed to be as ubiquitous and evenly distributed as the 'folk' elements.[132]

Haridas Palit was one such collector of folk-lore, folk music and folk-history, who wandered for twenty years "listening to legends and stories from the lips of illiterate villagers and collecting the varied materials of history".[133] He belonged to the Malda Literary Research Society. One of his books is about the Gambhira or Gajan festival, that is a folk tradition.[134] Another book authored by him is *Bangiya Patit Jatir Karmi*, written in the person of a Namasudra.[135] It is difficult to say whether he was actually a Namasudra because in another book, he authored in the same year (1915), he wrote as a person belonging to the Ganesh caste.[136] I feel his is a case of a 'nationalist-reformist', who managed to 'de-caste' himself so well that historians have taken *Bangiya Patit Jatir Karmi*, a narrative of toil-and-improvement, as actually authored by a Namasudra.[137] Mahendranath Karan, a contemporary Paundra, correctly

[132] A rebellious conviction in being the true repositories of the history of a region, as part of non-Brahman political consciousness, intertwined with a championing of the Vedic cause was not so unique to Bengal. In Maharashtra, the 'Maratha' identity, through Phule's intervention, conjured up "a conviction of a unique role in Maharashtra's history and wider cultural traditions". Rosalind O' Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*, p. 304. It had the potential to assimilate a broad range of non-Brahman social groups. In early twentieth century, during its peak, the non-Brahman movement came under the leadership of Chhatrapati Shahu, the ruler of Kolhapur, who campaigned actively for the removal of untouchability and supported Ambedkar. Shahu, however, also sympathized with the "Vedas-friendly Arya Samaj". Prachi Deshpande, 'Caste as Maratha: Social Categories, Colonial Policy and Identity in Early Twentieth Century Maharashtra', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 41, 1, 2004, p. 18.

[133] Palit quoted in Benoy Kumar Sarkar, *The Folk Element in the Hindu Culture: A Contribution to Socio-religious Studies in Hindu folk institutions* (London, 1917, pp. ix, x), cited in Satadru Sen, *Benoy Kumar Sarkar, Restoring the Nation to the World*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2015, p. 66.

[134] Haridas Palit, *Adyer Gambhira*, Malda: Aitihasik Anusandhankari Jatiya Siksha Samiti, 1912.

[135] Haridas Palit, *Bangiya Patit Jatir Karmi*, Calcutta, Entally, 1915.

[136] Haridas Palit, *Gansha*, Calcutta: Grihastha Publishing House, 1915. The Ganesh caste was tabulated in the Census of 1921 as pressing claims for the name 'Tantubay', which was already claimed by Tantis. *Census of India, 1921*, Vol. 5, p. 348. In *Gansha*, Palit took the autobiographical mode of a person belonging to this caste and wrote that Maliganj in north Bengal was one region where this caste was found.

[137] *Bangiya Patit Jatir Karmi* has been read as a Namasudra tract in Sumit Sarkar, 'Identities and Histories', pp. 69-70, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, p. 17, and Satadru Sen,

described *Bangiya Patit Jatir Karmi*, as written in the mould of *Negro Jatir Karmabir*. The latter was a translation of Booker T. Washington's *The Story of the Negro* by the celebrated intellectual Benoy Kumar Sarkar, who was Palit's friend, both hailing from Malda.[138]

Upper caste thought and writing thus keep emerging in this study in complex, multilayered relations with lower-caste thought. Swadeshi discourse valorized productive enterprise. As Haridas Palit wryly observed in the person of a Namasudra, "The winds have changed in the country. Don't you see, the words, '*chasha*', '*krishak*' (peasant) etc. have suddenly begun to command respect!"[139] It was always in reference to this widely shared common discourse that the caste-subaltern asserted his specific social worth as the 'backbone of the nation'.[140] It was, again, from within the prevailing general discourse about Bengal's economic debacle that he could eloquently taunt the Swadeshi *babu* – jeer at the failure of Swadeshi enterprises like the Bengal National Bank and the Bangalakshmi Cotton Mill.[141] If he remained alienated from Swadeshi, he certainly took part in its discourse.

V

Caste subalterns in early-twentieth-century Bengal were negotiating caste in a dual mode: in various ways, they were stating that caste had always been *political*; and,

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Benoy Kumar Sarkar, p. 66. Sumit Sarkar, however, had noted that 'Haridas Palit' was "a pseudonym", and that "parts of the book read too much like a model improvement tale to be entirely believable." Sarkar wrote that "the facticity of Palit's story is less relevant than the insights it can provide about one kind of lower-caste perception, imagination – and limits." But, the other book by Palit suggests that Palit is not a lower-caste himself, he is merely writing in their persons – upper-caste/reformist and lower caste writings often become as indistinguishable as this. Palit had written yet another book on a Tantubay, named Radheshchandra Seth. Palit, *Maldaher Radheshchandra*, Maldah: Jatiya Siksha Samiti, 1318 BS, 1911.

[138] Benoy Kumar Sarkar, *Negro Jatir Karmabir: Booker T. Washington*, Calcutta: Grihastha Publishing House, 1915. Palit used to contribute to the portion on 'economic anthropology' in Benoy Kumar Sarkar ed. *Arthik Unnati*. On one occasion, his anthropological observations were highly resented by Mahendranath Karan, a caste-subaltern (Paundra). Karan, 'Sahityacharchay Jatibidvesh, *Paundrakshatriya Samachar*, 1927, p. 57.

[139] Palit, *Bangiya Patit Jatir Karmi*, p. 74.

[140] To cite one of innumerable instances: "*Samaj merudondo jara, - noile jara samaj more/ mushti meyo gushti niye bhoy dekhachho tader kire*", 'Samjhe Chalo', see fn. 58.

[141] 'Chakurir Angsha', 'Samvad Samgraha', *Adhikar*, Bhadra, 1334 BS, 1927, pp. 11-12.

simultaneously, they were appropriating to their advantage the *religious* refiguring of caste that colonialism effected.[142] How the Brahmans guarded their monopolies, wrongfully kept others in subordination, churned scriptures for profit-making and remained cringing sycophants of evil kings to curry favour with them – all these were the staple of lower caste literature. Thus, they showed that caste was all about power. Interestingly, 'purity' remained a persistent vocabulary in their writings. They de-ritualized the notion of purity[143] to invest it with substance and make independent claims of self-worth. Their sometimes highly spiritualized rhetoric needs to be made sense partially in these terms. It was in reference to the notion of 'purity' valorized by colonial Indian upper castes and romanticized by Orientalists – say, Romain Rolland admiring the 'sublimity' of the 'Brahmin concept'[144] – that caste-subalterns would relish the event of a Brahman getting caught while trying to steal his *jajman's* (patron's) cow in Diamond Harbour![145]

The reconstitution of the ideal of purity had a related aspect. As the present study focuses on how caste-subalterns sought to regenerate social consciousness among their people, it finds elements of a traditional discourse of purity getting merged with radical humanistic notions of universal human perfectibility in their visions. The idea of perfectibility – with a *sacred* tenor to it – as an always-unfinished project, remained a key component of these. And, all these caste-movements – distinguished from earlier modes of corporate social mobility by the emphasis on reason, free-thinking and "a spirit of adventure"[146] – germinated in a mood that called for a 'divine madness' to transcend self-interest.[147] The cult of the common man was undercut by

[142] On how caste came to be understood through the mediation of colonialism as essentially derived from the religious principle of purity-pollution, as the most exotic characteristic of spiritual and exotic India, Nicholas B Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

[143] The religious refiguring of caste had the advantage that ethics being close to religion, ethical claims could be made in the language of 'purity'. Karma came to translated as action (judged in terms of social ethics), and not ritual practice or performance, that was its specific traditional meaning.

[144] Cited in Amulpada Chattopadhyay, *Hindu Dharma O Communism*, publishing details not available (torn), p. 56.

[145] 'Samvad Samgraha', *Adhikar*, Bhadra, 1927, p. 11

[146] 'Bangiya Mahishya Samitir Ekatringsha Barshik Sadharan Adhibeshane Sabhapatir Abhibhashan', *Mahishya Samaj*, Baisakh, 1336 BS, 1929, p. 3.

[147] "Today our people must become mad in thousands", Srimati Sitadebi, 'Amader Sadhana', *Tambuli Patrika*, 1324-25 BS, 1917-18, p. 340. This was somewhat akin to the Aristotelian understanding of

the cult of the superman and appeals for the *cultivation* of exemplary virtue. My engagement with this factor has inflected the overall tenor of the study. All four chapters cumulatively attempt to bring out how it conditioned the peculiar nature of articulation (or lack of it, in the institutional sense) of caste in Bengal's politics of the twentieth century.

A note on sources and method

The backbone of this study consists of a repertoire of 'small texts', or 'humble texts', that floated in the vernacular public sphere of early twentieth century Bengal. These are part of the 'caste-literature', but these also include other kinds of writings, reflections on society, that would not fall under the catalogue of 'caste-literature'. Periodical literature including essays, reports, poetry and fiction, and tracts, pamphlets, histories and autobiographies constitute these 'small texts'. It engages with archival sources. Caste petitions and memorials throw light on how caste associations sought recognition of their claimed Varna status or exclusive names from the 'ethnographic state'; else, they bring out how lower castes looked forward to government patronage. They confirm the theories of Sanskritization and Westernization. In the light of these petitions, caste movements become nothing more than efforts at positional improvement by counter-elites. While that was certainly part of the story[148], caste-petitions are of little help to understand how caste-subalterns spoke to their internal audiences, how they interrogated and reflected on the larger value structure of society and on the genesis of caste, or their persistent dilemmas of *belonging*. Archives tell us about historical events; but all which did not become important events in history find little place in official archives. Yet these constitute the material of our everyday cultures, inequalities, struggles and conflicts. I have also included interviews in this research. My purpose has been to engage with visions and perceptions – as reflected mostly in writings and, occasionally, speech – of contemporary leaders and organizers of caste-associations. This has involved some

'good life' or the realm of the political as marked by transcendence of self-interest. "For too great a love of life obstructed freedom – and was a sure sign of slavishness" Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 36-37.

[148] Within each caste, there were voices urging against Sanskritizing mores and pretensions to Shastric high status.

degree of moving backwards and forwards in time in this study. History, as E. H. Carr observed, is but "an unending dialogue between the present and the past".[149] And if there are facts that I have not detailed, that is mostly because existing historiography has done justice to them. Further, the historian's selection and interpretation of 'facts' are always only provisional.[150]

A brief note on the chapters

The first chapter studies the range of vocabularies and meanings that were organizing reflections on caste in the early twentieth century. Caste was more complex than just inequality and discrimination. It came to be construed as an entire metaphysic. Caste-subalterns brusquely elbowed their way through these constructions by asserting themselves as agents capable of autonomous judgment. But, even as they dissected the 'Brahman' and exposed the inhumanity of caste, their own defiant reconstructions of the metaphysic delegitimized social war and enjoined heavy moral burdens on the self.

The second chapter explores the nature of social/political consciousness that identity-mobilizations of caste brought in their wake in twentieth century Bengal. It takes up the case of the Mahishyas. If existing historiography has noted the 'assimilationist' aspect of the Mahishya movement and its elitist inflections, my work seeks to balance it by foregrounding its equally constant dimension of dissent. It ventures to suggest why, despite dissent as well as an unbroken movement through the twentieth century, this intermediate-caste movement remains invisible as a distinct political force in the state.

The third chapter looks at one 'Intermediate and Suppressed Castes' formation of the 1940s/50s. A range of castes, belonging officially to the Caste Hindu category, developed a distinctive and combative stance vis-à-vis the Caste Hindu. The nature of this middling-caste ideological stance, hardly known to the highbrow Bengali public, is revealed not through caste-literature alone. The broader identity is palpable in a

[149] E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (first published in 1961) Second Edition, London: Penguin Books, 1987, p. 30.

[150] *Ibid.*

variety of genres of writings where the different castes came together or spoke an identifiable voice.

The fourth chapter takes up the self-respect movement of an ‘untouchable’ community. It studies the moment of the *Bangiya Jana Samgha* with its potential for a broad popular mobilization against caste-power. It draws attention to some of the core constituents of ideology and aspirations within this Dalit vision that were destined to work against the stable congealment of a Dalit ‘alternative’ in the politics of the state.

Chapter 1

Analysing the Brahman: Purity and its Imperatives

By the late nineteenth century, educated Hindus knew that caste invited censure from many quarters. In the 1820s, Rammohun Roy blamed it for depriving Indians of patriotic feeling. Sibnath Shastri, a Brahmo, chastised *jatibhed* in an 1884 speech delivered to an audience of two thousand people.[1] Some Brahmos gave up the sacred thread and, even though some like Bijoykrishna Goswami re-adopted it, ripples had been sent through educated society. Missionary-cum-colonial discourse was often sharply critical of caste. The Reverend M. A. Sherring described caste, in 1872, as "intensely selfish" and as "the sworn enemy to human happiness".[2] At the other end, heretic faiths repudiating caste-hierarchy were not entirely cut-off from educated circles. Deviant religious orders like the Kartabhaja, while they invited a wholesome low-caste following, were also visited by quite a few enthusiastic, rather curious, middle-class persons.[3] A rethinking of religion, following the mid-nineteenth century Brahmo and missionary critiques, had boosted an open, often vigorous, circulation of spiritual ideas across social lines. The Sahajiya Tantrik tradition – which disregarded caste – had, in particular, drawn curious interest.

On the other hand, caste came to *stand for India* by the late nineteenth century. Undoubtedly, as Nicholas Dirks has shown, it was the construction of a nineteenth century Orientalism.[4] But the construction was a formidable one. Caste was represented in colonial discourse – and came to be seen by Indian elites – as "the essential religious basis of Indian society".[5] As Dirks observed, Herbert Hope Risley,

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[1] Sibnath Shastri, *Jatibhed*, Calcutta, 1884, ed. Dilip Kumar Biswas, Calcutta: Sadharan Bhahmo Samaj, 1963, Editor's Introduction, pp. 62-63, 40-49. Cited in Sumit Sarkar, 'Identity and Difference: Caste in the Formation of the Ideologies of Nationalism and Hindutva', *Writing Social History*, Delhi: Oxford University Press (henceforth, OUP), 1997, p. 365.

[2] M. A. Sherring, *Hindu Tribes and Castes*, 1872; New Delhi, 1974, pp. 274-296, cited in Nicholas B. Dirks, 'Castes of Mind', *Representations*, No. 37, Special Issue: Imperial Fantasies and Post-Colonial Histories, 1992, p. 67.

[3] Report in *Samvad Prabhakar*, 18 December, 1847, in Benoy Ghosh ed. *Samayik Patre Banglar Samajchitra*, Calcutta: Papyrus, 1978, p. 136.

[4] Dirks, 'Castes of Mind'.

[5] *Ibid*., p. 60

the colonial ethnographer and administrator, who studied extensively the tribes and castes of Bengal, was "challenged for his racial bias", but not for his overall view that caste "formed the *cement* that holds together the myriad units of Indian society", and that withdrawing its essential ties would be like withdrawing the "elemental force" from Hindu society.[6] Caste was seen as *uniting* difference. Jogendranath Bhattacharya[7] wrote in 1896 that caste was valuable for it provided "bonds of union between races and clans".[8] In Tagore's unforgettable words of 1902, "What is the distinctive spirit of our country? Where lies its soul? ...we are vast, but not detached". And how has India been able to accomplish this unity amidst *vast* differences?

> India classified and chastened all competing social forces to unite them in society, which would thus be capable of diverse actions. India did not allow the overreaching of one's *adhikar*. She, thereby, subdued the spirit of contention and strife.[9]

Thus, the soul of India lay in restraining and containing the will to power. The root word was *sanjam*, meaning self-restraint. Gandhi, later, called this the "soul-force". "Even the armed warrior pays obeisance to the Brahmin".[10] In ideal terms, the Brahman represented the pinnacle of this soul-force, otherwise defined as 'purity'. This was the ideology of caste – not very different from Louis Dumont's later characterization of it, except that, here, 'inclusion' was emphasized over

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[6] *Ibid*., p. 69.

[7] Bhattacharya combined in his person the traditional Brahman *Pandit* or pedant and the modern educated Brahman. He was educated at the University of Calcutta. He was the head of the Nadia College of Pandits, which provided authoritative rulings on Hindu tradition. He was also the head of the Bengal Brahman Sabha.

[8] Jogendranath Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects; an exposition of the origin of the Hindu caste system and the bearing of the sects towards each other and towards other religious systems*, Calcutta: Thacker, Spink, 1896, Firma, KLM, 1968, pp. 4, 10, 11. Cited in Sumit Sarkar, 'Identities and Histories', *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002, p. 57.

[9] *Bharatbarsher Itihas*, Bhadra, 1902, in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Centenary Edition, Dvadas Khanda (Vol. 12) Calcutta: Government of West Bengal, 1961, p. 1029.

[10] M. K. Gandhi, 'Satyagraha – Not Passive Resistance' (1917), cited in Aishwary Kumar, *Radical Equality: Ambedkar, Gandhi and the Risk of Democracy*, California: Stanford University Press, 2015, p. 184.

'hierarchization'[11] – that had consolidated itself within colonial sociology as well as Indian upper-caste thought by the early twentieth century. It was left unharmed by the censure for caste-arrogance that came from different quarters because all those targeted the *non-ideological* aspects of caste, as it were. Even the Nadia pandit Jogendranath Bhattacharya, otherwise a defender of caste-as-concept, had no regard for the scriptural explanations of caste-degradation like *varnasamkara*, as these assumed "an unlikely knowledge of irregular marriage and illicit sexual intercourse".[12] Indian society, in its existing form, was far from perfect – it was acknowledged – yet its "distinctive conceptions"[13] merited attention. In other words, caste spelt divisiveness in society as it was oblivious of its *core* conceptions.

The 'inferior' castes, as they gradually made themselves felt in the early twentieth century public, interrogated this religious principle of caste. Significantly, caste, which was seen in colonial-cum-upper-caste sociology as uniting 'basic' differences, was seen by the inferior-caste sociologist as "a parceling of an already homogeneous unit".[14] In other words, the Shudra necessarily refuted the notion of 'basic' difference that underlay the theory of compartmentalized *adhikar*. The root questions that moved her/him were: Who is the Brahman? What constitutes purity? Must *adhikar* – overreaching which was un-Indian, as it were, – relate to birth? "Why can't the tanner's son be a Brahman, mother", asks Amal, a Brahman boy (in a story authored

[11] Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (1966) held that the religious domain in India encompassed the secular domains of politics and economy. The King, though powerful, is inferior to, and encompassed by the Brahman. Dumont's oft-quoted words being, 'Hinduism hierarchizes and includes', *Homo Hierarchicus,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. I find Dumont's distinction between the 'ideological' and the 'non-ideological' useful in the context of the reconstruction of caste in early twentieth century Bengal: "the more conscious or valorized from the less conscious or valorized", p. 232; also cited in Dirks, 'Castes of Mind', p. 57.

[12] Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, pp. 3-4, cited in Sarkar, 'Identities and Histories', p. 57. *Varnasamkara* is the scriptural theory of mixed castes, evinced to explain the existence of the numerous *jatis* and their relation to the four-fold Varna order. A Namasudra tract writer around 1910 made the same point as Jogendranath Bhattacharya: "But how could the ancient law-givers know, he reasoned, who was entering whose room secretly at night to produce which particular child?" Sekhar Bandyopadhyay cites this tract authored by Sashikumar Badoi Biswas (*Namasudra Dwijatattva*, Barisal, 1317 BS, 1910, pp. 17, 33-34) in 'Beginnings of Social Protest and Construction of the Community, c 1872-1905', *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947*, Second Edition, Delhi: OUP, 2011, p. 47.

[13] Sir Henry Cotton's expression quoted by H. H. Risley in *The People of India*, London, 1909, p. 282, cited in Dirks, 'Castes of Mind', p. 71.

[14] B. R. Ambedkar, 'Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development', *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. XLI, May, 1917, reprinted in *The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar*, ed. Valerian Rodrigues, Delhi: OUP, 2002, p. 243.

by Birendranath Sashmal, the well-known Mahishya), whose friend Ramkrishna, the tanner's son, is but the best boy at school.[15] The core of caste-protest lay in questioning pollution and spiritual degradation – even though, these were merely "cultural constructions"[16] of social, economic and political power.[17] Even the 1872 Namasudra protest in eastern Bengal, which took an "agrarian-cum-class dimension",[18] was primarily driven by the hurt of pollution. Kayasthas had refused to accept a well-to-do Chandal's invitation and to dine in his house. The farm servants were persuaded to strike by their better-off community men, whose main grievance was that the upper castes did not accept food and water from their hands.[19] Fifty years later, when the Namasudras were well into claiming material and political rights, they continued to target the scriptural injunctions that cardinally denied the Shudra the realm of the soul:

> In the Smritishastras, there is a list of rights denied to the Shudra. 'Do not bestow knowledge upon the Shudra...do not give him/her religious instruction...he who tells the Shudra about religion or austerities is destined to go to hell.' Medhatithi, the commentator, explained the *sloka* by saying that it is forbidden to give advice to the Shudra in matters both of this-world and the other-world and that the Shudra did not have the right to access the Vedas and the Smritis. Another commentator said that the Shudra must not be given instruction in ethics...Six kinds of acts are sinful for the woman and the Shudra. They are: meditation on the name of God, spiritual austerities (*tapasya*), pilgrimage,

[15] Birendranath Sashmal, *Amal O Ramkrishna*, in Swadeshranjan Mandal (ed.) *Deshapran Birendranath Sashmal Rachanabali*, Calcutta: Shiropa, 2014, pp. 137-143.

[16] Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 5.

[17] That is the reason lower caste protest has often sought reprieve in alternative religion.

[18] For the use of this expression, see Sarkar, 'Identities and Histories', p. 47.

[19] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, pp. 34-35.

> asceticism, recital of spiritual incantations and worshipping God.[20]

And, Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) began by squarely reminding his audience about Hinduism's ascription of innate spiritual inadequacy to the 'inferior'-caste: Is not the Hindu forbidden to receive lessons from the *antyaja*, even if the latter is well versed?[21]

In Bengal, as Sumit Sarkar argued, the centrality that caste acquired in public discourse was sharp and sudden from around the turn of the century. It was undoubtedly related to "a spate of lower-caste affirmations".[22] Literacy had slowly but significantly spread and as Jogendranath Bhattacharya noted in 1896, the "occupational bases of caste distinctions had become very porous".[23] The historian Hitesranjan Sanyal observed that the decline of the indigenous system of production had condensed caste largely to notions of purity and pollution, which now appeared starker than ever.[24] If the religious reconstruction of caste happened under colonial rule as now "caste was disembodied from its former political contexts",[25] caste as a social form was also getting slowly disembodied from its traditional imbrication with socio-economic processes. Enumerative practices of the state had made strident a consciousness of identity. But, caste 'uplift' movements, as Sumit Sarkar pointed out, had indeed preceded "the official attempt to adjudicate jati hierarchies".[26]

In the early years of the twentieth century, one observes a remarkably common emphasis by the Indian elite on a routine list of Shudra saints, who "rose to the level

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[20] *Adhikar* (ed. Revatimohan Sarkar, Rasiklal Biswas, Saratchandra Majumdar, Madhavchandra Biswas, Jogendranath Sarkar) Sravan, 1334 BS, 1927, p. 10.

[21] B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, annotated by S. Anand, Verso, 2014.

[22] Sarkar, 'Identity and Difference', p. 376. "One rough indicator of changing times are the classified catalogues of printed Bengali tracts in the India Office Library. Only 24 entries are listed under the 'Castes and Tribes' heading for the entire period up to 1905; the years from 1905 to 1920, in sharp contrast, include 140 titles, the vast majority of them written by, or in support of, lower caste claims." *Ibid.*

[23] Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, pp. 4-10.

[24] Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*, Calcutta: Papyrus, 1981, p. 32.

[25] Dirks, 'Castes of Mind', p. 61.

[26] Sarkar, 'Identity and Difference', p. 377.

of Godhead".[27] The typical list comprised the Savari and Guhaka Chandal from the Ramayana, the Chandal guru of Sankara, the non-Brahmana preceptor of the Vaishnavite philosopher Ramanuja, Nanda the Pariah, "who became the preceptor of the proud Brahmin who would have kicked him to the dust",[28] Chokha Mela Mahar, Sajan Kasai, the Asura Prahlad ("no name stands in higher estimation than that of Prahlad in our Puranic legends"[29]) and a few others. It was as if caste-elites hastened to placate the agony of the caste-subaltern, whose assertions, even head-on oppositions to upper-castes, were steadily gaining in confidence. As already mentioned, the notion of spiritual degradation tied to 'impurity' hurt the caste-subaltern. Like the Orientalists, who exoticized India by emphasizing the 'spiritual basis' of caste, caste-subalterns emphasised the spiritual aspect to speak of the exceptional cruelty of caste and its difference from any other principle organising social classes. On the other side, caste elites found it easier to allow a generous redefinition of piety, drawing heavily from *bhakti* traditions, to mollify the protesting 'inferior'-caste political subject. Of course, they did not want to immediately dine with the Pariah, for it would be misguided, they knew, to "lump…together" the "clean and dirty alike".[30] They expected (or hoped) that "the high and the rich need not be afraid of losing the services of the low and the poor"[31] and that "distinctions in some shape or another will always remain in this country as in others in all ages".[32] And they were alarmed by the colonial officialdom's increasing concern for safeguarding the interests of 'backward' sections of the population (some such concessions had been already extended to the Muslims in the first decade of the twentieth century). The Indian elite's only national as well as social hope lay in convincing the offended

[27] For the use of this expression, see V. Krishnaswami Aiyar, Speech delivered at a public meeting held in Madras in December, 1911. Reprinted in Rajendra Singh Vatsa (ed.), *The Depressed Classes of India, An Enquiry into their Conditions and Suggestions for their Uplift* (originally published under the name The Depressed Classes by G. A. Natesan in 1912), New Delhi: Gitanjali Prakashan, p. 126.

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] T. V. Seshagiri Aiyar, Essay in *The Indian Review*, June, 1910, reprinted in *The Depressed Classes of India*, p. 56.

[30] *Ibid.* See Annie Besant's piece in the same volume.

[31] Babu Sarada Charan Mitra, Essay in *The Indian Review*, October, 1910, *The Depressed Classes of India*, p. 84.

[32] Justice N. G. Chandavarkar, Speech delivered in public meeting in December, 1911 at Framji Cowasji Institute, reprinted in *The Depressed Classes of India*, p. 118.

'low'-castes that the Brahmanic fold "in its best and purest aspects"[33] was elastic; that it always gave high place "to the pure in heart and the self-less".[34] This, however, signalled the birth of a new critical discussion on caste.

In Bengal, we find Bijoykrishna Goswami, the erstwhile Brahmo who turned to polytheistic worship and Puranic religion, telling his disciples the story of the Savari as early as in 1885, significantly just after he re-adopted the sacred thread. This was thus a moment of a reconstituted Brahmanism that had emerged stronger after absorbing the salient aspects of the mid-nineteenth-century critiques of caste. Bijoykrishna also converted to conservative Brahmanism some men like Satish Chandra Mukherjee, the eminent nationalist and founder of the Dawn Society, who, early in life, had also renounced the sacred thread. A brief account of the story of the Savari will give us the gist of, roughly, all these stories of Shudra-saints. Bijoykrishna took it from Tulsidas's Ramayana. It was the story of a 'low'-born woman, who secretly cleaned the path that the sages would take to go to the river. While all the sages humiliated her, there was one kind-hearted sage who taught her the name of Lord Rama. Many years later, when Rama visited the Panchavati Forest, he was moved by the Savari's devotion which was "rare even among saints". The arrogant sages, on the other hand, were admonished by Rama who said that, for all their learning, they had remained away from God. Bijoykrishna, during this time, had been telling a number of tales of Shudras, Chandals and Asuras, who 'realised God'. He told the story of Bharata and Guhaka Chandal. Bharata's (Rama's brother) holiness lay in touching the feet of the pious Chandal, Guhaka.[35]

Bijoykrishna, then, was anticipating in 1885 one important trope that would structure the contours of caste-discourse in the early twentieth century. We must not underestimate how deeply these evocations struck the chord with even some highly assertive low-caste groups. Kisan Faguji Bansode was a Dalit leader in Maharashtra of the pre-Ambedkarite era. He was sharply assertive about a non-Aryan identity and

[33] G. A. Natesan, Editor of *The Indian Review*, Presidential Address delivered at the Second session of the Depressed Classes Conference, held at Madras, on July 8, 1911, reprinted in *The Depressed Classes of India*, p. 185.

[34] T. V. Seshagiri Aiyar, *The Depressed Classes of India*, p. 56.

[35] *Srimadacharya Bijoykrishna Goswami Mahodayer Baktrita O Upadesh*, Dacca, Purba Bangala Brahma Mandir, 15 Aghrahayan, Sunday, 1292 BS, 1885, (publication details unclear as the front pages are missing) pp. 5, 11-12.

about the torture to which conquering Aryans, in the ancient past, subjected the original inhabitants of the country. "We are no longer your subjects…we are not your slaves or serfs", he used to tell the Caste-Hindu in the early years of the twentieth century. But he later turned to devotion to the Mahar saint Chokha Mela, and thereby identified with Hinduism.[36] Even Ambedkar dedicated his work, *The Untouchables: Who were They and Why they became Untouchables?* to "the memory of Nandnar, Ravidas, Chokhamela, three renowned saints who were born among the untouchables and who by their piety and virtue won the esteem of all".[37]

To pick up the thread that connects the above discussion with what will follow in this chapter, note how close-knit a conversation was developing between caste-elites and caste-subalterns in the early years of the twentieth century. The interweaving of these conflicting discourses forms the subject-matter of the present chapter. The reconstituted pro-Brahmanical discourse let loose a fibre, that always had a tremendous appeal to the caste-subaltern. It was that birth did not foreclose merit. In the spiritual realm, this notion was as old as the *bhakti* traditions. Yet its vigorous re-invocation connected to the demands of the times and the caste-subaltern, in modern India, took the notion of merit beyond the spiritual, while including the spiritual. That India was going through "a twilight time"[38] became a general observation – talks of a "tide in the affairs of men",[39] as they burgeoned, generated a turbulence far exceeding the notions and estimates of the elite speakers. On the other hand, the revolutionary caste-subaltern, however much he flared up in rage and agony from time to time, was mostly hesitant to appear 'haughty' or self-serving. The reconstructed *ideology* of caste had marked certain forms of individualistic affirmations as distasteful to the very soul of India.

The Shudra saints were but docile. They did not attempt to overstep their territories. But the early twentieth century caste-subaltern radically redefined his

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[36] Gail Omvedt, *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011, p. 40.

[37] B. R. Ambedkar, *The Untouchables: Who were they and Why they became Untouchables*? New Delhi: Amrit Book Company, 1948.

[38] Babu Sarada Charan Mitra, *The Depressed Classes of India*, p. 84.

[39] Ambika Charan Majumdar, Essay in *The Indian Review*, January 1910, reprinted in *The Depressed Classes of India*, p. 22.

territory. The Shastras were now in print. The cognitive freedom that print brought in through the dissemination of scripture was revolutionary, something that contemporaries remarked about.[40] The Shudra could now expose the "riddles in Hinduism".[41] If he was apparently less defiant, he certainly masked his assertion by claiming to redeem the Brahman ('*brahmanoddhar*' becoming a common trope). "Sometimes the *sishya* redeems the Guru", wrote one Tili writer in 1925.[42] It inverted the Brahman's traditional claim to redeem spiritually imperfect others. Caste-subalterns were thus conspicuously participating in the "restructuring of traditional religion" on which "the entire intellectual life of society depended" in late colonial times.[43]

The assertion of Varna claims was related to these intellectual analyses. The colonial state, by giving an "enhanced" importance to Varna status and ritual precedence in its judicial administration, and even in matters of granting public appointments, provoked the Indian concern with Varna status and caste mythological/ethnological questions. Lucy Carroll powerfully argued that it would be misleading to conclude from the "narrow sample" of census petitions that the caste associations' "goals, values and objectives were 'Sanskritic'". She found that "several of the petitions commenced by decrying the idea of social classification" altogether. The Census authorities, she said, "made the rules" of the game; "players came forward – many only after they found they could not get the game cancelled."[44]

Claims of good pedigree and performance of ritual were enmeshed with emphases on effort. The latter unleashed an abstract, universal dimension to the claims. As

[40] Digindranarayan Bhattacharya, on the change brought about by print, "The Shastras are no more confined to the iron-chest of the Brahman…" – Bhattacharya, *Hindur Nabajagaran*, Calcutta, 1338 BS, 1931, pp. 45-48.

[41] I borrow from Ambedkar's use of the expression in his *Riddles in Hinduism*, posthumously published in 1987. Narendra Jadhav ed. *Ambedkar Writes*, Vol. II: Scholarly Writings, New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 2014, p. 511.

[42] 'Purano Chithi' (letter from Sri Sahaji to Ajitkumar Mallik on 25 Kartik, 1331 BS, 1924) in *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika*, Aghrayan, Paush, 1332 BS, Calcutta, 1925, p. 37. For the ritual status of Tilis, see Introduction.

[43] Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Modernity and Politics in India', *Daedalus*, Vol. 129, No. 1, Multiple Modernities, Winter, 2000, p. 146.

[44] Lucy Carroll, 'Colonial Perceptions of Indian Society and the Emergence of Caste(s) Associations', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2, Feb., 1978, pp. 233-250.

Manindranath Mandal, a Paundra-cum-Dalit leader put it, "To claim high birth is ridiculous in the present day. Everybody is a Shudra by birth. The quality of *dwijatva*, that of the 'twice born', is no more given. It can only be earned through effort ("*ekhonkar dwijatva arjaner samagri*")."[45] Further, it could sometimes be a call to become all three Varnas at the same time. "The western peoples have developed the qualities of the three Varnas together".[46] Here was an affinity with elite thought, which recognized that the rejuvenation of the Brahman and of Hinduism required broad-based efforts. "The Brahman would rise only when the others rose to Dwijas".[47] In accord, the caste-subaltern would just add – with barely concealed banter – that the Brahman otherwise (and presently) was no better than "the bigshot calf within a colony of sheep" ("*bherar modhye bachur pramanik*").[48] This can be called the Vivekananda moment in Bengal's social history, marked by a cross-caste general observation that the awakening of the Shudra could alone regenerate the 'Brahman Dharma'.

The present chapter is divided into three sections. The first discusses how Varnasrama came to be redefined by those who defended it. It shows how the emerging ethic of *samya* or egalitarianism got entangled with it. The second section spools out the various threads of articulation on the relation between Varna and birth; between merit and individual effort. The third explores the imperatives that a counter-claim to spiritual prowess carried with it. If the lower castes appropriated the role of analysing the Brahman, it became incumbent upon them to live up to the standards of

[45] Manindranath Mandal, *Bangiya Jana Samgha, Bengal People's Association*, Midnapur, Khejuri, 1330 BS, 1923, p. 24.

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] Rabindranath Tagore, *Brahman*, 1902, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Dvadas Khanda, Centenary Edition, p. 1040. Tagore's writings around 1902 capture less of Tagore but more of the generalised sentiments that would prevail in society for a much longer time. He welcomed the popular surge for Dwijahood, observing that it would be a correction of Hindu society that was non-derivative and authentic. "All of society is restless today to retrieve the glory of ancient Dwijahood; its growing signs inspire a hope in the heart. There was a time when we tried to conceal and reject our Hinduism – with that attempt, we used to religiously visit the Chandni markets and the porticos at Chowringhee. Now if we have desired to become the Brahman, the Kshatriya and the Vaishya, if we have sought to cultivate ourselves without forsaking pride in our heritage, it is a great day for us. We do not want to become *firingees*, we want to be Dwijas." *Ibid.*, p. 1044.

[48] 'Samajik Hinata O Uhar Pratikarer Upay', *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika*, Aghrahayan, 1336 BS, 1929, p. 19.

'spiritual adequacy' defined by themselves. Assertion of the right to adjudicate norms of purity brought with it the burden of cultivating a self-denying ethics.

Varnasrama as *Samya*

However paradoxical it may sound, there was a trend of philosophising Varnasrama in late-colonial Bengal, until well into the middle of the twentieth century, as *the only mode* of reaching a universal plane of fundamental equality. It is necessary to look into this mode of enunciation because the basic concepts it worked with had a very widespread impact on society as a whole and for a considerably long time. To put it in a nutshell, the idea was that a complete surrender of vanity and self-interest was possible only by internalising the core philosophy of Varnasrama dharma. Thinkers like Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907), a Hindu Brahman-turned-Catholic, made a distinct logical connection between the following: the design of Varnasrama, desire-less action, the transcendence of worldly distinctions and the realisation of the supreme oneness of everything – *ekamevadvitiyam*. The last would translate into a metaphysically-oriented social ethic that saw the Brahman and the Chandal as ultimately equal. In this discourse, the worth of the Brahman lay in his non-possessiveness, voluntary poverty and absolute humility (*abhiman barjan*).

In a lecture delivered before a foreign audience, Swami Vivekananda spoke about how his '*Acharyadeva*' or preceptor, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, endeavoured to transcend caste pride.[49] He said that as the first step towards God-realization, Ramakrishna aspired to free himself from vanity that created the world of distinctions. He sought to perceive a fundamental likeness ("*samatva*") with the lowest castes. This was to uproot all traces of conceit as a high-born Brahman ("*jatyabhiman*"). Vivekananda described how his Guru deliberately ate from the leftovers of the Chandal and the Methar and subsequently cleaned those places. To convey the significance of this act to his foreign audience, Vivekananda explained that in ancient law books called the Smriti, the Brahman was forbidden even to see the face of the Chandal. Vivekananda described his Guru as '*Brahmanottama*' or the most ideal

[49] 'Madiya Acharyadeva' in *Swami Vivekanander Bani O Rachana*, Calcutta: Udbodhan Karyalaya, 1994, p. 302.

Brahman, who did not follow Shastric injunctions mechanically.[50] The idea was the same as in Bijoykrishna's story where the holy sage acknowledged the low-born Savari as a holy equal, or in his recital of how Bharata, potentially the king of Ayodhya, touched the feet of Guhaka Chandal, forgetting worldly distinctions. In all these narrations and lectures, the Brahmanic concept of *sattvika* impeccability consisted in perceiving the essential identity and equivalence of all things and beings. As Sumit Sarkar grasped the sentiment and its social implication: "caste was irrelevant at the highest levels of Vedantic jnana and sannyas: being unimportant, no effort was needed to attack it in everyday practice".[51] Thus, reformers could be repudiated for creating 'unnecessary' noise.

It was from the worldly plane of material ambitions, argued a tract called *Varnasramadharma* by one Baradakanta Majumdar, that hierarchy of ranks and classes became perceptible.[52] Majumdar's caste is unclear; but it does not seem that he belonged to any of the three upper castes. This vindication of Varnasrama was remarkable for being authored by someone from the lower castes. Howeverm Majumdar was typical of his times in arguing that from the "golden peak of spirituality" ("*paramarthik himachaler kanchansringa*") that sanctioned Varnasrama, the Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra could not be perceived as unequal to one another. He cited an oft-quoted *sloka* which amounted to saying that in the eyes of those who possessed spiritual truth, the cow, the elephant, the dog, the Chandal and the knowledgeable-yet-modest Brahman were ultimately all the same.[53] Gandhi had expressed the same idea in 1921 by stating that the Brahman, to be legitimately identified as a Brahman, should know that he and the *harijan* were equal to each other

[50] However, "a joke he (Ramakrishna) made was resented as an instance of high-caste prejudice by a Teli devotee". Sumit Sarkar, 'Kaliyuga, Chakri and Bhakti', *Writing Social History*, New Delhi: OUP, 1997, p. 327.

[51] *Ibid.*

[52] Baradakanta Majumdar, *Varnasramadharma: Arthat Jatibheder Gudha Tatparya Bibriti*, Calcutta: Metcalfe Press, 1308 BS, 1901, p. 188. His work indicates that he belonged to one of the merchant castes, probably Subarnabanik or Gandhabanik.

[53] *Ibid.*

and also with the animal and God.[54] Worldly distinctions, again in this scheme, need not be interfered with.

Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, whose real name was Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay, provided a very coherent philosophical treatise on the precise connection between the design of the institution of Varnasrama and the realisation of supreme oneness (*abheda*). His tract *Samaj* remains undated. But his way of writing suggests that it was written sometime around 1902-1903 when he took a lot of interest in Vedanta, in the Hindu caste codes and an examination of their worth, and even undertook a trip to England to defend Hindu philosophy and society. Bhavani had gone through several transformations: he had passed from the Brahmo Samaj movement through Protestantism into Catholicism. His name Brahmabandab was a Sanskritised form of Theophilus, meaning 'a friend of the Supreme Being'. He omitted that part of his family surname that signified glory ('Bandya', meaning, 'the praised one') so as to remove all traces of self-conceit but kept the other part of the surname ('Upadhyay', meaning, 'a teacher') that denoted his hereditary caste vocation.[55]

Reflections on 'caste' were reflections on 'India', as caste was seen in colonial modernity as "the basic form and expression of Indian society".[56] Was India all about hierarchy and discrimination? A chapter in Upadhyay's treatise, *Samaj*, was devoted to examining the ethic of the design of Varnasrama. Upadhyay asserted that Varnasrama was the only possible social arrangement that could make possible two conflicting things at the same time: regular material activity that strove towards perfection, and complete indifference towards enjoyment of the fruits of such strenuous activity. Productive action, in its struggle for perfection, cumulated vanity in the individual self as well as a craving for subsequent enjoyment of the fruits of one's labour. That craving, Upadhyay pointed out, could lead to infinite greed. But

[54] M. K. Gandhi, "Speech at Suppressed Classes Conference", Ahmedabad, 27 April, 1921, in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi Online*, New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1999, Vol. 23, p. 45; originally published in *Young India*, 27 April and 4 may, 1921. Cited in Aishwary Kumar, *Radical Equality*, p. 182.

[55] Editorial in *Sophia*, December 1894. Important secondary sources: Brahmachari Animananda, *The Blade: Life and Work of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay*, Calcutta: Roy and Son, not dated, Haridas Mukhopadhyay and Uma Mukhopadhyay, *Upadhyay Brahmabandhab*, Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1961, Ashis Nandy, *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 60-61.

[56] Dirks, 'Castes of Mind', p. 56.

the institution of *ashrama-dharma* made it essential that, after a youthful life of service, men and women had to retire to the forest as hermits, in the stage of *vanaprastha*, leaving all claims to rewards and returns that their services might have brought. This condition engendered a stoicism that restrained greed. Upadhyay explained that the impetus to action, despite this indifference towards enjoyment, came from a heightened sense of '*kulamaryada*', the honour of the clan, and '*kaulik dharma*', the ancestral calling.[57] And this sense of *kulamaryada*, in his view, applied to all castes and clans.

This was, at the same time, his justification for the institution of hereditary professions central to caste and his vision of how the "Aryan sages" sought to temper *rajas* with *sattva*. According to traditional Indian thought, *rajas* is the primal quality of action-oriented-ness and *sattva* the primal quality of knowledge. Upadhyay argued that Varnasrama was the only possible way of making *rajah* compliant to *sattva* ("*rajogunke sattvanujayi kara*") thereby making possible a single-minded devotion to the 'ultimate Being' ("*ekanishthata*") transcending the world of distinctions.[58] He was not exceptional in garnering concepts and expressions from the Upanishads as well as from Sankaracharya's version of Vedantic '*advaitavada*' or monism. The Upanishadic expressions and ideas which were present in Upadhyay's tract enjoyed a general currency during the first half of the early twentieth century. The most prominent among these were '*ekamevadvitiyam*' and '*bhuma*', roughly connoting the idea of a merger of the egotistic self with the 'only reality'. The other concepts in vogue were those from the Ishopanishad that recommended the virtue of sacrifice and cautioned against greed.[59]

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[57] Upadhyay Brahmabandhab, 'Varnasrama Dharma' in *Samaj*, Calcutta: Barman Publishing House, not dated, p. 60. Tagore, during these times, expressed very similar views and justified the fixing of definite boundaries or compartments of *adhikar* thus: "Commerce is a social necessity. If a community adopts this essential social function as its own vocation, and as its own rich *kaulik* heritage, then commercialization may not swallow the other faculties of society." *Brahman*, p. 1042.

[58] *Ibid*., pp. 73-74.

[59] This is a certain strand of Vedantic philosophy that can be traced to Upanishadic thought. '*Ekamevadvitiyam*', found in Chandogya Upanishad, is the idea of monism: that there is one eternal reality in the universe; this Supreme reality is *atman* or soul or Brahma. '*Bhuma*', found in the Taittiriya Upanishad, connotes the same concept. '*Yo bai bhuma tat sukham nalpe sukhamasti*': that, 'bliss consists in transcending the narrow limits of little selves and identifying with the eternal reality.' Like '*bhuma*', another Upanishadic phrase that found frequent use in early twentieth century Bengali writings was '*tena tyaktena bhunjitha*'. It was part of the following lines from the Ishopanishad: '*isa vasyamidam sarvam/ yat kinca jagatyam jagat/ tena tyaktena bhunjitha/ ma grdhah kasya sviddhanam*'

It is significant that a defence of Varnasrama was possible during these times only in terms of a philosophy of *samatva* (equivalence/parity). Upanishadic concepts like *ekamevadvitiyam* helped because they could be cited to argue that Indian thought was not all about distinction or discrimination – that Indian thought offered an alternative vision of equality. The alternative vision was that, a merger with the Supreme Being would do away with individual possessiveness ("*bhumananda*", as Upadhyay explained). And, non-possessiveness could be the only means to meaningful equality.

Traditional metaphysical ideas like '*bhuma*' – in particular – found extensive mention in textual productions of early twentieth century Bengal. It is not surprising that those who defended Varnasrama would invoke a philosophy of non-possessiveness and talk about '*bhuma*'. But it is rather curious that those who were arguing against 'tradition' for a freer, more liberal future were also talking about '*bhuma*'. The well-known writer Saratchandra Chattopadhyay noted this over-extensive use of '*bhuma*' in contemporary writings of all sorts.[60] Let us cite just one instance from the sources we use in this chapter. One Tili writer, Sri Sahaji, was critical of traditional social institutions for their oppressiveness. He criticised ritualistic gestures like the adoption of the sacred thread. He argued in favour of widow-remarriage and inter-caste marriage. He was keen to propagate that too much of an investment in the other-world ('*paralok*') was not in-keeping with the mood of the times. Even while he argued that a community need not look for its ideals only in its past traditions, Sahaji suggested that the universal ideal should be '*bhuma*'.[61] Frequently he insisted that 'self-sacrifice' was the key to the progress of the community. So even those who were bent on a future unencumbered by restrictions of

('all that is moving in the universe is pervaded by the supreme divine principle; get pleasure by giving away; forsake greed since the possession of property is a delusion').

[60] Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, 'Narir Lekha' ('Woman's Writing') in *Yamuna*, 1319 BS, 1912, 'Guru Sishya Sambad' in *Yamuna*, 1320 BS, 1913 in Sukumar Sen (ed.) *Sulabh Saratsamagra*, Vol. 2, Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1989, pp. 2077-2080, 1974-75. Saratchandra's particular target was a new genre of writings by women and subaltern groups who were talking about emancipation from traditional restrictions. Saratchandra thought that they were imitating Tagore and, in course of that imitation, were using expressions like '*bhuma*' frequently in their writings. The particular piece of writing by Amodini Ghoshjaya (one that came out in the Ashadh 1317/1910 issue of *Bharati*), which Saratchandra targeted, was a critique of Indian spiritual-cum-social injunctions. Notably, Ghoshjaya had criticised tradition for glorifying self-sacrifice over self-respect and human dignity.

[61] Sri Sahaji, 'Purano Chithi', p. 46. Sahaji wrote: "We have before us the unlimited *bhuma*. But we forget to look at it...We do not realise the great opportunities that the future holds out for us...Our duty is to abandon the obsession with the old ('*prachinata*') ...To put it in the words of the poet, 'move forward, brother, go ahead' ('*age chal age chal bhai*')."

the past put a lot of value on 'non-possessiveness'. At least tacitly, they critiqued 'self-interest'. The particular historical moment may be characterised as one in which the notion of 'self-interest' or 'self-seeking' generally constituted, to borrow Elias' term, the "threshold of embarrassment" and even "repugnance".[62] The last section will deal with this a little more.

Birth and Worth

Even the most conservative shades of pro-Varnasrama discourse since the late nineteenth century acknowledged that birth could not be ideally the sole determinant of destiny. *Bedabyas*, a periodical that described itself as socially 'conservative', addressed it as early as 1888. It said that the Shudra would definitely win the respect of the Brahman, the Kshatriya and others by virtue of his *good action* and that one day he might even come to the same level as the Brahman. That would be in a future life, a life in which he would take birth as a Brahman. But there was no way he could become a Brahman in this life for it was well-nigh impossible to overcome the 'demerits of the seed' ('*bijagata dosh*').[63] Thus, birth was made the necessary condition of attaining abstract Brahmanhood, but even in a 'conservative' discourse such as this, human agency was made to play a part in at least two ways. One was that conscious action of the agent determined destiny in the next life. In that sense, the 'in-born natural' ('*naisargik*') quality of the Brahman was 'earned' ('*svoparjita*') through deeds in a past life. The other was that birth alone was not sufficient: it could be a 'necessary' but not a 'sufficient' condition. So even for someone who took birth as a Brahman, dedicated effort was crucial for the *attainment* of Brahmanhood.

In other words, whoever glorified the ideal of the Brahman invariably complained about the evident degeneration of the birth-Brahman. The point was unequivocally settled that the Brahman lost all his spiritual power despite his high birth if he did not perform austerities. As Brahmabandhab Upadhyay pointed out, Hinduism would be

[62] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*: *Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (1939), translated by Edmund Jephcott, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982. See discussion in Peter Burke, 'The Great Tradition' and 'A New Paradigm' in *What is Cultural History?*, Polity Press, 2004, pp. 11, 53.

[63] *Bedabyas*, 1295 BS, 1888, Part 1, p. 28.

indefensible if it deified "the sweat-exuding, witless, lump of a Brahman" ("*sthulakay, svedasrabi, hastimurkha brahman*") merely on account of his birth.[64]

Brahman was another archetypal 'conservative' tract of the early twentieth century. It made the point, citing the *Manusmriti*, that the moment the Brahman took birth, he surpassed all other human beings in merit. But it distinguished between the worthy Brahman and the worthless Brahman. This writer noted that all afflictions such as new diseases, untimely rain and natural calamities were caused solely because the Brahman was not being duly safeguarded. He talked at length about *danadharma* or the religious duty of other castes to offer charitable gifts and endowments for the upkeep of the Brahmans. But he noted that endowments must be given to *deserving* good Brahmans alone. Citing Manu, he stated that gifts given to the Brahman who had no knowledge of the Vedas would not yield any benefit to the gift-giver; it would be like seeds planted on barren soil.[65] This entailed that the non-Brahman gift-giver must judge the merit of the Brahman whom he chose to support. We shall return to this theme soon.

Not a single piece of writing, in early twentieth century Bengal, which exalted the ideal Brahman missed the point about the 'decline' of the real Brahman. Yet it was difficult for many of these writers who talked of the high spiritual merit of the Brahman in terms of intrinsic quality to theoretically accommodate the point that a Brahman-by-birth could ever be bereft of it. Raja Sashisekhareswar Ray, an important organiser of Brahman Sabhas in Kashi, Calcutta and Bikrampur in the early twentieth century, admitted this theoretical contradiction. He began his essay, *Brahmaner Durgati*, literally, 'the degeneracy of the Brahman', by stating that just as fire could never be cold, it was impossible for the true Brahman to ever become 'degenerate'. Only the perverse "*bamun*", even literally a corrupt form of the word Brahman, has been decadent. The "*bamun*", said Sashisekhareswar, was born in a Brahman lineage but did not deserve to be called a 'Brahman' for he lacked in the purity that marked the Brahman.[66]

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[64] Upadhyay Brahmabandhab, 'Varnasrama Dharma', *Samaj*, pp. 44-45.

[65] Jagadbandhu Bhattacharya, *Brahman*, a compilation from the teachings of Srimat Swami Sahajananda Saraswati, Kashi, Calcutta: Sahitya Jantra, 1309 BS, 1902, p. 7.

[66] Sashisekhareswar Ray, *Brahmaner Durgati*, not dated, Kashi/Benaras: Mahamandal Press, pp. 1-2.

Sashisekhareswar was, undoubtedly, a status-quoist. But, in a different sense, he was too much of a reformer as well. He was trying hard to recast the Brahman. Aware of criticisms directed against Hindu society, he felt that the wretchedness of the Brahman was the sole cause of the society's degenerate state.[67] Again, vehemently anti-caste writings by Namasudras in the 1920s would also frequently relate the country's woes to the theme of the 'degeneracy of the Brahman'. Sashisekhareswar attacked Kulin Brahmans for their 'crimes' against women and saffron-clad Brahman *sadhus* and *gurus* for their spiritual pretensions. Sashisekhareswar took an inflexible stand when it came to opposing high Varna claims by lower caste groups. He attacked those '*bamun pandits*' who helped lower caste groups to formalise such claims. In it, he saw moral depravity on the part of the Brahman for he was sure that the latter would give such a *vyavastha* or ruling only to make money without scruple.[68]

The ideal of Varnasrama had to be properly revived, he thought, and the first step towards it must be the "protection of the Brahman" ("*Brahman raksha*"). He wrote that such a project must begin by telling apart the 'true Brahman' from his "spurious" ("*bhejal brahman*") version.[69] By implication, he addressed non-Brahman possible patrons, calling upon them to select 'deserving Brahmans' for charitable endowments. What is important for us to note is the tremendous power of discretion that such an address placed on a potential non-Brahman patron or gift-giver.

The emphasis on selection and identification of the 'worthy Brahman' in this pro-Brahman discourse inadvertently bestowed an important power, the power of adjudication, upon the class of potential patrons – always relatively low-born. It was the power that lay in the ability to differentiate between the 'high' and the 'low', between the 'pure' and the 'polluted'. And the lower castes had been prompt to appropriate it in the early twentieth century so that they could now define the criteria

[67] See, for instance, 'Upabit Samasya' in *Adhikar*, Jaishtha 1334 BS, 1927, p. 6. That the 'decline of the Brahman' was a very popular theme can be intuited from stray references in Bengali literature. Kebolchand Ostad, in Sukumar Ray's comedy *Jhalapala*, composed a song on the theme: 'Alas what has become of us in these awful times/ Where did Bhishma, Drona, Karna, Bhima and Arjuna all disappear?/ Where is the sage Yajnavalkya or Manu/...The Brahman has lost his strength/ The injunctions about forbidden food are all flouted...' *Sukumar Rachanasamagra, Vol. 1*, (ed. By Premendra Mitra), Calcutta: Saksharata Prakashan, 1976, p. 115.

[68] Sashisekhareswar Ray, *Brahmaner Durgati*, pp. 3, 4, 5.

[69] *Ibid*., pp. 18-20.

and conditions of 'purity'. It is this phenomenon of early twentieth century vernacular Bengali intertextuality – this interworking between texts from the right to the left – that concerns us in this chapter. It helps to unravel the intellectual grids and networks that operated in a given region and its culture at a particular time.

Maharaja Manindrachandra Nandi, the zamindar of Kasimbazar, Tili by caste, strategically appropriated this function of *selecting* and *rewarding* the 'good Brahman'. The Maharaja organised a Brahman Sabha in his Kasimbazar palace in 1916 to *fix a code of conduct for the Brahman*.[70] The Tilis were an ambitious lower caste whose coveted middle-caste or clean-Shudra status had not been officialised by this time (1916). It was merely in the process of *becoming*. At least till the eighteenth century, the Tili was more or less identical to the Teli (oil-producers and oil-traders), a 'degraded' caste. The Census of 1872 noted that the better-off sections of the Telis were intending to conceal their 'impure caste' status by "styling themselves as Tili Shaha and the like".[71] The Brahman, Kayastha or Vaidya – the Bengali bhadralok – hardly considered the Tili a respectable caste despite their economic prominence, temple-building and social ambitions in the nineteenth century. Risley had written about how the mercantile sections of the Telis were claiming distinct caste status in the late nineteenth century. But the Tili was recognised as distinct from the 'degraded' Teli by the census authorities only in 1931. Manindrachandra Nandi's predecessor Maharani Swarnamoyi had attained great reputation for her charities. All this was incongruous with the low-caste position of the Tilis and the founder of the Nandi family, Krishnakanta Nandi, was already concerned about it in the eighteenth century.[72] In the early twentieth century, the Tilis were orchestrating a movement for caste-uplift and bringing out caste periodicals, many of which had a prominent anti-Brahman stand. Manindrachandra Nandi was one of the main organisers of the Tili movement in early twentieth century Bengal. Nandi, by organising an event in 1916, where 'right conduct' for the Brahman would be decided upon, appropriated the function of *reconstructing* the Brahman. The conditions of the Brahman's 'purity'

[70] Somendra Chandra Nandy, *History of the Cossimbazar Raj in the 20th century*, Calcutta: Dev-all Private Ltd., 1995.

[71] H. Beverley, *Report on the Census of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1872, p. 176.

[72] Sabitriprasanna Chattopadhyay, *Maharaja Manindrachandra*, Calcutta, 1932, pp. 24-25. Hitesranjan Sanyal, 'Continuities of Caste Mobility in Traditional and Modern Society in India: Two Case Studies of Caste Mobility in Bengal', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2, (Feb., 1971), pp. 315-339.

would be laid down at his behest. Clearly, 'birth' was perceived as far less than a sufficient condition for 'purity'. A Brahman's *performance* of 'purity' was being evaluated in this meeting. Nandi even arranged for a prize of Rupees 10,000 for the Brahman who led the most 'unpolluted' life. As his grandson Somendra Chandra Nandi described later,

> The Maharaja paid all expenses of their travel, residence and meeting, welcoming the Brahmins by washing their feet and drying them with his own hands. His son and other male members of the family did likewise.[73]

He thus posed as the servant of Brahmans and their adjudicator simultaneously. He took a separate seat for himself. A common code of conduct, however, could not be agreed upon. The prize of Rupees 10,000 finally went to an old teacher in a government *tol* (a Sanskrit grammar school), who confessed that apart from procuring "false travelling allowance bills, he never lied in his day-to-day life."[74] This is one instance of the meeting point of discourses and practices where, without much ado, the tables have been turned on the non-Brahman. In a curious reversal of roles, the Tili, here, played the part of the redeemer of the soul of the Brahman and the arbiter of normative standards for the Brahman.

A similar discursive instance of reconstructing the Brahmana alongside the display of pro-Brahman sympathies can be cited from the *Mahishya Samaj*. This was a periodical launched by the Chashi Kaibarta caste which wanted to do away with the 'degraded' Kaibarta connection by taking the name 'Mahishya'. The caste, however, continued to appear 'degraded' in the eyes of upper castes. Their leaders, in the early twentieth century, had to routinely fight aspersions cast on them by Brahmans and Kayasthas, who refused to accept their coveted clean-caste status.[75] As a community, an articulate section sometimes portrayed itself as protector of good Brahmans. The

[73] Somendra Chandra Nandy, *History of the Cossimbazar Raj in the 20th Century.*

[74] *Ibid.*

[75] For questions raised by Brahmans, see Sri Pranballabh Sharma, 'Kaibarta' in *Prakriti*, 30 Jaishtha, 1299 BS, 1892. Sharma's interrogation was countered by the Mahishya leader Prakash Chandra Sarkar in *Mahishya Prakash*, Calcutta: Bhavanipur, 1912, pp. 25-31. Another typical example of opposition from Brahmans is *Kaibarta Mahishya Mimamsa* by Srijukta Trailokyanath Bidyabhushan Bhattacharya, Tamluk, Medinipur, 1321 BS, 1914.

1911 issue of the *Mahishya Samaj* stated that a Mahishya zamindar had set up an *ashrama* for Brahman boys where they could have a Sanskrit education. It was supposed to run on monthly subscriptions and donations from the community.[76] *Mahishya Samaj* analysed the conditions of the Brahman's superiority. In a poem (titled 'Who is superior?') it was emphasised that it was *not his caste*, but his love of God, that elicited respect for the Brahman. Without such devotion, the lines of the poem reiterated, nobody was entitled to be considered 'superior'.[77] Several other pieces in this periodical laid down the *norms* of spiritual highness: "the essence of all 'good action' was constituted by love of creatures, self-sacrifice and devotion to God."[78] Evidently, this group was playing the conscientious vigilante, watchful of whether the Brahmana measured up to the expectations.

Once it was largely settled that birth counted for little, it was not too far to reach the position that birth counted for nothing at all. Early twentieth century indictments of caste in Bengal usurped interstitial spaces from within this pro-Brahman discourse. It became common practice to cite from a certain Brahmanical text, the *Atrisamhita*, to suggest that caste pertained entirely to 'performance'.

> None but the ignorant, idle, immoral and cruel Brahmans were the Chandals.[79]

A Tili writer noted that times had changed with the advent of British rule. He observed that so long as common people were debarred from education, the Brahmans had been able to perpetrate all sorts of tyranny on them. But now the Shudra would not care to worship the Brahman who was known to be ignorant, corrupt or addicted to intoxicants.[80] Another remarked that the sacred thread had no value in itself: "Why even the syphilis-afflicted cook working in an eatery in Calcutta sported it much the

[76] Sebananda Bharati, *Mahishya Samaj*, 1318 BS, 1911, p. 8.

[77] Sri Bhupaticharan Das, 'Bara ke?', *Mahishya Samaj*, 1318, pp. 6-7.

[78] *Ibid*., p. 3.

[79] 'Jatibheder Mulochhed' in *Teli Bandhab* (ed. By Nabakrishna Saha), Phalgun - Baisakh, 1339 BS, 1933, No. 4., pp. 76-78.

[80] Dr. Sashibhushan Kundu, *Tilijatir Vaishyatva Praman*, 2nd Edition, 'Revised and enlarged with opinions of scholars and scriptural maxims', Calcutta: Bishnu Press, 1330 BS, 1923, p. 26.

same as the great saint Ramakrishna Paramahamsa did!"[81] Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, in his *Pallisamaj* (1916), gave expression to what, he found, was a new consciousness among lower castes. A character, Sanatan Kaibarta, tells the Brahman zamindar that a bunch of threads worn around the neck meant nothing at all. "The *bamun* is the same as us if he did not live up to the ideals", quips Sanatan Kaibarta.[82] This Kaibarta, in Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's fiction, still hangs on to certain values deeply embedded within caste-ethic. He would not kill a Brahman, however corrupt.[83] So the Brahman's birth now mattered only to the extent that it could keep him relatively immune from corporeal attack or bodily persecution.

From this it took just one more logical step to propose that birth, which was evidently not a sufficient condition for attaining 'true Brahmanhood', was *not even a necessary condition* for it. Anybody, through effort, *could become* a Brahman. This was a proposition that turned the everyday reality of caste upside down. Yet it did not come as a jerk; this reworking of caste-ethic masked itself as restoration of a lost ideal. Indictments of untouchability in the 1920s from upper caste writers frequently reiterated that many from the humiliated castes "were equal to and sometimes even better than" the upper castes in terms of virtuous practice, knowledge and moral probity.[84] To say the same thing, however, lower castes mostly used the metaphor of the '*khanti*' (pure) Brahman. This can be seen even within belligerent modes such as those expressed in the periodical *Adhikar*, edited by Namasudras, which castigated Brahmans and the caste system altogether. In one of its articles, a Namasudra writer lamented that if there was an apparatus that could test the nature of blood, it would soon be apparent that 'proper Brahman blood' flowed rather through the veins of the Namasudras. This was said in the context of establishing that sexual transgressions and instances of foeticide occurred rarely within the Namasudra community, at least

[81] Yugarahasya' ('The Wonder of the Times') in *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika*, Aghrahayan, 1336 BS, 1929, pp. 14-18.

[82] Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, *Rama* [play version of *Pallisamaj*; *Pallisamaj* was first published serially in *Bharatvarsha* in 1916], Calcutta: Gurudas Chattopadhyay and Sons, 1928, reprinted in Sukumar Sen (ed.) *Sulabh Saratsamagra*, Vol. 2, p. 1865.

[83] *Ibid.*

[84] Sri Dakshinacharan Sensharma, *Asprishya Jati*, Tripura, Brahmanbaria, 1334 BS, 1927, 'Utsarga'.

much less in comparison to the scale of their occurrence among Brahmans.[85] The metaphor of the 'true Brahman', who was not-Brahman-by-birth, occurred frequently within literary creations like poetry authored by the more 'degraded' castes.

A representative instance could be two consecutive poems from a book of poetry composed by Mahendranath Karan. He was a writer from the Pod/Paundra community, a caste of the same low ritual rank as the Namasudras. The book was named *Samajrenu* (literally, 'Particles of Society'). Its publication was supervised by Damodar Das, the leader of the Mali/Bhuimali community, another 'untouchable' caste in early twentieth century Bengal. Karan wrote the poems when his health was failing. The book was published (1926) two years before Karan died (1928). Karan wrote in its preface that most instances narrated in the poems were real ones taken from life. The first poem was named '*Prakrita Brahmanya*', meaning 'Genuine Brahmanhood'. It narrated an episode that supposedly occurred in the law-court at Narail. Upper caste lawyers there prevented the Kayastha attendant from serving the Namasudra lawyer, 'Debendrababu'. Deeply pained to see this, 'Sarasibabu', one Brahman barrister, came forward himself to serve water to Debendrababu. The poem ended on the note that the other lawyers, all champions of 'Swaraj', stared in amazement at the 'knowledgeable' Sarasibabu, who thus demonstrated the 'authentic quality' of the Brahman.[86]

The next poem was titled '*Karma-Brahman*', meaning, 'Brahman-by-action'. It recited the tale of how God revealed to his devotee, a certain sage, the identity of the 'pure Brahman'. The sage had been on the lookout for a 'pure' Brahman for a long time. He had paid homage to a great many Brahmans but his wish remained unfulfilled until God told him,

> You've worshipped merely the Vipra-by-birth/You've not seen the Truth/The pure Vipra is Charandasa/ A noble man, who is a Chandal

[85] Sri Bajrapani Dhali, 'Brahman O Namasudra' [a footnote attached to 'Brahman' in the title stated that "it did not include the 'Varna Brahman', whose moral condition was relatively better" (the Varna or 'degraded' Brahman served 'degraded' castes like Namasudras and their water was unacceptable for 'clean' castes)], *Adhikar*, Bhadra, 1334, p. 16.

[86] Sri Mahendranath Karan, *Samajrenu*, Medinipur: Sri Niranjan Bijali, 1332 BS, 1925, p. 61.

("*Balen Bibhu, 'Janme jeba*
Vipra sudhu tahari seba
Korecho tumi, satya kiba
Na bujhi tar parichay
Vipra khanti Charandasa
Chandal se mahasay")[87]

Thus, the first of the two poems signified that only some Brahmans were 'pure' and that 'purity' consisted essentially in abandoning caste-arrogance. The second suggested that a Chandal could well be a 'purer' Brahman than several birth-Brahmans. This suggestion was momentous and yet rather commonplace in the 1920s, when tracts authored by lower caste men invariably cited scripture to affirm that the Varna division was *fundamentally qualitative*. The plot structure of these tracts would include a substantial section on '*varnyotpatti*' or the emergence of the four-fold Varna order.

The general idea was that 'originally' there was no Varna distinction. Everyone was a Brahman. This was what upper-caste conservative writers also affirmed. Narratives differed when it came to describing how the distinction subsequently arose. The conservative version of this transition would be a saga of degeneration or moral downfall: the fourfold division (*chaturvarnya*) was the symptom of the oncoming of sinfulness in increasing degrees. According to it, many Brahmanas lapsed from right conduct and integrity and got demoted to the three respective *varnas*, thereafter created below the Brahmans.[88] Lower caste tracts, on the other hand, told the same thing minus the story of moral degeneration. Their explanation of the emergence of *chaturvarnya* from a primeval state of unity of Varna would be functional: that the spread of civilisation necessitated differentiation of skill and occupation. So, it was according to divergences in terms of *guna* (character traits, *qualities*) and *karma* (action) that the Varna division came into being.[89] Some of the more vehement lower

[87] *Ibid.*

[88] Brahmananda Bharati, *Siddhajibani: Baba Loknather Jibaner Alaukik Kahini*, Calcutta, 1922, 3rd Edition, 1982, p. 24.

[89] For one instance, Charuchandra Saha, *Vaishya Tattva Ba Teli Jatir Itibritta*, Calcutta: Teli Vaishya Samiti, 1330 BS, 1923, pp. 11-20. For the same discussion, see *Jatiya Samasya – Purbabanger Mali Jati* (by Baradakanta Gupta Bidyaratna and published by Kanchiram Das), 1st Edition, Mymensingh, 1914, p. 8.

caste writers would even add another point to this narrative. They would say that bad days came about with the onset of 'hatred': the 'hatred of productive labour' ("*karmaghrina*") came first, followed by the subsequent 'hatred of humankind' ("*manabaghrina*").[90] It was a narrative of moral decline from a different perspective, viz., the decline of universal love and equality and the development of hatred and caste-arrogance. The interface between oppositional texts is again significant.

Caste-histories which started coming up from a range of caste-groups in early twentieth century Bengal comprised broadly two elements: *jatitattva-varnatattva* and *itivritta*. The section on *jatitattva* would be a general theory of the emergence and differentiation of Varna and Jati. It would often contain detailed citations from Smriti literature to show which specific inter-Varna marriages and *samkara* (mixed-caste) offsprings were authorised by the Shastras. The *itivritta* section would contain the particular history, or historical claim, of a caste. The *jatitattva* element, though present, seems much less pronounced in tracts authored by upper castes like Kayasthas and Baidyas. These two castes were engaged in a mutual contest already by 1902-1903 over ritual supremacy. In the Census of 1901, its superintendent, E. A. Gait, had reported the two castes' respective claims to superiority over each other. But the report seemed humiliating to the Kayasthas because, among other things, it contained the mention of the High Court ruling which held Bengali Kayasthas to be Shudras and also a remark made by a Baidya that the Kayasthas were "originally the servants of the Brahmans and Baidyas".[91] A lot of *itibritta/itihasa* literature came to be authored at this juncture by both Kayasthas and Baidyas. Some of them were laboriously worked out regional histories of castes, based on genealogical literature.[92]

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[90] Manindranath Mandal, *Bangiya Jana Samgha*, p. 28.

[91] Sri Girish Chandra Basu, *Bange Brahman, Kayastha O Baidya*, Chandpur, Tripura: Saraswati Press, 1310 BS, 1903, p. 46 'kha'.

[92] *Kayastha Kaustubh*, *Kayastha Samhita*, *Kayastha Puran*, *Kayastha Gita*, *Kayasthakula Piyush*, *Kayasthe ki? Ba Kayastha Tattva*, *Kayastha Jatir Itihas* were some of the important works authored by the Kayasthas. Apart from *Kayasther Varna Nirnay*, Nagendranath Basu, the amateur historian-cum-archaeologist associated with the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal and one of the founders of Kayastha Sabha and the editor of the journal *Kayastha*, authored the multivolume *Banger Jatiya Itihas* on the genealogies of different castes and subcastes in Bengal. See *Banger Jatiya Itihasa: Rajanyakanda—Kayasthakander Prathamamsha*, Calcutta, 1321 BS, *Banger Jatiya Itihasa: Barendra Kayastha Bibaran—Kayasthakander Dvitiyamsha*, Calcutta, 1334 BS, *Banger Jatiya Itihasa: Uttar-Rarhiya Kayastha Kanda—Kayasthakander Tritiyamsha*, Calcutta, 1335 BS, *Banger Jatiya Itihasa: Dakshin Rarhiya Kayastha Kanda*, Calcutta, 1340 BS. The Baidyas authored similar caste-histories like *Baidya Darpan*, *Baidyajatir Itihas*, *Baidya Brahman*, etc.

Relatively absent in these caste histories ("*jatiya itihasa*") were questions on the primary origins of caste order. A general affirmation of conformism and conservatism can be discerned in these writings. But, this upper caste *itihasa* literature did not make much effort to theoretically redefine the *fundamental rationale* of the Varna order, that is, the basic philosophy ("*tattva*") of caste.[93]

In contrast, caste-literature, authored by 'inferior' castes like the Mali or the Teli, devoted far greater attention to reconstructing some 'lost' logic of the Varna design. This they did by citing from central texts like Srimadbhagabat, the Mahabharata, the Smritis and the Puranas, rather than regional genealogical literature. *Jatitattva-varnatattva*, in their writings, would compulsorily address the fundamental question about whether Varna was elastic and flexible, at least in its original intent.

As proof of Varna flexibility and openness, they would cite few *slokas*, which broadly suggested the following:
"...that if the qualities specified for a Varna were to be encountered in a person, born outside that Varna, the person must be included in the said Varna..."
"...that in this way, the Shudra became a Brahman, and similarly a Brahman became a Sudra; and the same became of the Kshatriya and the Vaishya..."
"...that the Shudra who steadfastly adhered to the principles of *dama* (sensual restraint), *satya* (truth) and *dharma* (piety) is to be held as a Brahman; it is behaviour that makes a Dwija (twice-born)..."[94]

These excerpts were purportedly from the Srimadbhagavat and the Mahabharata; in some tracts, the second excerpt was traced to Manusamhita. Purity was, thus, unrelated to birth or occupation, but pertained purely to moral qualities. The liberal critique of caste came full circle. Varna identity became all about human individuality, agency and action (*purushakar*). Caste depended on how one carried oneself and what one did. This was bolstered with reference to another Brahmanical

[93] As is evident from the above footnote, here I refer to caste-histories. These are a different genre altogether from the sort of philosophical-ideological arguments by, say, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay or other upper caste writers, who defended Varnasrama as an institution and invariably took up the question of the origins of Varna and *jati*.

[94] *Mali Jatir Itibritta*, published by Damodar Das, Director of Sarba Banga Mali Hitasadhini Samiti, Calcutta, 1336, p. 5, Charuchandra Saha, *Vaishyatattva Ba Teli Jatir Itibritta*, pp. 27-29.

pronouncement that, in the Kaliyuga[95], social/ritual 'degradation' would be constituted according to 'deeds' ('*kaliyuge karmanusare patitya*'). So 'pure' deeds sanctioned an elevated Varna status. The last section will attempt to throw light on what constituted 'pure deeds' in this imagination. Defences of Varnasrama had, since the late nineteenth century, stressed that the real purpose of the system was to raise everyone to the ideal of the Brahman. Swami Vivekananda's words had made a great impact:

> In India, the goal of *jati-bibhag* is to raise everyone to the status of the Brahman. The Brahman is the ideal man...Nobody has to be pushed down, but everyone has to be raised to the ideal...[96]

Thus, Varna was determined by individual self-cultivation of virtue and proficiency. Charuchandra Saha, a Teli by caste, compared Hindu society to a school and the four Varnas to classes in that school. If a student from the lowest class consistently fared well in his performance, did he not merit promotion? Similarly, he argued, was it not reasonable that students from upper classes who fared badly should be demoted? '*Janmagata jatitva*', or in-born caste-identity, was only a recent accretion, he added. Individual traits and acts made one eligible for "promotion" (the word he actually uses) to a higher Varna.[97]

Seen in the light of this argument, the claim by a number of castes to Vaishya or Kshatriya status does not betray logical fallacy in the sense the Census of 1921 made it out to be. The Census report on "claims strongly pressed" by caste-groups noted that:

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[95] Kaliyuga, a Puranic concept, is the last of the four ages (*yugas*) in the cyclical reckoning of time. The Puranas characterised it as the most degenerate of times, when caste and gender hierarchy would be overturned. For the same reason, it was the most regenerate of times for the Shudra and the woman. On the very frequent use of the motif of Kaliyuga since the late nineteenth century by writers from different social locations and their widely varying attitudes to Kaliyuga, see Sumit Sarkar, 'Renaissance and Kaliyuga: Time, Myth and History in Colonial Bengal', *Writing Social History*, pp. 187-215.

[96] Swami Vivekananda, 'Bharat O Anyanya Desher Nana Samasya Alochana', *Bani O Rachana*, p. 330.

[97] Charuchandra Saha, *Vaishyatattva Ba Teli Jatir Itibritta*, p. 36.

> The backbone of the argument by which the claims to be called Vaisya were supported contained an obvious fallacy, for, stripped of ornament, it was this: "These men are traders, the Vaisyas were traders; therefore, they are Vaisyas." The arguments supporting claims to the term Kshattriya contain also a doubtful assumption: "These men probably were soldiers at one time; the Kshattriyas were soldiers, therefore they are Kshattriyas."[98]

The logical fallacy of the 'undistributed middle-term' is obvious in the form in which the argument has been cited by the Census commissioner. But a closer reading of the tracts authored by these castes bring out that the argument was not just about 'what was' but more about 'what ought to be'. It was an innovative redefinition of caste whereby Varna identity became a matter of attainment. It was not just 'given'. The argument for the Vaishya claim, to an extent, ran somewhat like this: 'We are pious, God-fearing agriculturalists and traders whose productive labour brings prosperity to the country; the Vaishyas fulfilled the same social functions; so we, at least, deserve to be Vaishyas!' Many of them qualified the proposal by stating that 'true' Brahmanhood was the ultimate target.

The argument was on a par with the *triguna*-theory, heavily deployed to defend Varnasrama and *adhikar-bhed* as 'open', 'universal' and 'natural'. Here again we come to a meeting point of discourses of varying orientations. There was one basic classificatory premise of traditional Indian thought, harnessed to Varna ideology, that remained persuasive for long. It was the concept of the three *gunas*, or primal qualities inhering in nature. The *gunas* were *sattva* (purity), *rajas* (valour) and *tamas* (darkness). This classification had a great hold over the Indian (not just Hindu) public mind from the late nineteenth century till well into the twentieth century. Thinkers of varying persuasions used this classification in different contexts. Occasionally, some doubt would be cast on the hierarchy of the *gunas*, on whether it was alright to place *sattva* above *rajas*. But the idea that these three qualities of the mind constituted all human affairs remained uncontested. For instance, Nirmal Kumar Bose's works (mid-

[98] *Census of India, 1921*, Chapter XI, 'Caste, Tribe and Race', p. 348.

twentieth century) frequently invoked this classification. He was not a traditionalist or a revivalist. He was an anthropologist who saw himself as employing the tools of science. He was a rationalist, keen on distinguishing between science and dogma, and a Gandhian who was known for not attending the prayer sessions of Gandhi. Yet he frequently invoked the traditional classification of the *gunas* in describing the nature of things.[99] This is just to indicate the impact and persuasiveness of the *guna* model. What is significant for us here is how the concept of *triguna* came to be associated with Varna distinction since the late nineteenth century.

For instance, a disciple had asked his guru, Bijoykrishna Goswami, about whether the latter believed in *jatibhed*. This happened sometime between 1886 and 1892. Bijoykrishna had replied that so long as the three *gunas* existed in the nature of things, *jatibhed* was bound to remain. Men and women of the world differed in their respective proportions of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. Thus, would their Varnas be different.[100] This conversation took place in a milieu where caste had long since begun to be heavily debated. Many of those who gathered around Bijoykrishna were Brahmos or Hindu reformers questioning the legitimacy of caste-division.

A lot of Bengali writing during this time was devoted to unravelling the 'essence' and 'purpose' of Varnasrama. Baradakanta Majumdar, the lower caste defender of Varnasrama (see above), lamented that "neither the Brahman Pandit nor the propertied man cared to know about it, while the English-educated Indian patriot had completely lost faith in it".[101] Majumdar wrote that the country could improve either by understanding the essence of Varnasrama or by eliminating it at once. In writings like these, Varna division was legitimised, and theoretically universalised and naturalised ("*chari barna sarbabhoumik*"[102]), in terms of the three *gunas*. The idea of abstract Brahmanhood and abstract Shudrahood had come in vogue by early twentieth century through this critical pro-Varnasrama discourse.

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[99] N. K. Bose, *The Structure of Hindu Society* (tr. from the Bengali by Andre Beteille), New Delhi: Sangam Books, 1976, p. 171 (see translator's comment in footnote no. 2).

[100] Srimat Kuladananda Brahmachari, *Sri Sri Sadgurusanga* (journal maintained from 1886 to 1892: 5 volumes compiled in one) Puri: Thakurbari, 1996, pp. 95, 161.

[101] Baradakanta Majumdar, *Varnasramadharma*, 'Utsargapatra' ('Letter of Dedication').

[102] *Ibid*.

Despite that, orthodox opinion would not accept it when an *anacharaniya* caste demanded to be accepted in society as a Kshatriya or a Vaishya. As already shown, defenders of Varnasrama harped on the possibility of getting elevated to a higher Varna through 'pure' behaviour. Otherwise the system seemed too devoid of fairness. But the moment the 'low-born' really proposed to be raised to the twice-born (Dwija) Varnas, it seemed repulsive. After all, the idea was entrenched that piety, accumulated over a series of previous births, caused the birth of a Brahman. Equally rooted was the idea that it was incumbent upon the Shudra-born to suffer the agony of Shudrahood in a lifetime to neutralise the seeds of his past births ('*prarabdha karma*'). 'Purity' had to be hard-earned across births. Conservative opinion, as I have shown by citing the periodical *Bedabyas*, would not overlook the "demerits of the seed".[103] Did 'seed' refer to the seeds of past action (past birth) or the seed of the father, the lineage? Brahmabandhab Upadhyay was perhaps doubtful about the reserves of piety or impiety accumulated over several 'births'. But the hereditary factor was important for him too. *Samkara varnas* surely had the chance of attaining a higher Varna status ("*varnyotkarsha*"[104]), he wrote, but not in a single generation. He explained that Varna did not depend on individual acts, but on the acts of a clan — in the least, across three to four generations.[105] Dwija-Varna claims by lower castes thus faced tremendous resistance from upper castes (for instance, from Sashisekhareswar Ray, the Brahman activist we have discussed before).[106] That resistance sharpened the anti-upper-caste political element in the Kshatriya-Vaishya movements of the lower castes.

Sometimes the concept of sin of a previous life causing 'low-birth' in the next would be fully internalised by the lower-caste writer in revolt. A short story, *Sadhu Chandidasa*, written by a Paundra writer, in the *Paundrakshatriya Samachar* of 1927, narrated how a humble person named Chandidas, Muchi (tanner) by caste, was insulted by a Brahman priest. Chandidasa was then visited by God who bestowed on

[103] *Bedabyas*, 1295 BS, 1888, Part 1, p. 28.

[104] Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, 'Varnasramadharma' in *Samaj*, pp. 69-70.

[105] *Ibid.*

[106] A tract eulogising a Saha leader, Harekrishna Talukdar, gives an account of how "Sashisekhareswar Ray Bahadur of Taherpur" publicly criticised the "Vaishya Saha community" for their claim to Vaishyahood and of how Harekrishna offered stiff resistance by authoring *Vaishya Saha Jatitattva*. *Vaishya Saha Gaurab Harekrishna*, Chandpur, Srihatta, 1341 BS, 1935, pp. 22-24.

him ‘true knowledge’. Then he came to know that it was because of his arrogance as a Brahman in his previous birth that he was born a Muchi in the present.[107] The story thus upheld two contrary ideas: first, that ‘low birth’ did not preclude virtue; second, that wickedness, particularly of caste-arrogance, was the cause of ‘low-birth’. This instance reflects the hegemonic hold of a slightly liberalised Brahmanical imagination of caste over lower caste consciousness.

One thing that broadly emerges from the above discussion is that the aesthetic imagination of degraded castes was filled with the desire to represent *exemplary virtue*. This deep concern with ‘purity’ sometimes took the shape of the desire to adopt the *upabit*, the sacred thread, with its age-old association of sacred glory. For many of the lower caste leaders, the adoption of the *upabit* was a revolutionary gesture, almost a political claim to ‘purity’. The *upabit* was, however, not just the assertion of a claim. It was regarded like a talisman that could boost their *purushakar* or effort at self-cultivation.[108] The enthusiasm for *upabit*, however, helped integrationist moves of Hindu reformers who expected to satisfy lower castes with mere gestures of recognising spiritual dignity or Dwija status. Especially, before the Census of 1931, Hindu reform movements, geared to projects of Hindu unity, appropriated this gesture. Siding with the lower castes against orthodox opposition[109], the Bengal Hindu Samaj Sammilani in Calcutta carried a resolution that all Hindus

[107] Bipin Bihari Mandal, ‘Sadhu Chandidasa’, *Paundrakshatriya Samachar*, Asvin, Kartik, 1334 BS, 1927, pp. 93-95, 10-105.

[108] Baradakanta Majumdar, who sought to generate opinion in favour of the Subarnabanik and Gandhabanik castes being accepted in society in the rank of the Vaishya, thought that the Shudra was very far from *purushakar* or determination. He wrote that the three ‘twice-born’ *varnas* were capable of it. He understood *shudrahood* as an abstract condition of deficiency, a state of intense darkness (“*ghor tamasikata*”). A second birth as a Dwija was thus thought as creating the possibility for moral self-determination or *purushakar*. Baradakanta Majumdar, *Varnasramadharma*, p. 96. Raicharan Sardar (who we discuss in Chapter 4), a Paundra leader, expected that the *upabit* would do away with the “unaccountable small-mindedness” (“*ahaituki hinata*”) that, he thought, prevailed in his caste-community. Raicharan Sardar, *Deener Atmakahini Ba Satya Pariksha (An Autobiography of a Poor Man or his Experiments with Truth*), Diamond Harbour, Twenty-four Parganas, posthumously published by his son in 1959, p. 135.

[109] The *Census of India, 1931*(A. E. Porter, Superintendant of Census Operations, Bengal) Vol. 5, Bengal and Sikkim, Part 1, mentions in Chapter XII (‘Caste, Tribe and Race’) that the “All India Varnasrama Swaraj Sangha pledged to the maintenance of all caste-distinctions including untouchability and therefore definitely against any restriction in the rigidity of caste distinctions.” Calcutta: Central Publication Branch, 1933, p. 423. This shows the nature and degree of continuing orthodox resistance.

should be called Brahmans and invested with the sacred thread.[110] The Census of 1931 reported that at the time of its operations,

> ...the Hindu Sabha circularised its members calling upon them to withhold details of their caste...the propaganda issued by them suggested that the returns should comprise only the three twice-born varna names...and no person being returned as Sudra...[111]

However, the desire for 'purity' and 'merit' was not limited to ritualistic appropriations like the adoption of the *upabit*. There were, within every community, an articulate group of people, who were trying to convince others that the claim to Kshatriya/Vaishya status or the *upabit* was merely a hollow gesture. Those who spoke against ritualistic moves drew attention to matters of secular development, primarily education.[112] Common to all of these lower caste writers – looking forward to dignity in a liberal future – was but the value they put on self-preparation, something akin to what the Greeks called *askesis*. These subaltern writers called it '*yogyata arjan*', literally, 'the acquiring of competence'. Those who opposed ritualistic moves like the adoption of the *upabit* feared that outward gestures would serve to distract attention from the primary goal of improvement. The trope of self-correction was not an admission of innate lack. It was a powerful moral statement.[113]

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[110] *Ibid.*

[111] *Ibid*., p. 424. The Bengal Hindu Samaj Sammilani was similar to the Jat Pat Torak Mandal of Lahore who had invited B. R. Ambedkar to its 1936 Annual Conference.

[112] *Karmakar Patrika*, a quarterly edited by Sri Nityagopal Ray from Rangpur, lamented that "Even if we leave the Brahmans, Baidyas and Kayasthas, this community occupies a position lower than the Subarnabanik, Gandhabanik, Tili, Saha, Barui and other castes in terms of education ("*bidyabal*")." In another article entitled 'Jatir Bhabishyat' ('The Future of the Community'), the editor distinguished 'relevant' issues from 'irrelevant' ones. "The resolution of whether the Karmakar was Vaishya or Kshatriya will not help to remove the drawbacks that the community is suffering today. Education and economic strength have to be considered the primary issues of concern." *Karmakar Patrika*, Aghrahayan, 1334 BS, 1927, pp. 2-3.

[113] "Our Tili samaj lacks in education. This generates narrowness in us. We desire to speak of ourselves as Vaishyas; we attempt to adopt the surname 'Gupta'. But we are not ready to look within. We are not embarrassed to see our inner drawbacks…Our tendency is to advise others while neglecting the rectification of our selves". Sri Sachindranath Pal, 'Swaraj Sadhana O Amra', *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika*, Sravan-Bhadra, 1333 BS, 1926, pp. 204-205. 'Turning the search-light inwards' was also a sophisticated nationalist self-reforming gesture since the late nineteenth century. See Gokhale's praise lavished on Ranade's call for it in the Dharwar Social Conference of April, 1903, *The Depressed Classes of India*, p. 46.

Their model of perfectibility shared a close-yet-critical relationship with the thematic of Brahmanism. The quality of *rajas* was appreciated over *sattva* by some of these subaltern caste groups. The concepts of social comfort, utility and a this-worldly action-oriented-ness were often valued over the spiritual model of the *sattvika* recluse. This was part of their social critique of Brahmanism. Man's worldly goods and freedoms, they pointed out, had been unduly ignored in the Brahmanical idealization of *sattvika* abstemiousness and suffering.[114] But even while arguing for a this-worldly ethic of utilitarianism, they invariably insisted that service to society must be delivered without a trace of 'desire' and 'self-interest'.[115] This was perhaps how the Brahmnaical ideal of '*nishkama karma*' (desire-less action) stuck to them, as epitomising 'purity', even when they directed a social critique against Brahmanism.

To conclude this section, the early twentieth century moment of lower caste assertiveness witnessed a rare and deep exchange between the entrenched spiritual ideal and an awakened spirit of protest. This 'political' moment of contesting *adhikar-bhed* was characterised by two contrary aspects. One, utilitarian values of social comfort were invoked to critique Brahmanical metaphysics. Two, the Brahmanical metaphysics of non-possessiveness was invoked to insist that the ethic of social justice must not get reduced to the 'worldliness' of self-aggrandisement. This was paradoxical. Pratap Bhanu Mehta has recently remarked that India's "intellectual tragedy" lay in the "impossibility of dialogue" between "on the one hand, a deep metaphysics without a social ethic; on the other hand, a social ethic that is deeply suspicious of metaphysics."[116] However, during the early twentieth century moment

[114] Editorials in *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika*, Aswin-Kartik, 1925-26; see 'Hindu Samaje Narir Sthan' in a 1929 issue of the same periodical, where the writer asserted that a woman oppressed and ignored by her husband had the right to remarry even when her previous husband was alive. A rejoinder to a critique of this article stated that "learned men have taught us enough of renunciation, we are only too aware of its bitter fruits; by trying to kill the serpent we have only made ourselves feeble and impotent." A common refrain in many lower caste tracts was that "the present era signals the apotheosis of *rajoguna*." See, for instance, Harakishor Adhikari, *Rajbangshi Kulapradeep*, Calcutta, 1317 BS, 1910, p. 141.

[115] Sri Sahaji wrote of how it was mistaken to regard the world as unreal and to renounce it. In course of stating that, he quoted Vivekananda, "The only real purpose is to go on working, /Never claim its fruits". *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika*, Aswin–Kartik, 1925-26, p. 23.

[116] Mehta writes, "This has become an impossible dialogue, the marker of an unresolved *aporia* in Indian intellectual traditions: a piety of metaphysics locked in a battle with a deep hermeneutics of suspicion." Pratap Bhanu Mehta, 'B R Ambedkar: Slayer of All Gods', *Open*, 8th April, 2016.

of social debate, the "hermeneutics of suspicion" on the social question was attempting to refigure and reconstitute the "metaphysics of piety."

Rights and duties

What did a moral critique of the Brahman entail for the insurgent lower caste? We have shown how pro-Brahman discourses on the 'protection of Brahmans' ('*brahman-raksha*') incorporated within its interstices the notion that the 'right Brahman' must be selected for protection. The critique of the Brahman by the non-Brahman derived from a world-view in which all castes and Varnas in society ideally fulfilled mutual social obligations. The Brahman's duty was to remain 'pure' not just for his individual morality or spiritual liberation but for the sake of society. This theory of social interdependence and obligation vindicated certain prerogatives and also entailed obligations for the non-Brahman lower-caste critic.

The logic of subservience to society (*samaj*) was Brahmanical. A dichotomy was drawn by the late-nineteenth century neo-Brahmanic discourse with the modern West, which was represented as upholding the 'worldliness' of human endeavour. So, the merchant was obliged, in the Indian context, to provide for the impecunious Brahman. In the framework of this discourse, the Brahman should be served by all other castes because everyone was *indebted* to the Brahman. As a disciple of Sahajananda Saraswati, Jagadbandhu Bhattacharya, wrote in a tract titled *Brahman* in 1902, "no human being in the world could succeed in anything without the grace of the Brahmana". Thus, it was important for all to "be mindful of whether the Brahman received his basic maintenance allowance". Bhattacharya's purpose was to remind "common people" of the prescribed duty of gift-giving, *danadharma*, which was supposed to be the "primary and most ancient dharma of the Kali age."[117]

It was this theory of 'indebtedness' that assertive lower caste writers used *against* the Brahman in early twentieth century. They capitalised upon the Brahmanical ideology of mutual interdependence to point their fingers at the material dependence of the Brahman on them. This was an inversion of the idea of 'debt'. The apologist for

[117] Jagadbandhu Bhattacharya, *Brahman* (teachings of 'Srimat Swami Sahajananda Saraswati'), Introduction.

the Brahman had invoked the notion of transcendental debt of "all living beings" to the grace of the Brahman. The Tili writer Sashibhushan Kundu, in contrast, reminded the Brahman of his material debt to the non-Brahman patron. His work, *Tilijatir Vaishyatva Praman* (1923), had a section titled 'The Logician's Argument Diminishes the Brahman's Rage'. It described an event in Hooghly where local Brahmans, invited to a marriage ceremony, created a big row. The bride's name had been printed on a complimentary letter with the suffix '*debi*', instead of '*dasi*'. A group of local Brahmans would not accept it. '*Debi*', they stated, was exclusively meant for Brahman women. It was thanks to a *Naiyayika,* a scholar of logic, interceding on behalf of the Tili host that the Brahmans could be defeated in verbal debate. The marriage-ceremony ended peacefully with the Brahmans ultimately sitting for dinner late in the night. Kundu recited the argument put forward by the logician.

> If the womenfolk of the trading castes of Bengal had not engaged in various religious ceremonies like *Shashthipuja, Kartikpuja, Lakshmipuja*, and a lot more ceremonial vows (*vratas*), what would have happened to your women, we wonder! The Dubeys, Chobeys, Pandeys and Thakurs – Brahmans from the western parts of the country have come in hordes to Bengal to earn some livelihood. They serve as gate-keepers, guards and watchmen. You, in Bengal, do not even have the muscle strength to be eligible for such jobs...It is women of these trading castes who provide for your maintenance, your food and clothing...Don't you think they deserve the address of '*debi*' far more than our Brahman mothers and sisters who survive on the charities of these castes?[118]

Kundu satirically added that it suddenly occurred to the Brahmans that they were merely to lose if they did not relent. "In whispers, they told one another that, when

[118] 'Naiyayiker Tarke Brahmatej Kharba, Ashadh 1329' in Dr. Sashibhushan Kundu, *Tili Jatir Vaishyatva Pramana*, pp. 25-30.

they returned home, their wives would be hoping to receive food-packets obtained from the 'Teli' host".[119]

As providers for Brahmans then, it was in their power to assess the counter-obligations of the Brahmans. Here again they derived it from Brahmanical discourse to enjoin 'poverty' as ideal for the Brahman.

The pro-Brahman discourse, discussed in a previous section, suggested that the leaders of society must be capable of self-abnegation so as to be able to impart the same values to society. "The Brahman Varna was created to take up the stiff burden of this leadership".[120] Brahmabandhab Upadhyay had explained that while the Brahman alone was authorised to receive gifts (*pratigraha*), his countervailing obligation was to refrain from accumulating wealth. The ideal Brahman "would never receive wealth in return for instructing pupils".[121]

The assertive lower caste writer took up this theme. The image of the legendary 'Buno Ramnath', a scholar of eighteenth century Bengal and a subject of Maharaja Krishnachandra Ray of Nadia, found frequent mention in caste periodicals (of the Teli, Tili, Subarnabanik, Sadgop and others). It is said that he lived from hand to mouth, ate nothing but a curry of tamarind leaves daily, but refused to be a member of the royal court. The flamboyance of the court, he thought, would distract his intellect. This was the image of the 'scholar Brahman' or the 'ascetic Brahman' – a Brahman who had taken the vow of poverty – that was idealised in essays and articles authored by subordinate caste writers.[122] It extended to painting the image of an 'ideal teacher' (an abstraction of Brahmanhood), who might be born in a so-called low caste. The 'ideal teacher' was required to be the properly sacrificial being (*sattvika*). To quote one news item from *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika*,

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[119] *Ibid*., p. 30. It is striking that Sashibhushan Kundu, while he is speaking the mind of the Brahman, uses the word 'Teli' instead of 'Tili'. He puts the following words in the mouth of the Brahman guests: "*Tai to he! Na khaile amaderi loksan, barite ginnike asha diya asiyachi 'Telir bari hote chanda anibo', ginni ashapathe takaiya achen*." Kundu is aware that though the Tili zealously guarded his distinction from the Teli, the Brahman ignored it.

[120] Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, 'Varnasramadharma' in *Samaj*, p. 74.

[121] *Ibid*., p. 58.

[122] *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika*, 1925-26, p. 164.

> Sri Radharaman Mandal, B. A., the Assistant Head Master of Cuttack Ravenshaw School, is one of those teachers who have won recognition far and wide. He eats a single meal a day, refrains from eating non-vegetarian food and has no business with luxury. Looking at him, one remembers the sages of ancient times.[123]

Digindranarayan Bhattacharya, a reformer, had taken up the cause of the oppressed and humiliated castes in early twentieth century Bengal. Manindranath Mandal, a leader from the 'untouchable' Paundra community, praised Digindranarayan for being, among other things, "a Brahman one who had taken the vow of poverty" ("*daridrabrati brahman*").[124]

Dana or charity embodied the capacity for self-denial. The inferior castes asserted their prerogative of determining the code of conduct for the Brahman by simultaneously reiterating their own social obligations. Their criticism of the Brahman would, in part, be directed to their selves. Charuchandra Saha, a Teli by caste, observed in 1925 that it was a general decline of values which made all social groups selfish and exclusivist over their specific possessions. Saha was the president of the *Teli Vaishya Samiti* of Bengal. He remarked that "'Vaishya' people of the Tili, Subarnabanik, Saha and Gandhabanik castes" had desisted from sharing their wealth with the Brahman, the Kshatriya and the Shudra. The Brahman similarly, Saha drew a parallel, guarded his hard-earned knowledge selfishly. The knowledge of the Vedas and religious scriptures were made into a hereditary monopoly by the Brahman. But the Vaishya and Kshatriya must not blame the Brahman, thought Saha, for they had shown no greater generosity with their own respective possessions[125].

> Those who are unwilling to share their own rights of possession with society cannot demand rights from others. They will not give away even an iota of what

[123] 'Amader Sikshak', in *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika* (ed. By Nanigopal Kundu, Brajagopal Kundu, Sibdas Saha), Aghrahayan Paush, 1332 BS, 1925, p. 62.

[124] Manindranath Mandal, *Bange Digindranarayan*, Calcutta, 1333 BS, 1926, p. 7.

[125] Charuchandra Saha, *Vaishyatattva Ba Teli Jatir Itibritta*, p. 27.

> they have, yet they lecture about the selfishness of the Brahman. What a riddle![126]

That perfectibility and superiority consisted in protecting social others was repeatedly proclaimed. Writers from the 'inferior' castes, who otherwise upheld a distinctly anti-Brahman stand, occasionally conceded that perhaps Brahmans did a little better than them on this count. Sashibhushan Kundu wrote in 1923 that the Brahman, despite all their improprieties, mostly lived up to a couple of virtues – "one was the virtue of protecting whoever sought refuge, the other of maintaining dependants."[127] Kundu added that the advantage of high learning over generations inculcated in the Brahman this quality. He also observed that one prime cause of their own dishonour – the 'inferiority' associated with their castes – was that they failed to develop the same virtues.[128]

A similar criticism was directed at the Saha community by one Baidya writer, Dakshinacharan Sensharma, writing in 1927. His *Asprishya Jati* was dedicated to "the multitudes in India, denoted as Untouchables and Shudras, who were deprived of most human rights, were humiliated and deceived..."[129] Sensharma noted that the upper castes survived on the wealth and bread produced by these humiliated castes. About the Saha community, he observed that there were many highly educated and wealthy men among them. There was Meghnad Saha, the famous scientist, and Lalmohan Das, who was a judge in the Calcutta High Court. Countless lawyers and barristers from the upper castes have addressed him as, "My lord". The Saha community, he remarked, could not be perceived as lacking in merit in any sense, if compared to the Baidya, the Brahman or the Kayastha. "The only thing that may be said is that the Sahas, despite having the means, do not come forward to donate money for the welfare of the country".[130]

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[126] *Ibid.*

[127] Dr. Sashibhushan Kundu, *Tilijatir Vaishyatva Praman*, p. 22.

[128] *Ibid.*

[129] Dakshinacharan Sensharma, *Asprishya Jati*, 'Utsarga'.

[130] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

The counterpoint to humiliation, here, is understood as honour. And honour must be earned through charities. One had to prove oneself worthy of 'commanding respect'. A caste had to demonstrate honourable virtues in order not to be humiliated. The foremost among such recognised virtues was the ability to renounce one's possessions for the greater good of society.

Subordinate caste tracts generally devoted a lot of attention to how the respective communities could improve in secular spheres of life such as education, jobs and business. In Bengal, some of the segments from low-ranking Shudras were wealthy. The Sahas and Subarnabaniks were such affluent castes. There were also a few zamindars and some big landholders from other middle-to-low castes (say, the Tili, Mahishya or Paundra). But a large section of most of these castes was poor and backward in terms of modern education. Editors of caste-periodicals, from up and pushing middle peasant castes and lower castes, often the first generation educated in their local communities, aspired to middle-class social status. Through tracts and periodicals, they sought to inculcate the virtues of education, money making and the rationality of the market within their respective communities. But material progress, just for the sake of it, seemed too base, too alien, and a tad too 'western'. After devoting pages on the necessity of augmenting education and wealth, *Sadgop Jati O Samajtattva* observed in 1905 that the Vaishya did not, however, earn wealth out of self-interest.[131] It was entirely for the interests and needs of others. To substantiate this ultimate altruism, Annie Besant's work was quoted at some length,

> He (Vaisya) was to gather wealth, to be a useful steward in the national household, so that learning might flourish, so that the nation might be wealthy, and so that everywhere there might be an organisation of labour, plenty of agricultural supervision, plenty of commerce, plenty of trade, and plenty of everything that was necessary for that material side of the national life.[132]

[131] Sri Saracchandra Ghosh, *Sadgop Jati O Samajtattva*, Calcutta, 1312 BS, 1905, p. 192.

[132] *Ibid*.

A claim to Vaishya status, even in terms of attainment through dedicated effort, enjoined the function of the *benefactor*. At one point, the writer of this Sadgop tract observed that the community must first and foremost care for its all-round progress in the present day. Reclaiming a lost Vaishya past, he remarked, was relatively less important.[133] Still, social service, generosity and selflessness were considered the real means of earning social respect.

The concept of man being subservient to society in India had its foundations, as we have mentioned, in a theological worldview. But in twentieth century India, the concept has had an extraordinary hold, that transcended its metaphysical association. Even those, who were critical of the 'other-worldliness' of traditional metaphysics and blamed it for the degradation of humanity, deeply identified with it as it seemed to be a sort of civilizational philosophy.

It was the value placed on individual self-restraint. Consider, for instance, what Nirmal Kumar Bose, the scientifically-oriented anthropologist wrote in the middle of the twentieth century. In *The Structure of Hindu Society*, he insisted that one must seek to understand the 'design' of the Varna system and how "the genius of India expressed itself in a unique way" through it. He agreed that "exploitation and degradation of humanity were no doubt tied up with it". But, he thought, if we tried to see this exploitation for what it was and at the same time "reserved whatever there was of value in it", we might draw our attention to the "nuggets of gold" deep inside it.[134] Bose underlined with emphasis that texts like the Manusamhita , the Mahabharata and others, while they assigned the highest status to Brahmans, also "urged them to willingly adopt poverty".[135] He drew a dichotomy between western capitalism which elicited "the desire for gain and individual self-interest" and "our old arrangements" which made man subservient to society.

> But there was also an idea at the root of the caste system that man is subservient to society. The Blacksmith, Potter, Washerman, Barber, Brahmin or Astrologer

[133] *Ibid*., 'Bhumika'.

[134] Nirmal Kumar Bose, *The Structure of Hindu Society*, 'Conclusion', pp. 168-169.

[135] *Ibid*., p. 113.

> makes his living by serving society in the prescribed way. They attend to society and society attends to them. Rights and obligations are inextricably tied...[136]
>
> In this modern Indian society which is being built on a corrupt form of capitalism we will have to say anew that man is indebted to society. We may not acknowledge that debt in the same form in which it was acknowledged by the ancients, but in a different form. But indebted we are, and it is only by acknowledging this debt that we can establish our rights: may we never forget this ancient truth.[137]

On one side, then, was the Brahmanical worldview that enjoined self-abnegation and service; on the other, the "fundamental egocentricism of capitalism". Both had their respective merits and demerits, he observed.[138]

As cultural insiders, caste-subalterns knew the audience they were speaking to. Hegemonic opinion, even when critical of conventional social practice, was against the creation of social strife for a sectional cause, however legitimate the cause-in-itself might be.[139] Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, for instance, distinguished between 'voicing a critique' that was 'productive', and 'creating disorder by stirring up the hornet's nest' that was 'ill-fated'.[140] The dissent of subaltern castes during this phase constituted a political moment marked by a disclaimer. As we shall show in subsequent chapters, dissenting subaltern caste subjects insisted that they were *not* 'kicking up a row' for 'sectional interests' or forgetting their social obligations. A moral assault on the 'degenerate Brahman' from a Teli writer underlined that the Teli did not give up his traditional obligation of serving society through business

[136] *Ibid*., p. 168.

[137] *Ibid*, p. 169.

[138] *Ibid*., p. 170.

[139] Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, 'Samajdharmer Mulya' in *Bharatvarsha*, Jaishtha, 1323 BS, 1916, reprinted in *Sulabh Saratsamagra*, Vol. 2, p. 2087.

[140] *Ibid*., p. 2088.

activities.[141] In addition to performing his ordained social function, the Teli now claimed that he legitimately possessed the *adhikar* to read the scriptures, chant Vedic hymns, etc.[142] Even those subaltern caste writers and organisers, who tried to convince others in their communities that a Vaishya/Kshatriya identity or the *upabit* could not meaningfully "enhance dignity", suggested that,

> Those, who are keen to uplift the Tili community by adopting the sacred thread, should rather arrange for stipends for students.[143]

They noted that since 'charity began at home',[144] they must first direct their charities to their own community and subsequently to the entire society. "A single banyan tree provides shelter to so many birds and animals. That is the fulfilment of magnanimity ('*baro haoya*')".[145] A journal article insisted that it was better to give away even one's rightful claims to property, when it came to quarrels with share-holders who were kith and kin.[146] In these contexts, the expressions '*tyagat santi*', '*tyagena bhunjitha*', '*tena tyaktena bhunjitha*' and '*bhuma*' were frequently used. We have referred to these usages before. "He who is after his narrow interests will never attain sublime heights."[147] It is significant that this statement came from a lower caste subject who otherwise heavily critiqued the other-worldly ontology that glorified suffering and self-abnegation. He harped so-often on the necessity of cultivating, rather, a this-worldly ethic to eradicate human suffering, caused by social injustice, especially because "this was the era of the masses" ("*ganayuga"*).[148]

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[141] 'Abhijatya' in *Teli Bandhab* (ed. Nabakrishna Saha), Phalgun-Baisakh, 1339-1340 BS, 1932, p. 16.

[142] *Ibid.*

[143] 'Abhibhashan' (lecture delivered by Sri Harihar Seth, Chandannagar before the Baidyapur Tili Hitaishi Sabha), *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika,* Chaitra-Baisakh, 1332-1333, Vol. 4, p. 116.

[144] Dr. Sashibhushan Kundu, *Tili Jatir Vaishyatva Praman,* p. 31.

[145] 'Sarikani bibad' in 'Swajati Prasanga' in *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika*, Aghrahayan, Paush, 1332 BS, 1925, pp. 59-62.

[146] *Ibid.*

[147] Sri Sahaji, 'Purano Chithi', *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika,* Aghrahayan, Paush, 1925, p. 35.

[148] *Ibid.* Sahaji, 'Ganayuga', *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika*, Phalgun-Chaitra, 1335 BS, 1929, pp. 43-47.

Where is that simmering rage, we might ask, that characterizes the caste-radical? In all the fragments of lower-caste assertions presented above, that simmering is conspicuous by its absence. The rights-bearing individual is proclaiming her/his rise, but the proclamation is weighed down, as it were, by a conscience that calls for inner spiritual preparation. Notwithstanding exceptions, who raised the sword of protest more sharply perhaps, it was not an easy choice for caste-subalterns to disown that powerful construct of the idea of India and of Hinduism: "When Hindu society was alive, each and every part of it saw the interest of the social whole as its intimate interest".[149] Nonetheless, *bhuma* and similar concepts were made to align with modern Reason by those who used them. *Bhuma* was another name for reason in the sense that it enabled the individual subject to appreciate the general, the universal. "To partake in the body politic of the nation", individual units had to connect to the 'general will': "…the interest of the whole must automatically, and indeed permanently, be hostile to the particular interest of the citizen."[150] Equally, individual fulfilment of worldly interest was affirmed as a creed for the eradication of general human suffering. A modern humanism is apparent. Yet it is a tad too conscientious about the countervailing obligations of the free man. Its politics has become "interiorized".[151] The defiance of ritual hierarchy has taken the form of an austere inner resolve.

> What I am advising my community to undertake is no doubt pain-staking. I do not deny that...But the best things come for a price. Nothing less than the just price will suffice...[152]

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[149] Rabindranath Tagore, *Bharatbarshiya Samaj*, 1901, *Rabindra Rachanabali,* Centenary Edition, Dvadas Khanda (Vol. 12), p. 682.

[150] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, Viking Press, 1965, Penguin, 1973, p. 79. "One has often been struck by the peculiar selflessness of the revolutionists, which should not be confused with 'idealism' or heroism. Virtue has indeed been equated with selflessness ever since Robespierre preached a virtue that was borrowed from Rousseau, and it is the equation which has put, as it were, its indelible stamp on the revolutionary man and his innermost conviction that the value of a policy may be gauged by the extent to which it will contradict all particular interests, and that the value of a man may be judged by the extent to which he acts against his own interest and against his own will." *Ibid.*

[151] On the "interiority" of the subject, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Domestic Cruelty: Birth of the Subject', in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

[152] Sri Sahaji, 'Purano Chithi', pp. 45-46.

And yet – invariably and despite all this – caste-elites would see only the upper-caste-educated-middle-class as capable of "*tyaga, dana and vairagya*" (sacrifice, charity and renunciation) – categorically, not the masses.[153]

[153] Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, 'Smritikatha', not dated, reminiscing Chittaranjan Das, reprinted in *Sulabh Saratsamagra*, Vol. 2, p. 1971.

Chapter 2

Dissent or Assimilation? The Indeterminacy of Resistance to Indignity

This chapter focuses on aspects of the early twentieth century mobilization of a particular caste group in Bengal: the Mahishyas. Studies of post-colonial Indian politics have noted how 'intermediate' caste identities have emerged as formidable players in the electoral politics of other Indian states.[1] The Mahishyas were designated as 'intermediate' by colonial ethnographers like Risley[2] and are seen as 'middle' castes in academic common sense for a long time now.[3] They have also been the single largest caste group in Bengal since the late nineteenth century.[4] It is a matter of historical curiosity that despite having a remarkable and continuous tradition of caste mobilization since early twentieth-century, they have never so far electorally mobilized or captured political power on the basis of caste. What has been the nature of a politics of caste-associationism that has always chosen to stay away from inscribing caste identity on the formal domain of politics? To trace its genealogy, we go back to the early twentieth century moment when, through a novel form of agitational politics, the 'Mahishya' identity was introduced and asserted by people who founded the caste-association.

There are puzzles that beset a historical investigation about caste-associational politics of the Mahishyas. As the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti, Calcutta, founded in 1897, still exists and so does the journal *Mahishya Samaj*, introduced in 1910, the researcher of today is bound to interact with ideas of current Mahishya activists. In course of this, s/he encounters a basic contradiction between the academic common

[1] Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Modernity and Politics in India', *Daedalus*, Vol. 129, No. 1, Multiple Modernities, p. 156.

[2] H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal: Ethnographic Glossary*, Vol. 1, Calcutta: Bengal Secretrariat Press, 1891, reprint: Calcutta: Firma, Mukhopadhyay, 1981, p. 375.

[3] For instance, Partha Chatterjee, 'Caste and Politics in West Bengal' in *The Present History of West Bengal*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 73-74.

[4] Mahishyas were 2.5 millions (while Namasudras were 1.86 millions and Rajbansis 2 millions) according to the *Census of India, 1901*, Vol. VI, Bengal, pp. 391, 395-396; they were 22,10,684 in number by 1921, *Census of India,1921*, Vol. V, Part 1, p. 360.

sense about their early twentieth century movement and the Mahishya activists' way of reconstructing the same history. Most Mahishya spokesmen of today, however, unexpectedly agree with colonial ethnographers as well as academic historians about their 'Kaibarta' past. In fact, some of them in recent years have sought to establish that 'caste' has nothing to do either with race or genes by citing their own example, viz., how a section of the Kaibartas, whose occupation was agriculture, broke off connections over time with the fishing Kaibartas to become a different caste and even established a different name by the twentieth century. Scholars who have studied their agitations before the Census of 1901 and 1911 must be astonished at this because the agitation for the name 'Mahishya' at that time was precisely based on denying connections with the fishermen/ 'Jeliya' Kaibarta. But upper-caste lay opinion today, in general, associates the word 'Kaibarta' with 'low caste fishermen' while regarding the 'Mahishya' as a different caste, higher in status.[5] The Census authorities had granted the Mahishya agitators a victory in 1911 by recognizing Chashi (cultivating) Kaivartas exclusively by the name 'Mahishyas', professedly on the ground that the majority of Hindus accepted the name and the distinction. In fact, such a general acceptance did not exist then. It is only very recent. Ironically, it is now that Mahishya ideologues do not hesitate to invoke a Kaibarta past. But when it comes to talking about their early twentieth century movement, they differ from the contemporary academic historian in a fundamental respect.

The historian focuses too much on the processes and ramifications of colonial sociology and ethnography. S/he is trained to look at the Census, and the policies and politics of the colonial state, as the primary context that made available avenues of 'upward mobility' for many a caste group like the Mahishya. "Following" Risley, "several more recent students of caste", as Lucy Carroll had critically remarked in 1978, have been trained to see "the remarkable vitality of caste"[6] in popular mind from the evidence of the great number of petitions and memorials that flooded the Census officials. S/he is trained into an established academic common-sense that

[5] Amiya Kumar Banerji, *West Bengal District Gazetteers, Howrah*, Calcutta: Durgadas Majumdar, I.A.S., State Editor, West Bengal District Gazetters, 1972, p. 133. This is confirmed by my own informal interviews of upper-caste men and women within family and neighbourhood (south Kolkata).

[6] Lucy Carroll, 'Colonial Perceptions of Indian Society and the Emergence of Caste(s) Associations', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2, Feb., 1978, p. 242.

Mahishyas, being 'middle' castes, never questioned Brahmanism[7] or the values of caste but always aspired to vertical mobility within caste hierarchy. The 'upward mobility' frame of understanding is reinforced by the Mahishyas' "joining the bandwagon of nationalism",[8] understood as an essentially upper-caste-led affair. The caste movement is well-known for having neutralized the contradictions of class and garnered united popular support to nationalism especially in rural Medinipur from the 1920s. Thus, existing historiography has described the Mahishya caste movement as "the most moderate and assimilationist of the major movements in Bengal."[9] Perhaps that is how historians and political scientists have roughly made sense of the absence of the Mahishyas as a distinct political force in Bengal.

Mahishya ideologues, however, do not see colonial census operations as the decisive context for their early twentieth century movement. Rather they blame the census for having raked up the 'social precedence' question and reinforcing the humiliation of "all the valorous caste groups"[10] by bringing in the Aryan-Dravidian racial dichotomy. They see the census battle as a significant but partial aspect of the initial phase of their caste-mobilization, which they reconstruct as a 'modern' emancipatory movement, primarily for self-determination and human dignity. Times were changing, they say, and a new flood of consciousness about universal human dignity and perfectibility had arisen. The basic context of the early movement,

[7] There is this 'structural inevitability' argument implicit also within Dalit political discourse which makes a rigid distinction between conditions and ideologies of Shudras and those of Dalits. Dalits observed in the 1980s that Shudra Backward Classes "internalized the Brahmanic world-view" and was, thus, lacking in the "guts to start a virulent agitation" seeking implementation of the Mandal Commission Report which recommended quotas in government employment for OBCs. M.S.S. Pandian, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007, p. 236. Mahishyas, in fact, are still not included under the 'Backward Classes' of West Bengal, even though the Mandal Commission had recommended its inclusion. An important section of the community, so far, opposed and prevented the inclusion. (This would only lend credence to the idea about the middle-caste Shudra having "internalized Brahmanic values".) However, the 'Chasha Kaibarta' is included as a Backward Class as a result of the movement in favour of inclusion. West Bengal Commission for Backward Classes, Seventh Report, submitted on 17th April, 1997, e source: http://wbcbc.gov.in/advice/7th-rpt.pdf

[8] Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal, 1875-1927*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 76.

[9] Sumit Sarkar, 'Identities and Histories', *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002, p. 53.

[10] Phani Ray, *Mahishya Manisha Tatha Jatiya Gaurab*, Howrah: Ray Prakashani, 2012, p.23. Author's conversation with Mahishya Samiti members and their families in the house of Phani Ray in Kadamtala, Howrah on 18.11.2015.

according to these current Mahishya activists, was the steadily democratizing vernacular public sphere, a space, for asserting autonomy of judgement, remarkably novel for subordinate caste groups. This public also created the conditions for the metamorphosis of its participants into self-conscious political subjects who debated questions of autonomy, rights and representation. It created conditions for the forging of large solidarities reachable through the medium of print. Thus, Mahishya activists reconstruct the context of the beginning of their twentieth-century caste-mobilization not in specific colonial governmental policies, but in colonialism's changing "most emphatically the imaginaire, the way Indians conceived of the social world and its possibilities of organization".[11] Their idea was similar to what M. S. S. Pandian, for instance, wrote about colonialism "enabling new forms of 'speakability'about caste in a modern 'secularised' public sphere".[12]

When I was speaking about how Mahishya agitators around 1911 cited the Puranas and the Shastras to demarcate their caste from Jeliya Kaibartas, a veteran activist from Howrah, associated for half a century with *Mahishya Samaj*, remarked:

> The Census battle demanded that. But could men of the stature of Mahendranath Roy, the genius who effected the recruitment of C.V. Raman to the University of Calcutta in 1914, have had merely such parochial targets in mind? Roy, in those old-fashioned days, was a supporter of inter-caste marriage.[13]

These words provoked my thought in two ways. I knew that Mahendranath Roy was an early Mahishya leader, an advocate in the Calcutta High Court, and one of those who had checked the drafts of protest-petitions sent by Mahisyas to the Census Commissioner before 1901 against "being equated with Jeliya Kaibartas".[14] I did not

[11] Sudipta Kaviraj, *Politics in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 11.

[12] M.S.S. Pandian, 'Introduction: The Politics of the Emergent' in *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin*, p. 7.

[13] Phani Ray, the octogenarian, who said this, was often the editor of the *Mahishya Samaj* during the 1970s. Unlike his colleagues like Satya Ranjan Biswas, who did not want Mahishyas to be included under OBCs, Phani Ray, since the 1960s, has been seeking to include the caste as OBC. Conversation at Kadamtala, Howrah on 18.11.2015.

[14] Satya Ranjan Biswas, *Mahishya Andolaner Itihas*, Calcutta: Bangiya Mahishya Samiti, 1984, Chapter 6, cited in West Bengal Commission for Backward Classes, Seventh Report.

know that Roy was such a distinguished Senator in the University of Calcutta or about his exceptionally brilliant career that outshone his classmates like Brajendranath Seal and Dwijendralal Roy. His career was no less awe-inspiring than Ashutosh Mukherjee, his colleague.[15] It struck me that upper-caste Bengalis, in general, hardly knew about Mahendranath Roy, given the tradition of 'great-men worship' that we undoubtedly have in our culture. Further, I saw that an exclusive focus on the Sansktitizing drive of their early twentieth century movement could possibly effect a *reduction* of their socio-political imaginings, and a flattening of the series of paradoxes, that integrally constitute identities.

The conversation also reminded me of one of Sudipta Kaviraj's observations about post-colonial Indian politics. Writing about how 'intermediate' castes have seized power in other Indian states by electorally mobilizing caste-identity, he observed that India's 'modernity' evolved in uncharted ways also because "the new elites who emerge into political power are quite often without the education that the colonial elite enjoyed (and so) their understandings of the precedents of European modernity is tenuous, if not entirely absent".[16] I thought that the Mahishya activists who spoke to me were making the obverse of the same argument: that men like Mahendranath Ray 'were so highly educated in the ideals of the Enlightenment', that despite their Census-directed agitations which speak otherwise, they certainly fought to transcend hierarchies and identities of birth altogether.

Becoming 'Mahishyas' in the Early Twentieth Century

Risley had described in 1891 the Kaibartas as "one of the characteristic castes of the deltaic districts of Bengal".[17] He observed that the "nucleus of the group was probably Dravidian, but that their original cast of features may have been to some extent refined by a slight infusion of Aryan blood".[18] Further, he wrote that "the type as it stands at present is distinctly an intermediate one, equally removed from the extreme

[15] Phani Ray, *Mahishya Manisha*, pp. 25-40.

[16] Kaviraj, 'Modernity and Politics in India', p. 157.

[17] H. H. Risley, *Tribes and Castes, Vol. 1*, p. 375.

[18] *Ibid.*

types of Aryan and Dravidian races found in Bengal."[19] The Chasha Kaibartas, who claimed the Puranic name 'Mahishya' on the eve of the 1901 census never quoted Risley in these lines. But they quoted him for saying that, "There seem to be good grounds for the belief that the Kaibarttas were among the earliest inhabitants of Bengal and occupied a commanding position."[20] Hitesranjan Sanyal tells us that the Chasha Kaibartas emerged as a separate caste sometime between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The name is not found in the sixteenth century folk literature *Chandimangal* but appears in the eighteenth century *Annadamangal*.[21] They were an 'intermediate' caste, also in purely ritual terms, according to Sanyal's classification. Only 'degraded' Brahmans would assist at their ritual occasions. But their water was not theoretically unacceptable to upper-castes: so they were *jalchal*. Thus, they were below *satshudras* and above *asatshudras*.[22]

In the early twentieth century, the cultivating Kaibartas were spread over the eastern part of Medinipur, the contiguous areas of the Uluberia subdivision of Howrah, the southern part of the Arambag subdivision of Hooghly, Twenty-four Parganas, Nadia and Murshidabad as well as in the eastern districts of Tripura, Noakhali, Mymensingh, Dacca and Sylhet. They formed the local aristocracy in Medinipur from a very early date. They had reportedly founded five kingdoms in the region and the descendants of these ruling dynasties, like the 'Bahubalindras' of Mayna, exist till date. Since the eighteenth century, as Hitesranjan Sanyal's works have shown, the growth of European trade enlarged the scope of profit from manufacturing and internal trade of various kinds. A number of Chasha Kaibarta families made money through silk trade.[23] Many engaged in the trade of jute, rice, cotton-textile, sugar, iron and brass metal-ware.[24] The demand for commercial crops in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also fueled the expansion of cultivation and large-scale land-reclamation. Finally, new profits went into the purchasing of tenurial

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*, Calcutta: Papyrus, 1981, p. 75.

[22] *Ibid.*, pp. 33-65. For these distinctions, see Introduction.

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] *Ibid.*

or landholding rights. In Nadia, the Brahman scholar, Jogendranath Bhattacharya, found in 1896 that Chasha Kaibartas formed the lower level of the middle classes and many of them were even competing for university distinctions.[25] In Medinipur, there were substantial Jotdars and zamindars from their caste. O'Malley wrote in 1911 that they represented in Medinipur all interests from proprietor to cultivator.[26] But a recent thesis has made a striking point that control over agricultural lands by Chashi Kaibartas in areas of Eastern Medinipur such as Tamluk or Contai was not a new affair. Colonial developments like Permanent Settlement did not change much of the caste-composition in land-holding in these regions where "the development of a perfect land market was thwarted". "At best, huge zamindaries were on occasion divided into smaller holdings by men from the same caste".[27]

When Mahishya writers and organisers wrote tracts in the early twentieth century on their distinctive antiquity, respectability and identity, they harped on a similar point, viz., that they were "formerly a dominant caste of Bengal"[28], and not mere upstarts. While they cited the Puranas like the *Brahmavaivarta Puran* and the *Padmapuran* to speak of their honourable lineage, they never mentioned Mangalkavya literature.[29] Mangalkavyas indicate the emergence of Chasha Kaibartas as a separate caste as a relatively recent development following occupational shifts and new-found prosperity in the early modern period. Mahishya agitators during the censuses obviously sought 'original' distinction from the 'other' Kaibartas; not a picture of dissidence from a common parent caste through recent upward mobility.

In 1897, Narahari Jana, a zamindar from Tajpur in Nandigram, Midnapur, who gathered a lot of wealth out of business in timber, organized a *Jati Nirdharani Sabha* in Tajpur.[30] Brahmans were invited to decree the status of Chasha Kaibartas as a

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[25] Jogendranath Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, Calcutta, 1896, Reprint: Firma, Mukhopadhyay, 1968, pp. 223-225.

[26] L.S.S. O' Malley (ed.), *Midnapur District Gazetteer*, Calcutta, 1911, p. 58.

[27] Anirban Bandyopadhyay, 'An Intermediate Caste History: The Mahishyas of Bengal, 1886-1921', Unpublished M.Phil. Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2009, pp. 7-8.

[28] Pyari Mohan Das (ed.), *Mahishyas: Formerly a Dominant Caste of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1911.

[29] This has been noted as a 'significant absence' by Anirban Bandyopadhyay, 'An Intermediate Caste History', p. 120.

[30] Ashtosh Jana, 'Bhumika' in *Mahishya Tattva Baridhi*, Medinipur, 1319 BS, 1912.

distinct caste with the name 'Mahishya'. Soon the affluent Mahishya gentry founded the Nadia Mahishya Samiti, the Calcutta (or the Presidency) Mahishya Samiti and many other local Mahishya associations in different districts of Bengal, including Dacca. The patrons of the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti in the first decade of the twentieth century seems to have been quite distinguished elites. Trailokyanath Biswas was a scion of the Janbajar millionaire family of Rani Rashmoni. We have already mentioned Mahendranath Roy. Roy was also the Dean of the Faculty of Law at the University of Calcutta.[31]

The Samiti's work was conducted by Mahishya professionals from Calcutta. There were about six hundred tax-assessees amongst the Mahishyas of Calcutta.[32] The Samiti was housed in the premises of the Mahishya zamindar, Narendranath Das, who lived in Entally.[33] Rampada Biswas, a lawyer, introduced the caste-mouthpiece *Mahishya Samaj* in 1910.[34] Prakash Chandra Sarkar and Anantaram Das, patrons of the Samiti, were, respectively, a pleader and a *mukteur* at the Calcutta High Court. The former was the Assistant Secretary of the Samiti. Sashibhushan Biswas, the President Elect of the Samiti was a zamindar.[35]

Ashutosh Jana, who wrote *Mahishya Tattva Baridhi* (1912), was an electrical physicist. He taught at an American university before coming to his native Tamluk to "promote knowledge" and self-awareness among his caste brethren as part of a sacred calling.[36] More than a dozen tracts can be found in early twentieth century Bengal, which sought to clarify and establish the status of the Mahishya. A lawyer from Sunamganj, Sylhet, authored *Mahishyas: Formerly a Dominant Caste of Bengal* (1911). Prakash Chandra Sarkar, a lawyer and talukdar, compiled the *Mahishya Prakash* (1911). Mahishyayaji Brahmans, that is, priests who served the Mahishyas, joined hands with Mahishyas in writing tracts. The low status of both were

[31] Phani Ray, *Mahishya Manisha*, pp. 25-40.

[32] Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest*, p. 76.

[33] *Mahishya Samaj*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 'Abataranika', 1318 BS, 1911.

[34] In 1911, the journal's publication was taken over by the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti.

[35] Prakash Chandra Sarkar, *Mahishya Prakash*, Part 1, Calcutta, 1912, p. 9.

[36] Ashutosh Jana, 'Bhumika' in *Mahishya Tattva Baridhi*.

interlocked.[37] One of the most important tracts by a Mahishyayaji Brahman was *Bhranti Bijay or A Social History of the Brahmins of Bengal* (1912), which asserted that both Mahishyas and their priests have been living in Bengal (Gaur) since a very ancient time. Harish Chandra Chakrabarty, the writer of *Bhranti Bijay* deplored that "while the Bengali student would effortlessly recite the genealogical tables of the Slave dynasty of Sultans", or "would readily give the correct dates and facts of the Battle of Waterloo", he, alas, would not have any idea about "who constructed the great temple of Jagannath in Orissa, the caste to which the king belonged, or about the great Ganga dynasty, or of the kings of Tamluk, Mayna, Turka, Lat and Kankadvip".[38]

Most of these tracts bore scriptural citations from the Samhitas, from the Smriti-shastras like Manu and from the Puranas to make the point that 'Mahishyas' were clean Shudras, born of the seed of the Kshatriya in the womb of the Vaishya. Besides, there were references to very recent treatises and decrees by authoritative Brahman scripturalists from important centres of Sanskrit learning such as Benaras. Hunter and Risley would be quoted as attesting to the formerly "commanding position" of the Mahishyas. With these, there were often copious references from Aristotle to Adam Smith, from the New Testament to the Koran, to Bacon, Malthus, Buckle, Whitley and Gibbon to establish the worth of agriculture in society.[39] Ashutosh Jana concluded his compendium by saying: "the claim of antagonists that Ballal Sena raised the social status of some Jalik (fishermen) Kaibartas who later became Halik (peasant) was clearly malicious."[40] In a later section, we shall see why Ballal Sena mattered so much to them. Before that, let us proceed to understand the political nature of the early Mahishya movement.

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[37] On this aspect of "interlocking across the ritual status of Brahmans and the Shudra castes to whom Brahmans provided ritual functions", see Tanika Sarkar, '*Caste, Sect and Hagiography*: The Balakdashis of Early Modern Bengal' in *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designing Selves and Nations in Colonial Times*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2009, pp. 90-91.

[38] Harish Chandra Chakrabarti, *Bhranti Bijay*, Andul, Howrah, 1912, 'Purbabhas'.

[39] Ashutosh Jana, *Mahishya Tattva Baridhi*, p. 125.

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 205.

Dissent or Assimilation? Caste, Nation and Class

Prodded by Mahishya activists to engage with the 'enlightened'[41] content of the early twentieth century Mahishya movement, I ventured to investigate if there was something more to what apparently seemed to be a Census-oriented battle for recognition as a clean caste with a distinct name. The process by which 'Chasha Kaibartas' became state-recognised 'Mahishyas' by 1911 was based on, as we have shown, exclusivist claim-making. It drew 'original' differences with supposedly 'lower' Kaibartas and the new name was intended to do away with the 'degraded' Kaibarta connection. In what ways, then, was the movement any different from traditional upward-mobility drives by improving sub-castes, which always sought to establish a superior and distinct identity by breaking away from parent castes?

Notably, however, the early leaders and tract-writers would agree with their current successors in looking at the early twentieth century movement as 'revolutionary'. An early twentieth century Mahishya tract-writer observed that the traditional *samajpatis* of the Chasha Kaibartas survived into the present age like "so many living embodiments of sin" and that, "as a result *a full-scale social revolution* is on the way".[42] The *samajpatis* were traditional social leaders, often substantial zamindars, of *Kaibarta Samaj*, like the Bahubalindras of Moynachura in Medinipur, who held hereditary monopoly as headmen of the caste. They arbitrated caste disputes and their special power consisted in stopping the services of barbers and washer-men to offenders. The basic ideology of the 'modern' educated Mahishyas – the tract-writers and Mahishya spokesmen and members of the new Mahishya associations – was against hereditary monopolies and also against Brahmanical exclusionary practices such as stopping the services of barbers and washermen. A recent thesis has drawn attention to the important point that even the traditional *samajpatis* had an antagonistic attitude to the new movement.[43] Clearly, they apprehended that their hereditary nature of social power was fast eroding; a new class of educated gentry was

[41] My conversations with Mahishya Samiti members and their families in the house of Phani Ray in Kadamtala, Howrah on 18.11.2015. The search for 'enlightened' values inspiring the movement is evident in *Mahishya Samaj*, 2010 (ed. Amiya Samanta).

[42] Prabodhananda Saraswati, *Mahishya Suhrid*, Diamond Harbour, Twenty-four Parganas, 1911, pp. 20-26, cited in Anirban Bandyopadhyay, 'An Intermediate Caste History', p. 102-103.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 103.

fast replacing them. The *samajpatis* did not subscribe to the Vaishya status,[44] which foreign-returned leaders like Ashutosh Jana were exhorting the Mahishyas to assume as a matter of 'right'. Some of these *samajpati* families had introduced ritual reforms among the Kaibartas since the late eighteenth century. In fact, the new claims of 'clean' ritual status were based on these long-standing reforms. But the *samajpatis* were content with a 'clean Shudra' ritual status; Varnic claims seemed alien, somewhat unintelligible and dangerous to them. On the other hand, the new leaders were much too convinced about the malleability of the social world and of identity not to claim an appropriate Dwija Varna status.

But was there any larger protest against hierarchy as such? My correspondents seek to establish that the early twentieth century Mahishya movement was primarily inspired by faith in human dignity and social justice, that it was a movement of 'tyrannised peoples' against superior orders. They showed me 'evidences' of Mahishyas invoking broader identities as "suffering" peoples in the 1960s and '70s[45] and suggested that traces of it could be found in the early twentieth century movement. Perhaps it was not so contradictory that a group which sought to prove that it was "formerly" a "dominant caste" with a "commanding position" could simultaneously speak from the position of the marginalized, the weak and the oppressed. In a letter to the Superintendent of Census Operations in 1911, the Secretary of the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti referred to the "*rights* of the weaker in society" which, he complained, upper castes desired "to trample for an indefinite length of time."[46]

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[44] *Ibid.*

[45] "Mahishyas, Scheduled Castes and Muslims must unite as in a solidarity to prevent rural West Bengal from being preyed upon by urban upper castes; villages must become self-sufficient and agriculture must be supported by the government. They should also unite with the refugees from east Bengal, most of whom are Mahishyas and Scheduled Castes." Rekha Ray, 'Paschim Banga Bidhan Sabhar Nirbachan O Mahishya Samaj'; "Mahishyas demand that the government provides monthly pension of rupees fifty to the friends of society, i.e., the productive classes such as Kamar, Kumhar, Jele, Krishak, Tanti." 'Hooghly Jela Mahishya Sammelan, Nalikul, Hooghly', *Mahishya Samaj*, Baisakh, Jaishtha, 1384 BS, 1977, p. 46, p. 39.

[46] Letter from Narendranath Das, Secretary, Bangiya Mahishya Samiti to Superintendant of Census Operations in Bengal, Calcutta, December 31, 1910, cited in Bandyopadhyay, 'An Intermediate Caste Identity', p. 134.

Hitesranjan Sanyal has shown that corporate upward mobility of castes took place even before the advent of modern agencies such as the press.[47] Thus, Chasha Kaibartas, like Sadgops and Tilis, had achieved upward mobility before they took to these new caste-associations and participated in the new world of print and publishing. In a way, that was what my correspondents claimed. Unlike their predecessors, they did not deny that 'upward mobility' had taken place over the centuries for Chasha Kaibartas. Only, they were keen to locate the difference that marked the early twentieth century moment of upheaval, when 'modern' ideas of freedom, nationalism, justice and legitimacy were being debated through the medium of print.

Sudarshanchandra Biswas, a school-teacher from Faridpur in eastern Bengal, was a regular contributor to *Mahishya Samaj*, since it was founded in 1910. In a subsequent section, we shall deal with one of his tracts. As a Mahishya spokesman, we find him writing on such ritual matters like the validity of fifteen-day *ashauch*[48] for the Mahishya (marking Vaishya status), or arguing, in ritual-cum-historical terms, that the priests who served the Mahishya were not 'degraded'. Most of these were exclusivist claims to 'purity' assuming distances from supposedly 'lower' castes. Looking into a contemporary elite periodical like *Nabyabharat*, published from Calcutta, however, I found an essay by the same author in 1908, which carried a distinctly different tone. The essay was titled, 'The Inauguration of National Life'.[49] It began by referring to the creation of a "new political festival" in Bengal on the date of the 30th of Aswin (or the 16th of October), that is, the occasion of 'Rakhi' conceived by Tagore during the time of the Swadeshi movement. Biswas wrote that if Bengalis closed their eyes and contemplated on the solemn message that constituted this occasion, the *mantra* "*bhai bhai thain thain bhed nai bhed nai*" (that, "we are all brothers, there are no differences"), they would have had much to learn. He said that if Bengalis really felt that way, a 'new age' would have dawned in Bengal. But the *mantra* did not emerge

[47] Hitesranjan Sanyal, 'Continuities of Social Mobility in Traditional and Modern Society in India: Two Case Studies of Caste Mobility in Bengal', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Feb., 1971), pp. 315-339.

[48] *Ashauch* is the duration of ritual uncleanness, following the death of a kin.

[49] Sudarshanchandra Biswas, 'Jatiya Jibaner Udbodhan', *Nabyabharat*, Vol. 25, No. 11, Phalgun, 1314 BS, 1908, pp. 603-604.

from the depth of the Bengalis' soul; otherwise, why would the Hindu Bengali "become resentful when his Muslim 'brother' secured a government job"? "Your Namasudra 'brother', even if a B.A., is not allowed to sit beside you; does it signify your sacred love for the country?" Biswas said that it was a pathetic irony that upper caste Hindu Bengalis imagined themselves as nationalists when they were filled to their marrows with caste prejudices and religious parochialisms. "You are incapable of augmenting the strength of the nation by an ounce; yet you are proud to be booked on charges of sedition!" He hailed the 'policy of equality' ("*samyaniti*") as the only means by which to restore the nation's forte. "Learn to love the Namasudra: unless you dispel your hatred for the Namasudra, one of the largest castes of Bengal, you will not achieve your national mission." Then he made a point that was a common refrain within upper caste liberal circles as well as among lower caste ideologues by the 1920s, "You hate the Muslim and the Christian for being beef-eaters; yet you let the Hindu barber serve them. You outcast the barber if he shaves the Namasudra…how long will you continue with such absurd rules of division?"[50] After referring to the illegitimacy of the 'unclean' status of the Saha community, he mentioned the Mahishya. He wondered why the priests of the Mahishyas should be considered 'unclean'. "The cunning Swadeshi patriot could tell perhaps". He observed that one should not suppose that national unity could be forged even if caste divisions survived. Divisions were not horizontal groupings but vertical hierarchies that evoked arrogance – "*jatyabhiman*".[51] He related some events in his own village and observed that caste-arrogance of Kayasthas had suddenly soared in 1903, following which they stopped accepting invitations from Mahishyas and even forbade Tilis to accept the same. He did not mention that famous episode of 1872-73 in Bakarganj where Kayasthas had refused an invitation to a funeral feast extended by a rich 'Chandal' (later 'Namasudra'), following which 'Chandals' of Faridpur had organized a massive boycott of all agricultural and other services to high castes, and their village headmen had complained to the police officer about "the grievances they suffered from the Hindus, more especially from the Kayesths, whose treatment of them was

[50] *Ibid.*

[51] *Ibid.*

intolerable."[52] Biswas did not directly refer to these Namasudra agitations of an agrarian dimension, some of which took place again in 1907-08, but he invoked a recent episode of similar humiliation of Mahishyas by Kayasthas. He said that Kayasthas even forced Tilis to refuse Mahishya invitations by threatening them with exclusion from Brahmanical society. "Such hypocrisy did not befit the new age".[53]

We find Biswas speaking for the abolition of caste-differences in favour of 'the nation' and 'the irresistible force of the times' (he used words like "*yugadharma*" and "*yugantar*" to talk about why even the Sastras should be ignored to realise *the ideal of equality*)[54]. Thus, he constituted himself as a national political subject expectant of 'change' (romantic nationalism has always been associated with 'change'[55]). As a critical nationalist, he took part in the creative constitution of national society. In fact, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay referred to this essay by Biswas as authored by a "nationalist leader from east Bengal".[56] On the other hand, the Mahishya ideologue, in this essay, joined hands with the Namasudra and other inferior castes expressing a common sense of discrimination and injustice.

The invocation of broader identities by Mahishya ideologues against entrenched power was not so rare after all. We find such evidences in unexpected places. Local/regional periodicals were one of these. Mahishya contributors to *Diamond Harbour Hitaishi* in the 1920s often narrated the humiliation that Mahishyas, Muslims and 'untouchable' castes like the Paundras[57] faced from upper castes in common

[52] Report of W. L. Owen, District Superintendant of Police, to District Magistrate, Faridpur, No. 66, Camp Bhanga, 18 March 1873: Government of Bengal, Judicial Proceedings, March 1873, n. 179, quoted in Sumit Sarkar, 'Identities and Histories', p. 47.

[53] Biswas, 'Jatiya Jibaner Udbodhan'.

[54] *Ibid.*

[55] "All changed, changed utterly/ A terrible beauty is born" – Yeats, 1916, quoted, in the context of talking about nationalism as "a pure-minded rejection of the compromises of…authority" and about nationalism, in many countries, having "created the political concept of 'youth'", K. R. Minogue, *Nationalism*, London: University Paperbacks, 1967, pp. 7-8.

[56] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Social Mobility and Politics in the Swadeshi Era' in *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India, The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947*, Second Edition, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 73.

[57] The caste was commonly called 'Pod'. With the rise of their caste-movement in the early twentieth century, the name 'Paundrakshatriya' was adopted and sought to be established. Today, the name 'Paundra' has, more or less, settled. More on them in Chapter 4.

terms. All three communities equally faced the ire of upper castes when their boys went to high schools in the region.[58]

Mahendranath Tattvanidhi, a veteran Mahishya leader of the region (Diamond Harbour in the south Twenty-four Parganas), wrote in 1924 about the need for Mahishyas to form united associations with all Hindu and Muslim peasant and artisanal groups of India, irrespective of caste and religion. These words reached a considerable readership and Paundra writers and leaders immediately lauded the idea of Tattvanidhi. They wrote in the forthcoming issue of *Paundrakshatriya Samachar* (October- November, 1924) that such a unity of 'deprived' peoples, who 'produced' for the nation, was indispensable to fight humiliation.[59]

In *sabhas* and *samitis* arranged by Paundras, which were primarily meetings internal to the caste public where Paundras from different districts came together, Mahishyas were sometimes invited as non-Paundra speakers. Reports of such meetings bring out that Mahishya speakers, especially in Diamond Harbour, spiritedly upheld solidarity with the Paundras and the need to overcome the fragmented nature of lower caste resistance to caste tyranny.[60] We may bear in mind that in popular estimation and upper caste eyes, Mahishyas were low castes – or, 'low-caste parvenus'.[61] It is from after 1931, when Mahishyas were no more in the lists of the 'Scheduled' castes, that their 'middle' status has gradually normalized. Upper caste elites in the early twentieth century spoke of the "Pod and Kaibarta" in the same vein.[62] The Superintendant of Census Operations in Bengal had observed in 1921 that Chashi Kaibartas occupied the same position in the body politic as did the

[58] 'Jati Bidvesh' in *Paundrakshatriya Samachar*, Year 1, No. 9, Kartik, 1331 BS, 1924, excerpted in *Paundra Manisha*, Vol. 2, Calcutta: Paundra Mahasamgha, 2013.

[59] *Ibid.*

[60] 'Sabha Samiti', *Paundrakshatriya Samachar*, 1924, p. 337.

[61] The expression, not applying exclusively to Mahishyas but to lower caste claimants to high status, can be found in Jogendranath Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, pp. 3-4; Bimal Kumar Shit, himself a Mahishya with roots in Medinipur, writes in 2009 that Mahishyas belonged to 'inferior'castes in early twentieth century social reckoning. Dr. Bimal Kumar Shit, *Deshapran Birendranath Sashmal O Banglar Jatiyatabadi Andolan*, Calcutta: Arpita Prakashani, 2009, p. 25.

[62] The well-known Bengali columnist of early twentieth century Bengal, Panchkori Bandyopadhyay, for instance, referred to the 'Kaibarta' and 'Pod' together, as if similarly positioned, clearly not recognizing any essential differene between the sub-castes of the Kaibarta. See 'Brahman Jati', *Prabahini*, 6 Chaitra, 1320 BS, 1914, reprinted in Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay and Sajanikanta Das, *Panchkori Bandyopadhyayer Rachanabali*, Vol. 2, Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishat, 1951, p. 69.

Namasudras.[63] He had, thus, classified 'Chasi Kaibartas' under the 'Depressed Classes'.

Mahishya identity formation in the early twentieth century had components of a social-justice movement ingrained in it. Lucy Carroll differentiated between two kinds of caste associations of this time: the first type, she explained, emerged during the time of Census operations and died down soon after only to emerge again during the next Census operations, the second type had some amount of organization and permanence.[64] Mahishya caste associational activities belonged to the second type. I suggest that this second type of caste associational initiative, engaging in constructive activities such as opening of schools, was inherently hopeful of a more inclusive new world. A romantic notion of change – liberation, rejuvenation in a 'new' age, 'new' world – through pain-staking, unselfish effort had given a sacred tenor to caste associational politics such as these.[65] The liberating potential of Mahishya associational activities in Murshidabad, like the foundation of night schools, had won the appreciation of a European missionary (supposedly anti-caste in principle) named J. C. Joyce in 1909-1910. In fact, when a case was lodged by locals against some

[63] *Census of India, 1921*, Vol. V, Bengal, Part 1, Report, p. 366.

[64] As Carroll says, "The preoccupation with census petitions distorts the reality of caste(s) associations in several ways: it lumps together those mere ad hoc petitioning bodies, and the more permanent, better-organised associations; it concentrates on a single point in time, or on a periodically recurring point, to the total neglect of what happened before, after, or between the decennial censuses; and by thus narrowing the sample to *selected* (not random) points in time, it focuses on a particular type of confluct that manifested itself precisely at those pre-selected dates. Conclusions based on data on these carefully stage-managed samples are obvious: caste(s) associations were organized for purposes of "social mobility" expressed through a desire for change in *varna* classification as recorded in the official census…Certainly, the adhoc petitioning bodies were concerned exclusively with what the census could do to them or could do for them…but census concerns explain neither the origin nor the program" of the more permanent caste associations, which, however, also petitioned the census commissioner at ten years intervals. 'Colonial Perceptions…', pp. 243-244.

[65] Rampada Biswas, for instance, saw his task of introducing a new caste journal in 1910 as carrying forward God's own *mantra* of regeneration, that came in the form of the word 'Mahishya'. Introductory Editorial, *Mahishya Samaj*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Baisakh, 1317 (before its publication was taken over by the Samiti in 1318).

Also, see this poem in Amritalal Kundu and Lakshmanchandra De edited *Vaishya Tili Hitaishi*, a journal of the Tilis, of 1923. "*Tonic diye durbal Tilir sabal pran koro/ Satya dharmer parash diye jati drirha koro/…Sekal-buror praner samne tej madira dhori/ Tumi tare ekal koro/ Matao nutan kori/ …Tomar ganer sure jeno mrito byektio jage/ Gonrader hridoy o bhore jeno svajatya anurage*", broadly meaning that 'God must regenerate the weak minds of Tilis by enthusing them with the religion of truth; the conservatives must be enlivened, their bitterness replaced by cheerfulness and a youthful reinvigoration of love for the community'. *Vaishya Tili Hitaishi*, Aswin, 1330 BS. I cite this as a typical example to indicate the spirit that propelled the origins and programmes of many of these associations, and as proof that census concerns with relative status could be parallel but removed from some of these anti-orthodox exhortations for regeneration.

members of the Mahishya Samiti of Murshidabad (established 1897, as a branch of the Presidency Mahishya Samiti of Calcutta) allegedly for 'highhandedness', Joyce had testified to the magistrate about the constructive nature of the work of the Samiti and about how the night school founded by the Samiti led to an increased desire on the part of the villagers to educate themselves.[66] Education had a direct relationship with 'change' and, in fact, upper castes knew that only too well. Lower castes taking to schools would invariably make upper castes nervous about having to lose their services.[67]

The idea of '*atmano mokshartham jagaddhitaya (ca)*' had made a huge impact within bhadralok circles around this time.[68] It was perhaps the central plank of Swami Vivekananda's teachings and it meant that the salvation of the soul lay in service to humanity. Mahishya Samiti patrons sought to belong to the same milieu. Not just Mahishyas, but tract/pamphlet-writers, journalists and organizers of all caste associations described their efforts with terms such as 'pilgrimage' or 'sacred vow' ("*vrata*").[69] The sense of this new 'sacred' was inherently political in intent. Kangal Harinath, for instance, had exemplified this 'sacred' politics of protest through persuasive journalistic articulation. Tilis in the early twentieth century made him into

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[66] *Mahishya Samaj*, Aghrahayan, 1317 BS, 1910. More references to this case below. A good account of this case has been given in Bandyopadhyay, 'An Intermediate Caste History', pp. 93-99.

[67] Thus, local Kayasthas had opposed the foundation of a high school for Namasudras at Orakandi. *Guruchand Charit*, the hagiography of the son of the founder of the Matua faith, Harichand, described Kayasthas as arguing that education of Namasudras would disrupt the age-old principles of *adhikar-bhed*, "as enshrined in the Ramayana". The Kayasthas feared "that sharecroppers and servants would no longer work for them if they became educated. Literacy, further, was vital for peasants, for otherwise high-caste landlords were constantly tricking them in matters of rent-receipt and indebtedness". Sumit Sarkar, 'Intimations of Hindutva', *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, p. 92. The spread of schools in the Indigo districts during the 1850s, we may recall, was a development "regarded by the planters and their barely literate minions with utter hostility. 'My Lord', says the indigo factory's dewan to his boss in *Neel Darpan*, 'the establishment of schools in the countryside has made the peasants more turbulent than ever…We shall fight to stop schools from being set up' [*Act I*]…These extreme sentiments follow immediately upon an exchange between Sadhucharan, a principal ryot, and the officials…The dewan, an upper-caste Hindu, asks him (Sadhucharan) to shut up, because for a common peasant to use *sadhubhasha* is to overreach himself… '*banchat bada pandit hoiachhe*' (the planter quips)…The amin is outraged that a man from a family that works on the land should use a language so far above his status." Ranajit Guha, '*Neel Darpan*: The Image of a Peasant Revolt', in *The Small Voice of History: Collected Essays*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2009, pp. 135-136.

[68] For a good discussion on this, see Ranajit Guha, 'Nationalism and the Trials of Becoming' in *The Small Voice of History*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2009, p. 530.

[69] Sumit Sarkar has quoted Rashbihari Roy Pandit from his *Namasudra Darpan* (Calcutta, 1909) in the latter's use of the word 'pilgrimage' to describe his caste-related activities, 'Identities and Histories', p. 38.

an icon. He was born in Nadia and, even though he was a destitute (*kangal*), he had established his own press in 1873. He had taken to journalism in order to protect the peasant from the tyranny of the zamindar and it is said that his journals *Sambad Prabhakar* and *Grambarta Prakashika* survived repeated threats from British magistrates and native zaminders.[70] Journalism was always about questioning power and authority, be it traditional scriptural or colonial. The moral-political persuasions of subaltern caste journalists in early twentieth century Bengal get reflected in the manner in which Tili writers of the 1920s eulogized Kangal Harinath. A poem in 1921 described Harinath as "neither worldly nor a renouncer of the world".[71] With inspirations of a similar nature for an 'exalted' cause, the journal *Mahishya Samaj* was launched in 1910.[72] For the same cause, around 1911-12, they had set up the Mahishya Education Trust, the Mahishya Trust for Orphaned Children, the Agricultural Association of Bengal and the Mahishya Banking and Trading Company. The first two were intended to spread education and the rest to further the development of agriculture, trade and commerce.[73]

These were certainly initiatives at 'change'. But were they cumulating towards the emergence of a formidable political force that could challenge the authority of upper castes within the 'nation-in-making'? Were these wedded to nationalism or loyalism to the British government? Existing historiography suggests that since 1905 when 'protective discrimination' in favour of Muslims became an established trend in British policy in Bengal (the Muslims granted a separate electorate in 1909), caste associations began to proliferate as similar hopes were generated in the minds of lower castes, "whose leaders now tried to carve out a place for themselves in the new world of institutional politics and professions".[74] This is part of the 'upward mobility'

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[70] Sahaji, 'Mahatma Kangal Harinath', *Tili Bandhab*, Jaishtha, 1328 BS, 1921, pp. 17-18. Subodhchandra Sengupta and Anjali Basu (ed.), *Samsad Bangali Charitabhidhan*, Part 1, Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1994, p. 79.

[71] Sahaji, 'Mahatma Kangal Harinath'.

[72] Even in 2010, its patrons and editors regarded it as a site of altruism. Amiya Kumar Samanta cited a *Mahishya Samaj* Editorial of 1960 to underline his own point. "But how many people would be generous enough to participate in these activities?" 'Sampadakiya', *Mahishya Samaj*, 2010, p. 8.

[73] See the Resolutions adopted on the Annual Conference of the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti, *Mahishya Samaj*, Sravan, 1319 BS, 1912, p. 93; *Mahishya Samaj*, Paush, 1319, pp. 210-213; *Mahishya Samaj*, Paush, 1320 and Phalgun-Chaitra, 1320, 1913.

[74] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal, 1872-1937*, Calcutta: K P Bagchi, 1990, p. 144.

thesis. Let us look at some of the contents of the *Mahishya Samaj* journal in its early years.

We find the evocation of the Upanishadic principle of the supreme Brahma on the top page of the *Mahishya Samaj* in 1911[75]: '*Om tat sat om*'. The reference to '*tat sat*'[76], roughly meaning, 'only that exists', developed a connotation, more social than spiritual by the early twentieth century. Any random sample of lower caste discourses[77] of the time would reveal how widely, almost compulsorily, this and similar Upanishadic concepts would be invoked as part of social critique. It would be invoked to affirm that divisions between men were untrue; that 'all' were manifestations of the supreme 'One'. Below '*Om tat sat Om*' on the title page of *Mahishya Samaj*, there would be a '*Mangalacharam*', or a sort of inaugural prayer. It stated that neither the Vedas, nor the Sastras, nor 'pure' rituals, nor *mantras*, nor meditation, nor ritual sacrifices, nor worship were effective, as such, because the immaculate ("*niranjan*") Brahma, the only reality, transcended all these particulars.[78] Below these, there would be another message from the editors. It was that the purpose of the journal was to help the accomplishment of great deeds and duties as well as the realization of the 'true self'.[79] The 'Preamble' on the second page noted that knowledge was futile without complementary action; action infused with knowledge and devotion must be the objective of arduous endeavor. The journal was annually priced at Rupee One.[80]

Sevika had been the journal of the community since 1899. The Preamble of *Mahishya Samaj*, 1911, stated that in the twelve years from 1899 and 1911, *Sevika*

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[75] *Mahishya Samaj*, Issue 1, 1318 BS, 1911, p. 1. After the Samiti took over the publication of the *Mahishya Samaj* from Ramapada Biswas, the first issue in 1911 was again introduced as an inaugural issue, as 'Vol. 1, No. 1'. Now, the editor was Sebananda Bharati.

[76] *Om tat sat om* (source: Chandogya Upanishad) was a commonplace invocation of the times. Below it, in a matter-of-fact manner was placed the description of the periodical: "The mouth-piece of the Mahishya Community of Bengal", *ibid.*

[77] These Upanishadic concepts would be invoked, for instance, in public meetings and speeches organized by a so-called 'untouchable' caste like the Paundras. More in Chapter 4. Everybody seemed to be talking about the contradiction between actual social practice in Hindu society and its founding metaphysic.

[78] *Mahishya Samaj*, Issue 1, 1318 BS, 1911, p. 1.

[79] *Ibid.*.

[80] *Ibid.* p. 2.

had done much to inspire self-awareness within the community. "Any discerning person would know how the Mahishyas think today from the number of high-schools, village schools and *chatushpathis* that they have set up in these years and the improvement in agriculture and industry that they have brought in."[81] *Sevika* had made that possible, observed the editor of *Mahishya Samaj*, by inspiring a sense of belonging to the community. "So many minds hitherto bound to petty self-interest have become generous and altruistic."[82] The Preamble also stated that the objectives of Mahishya social development or *samajik unnati* were: spread of education, agriculture, industry and trade, the progress of ethical awareness, dedication to duty and love of God. Moreover, it exhorted its readers to keep in mind that "love of all living creatures, unselfishness and devotion to Narayana constituted the essence of good action."[83] There was no mention of ritual reforms.[84] An affiliation with the protestant Chaitanya tradition was fairly evident. Selections from the sixteenth century biography of Chaitanya, *Chaitanya Charitamrita* by Krishnadas Kavraj, began to appear serially in the journal under the title '*Sri Sri Chaitanya Shatakam*'. There was also a footnote attached by the editor stating that majority of the Mahishya community being whole-hearted Vaishnavas, they might appreciate the reproduction of some of the prime *slokas* of the *Charitamrita* in the caste journal.[85] Chaitanya symbolized "rebellious brilliance"[86]; but Chaitanya bhakti, we know, was in between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. While its promise of easier salvation for the woman and the Shudra and its multi-caste following made it a protestant religious faith, its doctrines were entirely derived from Brahmanic resources like the Bhagavat Purana.[87]

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[81] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[82] *Ibid.*

[83] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

[84] It bears mention that there was some difference between the mood of the *Mahishya Samaj* of 1910, when Rampada Biswas edited it, and the new avatar of the *Mahishya Samaj* from 1911, when it became the official mouthpiece of the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti. In 1910, Biswas's journal had focused on the Census battle and on the distinction of Mahishyas from Jeliya Kaibartas. In 1911, the battle was already won by the Mahishyas because the government had recognized the use of the name 'Mahishyas' exclusively by Chashi Kaibartas.

[85] *Mahishya Samaj*, Issue 1, 1318 BS, 1911, p. 5.

[86] I borrow this expression from Tanika Sarkar. 'Caste, Sect and Hagiography', p. 110.

[87] For a comprehensive discussion of the social aspects of Chaitanya Bhakti: Tanika Sarkar, 'Caste, Sect and Hagiography', pp. 73-79.

Smarta Raghunandan, the law-giver in medieval Bengal, was doubtless a Brahmanical 'conservative'. Characteristically for early twentieth century Bengal, however, the *Mahishya Samaj* editorial drew equivalences between opposites: it hailed Chaitanya as well as Raghunandan, the Buddha as well as Adi Shankaracharya for having restored Vaidik Hinduism in its 'essence' in different and complicated ways.

This inaugural issue of *Mahishya Samaj,* 1911, thanked God for placing the British on the throne of India and making them the dispenser of India's destiny ("*bhagya bidhata*").[88] This uninterrupted reign of peace was a splendid opportunity for the subjects, the editorial said, to progress in truth and knowledge. A lot of coverage was given to the coronation of George V and *Mahishya Samaj* asked its readers, "Have you ever seen such a great empire anywhere in the world? Could the world's first emperor even dream of such an empire? ...Let India, ruffled and agitated as she is, be soothed by the emperor's compassion."[89] The royal couple's holiness was proclaimed and their well-being prayed for.[90] When in December, 1911, the Viceroy Lord Hardinge narrowly escaped an attack on his life, a message was immediately sent by the Samiti to the Viceroy's office condemning the assault and expressing relief and joy at the Viceroy's blessed escape.[91] Even as late as 1918, there were prominent voices within the *Mahishya Samaj* that expressed opposition to the goal of absolute self-government in India. The British must reign supreme but reform the present scheme of things whereby upper-castes enjoyed family monopolies over government offices.[92] And the government must provide facilities for the spread of education in the caste.[93] The stage was thus set for the emergence of Mahishyas as a political force challenging the idea of the nation.

In course of his researches on the nature of participation in national movements in rural Medinipur, Hitesranjan Sanyal wondered why the patrons of the Mahishya caste

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[88] 'Abataranika', *Mahishya Samaj*, Baisakh, 1318, p. 3.

[89] 'Abhishek', *Mahishya Samaj,* Ashadh, 1318, p. 49.

[90] *Ibid.*

[91] *Ibid*., Paush, 1319 BS, 1912.

[92] *Mahishya Samaj*, Baisakh, 1325 BS, 1918. Also cited in Bandyopadhyay, 'An Intermediate Caste History', p. 166.

[93] Resolution adopted on Annual Meeting of Bangiya Mahishya Samiti, 1912, *Mahishya Samaj*, Paush, 1319, pp. 214-215.

movement so enthusiastically participated in the anti-Union Board nationalist agitation in 1921. The patrons of the caste movement in Medinipur were landlords, *jotdars*, money-lenders, businessmen and other affluent men of the caste. These groups generally sought entry into local seats of power, however little power the government might actually have devolved to these institutions. As union boards were at the level of the village, groups which nurtured political leadership ambitions but were eclipsed by metropolitan leaders at the provincial level saw a promising niche of power, prominence and upward mobility in the union boards. The government intended to woo these classes by extending crumbs of administrative and political power. Like other subaltern castes, the patrons and authors of *Mahishya Samaj* also voiced loyalist sentiments as evident in the citations in the last paragraph. Many of them in eastern Medinipur had initially entered the union boards. What made them resign and oppose the union boards soon after?[94]

Sanyal, in his efforts to understand the origins of their nationalist sentiment, had drawn attention to a very important aspect of Mahishya caste mobilization, viz., their emphasis on an ideology of autonomy and self-help from the start.[95] Even though the caste journal reminded readers from other castes and the government that Mahishyas were aware of their citizenly rights and claims over government offices and education, it reminded its own people not to 'emulate' the office-going upper-caste *babu*. To use Sumit Sarkar's expression used in a different context, the leaders exhorted their caste members to capitalize on the "skills and capabilities" that they had "developed through subordination."[96]

> Do not forget your spinach, legume and brinjal fields, or about watering your paddy seedlings. Now that you are a lawyer, a *mukteur*, a judge or a magistrate, do not think you can afford to forget your skills of working the plough on your fields of mustard, linseed and gram.[97]

[94] Hitesranjan Sanyal, 'Jatiyatabadi Andolan: Purba Medinipur', *Swarajer Pathe*, Calcutta: Papyrus, 1993 (posthumously published), pp. 101-107.

[95] *Ibid.*, p. 105.

[96] Sumit Sarkar, 'Identities and Histories', p. 70.

[97] 'Mahishyer Kartabya', *Mahishya Samaj*, Jaishtha, 1318 BS, 1911, p. 46.

Some of what was said remains difficult to translate for someone unfamiliar to tilling practices. *Mahishya Samaj* regularly wrote about improved techniques of agriculture and cow-tending. The Agricultural Association of Bengal and the Mahishya Banking and Trading Company were set up to further agriculture and trade. Sanyal saw a continuum between this ideology of autonomy and self-reliance, which was part of their statement against the upper-caste *babu*, and a nationalist spirit of autonomy that propelled them to reject the crumbs of patronage that the government offered through village-level union boards.[98] The politics of Mahishya identity formation was also a politics of articulating peasant pride as subaltern caste resistance to urbane arrogance. Because of the salience of this peasant identity in its assertion, the nature of its politics was not so fragmented or exclusionist in terms of caste. When they voiced claims as agriculturists, they took along with them "similarly placed" cultivating castes.[99]

Addressing the caste-brethren, *Mahishya Samaj* stated that Mahishyas must know that "their present miseries" stemmed from distractions and neglect of their traditional occupations. "Where are those barns that would overflow with paddy, corn-bins that would be full to the brim with legumes? Cows flourishing in the cowshed and the name of Kanu (Krishna) flourishing in the heart – without these, alas, we have no luck!"[100] The old-world peasant was idealized for his steadfast perseverance ("*adhyabasay*") and simple piety. Government service ("*rajseva*") should be the last resort, implied Ashutosh Jana in his *Mahishya Tattva Baridhi* quoting Shastric formulations, as it was superior only to begging, while agriculture was an esteemed livelihood option.[101]

Much of what apparently seemed like loyalist profusions in the *Mahishya Samaj* on the "emperor's compassion", etc. can perhaps be read as reminders to the government that it was, at least, expected to be non-partisan and deliver even-handed

[98] Sanyal, 'Jatiyatabadi Andolan: Purba Medinipur', p. 106.

[99] Some examples will be shown below.

[100] "Amader '*golabhora dhan', 'dolabhora dal', 'gohalbhora dhenu' ar 'paranbhora kanu', - esob chariyai to amader eto durdasha. Amader na ache byabsay, na ache adhyabasay. Amra na pushi dhenu, na sebi kanu*", *Mahishya Samaj*, Baisakh, 1318 BS, 1911, p. 16.

[101] "*Banijye basati Lakshmi/ staddardham krishi karmani/ tadarddham rajsebayam/ bhikshayam naiba naiba cha*", Ashutosh Jana, *Mahishya Tattva Baridhi*, p. 125.

justice. As early as in 1872-73, Namasudra (then 'Chandal') village heads had demanded an end to the practice by which Namasudra inmates of jails were invariably used as sweepers; they said that the practice went against the government claim "to treat all castes on terms of equality".[102] Not necessarily 'special favours' but 'justice' could be demanded by showing awareness of the promise of non-discrimination that the Queen's government enshrined. The Mahishyas thus made claims on the government as rightful tax-payers. A 1912 issue of *Mahishya Samaj* stated that Mahishyas, Aguris and Sadgops were the three principal agricultural castes of Bengal and that agriculturists of the land counted among the highest tax-payers. As these cultivating castes were subsidizing the education costs of students of higher castes, the question of higher education of these cultivating castes could no more be ignored. The government must set up schools with provisions of scholarships for the agricultural classes.[103]

The anxious letter to Hardinge expressing relief at his lucky escape was driven perhaps by the urge to ensure that the government would not doubt the fledgling Bangiya Mahishya Samiti's non-seditious nature. The Samiti, since its foundation till many years even after Independence, described itself as a civil-society organization that chose to 'stay out of politics'.[104] In 1911, in particular, the name 'Mahishya' had just been recognized by the government after a prolonged battle. More importantly, the Samiti had just freed itself of charges of a 'seditious' colour in 1909 after fighting a case in the Calcutta High Court. Some members of the Murshidabad branch of the Mahishya Samiti were charged with 'potentially disrupting law and order', being 'politically active', 'organising public meetings and lectures provoking the subjects' and forcing people to contribute to the funds of the Samiti. The Calcutta Mahishya Samiti fought the case in the High Court where Justice Digambar Chatterjee

[102] Report of W. L. Owen, District Superintendant of Police, to District Magistrate, Faridpur, 1873, cited in Sumit Sarkar, 'Identities and Histories', p. 47.

[103] *Mahishya Samaj*, Baisakh, 1319 BS, 1912. Also cited in Bandyopadhyay, 'An Intermediate Caste History', p. 185.

[104] Resolutions adopted by the Samiti in 1959, quoted from the 1959 issue of *Mahishya Samaj* in Shyamadas Mallik, 'Mahishya Samiti Keno? Itihaser Prekshapate Kichu Bhabna', *Mahishya Samaj*, 2010, p. 66.

pronounced that the prosecution had not been able to prove the case.[105] This episode indicates the field of resistance within which the caste association and movement operated. It further shows that *samitis* and *sammelans* such as these during Swadeshi times and its aftermath ran the risk of being charged with 'sedition'.

The well-educated leaders of the Mahishya Association, eager to uplift their caste-brethren in terms of education, industry and improved farming, did not want their fledgling movement with its meagre resources and funds to catch the ire, or suspicion, once again of the police, administration or government. Moreover, as Sudarshanchandra Biswas' *Nabyabharat* essay shows, Mahishya thinkers and writers ridiculed 'sedition' and saw it as a travesty of nationalism.[106] They did not consider the 'seditious' upper-caste *babu* a 'true' nationalist. Mostly lawyers themselves, Mahishya leaders, like quintessential liberals, had a lot of faith in the law. This faith in the basic impartiality of law and in its powers to defend the poor or tyrannized was not exclusively the sign of the 'loyalist' lower caste subject. The upper-caste educated bhadralok, who defended the ryot against the tyranny of the Indigo planter or even joined the Indian National Congress, found in *law* his ultimate ally till the late nineteenth century.[107] Similarly, even though the Sessions court at Berhampore had refused to entertain the appeal of the Mahishyas against the conviction of some members of the Samiti by a District Magistrate, Mahishya leaders did not lose faith in the proclamations of evenhandedness of law and their final victory in the High Court only reinstated this faith. They were in no mood to be suspected as 'law-breakers' and yet, after the bomb-attack on Lord Hardinge, knowledge was soon to spread that a Mahishya (Basanta Biswas, later iconized[108]) had been arrested in connection with the assault.

All this is to say that what seems like loyalist avowals in the initial phase of the caste movement could perhaps more appropriately be described as the following: self-declarations as law-abiding subjects, deliberate pronouncements of faith in law, and

[105] The case was serially reported in *Mahishya Samaj*, Jaishtha, Ashadh, Sravan, Bhadra, Aswin, Kartik, Aghrahayan, Paush, Magh, Phalgun, 1917 BS, 1910-1911. See Bandyopadhyay, 'An Intermediate Caste History', pp. 93-94.

[106] Biswas, 'Jatiya Jibaner Udbodhan', p. 604.

[107] Guha, '*Neel Darpan*: The Image of a Peasant Revolt', p. 137.

[108] Phani Ray, 'Agnisishu Basanta Biswas', *Mahishya Manisha Tatha Jatiya Gaurab*, p. 85.

reminders to the government that as custodians of law they were expected to deliver justice; also that, Mahishyas as Her Majesty's law-abiding subjects were vigilant about it. The simultaneous existence or development of a spirit of 'critical' nationalism (not yet of the law-breaking variety) and self-help was not incompatible with this mindset.

In 1911-12, their protestations of loyalism in the pages of *Mahishya Samaj* became emphatic whenever they felt humiliated by upper-caste nationalists. Upendranath Mukherjee, an influential figure with his serialized publication of 'Hindus: A Dying Race' in the *Bengalee* of June 1909, had been advocating paternalistic self-reform initiatives and lower caste uplift to fortify the Hindu community.[109] While Upendranath's project was driven by the anxiety over the evident fragility of upper-caste hegemony, many from the 'untouchable' castes and other lower castes looked at him as "a genuine sympathizer with the oppressed castes of Bengal."[110] In February 1912, Upendranath had convened a conference, the All Bengal Hindu Education Conference, in the Arya Samaj Mandir. Representatives from lower caste groups participated in it. One of the pioneer leaders of the 'untouchable' Paundra caste from Twenty-four Parganas, generally wary of Hindu high-caste integrationist politicking, thought that he gained from Upendranath's Conference in an unexpected way. He later recalled in his autobiography how the Conference of 1912 first created an opportunity for him to see his Paundra compatriots from Medinipur.[111] Thus, the Conference was a big event that attracted a good deal of lower caste participation. The Mahishyas, however, stayed away from it and essayed a strong-worded criticism of the Conference-initiative in the *Mahishya Samaj*. They stated their political weight and their strength of numbers as they knew that 'numbers' (of Hindus) formed the core of Upendranath's anxiety. They said that "the two million Mahishyas or Chashi Kaibartas of Bengal, constituting one-tenth of the Hindu population of the province and including among them eleven thousand wealthy and educated zamindars, were all

[109] See P. K. Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in early Twentieth Century Bengal*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 21-63.

[110] The expression "*Banglar nipirita samajer akritrim suhrid*", for instance, was used to describe Upendranath Mukhopadhyay in a news section titled '*Upendranather Matribiyog*' in the *Paundrakshatriya Samachar* of 1330-31 BS, 1923-24.

[111] Raicharan Sardar, *Deener Atmakahini ba Satya Pariksha* (*An Autobiography of a Poor Man or his Experiments with Truth*), Twenty-four Parganas, 1959 (posthumously published), p. 342.

loyal subjects ("*rajbhakta praja*") who could not be wooed into Upendranath's Conference".[112] They observed that Swadeshi bigwigs, knowing that they had no hegemony over the majority of society, were seeking to elicit popular support by staging conferences of a 'social' nature. The Education Conference was "their latest resort to shore up popularity". But Mahishyas would not 'play along'.[113] In this, Mahishyas were representing themselves as a political force challenging nationalism.

However, they had not initially kept away from the Conference. Their own version of the events tells that they were even enthusiastic about it. The sharp about-turn happened when, in a booklet circulated prior to the Conference, the distinction between the Halik (Chasha) and the Jalik (Jeliya) Kaibarta was blotted by the expression "*Halik O Jalik Kaibarta (Mahishya)*". Upendranath, reportedly, had declined to 'correct' the expression even when it was demanded by Mahishyas.[114] This feeling of being humiliated by "the whimsical and foppish babu"[115] had little to do with either a principled critique of caste-hierarchy or a political move away from the nation towards seeking government patronage. It just had some ambivalent elements of a critique of nationalism as an upper-caste affair and a suspicion of high-caste self-reform measures as "the philanthropist's show of love".[116] But instead of a critique of the Hindu Sanskritic tradition of caste-society, the writers who essayed this report portrayed Mahishyas as an alternative sort of conscientious Hindus: they must help the country by reviving the learning of Sanskrit by founding seminaries – 'Brahmacharya Ashramas' – because "an extreme general deficiency of moral education was perceived".[117] Thus, they challenged nationalism but not its values. They posed simultaneously as challenge and asset to the nationalist.

Mahishyas did not acquiesce to the embrace of the urban, upper-caste Bengali nationalist; they were keen on stressing their distinction as agriculturists who pitied

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[112] 'Sarba Banga Hindu Siksha Sammilani O Mahishya Samaj', *Mahishya Samaj*, Vol. 1, No. 11, Phalgun, 1318 BS (1912), p. 261.

[113] *Ibid.*

[114] *Ibid.*, pp. 261-262.

[115] *Ibid.*

[116] *Ibid.*

[117] *Ibid.*, p. 263.

the parasitic *babu*. In the 1920s, Gandhian nationalism with its ingrained peasant ethic appealed to them.The Samiti was still unsure in 1921 as to whether it should formally avow nationalism as representing the standpoint of Mahishyas as a whole. It stated, as always, that it focused on apolitical matters of relevance to all Mahishyas – "so many areas of activity vying for the Samiti's immediate attention"[118] – and encouraged individualism in politics. "Individuals are free to voice their opinions on Non-Cooperation".[119] Birendranath Sashmal, the Gandhian nationalist leader from Medinipur, who led the anti-union-board agitation and played a decisive role in drawing Mahishyas in large numbers to the national movement, had formal connections with the caste-association. Even though he had little time for caste associational affairs as such, his self-identification as Mahishya, or broadly, as someone from a subaltern caste was always very intense. Mahishyas, even when conforming to the mainstream nationalist ideology, never became pliable.

They retained the subversive edge of a distinct identity. Thus Ashok Datta, an upper caste candidate in the municipal council elections at Medinipur, who, reportedly, disparaged Mahishyas as a bunch of gullible peasants and was confident of their electoral support, was subjected to a embarrassing defeat in 1921.[120] When Chittaranjan Das appointed Subhas Chandra Bose as the Chief Executive Officer at the Calcutta Corporation in 1924 rejecting Birendranath Sashmal (according to many the more deserving candidate), feelings of betrayal ran high and Mahishyas of Medinipur are said to have withdrawn their support to the Swarajya party. That episode came as a jerk even to other low-caste groups, especially in Medinipur. The disaffection that it brew could hardly be ignored by Swarajists at the time. The *Paundrakshatriya Samachar* referred to the episode in its news section and deplored that even premier nationalist organisations were not immune from "*jatibichar*" or caste discrimination.[121] 'Caste' did not lose itself within 'nation'. It was bound to be so because upper-caste nationalists of the Bengal Congress could derogate a colleague

[118] *Mahishya Samaj*, Ashadh, 1328 BS, 1921.

[119] *Ibid.*

[120] Bimalananda Sashmal, *Deshapran Sashmal: Bharater Rajniti O Musalman*, Calcutta: Bani Prakash, 1994, p. 25.

[121] 'Swarajye Jatibichar', Bibidha Prasanga, *Paundrakshatriya Samachar*, 1330-31, p. 91 (month not known).

of the stature of Birendranath Sashmal, a barrister who received his degree from England, with words like "*Medinipurer Kyaoi*"[122], '*Kyaoi*' being a contemptuous distortion of Kaibarta. Sashmal also maintained an ideological position distinct from upper-caste colleagues. He defended the Bengal Pact of 1923 that promised Bengal Muslims a large measure of concessions (later generation Mahishyas portray him as the friend of Muslims and the lone Bengal Congress leader who cared for communal harmony). When, at the Krishnanagar Conference in 1926, Sashmal made a plea to the Bengal Congress to the effect that the Bengal Pact should not be abrogated, he was, reportedly, rudely reminded of his inferior-caste belonging.[123]

The relation of Mahishyas with the nation was thus markedly oblique. Yet their leaders did not want the community to receive benefits as 'Depressed Classes' in the 1920s. One wonders whether they envisioned some different form of governmental provision when they were stating their right as tax-payers to receive educational support in 1912. Sashmal is said to have been one of the key-figures who helped to ensure that the Mahishyas would be finally excluded from the list.[124] It bears mention that even in 1930, after the Bengal (Rural) Primary Education Bill was passed by the Provincial Legislative Council and the Director of Public Instruction was looking after the extension of free studentships, additional scholarships, etc., with the government already spending a sum of more than one lakh rupees for these purposes, district officers wanted the extension of special facilities in education and in higher provincial services to the Mahishyas, who were included as Depressed Classes in the Census of 1921 but not included in the Calcutta University Commission's list of 1919.[125] However, essays and reports in the *Mahishya Samaj* of the late 1920s condemned the "weakness of character" and "opportunism" of those Mahishyas who 'stealthily', as it were, took advantages of Depressed Class scholarships and concessions.[126] It was perceived as so much of an 'affront' to the community that if a

[122] Bimalananda Sashmal, *Bharat Ki Kore Bhag Holo,* Calcutta: Tin Songi, 1981, p. 89.

[123] Hitesranjan Sanyal, 'Dakshin Paschim Banger Jatiyatabadi Andolan', *Chaturanga,* Baisakh-Ashadh, Kartik-Paush, 1383 BS, 1976, p. 72, pp. 191-203. On how later generation Mahishyas applaud his distinctive concern for communal harmony, see Phani Ray, 'Deshapran Birendranath Sashmal', *Mahishya Manisha,* p. 103.

[124] West Bengal Commission for Backward Classes, Seventh Report.

[125] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Caste and Protective Discrimination', *Caste, Politics and the Raj,* p. 68.

[126] 'Mahishya Jati O Depressed Class', *Mahishya Samaj,* Jaishtha, 1336 BS, 1929, p. 64.

Tili teacher helped a Mahishya student become a recipient of the Depressed Class scholarship, that would be seen as exemplifying the rivalry and spitefulness of the Tili![127]

Apparently, the same confidence and self-determination that spirited their assertion in 1912 of their right to receive government provisions as tax-payers now energized their opposition to being classified as a 'Depressed' caste. It was indeed the same spirit of bold defiance that retained their distinct and oblique position *vis-à-vis* the metropolitan upper-caste nationalist. An identical ethic of righteous struggle against authoritarianism enthused their nationalism. Again, in the heyday of nationalism in Medinipur in the 1940s, it was this sturdy spirit of independence of Mahishyas that retained a lot of local/regional autonomy from metropolitan political control.

It is striking that after those intense years of Mahishya patriotism during the Quit India movement, when Mahishyas like Satish Samanta and Sushil Dhara of the 'national government at Tamluk', with their storm-troopers, persecuted hundreds of 'traitors of the nation'[128], a Memorial was sent in 1946 by the 'All India Mahishya Sabha'to the Secretariat of the Governor General requesting for 'separate representation' of Mahishyas.[129] The memorialists, however, included none from Medinipur but Mahishya representatives from Howrah, Calcutta, Twenty-four Parganas, Nadia, Rajshahi, Pabna, Sylhet and Jamshedpur.The letter placed its trust on Lord Wavell with loyal words such as:

> benevolent as you are towards the outraged *nationalities*[130] of the country, Your Excellency will take the initiative to remedy the grave injustice that is being done to our race, and thereby do a great act which

[127] *Ibid.*

[128] Sushil Kumar Dhara, *Prabaha,* Kolkata O Medinipur: Janakalyan Trust, 1389 BS, 1982.

[129] 'Memorial from the All India Mahishya Mahasabha regarding separate representation in political and economical organization of the country', GI, Reforms, File no. D-458/46-R, National Archives of India.

[130] Emphasis mine.

> will bear your name in the history of our country as the upholder of the cause of the oppressed.[131]

The spiritual continuum between conflicting material bargains (of caste and nation) becomes evident in the statement of the Mahasabha's "motto", as printed on its letterhead: "The attainment of Freedom, Unity and Fraternity on the basis of Self-Determination".[132] The Mahasabha's headquarters were at 24, Suresh Sarkar Road, Entally, in Calcutta, not faraway from 29, Police Hospital Road, Entally, where the office of the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti was situated. One wonders what could have been the relation between the two associations, both of which claimed to represent Mahishyas from Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. The All India Mahishya Mahasabha described itself as "a mouthpiece of ten million suffering humanity" or "a mouthpiece of ten million neglected and distressed Mahishyas".[133] Mahishyas of Medinipur, historically 'the local aristocracy' of the region, were too much of nationalists, it seems, to involve in an association like this Mahasabha which championed caste over nation.

I must immediately qualify my statement by noting that Sarat Chandra Jana from Medinipur, who was Secretary of Bangiya Mahishya Samiti since 1922, the President of the Samiti in 1924-'26 (when the Samiti and *Mahishya Samaj* expressed clear opposition to receiving special caste-based patronage from government), in 1934 and again from 1943, founded the 'Anagrasar Barna-Hindu Jati Samgha' ('Caste-Hindu Backward Peoples' Association') in the 1940s and demanded special patronage from the government for non-'Scheduled' backward castes. As a student of the esteemed Presidency College in Calcutta, Jana had faced caste-discrimination in the Hindu hostel. That experience disposed Jana to establish and seek to redress the 'disadvantaged'/ 'exploited' situation of the Mahishyas as an oppressed and 'backward' caste.[134]

Similarly, the All India Mahishya Mahasabha, in its memorial to the Governor General in January, 1946, stated that Mahishyas were "innocent by nature, being

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[131] *Ibid.*

[132] *Ibid.*

[133] *Ibid.*

[134] Phani Ray, 'Labdhapratishtha Advocate Sarat Chandra Jana', *Mahishya Manisha*, p. 56.

mostly agriculturists by occupation" and "admittedly poor – both educationally and economically".[135] And then it made the clearest articulation of dissent – the Mahishyas' sense of betrayal and alienation from the nation of 'privileged' Hindus:

> Consequently they have been hitherto subject to the exploitation of the 'privileged' Hindu whose ranks they have been made to swell. The latter after gaining their ends with the help of these simple-minded folk, have left them to fend for themselves. The natural result being that they have uptill now no representation in any political or economical organization of this country, nor have they been allowed their proper ratio in government services in comparison with the 'privileged' Hindus and the business magnates (i.e., the 'vested interested' section).[136]

Though coming almost fourteen years after Ramsay McDonald's announcement of the Communal Award, this petition demanded a separate electorate for the Mahishyas, "an electorate separate from that of the Caste-Hindus and the Scheduled Caste."[137] If that was too much, they claimed at least fifty seats in the various legislatures. Otherwise Mahishyas, ten millions in number, could not have a "legitimate contribution in the legislation" nor legitimate "shares in the services". They were being "crushed out of existence" in the political and economic sphere by privileged Hindus; they have been "outraged, neglected and oppressed" by the same. They have also been entirely "bereft of all sympathy from the government" so far.[138]

The petition asserted the right of the Mahishyas to self-determination in the form of proportionate representation "in the realm of politics and in the economic structure of Bengal".[139] It noted that these rights must be equally granted to "similarly

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[135] 'Memorial from the All India Mahishya Mahasabha…'

[136] *Ibid.*

[137] *Ibid.*

[138] *Ibid.*

[139] *Ibid.*

oppressed" other "communities among the Caste Hindus of India".[140] Further, the petitioners demanded to see "each and every village throughout India", equipped with a free primary school, where education would be made compulsory, and a charitable dispensary that would meet the needs of all, irrespective of caste and creed.[141] Thus, they registered that their demands were 'casteist' in the least: it was from the vantage point of a disadvantaged 'class' that they were making demands expected to deliver universal benefits.

With the above letter was attached another one addressed to the British Parliamentary Delegation that visited India in the beginning of 1946. Probably the landslide victory of the Labour Party in Britain in 1945 and the visit of Parliamentarians to India soon after generated fresh enthusiasm among subaltern social groups for organised articulation of grievance. The 'Memorialists' representing the Mahishya Mahasabha profusely thanked the "very distinguished Members of Parliament, who have graciously consented to come out to this unfortunate country for helping the dumb millions to attain their respective legitimate contribution in legislation and shares in social and economical (*sic*) spheres".[142] It stated that there are two hundred and sixteen castes into which the three hundred and twenty million Hindus of India were divided. It said that "this nefarious caste system can never be totally abolished".[143]

The All India Mahishya Mahasabha argued that the 1935 Act served no purpose by "tak(ing) out about 75 castes[144] and plac(ing) them in a Schedule". Namasudras, "a caste among the Scheduled Castes numbering two millions", alone have gained some advantage out of these provisions. The seven millions of other Scheduled Castes have not made "any tangible gain".[145] The letter compared the position of Namasudras within the Scheduled Caste group with the position of the three higher castes

[140] *Ibid.*

[141] *Ibid.*

[142] *Ibid.*

[143] *Ibid.*

[144] The Scheduled Caste Order of 1936, which was the 'final list', however, included 76 castes. Bandyopadhyay, 'Caste and Protective Discrimination', *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, p. 78.

[145] 'Memorial from the All India Mahishya Mahasabha…'

(Brahmans, Kayasthas, Baidyas) in the Caste-Hindu group. The present classification of castes into Scheduled Castes and Caste Hindus was meaningless, the letter alleged, because there were many communities within both these broad rubrics who were rendered invisibilised. "The other castes can hardly therefore make any headway in any department of life independently (*sic*)".[146] The letter highlighted that:

> though the Hindu Mahasabha and the Congress observe that they are fighting for the attainment of Freedom, Unity and Fraternity on the basis of self-determination, yet these bodies have not, at any time, showed their willingness in any practical manner to help these Mahishyas…[147]

Apart from demanding an electorate, separate from that of the Caste Hindus and the Scheduled Castes, the memorial demanded special facilities in the matters of education and appointments "in all departments according to proper and legitimate ratio" and also "training in all branches and distribution of service and seats in public bodies by preference".[148]

The memorial of 1946 thus manifests total dissent. Mahishyas here described themselves as a separate and "outraged" "nationality" of sorts. They were in between: neither the Caste Hindu nor Scheduled Caste. It is significant that they described the professed (yet betrayed) goals of national political organisations like Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha with exactly the same words by which they defined their own motto – 'self-determination' being the keyword.

Let us sum up what emerges from the prolonged discussion above. Since 1908, when Sudarshan Biswas, whom Sekhar Bandyopadhyay described as a "nationalist leader from east Bengal', critically reflected on the 'inauguration of national life' in India, discerning Mahishyas were already participating in national renewal by investing in values such as 'unity', 'fraternity', 'freedom' and 'self-determination'. These values pulled them in contradictory political directions in different places and

[146] *Ibid.*

[147] *Ibid.*

[148] *Ibid.*

different times. Thus, Mahishyas can be cited both in their assimilationist nationalist mode as well as in modes of powerful dissent. The basic inspiration was *to come out of dependence*. As we show below, it was this dream of *exit from tutelage* through united resistance against power that also stirred the radicalization of the lower peasantry. And Mahishya political consciousness – the caste "representing all interests in land from proprietor to cultivator" in Medinipur[149], for instance – had complex relations with it.

The horizon of expectations generated by subaltern caste assertion could not remain confined to the 'upward mobility' aspirations of "emergent counter elites".[150] It boosted expectations from the lower peasantry and sharecroppers, which, even if they did not sit well with the interests of the upper strata, could not be disdained or delegitimsed. Often these were contradictory movements but they converged in important ways: caste, nation, class – each of these formats of solidarity for emancipation losing itself into the other while augmenting each other's relative potential. The Mahishya movement has been generally understood as a movement patronized by a *kulak* class of substantial peasantry – the *jotdar*. This has been the structural understanding of almost all intermediate caste movements in India. Mahishya caste mobilization is seen in existing historiography as having successfully nullified the contradictions of class (within the caste), especially in Medinipur, and garnered wide-ranging popular support to nationalism. Thus, it is said that when the Mahishya owner-peasntry participated in the Congress, caste-allegiance guaranteed Congress support from the Mahishya lower peasantry and sharecroppers in Tamluk and Contai.[151] Simultaneously, however, as Hitesranjan Sanyal's studies had shown, class-anger found expression and demanded recognition within the same space of anti-British agitations where the *jotdar* and the lower peasant came together.[152]

Birendranath Sashmal had succeeded in mobilizing different layers of rural society in a unified opposition to the Union Boards in 1921. In this, he primarily stood for the

[149] O' Malley, ed., *Midnapur District Gazetteer*, p. 58.

[150] See Sumit Sarkar, 'Intimations of Hindutva' in *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, p. 93.

[151] Partha Chatterjee, 'Caste and Politics in West Bengal', *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 76-82.

[152] Sanyal, 'Jatiyatabadi Andolan: Purba Medinipur', pp. 113-115.

poor people of rural society who were naturally or spontaneously against the Union Boards as they knew that Union Boards would only increase their burden of taxes.[153] It was the rich peasantry or the *jotdar* class that had to be weaned away from joining the Union Boards by Sashmal. Thus, from the very start, the peasant masses saw Sashmal as their man. Sashmal's leadership generated in the minds of lower caste sharecroppers of Chandibheti (Sashmal's native village in Contai) a hope of emancipation simultaneously from British highhandedness, upper-caste arrogance and *jotdar* (often belonging to the same caste as themselves) exploitation. It is with a lot of pride that later generations of Mahishyas speak of this anti-Union Board agitation as the first mass movement in Bengal, which "sadly", they observe, "has not found place in history text-books".[154] It was people's pressure that, in fact, drew the prosperous sections of rural society to it. Now the movement became invincible with the participation of those who wielded social and economic authority in the countryside. These prosperous classes took over the reins of the movement. Significantly, immediately after the anti-Union Board agitation was successful, in early 1922, sharecroppers protested against the illegal exactions of *jotdars*. In a large meeting at Chandibheti comprising all ranks of peasants and jotdars, a sharecropper protested the high exactions of the *jotdar* whose lands he worked. The *jotdar* had to defend himself talking about his own burden of tax-payment and his expenses over religious festivals in the village. He agreed to reduce rents a little. This generated greater enthusiasm among sharecroppers who now demanded a greater reduction of rents and began taking the names of Gandhi and Sashmal. When another *jotdar* pleaded for a compromise allowing some more reduction of rents and suggesting that peasants must take to the *charka* following Gandhi to meet their needs, the sharecroppers firmly declined to comply. They loudly told themselves that they must organize as a unified body and walked out of the meeting shouting 'Victory to

[153] In 1921, the British government established Union Boards at the village level replacing the traditional self-governing village panchayats. The Union Boards would be partly elected but had to function under strict official supervision. The Chowkidari tax was increased by 50% under the new system. The poorer sections of the population were the most hurt by it. Birendranath and his associates organized such a powerful agitation in Contai and Tamluk that the government had to withdraw Union Boards from the entire district of Midnapur. Sanyal, *Swarajer Pathe*, p. 131.

[154] Bimalananda Sashmal, *Bharat Ki Kore Bhag Holo*, p. 99.

Mahatma Gandhi!' and 'Victory to Birendrababu!'.[155] As Sanyal wrote, peasant movements in eastern Medinipur began like this.

After C. R. Das' death in 1925, or even before, when Das in 1924 had to give in to the pressure from Calcutta (upper caste) politicians to reject Birendranath and instead appoint Subhas Chandra Bose as the CEO of the Calcutta Corporation, Mahishyas of Medinipur were acutely conscious of caste being *the* important factor in the manner of derision with which Birendranath Sashmal or his associate Basanta Kumar Das were treated. We have already said how they withdrew their support from Swarajists. If we give any importance to how Sashmal's marginalization and subsequent ouster from the Congress is remembered by Mahishyas, it bears mention that Sashmal is seen, at least by later generations, as having represented the voice of the lower peasant while the Swarajists entirely backed landed groups. It is common knowledge that circulates among Mahishya leaders today that Swarajists made sure that Sashmal was ousted because otherwise, they knew, "Sashmal would never have allowed the anti-peasant Tenancy Amendment Act of 1928 to be passed".[156] This act abrogated the commutation of cash rents to produce rents and curbed all legal rights of sharecroppers. The clash with the Calcutta politicians has been seen by Mahishyas as one between upper castes and lower castes, between a metropolitan elite and "*palli Bangla*" and also between landed interests (backed by Swarajists) and small-peasant interests (that Sashmal would champion). According to Sashmal's son Bimalananda Sashmal, "The most important leaders of the Congress in Bengal and India were shameless appeasers of the rich…That was why Birendranath Sashmal's anti-Union-Board agitation was opposed by the Congress in 1921".[157]

True that leading Mahishyas came from the landed gentry and also that, as Sumit Sarkar has shown, *Nihar*, the weekly journal of the Mahishyas of Medinipur, had "developed in summer 1909 a sustained critique of settlement operations in part of

[155] Sanyal, 'Jatiyatabadi Andolan: Purba Medinipur', p. 114.

[156] Sashmal, *Bharat Ki Kore Bhag Holo*, p. 97. Bimalananda also spoke about this in Mahishya congregations in the 1970s. Perhaps, that is one reason this has become a common knowledge among the more aware Mahishyas or Mahishya activists. 'Hooghly Jela Mahishya Sammelan, Nalikul Hooghly', *Mahishya Samaj*, Ashadh, 1384 BS, 1977, p. 40

[157] Bimalananda wrote that this principled "appeasement of the rich" by the Congress unnerved the Muslims since peasants in Eastern Bengal were largely Muslims. Sashmal, *Bharat Ki Kore Bhag Holo*, p. 99.

that district, entirely from the point of view of relatively privileged rural strata".[158] However, *Nihar* also recorded the sharecroppers' protests and demands once these started coming up. The sharecroppers' movements were spreading across Contai and Tamluk (populated mainly by Mahishyas) since 1922. In 1930, when the movement of Disobedience of Salt Laws started in these areas, peasants took the movement forward even without the lead of Congress volunteers and despite police repression. 'Freedom to manufacture salt' strengthened the expectation of 'freedom from taxes'.[159] Sharecroppers' movement against oppressive *jotdars* followed soon. They demanded the withdrawal of all unfair exactions, cancellation of outstanding dues and half the share of the produce. They refused to work the fields of the *jotdar* until their demands were granted. The jotdars took revenge by evicting sharecroppers. Interestingly, the owner-peasant/*jotdar* was refused to be recognized as belonging to the Congress by sharecroppers! They denied his social and ethical authority. An armed conflict between *jotdars* and sharecroppers occurred in the middle of 1931. A compromise was finally arrived at by the Congress leaders and some of the most important demands of the sharecroppers were granted.[160]

Nihar gave all these details of the sharecroppers' movement and, most importantly, interpreted it as yet another expression of Gandhian political ideology.[161] To an important extent, then, its legitimacy was registered in the local Mahishya journal. After all, the village level Congress workers who drew attention to peasant demands were very often Mahishyas like Bangshidhar Samanta and Saratchandra Jana.[162]

Let us return to the question with which we started this section. The framework of 'caste-mobility', a longue duree historical phenomenon becoming only more strident

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[158] Sumit Sarkar, 'Intimations of Hindutva', p. 93.

[159] Sanyal, 'Medinipur Jelay 'Bharat Charo' Andolan', *Swarajer Pathe*, p. 132.

[160] *Ibid.* p. 133.

[161] *Ibid*. pp.133,135. *Nihar*, 22nd May and 26th May, 1931; Basanta Kumar Das, *Medinipure Swadhinatar Janasangram: Khejuri Thana*, Medinipur: Ajanbari, 1975, pp. 26-27.

[162] Sanyal, 'Medinipur Jelay…', p. 135. Of course, there were important Mahishyas like Kumar Chandra Jana, Satishchandra Samanta and others, who sought to quell the share-croppers' movement. Besides, there is absolutely no doubt that the sharecroppers' movement had nothing to do with the Mahishya movement, as such. What I am trying to suggest is merely that, a journal like *Nihar* that upheld an awakened sense of self-respect and desire for emancipation, if that is a translation for *mukti*, could not entirely derecognize the legitimacy of another kind of people's movement for 'redistribution' and rights.

with census operations, indeed fails to capture the varied forms of *questioning power* that a subaltern caste identity movement in the early twentieth century encompassed. Mahishya identity formation began in the first decade of the twentieth century with the notion of 'rights of the weaker' being 'trampled' by the powerful. Its assertions at different times bring out that Mahishya ideologues, however diverse in political perspectives, time and again invoked wider political identities as varied as: 'tyrannised communities (like 'untouchable' castes and Muslims) at the receiving end of upper caste arrogance'[163], 'agriculturists at the receiving end of urban exploitation'[164], 'rural Indians suffering the government's heavy taxation and unwarranted interference'[165], 'intermediate castes marginalized by the Caste Hindu'[166], and later 'ryots of rural Bengal exploited by landed interests backed by upper-caste Congress'[167]. It was not a passage from initial loyalism, simply driven by material and status ambitions of emergent counter-elites, to later nationalism, driven by similar aspirations. The ideology of *autonomy* that powered their early pronouncements of peasant pride continued into their nationalism as much as it inspired their critiques of nationalism, or their critiques of the parochialisms of national political parties, as an "outraged nationality" of exploited agriculturists. Individualism, the foremost principle of liberal thinking, always found an important place in Mahishya identity formation. The caste association always believed that individuals must be free to have their distinct political opinions. That has been a major reason why Mahishyas, despite having been so politically active, cannot be identified with any particular political line.

Inspite of their broader identifications, the particular attachment of caste remained. Around 1911, it was a lot to do with getting recognition as a caste of distinctly good pedigree. The attachment still remains in a modified form today, manifesting itself when Mahishyas complain that caste prejudice has denied them public recognition for

[163] See above: the report in the *Diamond Harbour Hitaishi* (1920s) and Mahendranath Tattvanidhi's (a Mahishya leader) call for a unity of Hindu and Muslim peasant and artisanal castes.

[164] See above: Mahishyas stating that they, as tax-paying agriculturists, subsidize the education of urban upper castes.

[165] See above: Birendranath's organization of the anti-Union Board agitation in Medinipur.

[166] See above: 'Memorial from the All India Mahishya Mahasabha…'

[167] This was, to an extent, a later construction, brought in vogue by Bimalananda Sashmal and his generation of Mahishya leaders, writers and organisers.

the great accomplishments of men and women of their caste. This attachment to caste has always made them appear 'parochial' or 'casteist' in upper caste eyes. In the following section, we narrate a peculiar predicament that aggravated their antagonism to the so-called 'liberal' hegemony of early twentieth century Bengal. This antagonism finally helped to accentuate their alienation from upper-caste Bengali liberals[168] and, in the long run, added force to the spirit of dissent within their caste movement.

Forgotten Problem: The Unique Predicament of the Mahishyas in the Early Years

Mahishya tracts, written around 1911, give a general impression about the community's having been in a war-like position with almost every other group in society. Their authors described "some malicious, ill-educated Brahmans"[169] as enemies of the community just as any other oppressed caste group would do. But even a cursory reading of the Mahishya tracts would suggest that the caste-writers were also at loggerheads with influential 'scholarly opinions' of the time, the kind of scholarly consensus that many contemporaries (Brahmans, other upper castes as well as Dalits among them) saw as 'enlightened' and 'liberating'. For our historical curiosity, let us look at a forgotten problem which then besieged, cornered and isolated them. It made them appear somewhat opposed to the new critical opinion on caste that was beginning to take hold over the Bengali public sphere.

Not long after cultural nationalists were valorizing the pre-eminence and autonomy of spiritually-governed *samaj*/society over temporal power in 'the Indian tradition'[170],

[168] Bhadralok reformism, as Sumit Sarkar has shown, remained limited to "attempts at persuading barbers and washermen to extend their services to lower jatis like Malis – without disturbing, it should be noted, the pollution taboos imposed by the bhadralok themselves." Sarkar, 'Intimations of Hindutva', p. 83. Papers like the *Sanjivani* and *Bengalee* represented the face of this bhadralok reformism. The Mahishyas had a difficult relation with these groups.

[169] Prakash Chandra Sarkar, *Mahishya Prakash,* Part 1, Calcutta, 1912, pp. 44-49; Sebananda Bharati, *Mahishyashauch Bibek,* Diamond Harbour, 1321 BS, 1914, p. 52.

[170]See Sumit Sarkar, 'The Many Worlds of Indian History', *Writing Social History*, Delhi: OUP, 1997, pp. 24-26.

did 'subaltern counter publics'[171] start emerging, in different places in India and also in Bengal, which attributed the rules governing caste-society to base motives, interventions and intrigues by temporal powers. In an autobiography published in 1976, a Dalit leader from Bengal (born 1903) wrote that in his childhood, he had known a popular adage that said: *Jat mereche tin sene/ Ballal Sene, Wilsene ar istishene*.[172] It meant that ritual debasement happened in three ways: by the caprice of Ballal Sena, the medieval Sena ruler, by dining in public eateries like the famous 'Wilson's Hotel' or by getting exposed to 'polluting' touch in busy railway stations. A wide new consensus had emerged in early twentieth century Bengal about Ballal Sena having arbitrarily 'made and unmade' caste status in Bengal. Low and middling caste narratives of the time told how Ballal favoured the most docile, supplicating and greedy sycophants among Brahmans, Kayasthas and Baidyas and 'lowered' all others. Thus, a Sadgop tract expressed the typical opinion:

> Kayasthas are docile by nature; despite that, Purushottam Datta's clan was given a low social rank by Ballal because Datta did not speak of himself as *dasa* or servant of Brahmans. It is unsurprising then that Sadgops, courageous and forthright as they always have been, would be allotted any high rank.[173]

"*Ballali Koulinya*" became the specific target of lower caste satire.[174] On the other end, Babu Saradacharan Mitra, the retired judge of the Calcutta High Court, wrote in the *Indian Review* of 1910 about the need of the hour to help the "depressed classes…out of the depth of social condemnation they are in for no fault of theirs."[175] In that context, he cited that Bengal traditions brought out the arbitrary nature of the

[171] See M. S. S. Pandian's use of this expression, originally coined by Nancy Fraser ('Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy' in Craig Calhoun ed. *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge Ms.: MIT Press, 1992) in Pandian, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin*, p. 210.

[172] Rajendranath Sarkar, *Jibankatha* (Calcutta, 1975), reprinted in Sanat Kumar Naskar (ed.), *Paundra Manisha, Vol. 2*, Calcutta: Paundra Mahasamgha, 2013, p. 108.

[173] Saracchandra Ghosh, *Sadgopjati O Samajtattva*, Calcutta, 1312 BS, 1905, p. 58.

[174] Mahendranath Karan (Paundra), *Samajrenu*, Medinipur, 1332 BS, 1925.

[175] Sarada Charan Mitra's essay in *The Indian Review*, October 1910, originally published in *The Depressed Classes* by G. A. Natesan in 1912, reprinted in Rajendra Singh Vatsa (ed.). *The Depressed Classes of India: An Enquiry into their Conditions and Suggestions for their Uplift*, New Delhi: Gitanjali PRakashan, pp. 77-81.

rankings and the power of Ballal Sena who "degraded the Vaishyas" and "*raised* the Mahishyas"[176] (emphasis mine).

As one can imagine, the latter part of the assessment was most unflattering to the Mahishyas. Far from being an exceptional opinion, this view began to gain exceptional prominence in early twentieth century Bengal when *Ballalcharita* came to be published by the Asiatic Society of Bengal with the redoubtable scholar Haraprasad Shastri authenticating it. *Ballalcharita* was discovered by an erudite Subarnabanik, namely Ray Bahadur Brahmamohan Mallik, who was a retired high-ranking government servant and outstanding mathematician. Haraprasad Shastri attested to its credibility by reading out a paper on the subject before the Asiatic Society in 1902.[177] It explained the low social position of the Subarnabaniks, in particular, by narrating how Ballal was annoyed with wealthy Subarnabaniks of his time when they refused to submissively lend him money. Evil machinations followed and Subarnabaniks were made 'unclean' Sudras. The narrative also told that Kaibartas, who were so long *ajalchal* and could not serve 'clean Sudra' castes were suddenly made servants and thus *jalchal* by Ballal Sena. Further, that being pleased with them for having rescued his son, Ballal helped a section of Kaibartas (fishermen) to become a respectable caste of agriculturists.[178]

Ballalcharita did not gain credibility within certain important academic circles. Scholars like Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay who were keen on 'hard' evidences for 'scientific history writing' rejected it as a 'historical mockery'.[179] We shall soon come to that. However, that did not diminish the impact that purported discoveries such as this made on the public mind. Scholars like Haraprasad Sastri and Dinesh Chandra Sen were seen as discovering from cultural artefacts the lives of the *people* of Bengal in a forgotten past – their crafts and traditions, their great accomplishments, their social prestige and material culture. Regional and local histories assembled through pioneering use of vernacular sources including genealogical literature (*kulaji/kulasastra*), literary texts and folk traditions gained a new political importance.

[176] *Ibid.*

[177] Sudarshanchandra Biswas, *Ballalcharit Samalochana*, Faridpur, Habashpur, 1321 BS, 1914, p.7.

[178] *Ibid.*

[179] Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay, 'Aitihasik Upanyas' in *Prabasi*, Magh, 1330 BS, 1924.

While a group of scholars doubted the verifiability of these sources, hegemonic Bengali miscellanies of the early twentieth century spoke of how "Mahamohopadhyay Pandit Haraprasad Shastri was drawing attention to the splendor of the presently degraded trading communities in Bengal of the olden days".[180] These communities, proposed a 1922 issue of *Nayak* citing Haraprasad Shastri's novel *Bener Meye* (1919), were never 'depressed' in the past.[181] *Bener Meye* told the story of how Buddhist Sahajiya predominance in Bengal gave way to a new Brahmanic dominance in early modern Bengal.[182] It contained details of the princely splendor of the Bagdi in Sahajiya-dominated Bengal (Satgan or Saptagram, in particular) the grandeur of sea-faring commerce of Bengali traders and the subsequent Brahmanical Smarta consolidation whereby all these communities came to be grouped under the umbrella category of 'Shudras'. Nagendranath Basu, like Shastri, churned out a huge volume of works on Bengal's local history of castes by using vernacular literature, especially the much-contested genealogical tales, the *Kulashastras*, as sources.[183] Whatever be the scholarly importance of his works, these were cited by lower caste writers as supports to their claims to have been 'great communities' in the past. Mahendranath Karan, a pioneer-leader of the Paundras, wrote in the 1920s how *Ballalcharita* and the works of Basu proved that ritual debasement did not relate to intrinsic racial/genetic or spiritual matters, that it was just another story of secular dominance and political defeat.[184] Mahendranath Karan excerpted the following from Basu's work (*Modern Buddhism*) to substantiate his point:

> After the Mahomedan conquest, Brahmanic ideals were superinfused on the Buddhist ideals of society. The

[180] Panchkori Bandyopadhyay, 'Hindu Ke?', *Sahitya*, Phalgun, 1329 BS, 1922, reprinted in *Panchkori Bandyopadhyay Rachanabali* (eds. Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay and Sajanikanta Das), Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishat, 1951, p. 343.

[181] 'Sri Sri Gandhesvari Puja', Baisakh, *Nayak*, reprinted in 1329 BS, 1922, reprinted in *Panchkori Bandyopadhyay Rachanabali*, pp. 386-387

[182] Haraprasad Shastri, *Bener Meye*, first published in *Narayan*, Calcutta: Gurudas Chatterjee and Sons, 1326 BS, 1919.

[183] See discussion on 'Prachyavidyarnava' Nagendranath Basu's *Banger Jatiya Itihas* in Kumkum Chatterjee, 'Communities, Kings and Chronicles: The Kulagranthas of Bengal, *Studies in History*, Vo. 21, Issue 2, 2005. Basu was a member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Bangiya Sahitya Parishat, a founder member of the Kayastha Sabha, and editor of *Kayastha*.

[184] Mahendranath Karan, *Paundrakshatriya Kulapradip*, Medinipur, 1334 BS, 1928, reprinted in 2001 by Dhirendranath Mandal of Paundrakshatriya Unnayan Parishad (Calcutta), p. 56.

> distinction between the classes became more and more prominent till they developed into a regular caste system. People forgot their old history, the history of their own distinction and began to think with the Brahmins that all distinctions were due either to cross-breeding or to excommunication. Thus, a social edifice was built up in Bengal with the Brahmins forming the topmost part. The existence of Buddhism was forgotten. Masses of *Anacharaniya* classes are the survivals of the forgotten Buddhism, and those who have come under the Brahmanic influence. The more one would study the social history of Bengal, the more will one be convinced that the classes were not really depressed. They continue to be what they were; only they have lost their consciousness of a great past, -- intellectually, morally and socially.[185]

If Basu's works were embraced by lower caste writers to speak of their past 'greatness', the same were singled out for being most representative of upper caste prejudices against Mahishyas by Mahishya writers.[186] Shastri or Basu did not budge from describing the Kaibarta as 'originally' a fishermen caste. One wonders whether they deliberately opposed Mahishya writers or whether they simply did not know what Mahishya elites could be claiming. Shastri, for instance, never used the word 'Mahishya' in any of his writings (spanning more than forty years from 1887) on the 'Kaibarta' or on Bengal's social history. He equated the Kaibartas with the "Bagdi, Dhibar, Pod", "Khatik, Akhetak", "Tibar, Jele, Mala" as just another fishing caste in "a region with ample rivers, rivulets and streams where fishing constituted the livelihood of half of the population".[187] Basu did the same and equated Kaibartas of

[185] *Ibid.*, p. 57.

[186] Prakash Chandra Sarkar, *Gobardhankrita Brihat Mahishya Karika*, Calcutta, 1931, pp. 240-280. Sarkar targeted Basu's *Biswakosh*, in particular. Basu (ed.), *Bangla Biswakosh*, Vol. 4, Calcutta, 1893, Internet source: https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.289390, pp. 494-99.

[187] Shastri, 'Jatibhed', *Bibha*, Aswin-Kartik, 1294 BS, 1887, *Haraprasad Shastri Rachana Samgraha* (Satyajit Chowdhuri and Nikhileswar Sengupta eds.), Calcutta: Paschim Banga Rajya Pustak Parshad, 1989 (henceforth, *HSRS*), Vol. IV, pp. 79-101; *idem*., 'Abhibhashan: Medinipur Parishade Sabhapatir

Bengal with the low-caste fishermen Kewats of Bihar.[188] All this they did apparently without caste-prejudice in a matter-of-fact manner. It is striking, for instance, that Shastri did not even consider reflecting on claims made by his Mahishya contemporaries like Prakash Chandra Sarkar, a highly-educated Sanskrit scholar and practicing advocate living on Elgin Road in Calcutta, who was writing for nearly forty years on 'agriculture' being the original occupation of Chasha Kaibartas/Mahishyas. Shastri was convinced that the Kaibarta, like the Tibar and others, took to agriculture only after having converted to Buddhism and its vow of non-killing. He even singled out that phenomenon as constituting "the first clue to the social history of Bengal."[189]

Mahishya writers were agitated because they knew that Shastri's or Basu's words would become hegemonic in the day and would be valued by posterity. It was the *Ballalcharita*, they surmised, that 'misled' Census officials in 1901.[190] The Census authorities had not accepted the appellation 'Mahishya' in the final lists despite the spirited agitation of the Mahishyas on the ground that the dividing line between them and fishermen (Jeliya) Kaibartas was "still far from clear and universally recognized".[191] In fact, Haraprasad Shastri, being an eminent Indologist and Sanskrit scholar, was one of those private individuals that H. H. Risley, as the Special Officer of Ethnographic Enquiries in Bengal, had consulted since 1886-87 on the subject of social precedence of castes. Official circles, as a recent work has shown, distinguished between orthodox Brahman pedantry and 'enlightened'/disinterested opinion on the social standing of castes.[192] Shastri was especially invited to comment on draft lists forwarded by Risley in 1886 because he was seen as representing 'enlightened opinion'. Of course, 'enlightened opinion' was invariably upper-caste; no lower caste elite was consulted. In 1888, Shastri, in his deposition to Risley, ranked Kaibartas as a whole below Goalas/Gopas (milkmen). Thereby all Kaibartas became inferior to the

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Katha', *Narayan*, Bhadra, 1324 BS, 1917, *HSRS IV*, pp. 243-254; *idem*., *Bener Meye*, *HSRS I*, p. 317; *idem*., 'Banglar Samajik Itihaser Mul Sutra', HSRS IV, pp. 383-384.

[188] Basu (ed.), *Bangla Biswakosh*, Vol. 4, pp. 494-99

[189] Haraprasad Shastri, 'Banglar Samajik Itihaser Mul Sutra', (posthumously published in 1949 in *Masik Basumati* – Phalgun, 1356 BS – research undertaken in his last years) *HSRS IV*, pp. 383-384.

[190] Sudarshanchandra Biswas, *Ballalcharit Samalochana*, p. 7.

[191] *Census of India, 1901 (Bengal)*, Report by E. A. Gait, pp. 370-375. For more details, see Bandyopadhyay, 'An Intermediate Caste History', pp. 66-67.

[192] *Ibid*., p. 44.

only other caste that was 'intermediate', like them, between *navasakhs* and *ajalchals*. More importantly, Shastri narrated a 'tradition' that did not go down well with them at all. It was that Ballal Sena, being pressed by Kaibartas for a Brahman priest, which they did not have so far, vested a Hari, an 'untouchable' scavenger caste, with the sacred thread and presented him as Brahman/priest to the Kaibartas.[193]

In 1911, the Mahishyas won their census battle. The name was recognized as pertaining exclusively to the Chasha Kaibartas by the government; thus, they formally became a distinct caste. For more than a decade now, they were also arguing that their priests were not 'degraded' but an older set of Brahmans of Bengal, who came long before the early medieval migration of the five Brahmans from Kanauj whose descendants subsequently gained favours from rulers like Ballal.[194]

We see Saradacharan Mitra, towards the end of 1910, using the word 'Mahishya', and not Chasha Kaibarta/Kaibarta, in his *Indian Review* essay. But as Mitra's essay revealed, the 'clean' status of the Mahishyas seemed almost as anomalous in upper caste eyes as was the 'unclean' status of gold-merchants or Subarnabaniks. The purported discovery of *Ballalcharita*, as a medieval text, explained all these anomalies, attributing them to the arbitrary actions of the king. It was happily embraced within frames of lower caste critiques of the institution of caste and varied projects of lower caste identity formation. Only the Mahishyas found themselves on the wrong side. To be portrayed as an 'originally' inferior community elevated to some status by a proverbially capricious ruler could not have been flattering. It was exactly the much-despised image of the opportunist 'lower caste parvenu (eternally) aspiring to higher status'.[195]

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[193] *Ibid.*, pp. 51-51; Haraprasad Shastri's Deposition to the Special Officer, Ethnographic Investigations, September 1, 1888, Risley Papers (1866-1911), National Archives of India. Also narrated in Shastri, 'Jatibhed' (1887), p. 97.

[194] Harishchandra Chakrabarti, *Bhranti Bijoy*; Trailokyanath Halder, *Mahishya O Mahishyajaji Gauradya Brahman Parichay*, Twenty-four Parganas, 1911.

[195] See how Jogendranath Bhattacharya, the Nadia pandit-cum-lawyer, represented such claims. Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects: An Exposition of the Origin of the Hindu Caste System and the Bearing of the Sects Towards Each Other and Towards Other Religious Systems*, Calcutta: Thacker, Spink, 1896, pp. 3-4.

In 1914, the Mahishya writer Sudarshanchandra Biswas published a *Samalochana* ('Critique') of the *Ballalcharita* from Faridpur in eastern Bengal.[196] He alleged that the *Ballalcharita* was a forged text. The allegation was strong-worded and it attributed dishonesty to the authenticators and discoverers of *Ballalcharita*. It made Haraprasad Shastri complicit in a project of dishonesty by "affluent Subarnabaniks who could afford costly manipulations".[197] Biswas assumed that some petty *Pandit* must have been paid in recent times to compose a rubbish of a versified text that could be made to pass for an old *punthi* manuscript by keeping it buried under stacks of paddy or tobacco.[198] He showed that there were multiple versions of *Ballalcharita*, each customized to suit the the caste claims of the respective discoverers and publishers. There was nothing like 'scientific history' in it. In effect, Biswas was negating the emerging critical opinion about arbitrary state interventions in the organizing of castes and speaking in favour of the sanctity and autonomy of Hindu *samaj* much like Brahman apologists of caste or upper-caste nationalist champions of the same.

Such allegations about forgery were but common even within elite academic circles of the time. R. C. Majumdar, a defender of 'scientific history writing' wrote many years later in *Bangiya Kulashastra* that much of the genealogical literature that Nagendranath Basu worked with, along with his supporters like Haraprasad Shastri and Dinesh Chandra Sen, were of uncertain provenance.[199] They were neither properly datable nor trustworthy in their contents. Many seemed to have been composed in recent times to pander to caste pride, wrote Majumdar. He also wrote about the possible ways of giving freshly composed made-to-order manuscripts the look of old ones. In 1913-14, while travelling from Dacca to the Pabna Literature Conference, Majumdar had met a gentleman in a steamer who told him about how to 'manufacture' old manuscripts. After having composed a fresh manuscript, the papers should be sprinkled with some acid and then kept underneath sand for about a month. Papers would then look like worm-eaten old *punthis*. When Majumdar asked the man

[196] Biswas, *Ballalcharit Samalochana*.

[197] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[198] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

[199] Rameshchandra Majumdar, *Bangiya Kulashastra*, Calcutta: Bharati Book Stall, 1973, pp. 6-11.

if he ever did it himself for somebody, he admitted that he did it a few times as he was in need of money. Majumdar tells us that the man even gave him the name of the person who had employed him.[200]

Thus, according to R. C. Majumdar, literature such as these could not have been reliable on any count: not even as popular historical 'traditions', which Basu, Shastri or D. C. Sen thought they were. Sudarshanchandra Biswas, our Mahishya writer, was thus participating in an academic debate over 'scientific' history writing. The debate was raging in the early twentieth century with the stage divided between Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay, Rameshchandra Majumdar, Ramaprasad Chandra and Akshaykumar Maitreya on the one side and Basu, Shastri, Sen on the other.[201] Like Maitreya *et al*, Biswas wrote that myths and fables had a tradition in this country of passing off as history. He wondered how, even in the "present scientific age", a complete confusion of fact and fiction "could delude men of eminence as Justice Saradacharan Mitra or the archaeologist Pareshnath Bandyopadhyay".[202]

It is interesting to see the frame in which Biswas construed the 'true story', as it were, *vis-à-vis* the 'forged' or 'false' one. Ballal had indeed rewarded a small group of fishermen with a plot of land. It was the "kingdom of the fisherman-king" in Jessore, said Biswas. They were Malos with surnames such as 'Majhi'.[203] "Mahishyas with respectable surnames such as Raychaudhuri, Bhaumik, Majumdar and Mandal" have been living as neighbours in the region as a clearly different caste.[204] These Malos, wrote Biswas, were now trying to adopt the name 'Mahishya' across Pabna, Dacca, Tripura, Noakhali. He was "disgusted" that the "caste-difference-erasing" *Sanjivani* and *Bengalee* were even supporting their plea![205] Compare this mood of arrogant self-distancing from supposedly 'inferior' castes with the same author's 1908 essay in *Nabyabharat* which criticised 'caste arrogance' – '*jatyabhiman*' – as such.

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[200] *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

[201] Kumkum Chatterjee, 'The King of Controversy: History and Nation Making in Late Colonial India', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 110, No. 5, Dec., 2005, pp. 1454-1475.

[202] *Ibid*, p. 43. Biswas went at length to show the anomalies of dates and facts, including a confusion between two separate kings with the same name, between the narrative of *Ballalcharita*, published by the Asiatic Society, and articles by historians like Dinesh Chandra Sen. *Ibid*., pp. 45-48.

[203] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

[204] *Ibid.*

[205] *Ibid.* p. 23.

Finally, like other lower caste writers, Biswas also drew a picture of the Mahishyas or Chasha Kaibartas as persecuted by Ballal Sena. The Mahishya rulers of some princedoms had 'provided asylum to good Brahmans who could not tolerate the corruption and sexual licentiousness of the king'.[206] Thus, Mahishyas were not the spineless loyalists of a bad ruler. Rather, they were the courageous challengers of an evil regime.

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The Mahishyas were then angry with upper-caste Bengali 'liberals' for all the wrong reasons. If they were vigorously trying to dissociate themselves from supposedly 'inferior others' like the Jeliya Kaibartas and the Malos, the liberal intelligentsia was either ignoring it or discouraging it or actively opposing it by supporting the rival claims of these 'others' (who, for instance, demanded that all Kaivartas be allowed to adopt the name 'Mahishya').[207] By supporting the claims of the more 'inferior' castes, the intelligentsia achieved two things at a time: first, they could pose as the friends of low castes, especially when Hindu unity was urgently sought; second, they could restate the 'imagined' status of the 'Mahishya' appellation, that is, deny 'reality' to the Mahishya claims. In other words, the crux of the matter was that 'becoming a Mahishya' was never fully achieved in the early twentieth century. Most upper-castes hardly knew about the claim. Mahishyas would be called 'Kaibartas' by the majority of upper-caste people till well into the twentieth century – not with malice but out of habit. And, the "Kaibarta" used to be customarily pronounced along with the "Hari, Dom, Bagdi" by caste-elites to refer to the 'masses'. Of course, there was nothing wrong in it, and some of these references were moved by genuine affection for the masses.[208] The net effect was an inevitable self-identification of the Mahishya as a *bahujan* caste. Despite their claims to high caste-status, the Mahishyas – somewhat

[206] *Ibid.* p. 24.

[207] The Jeliya Kaivartas had set up the Calcutta Mahishya Samiti at Chingrighata on the eve of the census operations of 1911. 'Census Superintendant of Bengal to Bangiya Mahishya Samiti, no. 4220C, dated Calcutta, February, 1911 ans Secretary, Bangiya Mahishya Samiti to Census Superintendant of Bengal, dated Calcutta, February, 24, 1911', cited in Bandyopadhyay, 'An Intermediate Caste History', p. 105.

[208] Rabindranath Tagore, "Address to the Students" (Bangiya Sahitya Parishat, Calcutta), *Rabindra Rachanabali,* Vol. 12, Centenary Edition, Calcutta: Government of West Bengal, pp. 728-729.

failing in their Sanskritizing ambition to 'become' a 'pure' caste – ended up consolidating a mass ideology as a tyrannized caste.

After all, a Dalit organizer, Manindranath Mandal, could invite Birendranath Sashmal to a conference of tyrannized castes in 1922. Sashmal did not actually participate though he showed enthusiasm; nor did any Mahishya representative take interest in it.[209] But the fact that Manindranath could even imagine Mahishya participation in a Dalit solidarity and invite Sashmal is proof that Mahishyas were still 'inferior' castes.

The early movement of identity formation began with a parochial emphasis on dissociation from 'lower Kaibartas'. But like any movement that awakens a consciousness of the self, it exceeded that status-ridden emphasis. As I have tried to show, caste-identity was an idiom of self-respect – an inspiration of esteem for the common man's work of tilling the soil, of watering paddy seedlings and tending the fields of spinach and brinjal. "The growth of social consciousness, like the growth of a poet's mind, can never, in the last analysis, be planned"[210], and once a spirit of critical social interrogation is inspired, its direction remains indeterminate. Some of the Mahishya meetings were large and comprised about as many as four-thousand participants.[211] An awakened identity could sometimes lead to vulgar demonstrations of caste-arrogance, including rowdy street-fights at times.[212] But an awakened self-respect could also, occasionally, inspire a Mahishya woman to be assertive in an unprecedented way (through print) and "lash out at the crassness of 'greedy devilish men'", who hailed the self-immolation of young girls, who died for issues of

[209] Manindranath Mandal, *Bangiya Jana Samgha*, Medinipur, Khejuri, 1330 BS, 1923, 'Bhumika'.

[210] E P Thompson, 'Time, Work-discipline and Industrial Capitalism', *Past and Present*, No. 38, December, 1967, p. 97.

[211] *Mahishya Samaj*, Aswin, 1318 BS, 1911, cited in Bandyopadhyay, 'An Intermediate Caste History', pp. 177-178.

[212] There was one incident in Hooghly where one Manomohan Goala refused to personally carry the curd, that was ordered and paid for, to Panchu Kaibarta's house to counter the latter community's new pretensions of respectability with the name 'Mahishya'. A legal case followed, and when the case was going on, Kaibarta/Mahishya youths attacked one Khudiram Goala, who was on his way to deliver curd to a customer at Singur. A riot between Mahishyas and Goalas flared up with seven men wounded and carried to the Serampore hospital. Cited from *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, May 13, 1910, by Bandyopadhyay, 'An Intermediate Caste History', p. 91.

dowry.[213] A spirit of emancipation spurred a general interrogative mode. From the start, it inaugurated a questioning of social conventions: the Shudra (proudly defying that ascription) now dared to interpret Vyasa, Vasishtha and Parashara and argue that their rulings must be subject to democratic change for they were, in their time, "popular opinion and voice personified".[214] It could not remain wholly blind to issues of social justice. Thus, even patriarchal disciplining geared to attaining social respectability was attended by stating: "If widows should follow rigid disciplines, the same codes should be imposed on males for the regulation of their sexual desires".[215] There were voices, integral to the Mahishya identity movement, that denigrated ritual issues and exhorted the community to be concerned with education, the reclamation of fallow lands, the improvement of cultivation technique and the abolition of social evils like dowry and child-marriage.[216] New forms of 'speakability' in a novel public sphere had enabled Mahishyas to define themselves. While they claimed an Aryan identity, they also demonstrated the confidence to dissect the identity of the caste-elite. The good Kulin Brahman, they showed, citing colonial ethnography, had non-Aryan infusions in his blood for he was known to take wives from "non-Aryan races like Nagas and Manipuris".[217]

A self-identification with persecuted peoples, I have shown, was always an integral part of the Mahishya movement of identity-formation. With time, it evolved into the archetypal *bahujan* identity, which identifies with the original inhabitants of particular

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[213] Sumit Sarkar, 'Identities and Histories', p. 77 [article by Giribala Dei, a Mahishya woman, in Krishnabhabini Biswas ed. *Mahishya Mahila* (published from Nadia), Magh Phalgun, 1914]. Pratima Mondol, a Mahishya woman, writes in 2010, that Krishnabhabini's (born around the middle of the nineteenth century) mission had been to remove the superstitions that flourished in society. As early as the first decade of the twentieth century, she had advised her only daughter to divorce her husband, who was corrupt, and devote her attention to the uplift of society. Mondol, 'Pragatishila Krishnabhabini', *Mahishya Samaj*, 2010, p. 153.

[214] Pulinbihari Chowdhuri from Baishnabdanga, Diamond Harbour, 'Matabhed Keno', *Mahishya Samaj*, Magh, 1318 BS, 1911, p. 250.

[215] Abinash Chandra Das, 'Purusher Brahmacharya', *Mahishya Samaj*, Kartik, 1318 BS, 1911, pp. 157-159.

[216] 'Bangiya Mahishya Samitir Ekatringhsha Barshik Adhibeshane Sabhapatir Abhibhashan, 1335', *Mahishya Samaj*, Baisakh, 1336 BS, 1929, pp. 3-10; also, Santosh Kumar Das' address published in *Mahishya Samaj*, Aswin, 1329 BS, 1922.

[217] Harish Chandra Chakrabarti, *Bhranti Bijoy*, 'Purbabhas'.

regions, rather than with Aryans.[218] But the crux of the older argument or claim remains in a different form as it does for all caste-subalterns in some way or the other: that caste distinctions were *social*, and did not emerge from racial or *genetic* difference.[219]

The difference between Mahishyas and caste-elites crystallized not quite through opposing ideologies. Ideological premises were mostly similar, the reason the Mahishya movement appears the 'most assimilationist' of all the lower caste movements. The differences have shown themselves in the opposite tropes by which upper-castes see them, vis-à-vis their own ways of seeing themselves. Though, each of these are multi-dimensional, a pattern makes itself apparent. From Jogendranath Bhattacharya, the English educated Nadia *pandit*, who described the affluence of Nadia Mahishyas as flowing from evil rewards from Indigo planters[220], to early twentieth century scholars, who explained their relatively better caste-status as flowing from the favours of Ballal Sena, upper-castes have always seen them as proficient in ingratiating themselves with morally corrupt temporal powers. Their success with the British census officials at securing the name-change to 'Mahishya' was also perceived in that light. Conversely, the Mahishyas have always portrayed themselves as valiant – highly masculine – fighters against evil regimes. Sudarshan Biswas depicted Mahishyas as protectors of good Brahmans against Ballal Sena. As for the Indigo affair, Mahishyas, since the 1970s, speak of how Bishnucharan and Digambar Biswas (Mahishyas), raised the banner of the Indigo rebellion in Nadia. In addition, they protest that Dinabandhu Mitra never mentioned them in his *Neel Darpan*. The Mahishya brothers' "self-respect and concern for ryots drew them into insurgency", that ruined them financially and otherwise.[221] The Mahishyas see themselves as having played a part in the Revolt of 1857.[222] That same line of defiant

[218] See the introductory pages in Bimalananda Sashmal, *Bharat Ki Kore Bhag Holo*. Bimalananda identifies with the conquered non-Aryans to speak about the vices and blood-thirstiness of the conquering Aryans.

[219] Shyamadas Mallik, 'Mahishya Samiti Keno? Itihaser Prekshapate Kichu Bhabna', *Mahishya Samaj*, 2010, p. 65.

[220] Jogendranath Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, pp. 223-225.

[221] Phani Ray, Mahishya Manisha, 'Nilbidroher Dui Mahanayak Bishnucharan O Digambar Biswas', p. 19.

[222] 'Sampadakiya: Palabodoler Naba Paryay', *Mahishya Samaj*, Baisakh, 1383 BS, 1977, p. 2.

sturdiness – the very opposite of opportunist loyalism – they extend to the Quit India movement in Tamluk, where a 'national government', defying British rule, had been established under the headship of a Mahishya named Satishchandra Samanta.[223] They extend the 'line of revolution' further to the foundation of the Bangla Congress as a protest against the dictatorial reign of Atulya Ghosh within the Congress.[224]

This brings us to the final question of why the crystallization of *bahujan* difference in the case of the Mahishyas did not inscribe itself onto the realm of institutional politics of the state. This is a poser and one can merely suggest clues. We must note that the consciousness about marginality in the decision-making processes of the state has been very much there among Mahishya activists since the 1950s.[225] There is the frequent call to raise the political consciousness of the Mahishya.

The liberal ideal of free citizenly political choice, unconstricted by loyalties of 'birth', appears a little too hegemonic among these caste-subalterns of Bengal. Mahishya demands for political recognition as a community have invariably been qualified by stating their 'abstract', 'universal' and wider relevance. Thus, a solidarity with "similarly placed communities" has always been invoked, as if to hasten to prove the non-communal nature of the caste-organisation's perspectives.[226] The Samiti and its sister associations have continually sought to prove to its people why a caste association was at all necessary, when the "abolition of caste was the ultimate goal".[227] The Samiti never had a declared political line; it has always functioned as a

[223] *Ibid.*

[224] Amiya Kumar Samanta, 'He Mahajiban', *Mahishya Samaj*, 2010, p. 53.

[225] Rekha Ray, 'Paschimbanga Bidhan Sabhar Nirbachan O Mahishya Samaj', *Mahishya Samaj*, Baisakh, 1384 BS, 1977, pp. 45-46.

[226] See Memorial of All India Mahishya Mahasabha (1946) above.; resolution adopted by Samiti in 1948 Dakshineswar Mahasammelan, published in a 1959 issue of the Mahishya Samaj by editor Nityasharan Chowdhuri, cited in Shyamadas Mallik, 'Mahishya Samiti Keno', p. 68; speaking on behalf of the 'friends of society', the *kamar-kumor-jele-krishak-tanti* (ironsmiths, potters, fishermen, peasants, weavers), in 'Hooghly Jela Mahishya Sammelan, Nalikul, Hooghly', *Mahishya Samaj*, Baisakh, Jaishtha, 1384 BS, 1977, p. 46.

[227] See the citations from Nirod Kumar Roy (*Chhatra O Juba Andolan ebong Nikhil Banga Mahishya Chhatra O Juba Samitir Bhumika*, Vol. 1, Baisakh, 1366 BS, 1959) and Bijoy Chandra Das (*Mahishya Jatir Ganachetana*, No. 10, 1366 BS, 1959) in Shyamadas Mallik, 'Mahishya Samiti Keno', pp. 68-69. Both stated that the first and foremost aim was to abolish caste from the country. Until that was realized, there was no other alternative, but to see the caste-community as the unit for general uplift.

civil-society organization, respecting individual autonomy is politics.[228] Caste-identity has remained within the civil social domain, outside the sphere of recognition by the state. The Mahishyas are unique *bahujans*, who still belong to the 'General' category. In other words, they interact with the state as the abstract citizen, unmarked by caste. Voices urging that the "bracketing of social inequalities" does not really eliminate them are increasingly becoming forceful. These voices were, however, never quite absent and these have always suggested, at it were, that it was "more appropriate to *unbracket* inequalities in the sense of explicitly thematizing them".[229] But there is an unmistakable general misgiving for "*jati-rajniti*" or a 'politics of ethnicity' among these groups in Bengal – even those who demand reservations all too often mention that objective material markers such as the 'poverty line' should ideally have been the basis for reservations, rather than caste.[230] This impulse to overcome the marks of birth as political subject and citizen is related, after all, to one of the foundational inspirations of the early twentieth century caste movements. Not just the Mahishya identity formation but all the subaltern caste movements – for all their parochial invocations of 'pure' status – had been primarily inspired by a liberal humanism, that defied the hereditary gradations of tradition to vindicate the abstract, Universal Man.[231]

[228] *Mahishya Samaj*, Asadh, 1328 BS, 1921 (during the non-co-operation movement). Nityasharan Chowdhuri's editorial, 'Samitir Niti O Uddeshya', *Mahishya Samaj*, 1366 BS, 1959, cited in Shyamadas Mallik, 'Mahishya Samiti Keno?', p. 67.

[229] I owe these expressions to Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere'', pp. 119-120. That is the idea voiced by Phani Ray, Shyamadas Mallik and many others. Phani Ray's advocacy of the necessity for special protection for the Mahishyas in the Sravan-Bhadra issue of *Mahishya Samaj*, 1366 BS, 1959, was cited by Shyamadas Mallik in 2010 to highlight that the Mahishya demand for reservations was hardly new: "The government must secure us rights to protection that the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are entitled to". 'Mahishya Samiti Keno?', pp. 68-69.

[230] *Ibid.*, p. 65.

[231] "Identities which were formerly mandatory, seem to become optional, matters of choice"— on what modernity does to the configuration of identities, Sudipta Kaviraj, *Politics in India*, Delhi: OUP, 1997, p. 28.

Chapter 3

Heroes of 'Action': The 'Suppressed Castes' Chorus a Critique

That the Rig Vedic *Purusha Sukta* expressed no literal truth was more or less established in literate circles in Bengal by the early years of the twentieth century. Liberally inclined Vedic scholars, since the nineteenth century, had been telling that there were no precise Varna differences in the Rig Vedic age.[1] Lower caste writers, and even those from respectable castes like Kayasthas, quoted from these scholars and from hegemonic journals like the *Hindu Patrika* to make the point that the *Purusha Sukta* was only a later accretion to the Rig Veda, and that Manu's statement, supposedly deriving from the *Sukta*, that the four Varnas emerged out of the mouth, arms, thighs and feet of the Puranic god Brahma was ridiculous and vicious.[2] A range of people from different status groups sought to uproot this "deeply-entrenched and perverse prejudice" – "the pillar of Brahmanic caste arrogance" – from the "minds of common people".[3] Much of Bengali ingenuity had been devoted to establishing the reasonableness of the 'inner core' of Hindu institutions as part of the Swadeshi movement. The Bangiya Jatiya Siksha Parishat, the platform of National Education founded in the Swadeshi era, began to sponsor and publish thick volumes on subjects like *Hindu Samaj Vigyan*, that is, 'The Science of Hindu Society'. In this ensemble of writings, the *Purusha Sukta* was interpreted and reinterpreted as a metaphor, '*kalpana*', or an abstract social 'formula', an interpretation that was to stay.[4] The *Birata Purusha* of the *Purusha Sukta*, it was suggested, represented the human collective – '*lokasamashti*' – and the body metaphor indicated the distinct social

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[1] Haraprasad Sastri, 'Jatibhed', *Bibha*, Aswin, Kartik, 1294 BS, 1887, Sukumar Sen, Satyajit Chowdhuri and Nikhileswar Sengupta (eds.) *Haraprasad Sastri Rachana Samghraha, Vol. IV*, Calcutta: Paschimbanga Rajya Pustak Parshad, Calcutta, 1989, p. 80.

[2] Mahendranath Mallabarman, *Jhalamala Tattva, The Origin and History of the Jhalmal Caste*, Part 1, Mymensingh, 1914, p. 9. Scholars like Sastri, Satybrata Samasrami and Rameshchandra Datta, well-known as authorities on the Vedas and for their liberal views on issues like widow-remarriage or the woman's right to read the Vedas, were quoted. 'Barna Tattva' in *Kayastha Patrika*, Year 17, Bangadeshiya Kayastha Sabha, 1917, pp. 9-10.

[3] 'Barna Tattva', *Kayastha Patrika*, 1917, pp. 9-10.

[4] Kaliprasanna Das, *Hindu Samaj Vijnan, A Comparative Study of the Hindu Social System*, Bangiya Jatiya Siksha Parishat Granthabali, Vol. 1, Calcutta, Year not mentioned. 'Barna Tattva', *Kayastha Patrika*, 1917, p. 10. That this interpretation has come to stay is evident in Svami Gambhirananda ed. *Stabkusumanjali*, Calcutta: Udbodhan Karjalaya, 1961 (6th edition) p. 33.

functions, all of which were equally vital for the preservation of the organic whole. This interpretation implied a tentative recognition that perhaps there were no 'original' differences between the Varnas, a theoretical point that different ranks of non-Brahman-caste writers of the times were strenuously laboring at. It also acknowledged that the four Varnas were ideal 'types', not pertaining to the fact of birth. Moreover, the analogy of body-parts positively demonstrated the indispensability of *all* the four social 'types'. As Baradakanta Majumdar wrote in his 1902 tract *Varnasramadharma*, "In reality, none of the four Varnas is higher or lower, any more venerable or contemptible, than the other; all four are equally indispensable." With that, though, he added – and this is the point from where this chapter takes off – that the head, the hands, the thighs and the feet in our bodies were of different orders with a subtle hierarchy between the respective faculties. "There is *just a similar distinction in esteem* for the four Varnas respectively"[5].

The repeated invocation of this body metaphor, even in course of discrediting the *Purusha Sukta*, refurbished the traditionally presupposed hierarchy between intellection and material production. The Kayasthas and Baidyas had since long been lumped together in popular estimation with Brahmans to form the *uchhajati* conglomerate because as clerks and physicians, they were part of the intelligentsia. Now as forerunners in the field of English education and the liberal professions, they formed the *sikshita bhadrasreni* who saw themselves apart from the '*asikshita nimnasreni*'. Periodicals like *Banik* which sought to encourage trade-and-business among Bengalis in the post-Swadeshi period pointed out that not just agriculture or artisanal production, but even trade-and-business was considered the occupation of the '*asikshita nimnasreni*' by the '*bhadra Bangali*'.[6] These perceived dichotomies – *ucchasreni/nimnasreni*, *bhadra/abhadra*, *sikshita/asikshita* and the 'intelligentsia' versus the 'productive classes' – became so central to caste 'common sense' in early twentieth century that it generated aggregative identities, cutting across considerable ritual differences, something that was unprecedented. The aggregative identities were hardly coordinated or politically organized; they remained diffusely floating in a shared world of sentiments articulated through disparate channels.

[5] Baradakanta Majumdar, *Varnasramadharma*, Calcutta, 1902, p. 188. Emphasis mine.

[6] Jagabandhu Bhattacharya (ed.), *Banik*, Ashadh 1338 BS, Calcutta, 1931, p. 59.

By the late 1930s, we find a more organized articulation of such an aggregative identity in the Association of the Intermediate and Suppressed Caste Hindus which sent a Memorial addressed to Sir Stafford Cripps in 1942 expressing that "they have been frustrated for centuries" under the caste system.[7] The Memorandum of Association attached to the Memorial stated that 'The Intermediate Suppressed Castes (Hindu) Association' consisted of "the Bengali Hindus between the three so called caste-Hindus, viz., the Brahmins, the Kayasthas and Baidyas on the one hand and the 76 castes at present included in the Schedule of Castes on the other hand".[8] That was a diverse assortment of castes in terms of traditional ritual ranking, occupations and economic standing. 'Clean'-*shudras* or *nabasakhs* like Tili, Barui, Gandhabanik, Tambulibanik, Kangsabanik (trading castes), Karmakar, Kumbhakar, Malakar, Napit, Tantubay (functional castes), and Sadgop (middle peasant caste) joined the Association. 'Unclean' or *asatsudra jatis* like Teli, Saha, Subarnabanik and Jogi joined it as well. Water touched by *asatsudra* castes were unusable to *nabasakhs* according to ritual norms. The Mahishya and the Goala, castes lower than *nabasakhs* but higher than *asatshudras*, were also included in the 'Suppressed Castes Association'. The Sutradhar, enlisted as Scheduled Caste in the early 1930s, petitioned to get excluded from the list of Scheduled Castes, and on being successful in that endeavor, joined this Association. The Memorandum of Association stated that one of the objectives of the 'Suppressed Castes Association' was to secure special advantages, "as an interregnum", for these "less advanced" castes. "So long as the caste system remained", they demanded "special facilities for all backward castes and communities" in education and appointments, and "joint electorates with reservation of seats for Hindu castes separately on percentage of population basis (sic.)". But the foremost demand was the "abolition of caste system by a declaration of fundamental rights in the Statute Book". Palpably, the 'Intermediate' identity of these castes congealed with the finalization of the Scheduled Caste lists. And, the united 'Suppressed Caste' identity *vis-a vis* the "Brahmins, Kayasthas and Baidyas" was formulated by specifically asserting the distance in terms of educational progress – that the "so-called higher three castes (sic.)" were "roughly 52 percent educated and

[7] Government of India, Reforms, File no. D 709/42-R, 1942, 'Memorial from the Intermediate and Suppressed Castes (Hindu) Association' (henceforth, 'Memorial ISCA')

[8] *Ibid.*

who, on account of their education, wealth and influence, manage to hold key positions in all matters…" The Memorialists also formulated their identity as "the mass of the Indian people" versus "the upper class".[9]

Even if the coming together of these diverse castes can be assumed to have been dictated by political expediency, there was an ideological content to this aggregative unity. The unity had been posited, albeit negatively, by upper-caste elite discourse for quite some time. The genealogy of the 'Suppressed Caste' rubric may be traced within early-twentieth-century hegemonic discourses about Hindu society. Kaliprasanna Das in *Hindu Samaj Vijnan*, published by the National Council of Education, introduced the term "*shashita sampraday*" (meaning, 'the subdued/suppressed/governed classes') to speak of the "combined masses of Vaishya *varna* and Shudra *varna* peoples", comprising a wide array of artisanal, manufacturing, trading and agricultural castes. According to Das, Vaishyas merged with Shudras "at this subordinate level" ("*ei nimnatara stare*"), where lines of distinction blurred. "Some of these castes are higher in status than some others; they have very different occupations; but, even though there are many branches and divisions," observed Das, "they are broadly classifiable, in terms of their qualities, as the great Shudra collective". Das defined Shudrahood in cultural terms. Those comprising the "great Shudra collective" were the "non-intellectual and uncultured masses". They were the "subjects" ("*praja*"), "somewhat underdeveloped in their cerebral capacities", serving society through work, but deserving protection, and even a certain guarantee of prosperity, from the "intelligent leaders" of society. As cultural traits defined Shudrahood for Das, he conceded that many, who now demonstrated these traits, might have been Vaishyas in some faraway past – they were the "*shudrabhabapanna vaishyas*". Together with other Sudras, these groups formed the "*demos*", the faceless people. Das ended the subject by observing that, by virtue of their great numbers in the age of democracy, these "non-intellectual" groups (including "*shudrabhavapanna vaishyas*") could succeed in politically challenging the overlord-ship of the superior orders. But he was afraid, they would never equal the task of ably governing society and country. If "they took over the

[9] *Ibid.*

reins of public affairs in their hands, they would not only ruin society but bring harm to themselves".[10]

To go by Das' reckoning, the 'people', the numerically preponderant 'masses' of 'governed' classes, were assured of preservation and even prosperity in the rule-book of Varna society. Only, they were allotted the role of performing instruments, the role of 'limbs' of the social organism. Rupa Vishwanath, in a different context, described the construct of such an assurance of preservation as "the trope of gentle slavery".[11] In this chapter, however, we do not deal with social groups like Dalits for whom, in many parts of the subcontinent, self-preservation itself was a major predicament under highly exploitative conditions of agrarian slavery. This chapter is about the distinct ideological-political stance of a certain articulate section of the self-styled 'Intermediate and Suppressed Castes', which was, to go by their self-representations, not severely burdened with poverty. We will talk about a milieu of small traders, shopkeepers, manufacturers, well-to-do businessmen, rising industrialists and some writers and polemicists organically associated with traditional trading castes. These caste-groups were beaten by the "Caste Hindu"[12] in the field of colonial education and the sort of educational, cultural and professional access that it offered. What these groups shared with the various strata lower than them in social, ritual or economic terms, was *obscurity*. They were all summarily classified by social elites as the faceless 'masses'. Just like social orders below in the hierarchy, these groups suffered the predicament of remaining "excluded from the light of the public realm where excellence can shine."[13] The hegemonic public realm in late colonial 'Renascent' Bengal was particularly highbrow and, thus, somewhat forbidding to these groups for

[10] Das, *Hindu Samaj Vijnan*, pp. 645-647.

[11] Rupa Vishwanath, *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion and the Social in Modern India*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014, p. 3.

[12] The Memorial of the 'Intermediate and Suppressed Castes' referred to their adversaries, the three upper castes, as 'Caste Hindus'.

[13] Hannah Arendt 'The Social Question', *On Revolution*, Harmondsworth [England]: Penguin Books, 1973. Arendt quoted from John Adams, the leader of the American Revolution, on the ordinary man's predicament after his self-preservation is assured: he "is not disapproved, censured, or reproached; *he is only not seen*…" p. 69.

their apparent cultural unsophistication. “To be wholly overlooked, and to know it, are intolerable.”[14]

An instance will illustrate the sentiment. Hitesranjan Sanyal observed how ambitious groups from inferior-castes, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, established their prominence in society through temple-building and temple-patronage.[15] By the early twentieth century, however, people knew that times had substantially changed. How they perceived the change can be gauged from what Harihar Seth, the wealthy Tili merchant, said in 1925-26 in his address to a large meeting of the Tilis at Baidyapur, Kalna in the district of Burdwan. Kalna was, and still is, scattered with temples, many of which were perhaps linked to aspirations for eminence among lower social groups. To put things into perspective, let us recall that Sanyal specifically studied the upward mobility efforts of Tilis, the dissident group of Telis (originally, oil-pressers and oil-traders), who made it to the respectable *navasakh* status and rose in “popular estimation” in greater society by the late nineteenth century. Alongside diversification of their trades, mercantile prosperity through silk and salt trade, banking and moneylending for over a century, temple building was what they had enthusiastically taken to.[16] To come to our story, Harihar Seth in the Tili congregation (1925-26) was speaking about how the Tilis had once gained social reputation in these parts of Bengal by sponsoring religious activities and temples. He drew attention to the magnificence of the temple edifice in the very precincts of which the meeting was taking place. “Countless rich men have come and gone since this temple was founded, but how many temples are there in Hooghly that are as well-planned and opulent as this one?” With that he observed that the country’s trends had now greatly changed (“*ekhon desher haoya anyarup*”) and temple-building no more fetched any honour. Seth, like others of his ilk and generation, was particularly sensitive about how his caste appeared in the eyes of ‘elites’. He reminded his audience that “upper caste people who saw themselves as educated and civilized” did not value such works anymore. “It was not even important”, observed Seth, “to talk

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] Hitesranjan Sanyal, ‘Continuities of Social Mobility in Traditional and Modern Society in India: Two Case Studies of Caste Mobility in Bengal’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2, Feb., 1971, pp. 315-339; ‘Temple Building in Bengal from 15th to the 19th Century’, in Barun De (ed.), *Perspectives in Social Sciences, I, Historical Dimension*, Delhi, 1977.

[16] Sanyal, ‘Continuities of Social Mobility…’, p. 327.

about whether they ostensibly showed respect because they would do that just so as to take our services". Seth was certain that upper caste elites, at heart, "loathed" them "as a caste". "The so-called educated elite abhorred the very vocation of business". Seth believed that upper caste conceit derived from their superior educational status.[17]

By the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century, this resentment – quite a *ressentiment* – provoked their interrogation of the very worth of university education. Unlike Sitanath Ray, the Tili leader, who in 1916 avowed contented optimism about the emancipatory prospects of modern education before the Indian Legislative Council[18], the likes of Seth invariably repeated what, by the 1920s, had become a cliché: "It is an uncontested fact today that university education merely leads to the clerk's job".[19] A political subjectivity was in the process of being fashioned amongst these caste-groups that drew its sense of *distinction* from a critique of the 'hollowness' of the vaunted turn-of-the-century 'Bengali cultural efflorescence'. It indeed largely anticipated the late twentieth century critique of the so-called 'Bengal Renaissance' in its insistence that the colonial intellectual represented a "distorted caricature of bourgeois modernity".[20] In essays, letters and addresses to respective caste-publics as well as to broader publics, leaders of these relatively middle-positioned inferior castes never tired of pointing out that the cultural elite had grossly failed in the *decisive nucleus of economic activity*. Emulation was no more the avowed ideal. An alternative paradigm was being progressively defined, in the yardstick of which the achievements of upper-caste highbrows would appear insignificant.

Histories of social mobility, relating to the castes mentioned above, have brought to the fore mostly the emulative aspect of the movements. Perhaps it is a continuum shared with the habitual upper-caste view that makes existing historiography merely reinstate the observation the *Bengalee* had made on the eve of the census operations

[17] 'Abhibhashan', Sri Harihar Seth, Chandannagar, Address delivered as President in the Tili Hitaishi Sabha convention in Baidyapur, *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika* (eds. Lalitmohan Pal, Dr. Nanigopal Kundu, Brajagopal Kundu, Sibdas Saha) Chaitra-Baisakh, 1333 BS, 1926, p. 114.

[18] Government of Bengal, General (Education), File No. 1E-8 (1-2), January 1917, Progs. Nos. 14-17, 'Extract from the Proceedings of the Indian Legislative Council'. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Caste and Social Mobility', *Caste Politics and the Raj, Bengal 1872-1937*, Calcutta: K P Bagchi, 1990, p. 122.

[19] 'Abhibhasan', *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika*, 1926, p. 115.

[20] See Sumit Sarkar, 'Introduction' and 'Rammohun Roy and the Break with the Past', *A Critique of Colonial India*, Calcutta: Papyrus, 1985, p. 23.

of 1911: that "there is a widespread desire to *level upwards*…".[21] While there is no denying this palpable aspect of caste agitations, what is generally missed out is that the widespread desire brewing amongst inferior caste groups was "not just to equal or resemble" elite upper-castes, "but to excel" them.[22] Historians have shown that social respectability was pursued by inferior-caste groups through two distinct routes: one, by demanding and acquiring ritualistic symbols of status such as Varna affiliations (most of the groups, dealt with in this chapter, aspired to Vaishya Varna status); and, two, by aiming at the "material sources" of high status such as modern education, employment and political power. In the words of Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, "their goal remained the same", that is, either way they emulated existing social elites. In the first, the "reference category" was "one of the three classical Varnas", while in the second, "their reference category was the educated liberal *bhadralok*".[23] It is a different matter, an aspect we briefly indicate, that there were multiple voices within each individual caste movement, say of Tilis, Mahishyas and others, and many spoke against the relevance of ritualistic gestures. But what pervaded their speech (within and beyond the organs of caste organisation), across these considerable differences of opinion, was the articulation of a distinct ideal – a distinct posture as *custodians of the country's material culture*, as the very *pillars of her economy*. It is this differential subject position that constituted their political being as domineered peoples[24] in early twentieth century Bengal much more than the entry of some of their men into the legislative councils.

Petitions sent by respective caste associations to the colonial state will confirm the emulative nature of aspirations. These groups expected and hoped that the colonial

[21] *Bengalee*, 2 October, 1910. Cited in Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, p. 102. Emphasis mine,

[22] As Arendt quoted John Adams in his reflections on the 'passion for distinction' – the 'desire not just to equal or resemble, but to excel' – which 'next to self-preservation will forever be the great spring of human actions'. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 69.

[23] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Politics and the Raj, Bengal 1872-1937*, Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi, 1990, p. 120.

[24] Their awareness of being tyrannized/domineered was unambiguous: "*Chirakali Brahmanera jatir karta…iha ki kono rup ajouktik katha boliya mone hoy? Ei dekhun sedin jakhan Swadeshi Andolan upasthit hoy, takhano Brahmanera niyam koriyachilen je, je byekti Bilati laban, kapar, ityadi byabahar koribe, tahake samajchyuta hoite hoibe*" (meaning that, 'Brahmans have always asserted their will over the rest of society; during the Swadeshi movement, anybody using foreign salt or cloth was threatened with social boycott by Brahmans') Sashibhushan Kundu, *Tilijatir Vaishyatva Praman*, Calcutta: Bishnu Press, 1330 BS, 1923, p. 14.

state would be the impartial equalizer, the institution wherefrom they could both formalize status (ritual rank) and claim material facilities like education, so that they would not fall short of upper caste elites in any way. Here, they really wanted to 'resemble' the latter. It was in the realm of society, beyond the exercises of caste petitions, that they pronounced their *differential*. Harihar Seth, for instance, recognized the need of modern education to gain social respectability (and perhaps he would demand the state's assistance on that account). But, in his address to the congregation of Tilis, he qualified it by observing that the current variety of university education was manifestly flawed. He urged well-to-do Tilis to arrange for the dissemination of an alternative curriculum of education that would preserve their "distinction as trading castes".[25] Another contemporary Tili leader recommended that the community stop bothering about the 'Vaishya' title; their glory must properly derive, he proposed, from the necessary efforts to liberate the country (Bengal and India) from the fetters of scarcity. 'Scarcity' found heavy emphasis: "India stands naked today, she does not own her cloth, her people are rickety out of consuming adulterated food and Bengal's business has been captured by non-Bengalis." Tilis must step in to save the country, to let her swell into a stream of abundance.[26] The theme of 'scarcity' (in particular, Bengal's economic 'failure') was not the original idea of these men. As we shall show in the initial sections of this chapter, it was a commonplace of the time. By variously repeating it as *critique*, these groups outlined a sovereign territory, where they could potentially 'excel' the social hegemons as national pathfinders.

The distinguishing subjectivity found enunciation within and beyond caste literature. Our sources thus include tracts and journals on financial and industrial matters. For those whose predicament was *obscurity*, it was important to demonstrate acumen on issues of wider public/national significance. "The passion for distinction and excellence…can exert itself only in the broad daylight of the public".[27] The site of this 'public' – where preeminence was desired ('*pratishtha*', to use their key word) as corporate groups – wavered between 'Nabya Bharat' and 'Bangla'.

[25] Seth, 'Abhibhashan', p. 115.

[26] Sri Sahaji, 'Purano Chithi', *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika* (eds, Sri Radhabinod Saha, Sri Lalitmohan Pal), Calcutta, Aghrahayan-Paush, 1332 BS, 1925, p. 44.

[27] Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 70.

The Self-critique of the Upper-caste Literati

Already by the late nineteenth century, the 'sentinels' of Bengali 'culture'[28] were articulating an internal critique of the "talented middle classes", by and large coterminous with the scribal upper castes. *Dasi*, a hegemonic Bengali miscellany, edited by Ramananda Chattopadhyay, who was later the editor of *Prabasi*, contrasted the Marwari with the Bengali in 1897. The essay, titled '*Bangali Jatir Bartaman O Bhabishyat*' ('The Present and Future of the Bengali Community'), observed that it was high time that the 'brain' of the intelligentsia be combined with the 'money' of the Pals, the Sahas and the Kundus, the traditional businessmen, and the zamindars in order to fight the constraints of a colonial economy.[29] The Marwari was made to represent the exact complement of the Bengali. The 'educated Bengali' demonstrated 'talent' in securing the modern 'services', including the prestigious Civil Service and in his sensitivity for 'culture and civilization'. He was but indifferent to business. The Marwari, this essay observed, was similarly indifferent towards the modern service sector or matters of cultural refinement. "The men are slowly getting a little refined on coming in contact with all kinds of people in course of their business transactions", but "imagine the nonchalant Marwari lady, what with her mammoth bell-metal or silver jewelry!"[30] However, the Marwari's strength lay in his great stamina for business, in his frugality, in his pain-staking, hardworking nature and in his community solidarity. Just as the Bengali would stake everything for "*chakuri*", the Marwari would stake his all for "*byabsay*". As someone who pioneered profitable periodical-publishing in modern Bengal, Ramananda Chattopadhyay was acutely aware of the links of the success of print media with industrial capitalism – "the complementarity between magazines and advertising".[31] The essay lamented that Bengalis had no initiative in enterprise. It was certain that Bengal's glory derived solely from its intelligentsia, the enlightened "*madhyabitta sreni*". But now that these classes had become the "eyesore of the British" for having equaled them in the Civil

[28] To use the expression of Tithi Bhattacharya, *The Sentinels of Culture: Class, Education and the Colonial Intellectual in Bengal, 1848-85*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

[29] 'Bangali Jatir Bartaman O Bhabishyat', *Dasi*, December, 1897, pp. 535-553.

[30] *Ibid*., p. 536.

[31] Samarpita Mitra, 'Periodical Readership in Early Twentieth Century Bengal: Ramananda Chattopadhyay's Prabasi', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 47, Issue 1, January, 2013, pp. 204-249.

Services and in the superior law courts, there was a concerted attempt by the British to prevent Bengalis from occupying high official posts in the North-western provinces, in the Punjab, in Madhya Pradesh and in Burma. The legal profession had also become saturated. The 'glorious middle-classes' were thus in crisis. In such a moment, the middle classes must turn to the peasantry, the artisanal classes and craftsmen on the one hand, and to the affluent Bengali zamindars[32] on the other. The essay made the observation that these 'other classes' were to benefit greatly if they were guided by the superior intelligence of the educated middle classes. "The traditional Bengali '*banik*' lacks the ingenuity required to fight the stiff competition offered by foreign merchant firms today". The cerebral talent of the middle classes must be combined with the resources and know-how of the other classes for a wholesome development of the Bengali community. The essay recognized that the "university boys" were blind to the material world of production, and that university education required a fundamental overhauling. But it elaborated on the faults of the richer sections and the traditional trading classes. Dearth of national feeling kept them away from promoting development.[33]

A fresh edge and stimulus to the critique of genteel nationalism came from the aspirations of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal. Saradaprasad Chattopadhyay launched *Kajer Lok*, subtitled 'The Business Man – An Ideal Journal Devoted to Useful Art and Manufacture', in 1906 from Calcutta. It asserted that Swadeshi nationalism was missing out on the actual site of historical transformation, that is, trade and manufactures. Such emphases invariably incorporated a critique of caste sensibilities. A causality would be insinuated between economic backwardness and the 'exotic' cultural principle that made India 'different'.

> Bone dust of cows and pigs remain mixed in sugar and salt, blood is often used in the process of refining. You happily consume it because it is inexpensive – you, who

[32] Mercantile castes were also holders of estates. The Nandis of Kashimbazar, Roys of Bhagyakul, Pal Chowdhuris of Ranaghat, Dey Chowdhuries of the same place, Deys of Srirampur, Chowdhuris of Ganpur and the Kundu Chowdhuris of Mahiari were Telis and subsequently Tilis. Some were exclusively zamindars like the Teli 'Raj' family of Dighapatia, Rajshahi. See Sanyal, 'Continuities of Social Mobility…', p. 328.

[33] 'Bangali Jatir Bartaman O Bhabishyat'.

> are loquacious about 'pure' conduct ("*acharaner pat patao*"). You sermonize in society and insult the innocent. Your status is so fragile that it is hurt when the oil-man ("*kalu*") walks past you wearing shoes. But you are happy to consume the dried bone dust of cows and pigs, taken right out from the carrion-depots. Had you eaten instead the flesh of these animals, that would have added some muscle to your hopelessly effete body. Do you realise that your theories of 'purity' are mere ashes in the cooking-oven of the *Chandal*? Hope this hypocrisy meets its end![34]

Kajer Lok rejected the show of political discontent against the colonial state as useless and effete. It showed allegiance to the government to ensure stability for 'useful' activities like commerce. The target was to minimize the competition that indigenous enterprise faced from foreign products such as cigarettes, salt, sugar, etc.[35]

The chorus of enthusiasm voiced in Swadeshi circles for material self-reliance had a revolutionary content because it highlighted the dangers of staying away from manual labour. Satishchandra Mukherjee had attempted during the Swadeshi years to have industrial workmen teach their trades to the *bhadralok* youth.[36] By the early 1920s, when Prafulla Chandra Roy was talking about "*Bangalir Annasamasya*" or the "food-problem" of the Bengali, a paranoia had set in, not just about commercial competition from European merchants, but about Bengal entirely "passing over to non-Bengalis and foreigners".[37] The words '*sram*' (toil) and '*byabsa*' (business) were compulsively used together. The "university graduate" in Bengal, Roy observed, was hardly left with livelihood options: dissociated from all crafts and means of production, the proletarianized "graduate" served as the wage-earning *kerani* or book-

[34] *Kajer Lok* (ed. Saradaprasad Chattopadhyay), Aghrahayan, 1313 BS, 1906, p. 34.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 1, p. 33.

[36] Satishchandra Mukherjee, an eminent Swadeshi nationalist figure, was founder of Dawn Society, a meeting ground of Swadeshi intellectuals. Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2010, pp. 39-52.

[37] During this time, Prafulla Chandra Roy was an adored figure amongst lower caste groups, particularly Dalits of western Bengal like the Paundras. See Chapter Four.

keeper in the Marwari's shop. "The M.A. in English with a First-class, with all his talent for reciting from Milton and Shakespeare, ended up translating from the Devanagari his (Marwari) master's orders". First published in the *Masik Basumati* in 1923 as '*Annasamasya O Bangalir Nischeshtata*' ('Scarcity and the Unenterprising Bengali') and included as compulsory reading for school students over many generations, Prafulla Chandra Roy's was a very influential chastisement of the 'unenterprising' Bengali. The 'brains' of Bengal were so "sharp" that "they could only tear people apart, they did not lend themselves to united, constructive work".[38]

All trades, Roy showed, were going out of Bengalis' hands. The Chinese had monopolized carpentry in Calcutta, they had also taken possession of most of the timber factories, warehouses, tanneries, leather industries and shoe factories. Chefs and cooks and plumbers were either Oriya or '*Hindusthani*'. The majority of coolies, labourers and orderlies were non-Bengalis. Trade in jute, linseed, mustard and rice was beginning to be captured by Marwaris. Now the *bhadralok*, Roy stated, could not even count on the clerk's job for 'Madrasi' men were fast filling up the positions. Vegetarian Tamils consumed little. "They would be preferred to Bengalis as clerks as they were happy with lesser salaries". The Chinese had already taken possession of Bentinck Street, now they were occupying Lalbazar. The Marwaris occupied Burrabazar, they had also occupied the 'Bangalitolla' on both sides of the Harrison Road. "They will gradually become the owners of most parts of Calcutta" and oust the Bengali. The impoverished Bengali's residential house would be turned into the Marwari's commercial establishment. Roy predicted that in a city where rents were hugely soaring (post First World war), the *Bangali Babu* would soon find himself and his large family living as tenants in one or two-roomed flats, "the size of pigeon holes".[39] The crisis thus engulfed all classes of Bengalis. And it was not caused by inexplicable objective forces: it was entirely 'cultural', the 'poisonous contagion' of *bhadraloki* culture across the social landscape of Bengal.

[38] Prafulla Chandra Roy, 'Annasamasya O Bangalir Nischeshtata', *Masik Basumati,* Phalgun, 1329 BS, 1923, pp. 549-559, 'Annasamasya: Bangalir Aparakata O Srambimukhata, *Prabasi,* Jaishtha, 1338, pp. 194-200.

[39] Roy, 'Annasamasya O Bangalir Nischeshtata'.

Roy unsettled the notion of 'intelligence'. He was full of praise for the Marwaris and the Chinese. He praised their hard work and determination. Deeply influenced by the sociological ideas of Herbert Spencer,[40] Roy saw them as the exemplars of those who could win the competitive struggle for existence. It was nothing but 'toil', for these non-Bengali communities had come to Bengal empty-handed. The Chinese, who owned the warehouses, Roy observed, had come some fifty years back to work as carpenters in the same firms, then owned by Bengalis. Who really was "brainy" ("*mathawala*"), he asked. Was it the impoverished university-educated? Or, was it the upcountry man, despised as "*chhatukhor*" ('living on barley') by the smugly satisfied English-educated? The latter employed the former. For all their qualifications, observed Roy, no Bengali economist found place in the Fiscal Commission, whereas G. D. Birla, without educational degrees, was a member. Roy admired Birla's contribution to the furtherance of scientific research through the donation of thirty lakhs of rupees for the foundation of the Institute of Sciences in Bangalore. Thus 'intelligence' was not bound to reading and writing. And the 'intelligent' man remained free from notions of status. Roy cited the instance of William Carey, the British missionary known for his efforts at spreading education in Bengal. When someone made a snide comment on his 'shoemaking' past in the Viceroy's dinner party, Carey had clarified that he was "never a shoemaker, but a cobbler!"[41]

Prafulla Chandra Roy but counted on the 'intelligent' reformer. The intelligentsia had so far set a 'bad example' in Bengal. The *babu* thought it embarrassing to carry his load, the fish and vegetables that he bought from the market. The peasant learnt to be sluggish from him. Even if he stayed near the railway station and possessed physical strength, he did not supplement his meagre income by working as the coolie. It was now up to the intelligentsia to set good examples.[42] Roy prided himself for being a professor who ran a grocery store and engaged with many a business enterprise. Hailing from an aristocratic family of Jessore-Khulna, son of a well-read father closely associated with the Brahmo movement, and himself a doctorate from the University of Edinburg in England, Roy saw himself as the quintessential reformer. When he admonished the educated youth for dreaming about being an ICS,

[40] Prafulla Chandra Roy, *Atmacharit*, Calcutta: Orient Book Company, 1937, p. 37.

[41] Roy, 'Annasamasya: Bangalir Aparakata O Srambimukhata', p. 195.

[42] Roy, 'Annasamasya O Bangalir Nischeshtata', p. 552.

there was an element of his own life-experience in it. He aspired to join the Imperial Service but despite his brilliant educational qualifications, he got an academic position only under 'Provincial Service'. He started as a 'temporary' Assistant Professor at Presidency College with a salary of two hundred and fifty rupees. As a fresh doctorate from Edinburg, he had expected more; he was aggrieved to see how the Indian intelligentsia was discriminated against by the British.[43] His was thus, literally, a self-critique and he empathized with the educated youth frustrated in their ambitions. His private experience opened his eyes to the powerlessness of the intellectual as well as to the commercial nature of colonial subjection. Roy hailed one Barendra Ghosh as a Bengali hero. Ghosh had failed to get his university degrees despite his father's efforts and had, instead, gone to Bombay to set up a cotton mill with success.[44] Behind such rhetoric against the educated Bengali, however, was a concealed belongingness to that very aristocracy of intellect. Glimpses of it can be snatched from his insistence that educated men must set better examples, and more poignantly in his retort to what he described was an allegation he often faced. "Bengalis accuse me saying that I am telling them to become Marwaris." "Of course, not", he asserted. He explained that the world's most creative leaders did not go to Oxford or Cambridge. "Did that make them comparable to the *asikshita* (unschooled) Marwari?"[45] The uneducated, then, were not exactly revered by him. Because he could hardly deny the superior value of the cerebral faculty, he "needed to reclaim intellectual prowess for 'Tili, Tambuli, Subarnabanik, Vaishya Saha communities' and assert that Meghnad Saha, Mahendralal Sarkar and Brajen Seal came from such traditional trading castes".[46]

Banik, a monthly on "trade, agriculture and industry", edited by Jagadbandhu Bhattacharya, articulated the same paranoia in the 1920s and 30s about the Bengalis (and sometimes, Bengali Hindus) losing their all to foreigners and 'non-Bengalis'. Its essays drew upon the same themes as of Prafulla Chandra Roy. The 'Pal and Saha' communities would be passingly mentioned as Bengali trading communities. However, much would be written in different essays about inadequacies of the

[43] Roy, *Atmacharit*, pp. 53-60.

[44] Roy, 'Annasamasya O Bangalir Nischeshtata', p. 559.

[45] *Ibid*., p. 558.

[46] Prathama Banerjee, 'Debt, time and extravagance', *Politics of Time*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 141. Prafulla Chandra Roy, *Jatiya Muktir Pathe Antaray*, Calcutta, 1936, p. 16.

"traditional trading communities" ("*puratan banik sampraday*"), on the "lack of their cooperation and empathy for the nation".[47] It exhorted the educated youth to take interest in commercial activities. It interviewed, for instance, a Brahman professor who opened shoe-companies in the Swadeshi era to "drive away caste prejudices and the stigma attached to the profession".[48] Talking about somebody from the "old business communities", a short report observed that "traders of the old" falsely complained about business being less profitable at present. These "traders of the old" were lazy, they hated competition and "were interested only in individual gain". "In reality", the report noted, "individual profit could be less at a time because of the participation of many in business; but it was overall gain as it marked the competitive progress of the nation or community."[49] Bengalis needed, *Banik* implored, a new class of Vaishyas or entrepreneurs who were capable of 'informed' commerce, that is, commerce wedded to knowledge. The traditional trading communities, it was implied, were 'primitive' in their money-making for they locked up wealth in land and government securities. But the essays emphatically wished away the caste prejudice against merchants. They asserted that Vaishyas were of a respectable order, and simultaneously that, they were '*vish*' or the 'people', with whom power rested in the modern world.[50] The "*Bangali sikshita bhadra jubak*" (the enlightened Bengali youth) – as vanguard – must come forward to represent the high Vaishya ideal through initiative, dedication, character and knowledge. Why, "the Bengali is no less intelligent than the people of other provinces".[51]

Nostalgia for a Prosperous Past: The 'Age of Merchants' in Bengal

A 1926 issue of *Banik* observed that even though *bhadralok* politicians, lawyers and barristers lectured about how important it was for Bengalis to turn to business, at heart they had no respect for the vocation. None of them would want their own sons

[47] 'Byabsay Bangali', *Banik*, Ashadh, 1338 BS, 1931, p. 61.

[48] 'Adhyapaker Jutar Karbar' (An interview of Professor Gyanendranath Maitra, the owner of 'Popular Shoe Stores' in Hazaribagh), *Banik*, Kartik 1338 BS, 1931, pp. 149-151.

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 151. Excerpt from another periodical, *Byabsayi*.

[50] 'Banijye Sambhram', *Banik*, Jaishtha O Ashadh, 1333 BS, 1926, p. 5.

[51] 'Byabsay Bangali', pp., 61, 59.

to go into business. They would only be happy, it seemed, if their "friends' sons" took to business. They would want their own sons to become barristers and magistrates. Only if the son was unable to secure even a petty clerk's job would the father consider the option. It was curious, one of the essays remarked, that a businessman earning a thousand rupees a month received less respect from these scribal classes than a job-holder earning about a hundred. It mentioned that even a person from an old business family, that had subsequently bought a *taluk* or estate, refused to accept that his forefathers ever ran any business.[52] Were Bengalis always so averse to business? The question was posed over and over again.

The obsession about the 'unenterprising Bengali' – "*bangalir byabsa nei*" – in Swadeshi circles was, however, matched by a simultaneously generated nostalgia for a prosperous Buddhist Bengal of a bygone era. Was Bengal always like this? The literati answered this with a resounding 'no'. What is often ignored in histories of Swadeshi nationalism is that while much of its rhetoric was Hindu-inflected, a very important component of Bengali Swadeshi discourse was the celebration of Bengal's difference ('*bishishtata*') and its 'liberal' Buddhist tradition. The writings of the extremist leader Bipin Chandra Pal and the influential early-twentieth-century journalist Panchkori Bandyopadhyay, to mention just two instances, abound with this theme.[53] Bengal, in this discourse, was the land of merchants, a haven of trade, civilization and liberal culture, a place known for its sea-voyages in the Indian archipelago, away from the Aryan heartland's land-locked conservative culture. The *Sreshthis* (merchants) at Tamralipta, Subarnagram, Saptagram were all Buddhists. Buddhism, the "*adi* democratic religion" remained the religion of "Bangla, Magadha and Utkala" for "one thousand and five hundred years" and "Varnasrama had been erased from these places". And Buddhist Sahajiya permissiveness, bordering on

[52] 'Banijye Sambhram', p. 6. "The greatest ambition of a salt, jute or rice merchant (generally a *teli* or *shaha* by caste) after rising to influence is to buy up a zamindari or estate". Benoy K. Chowdhury, 'Agrarian Relations in Bengal (1859-1885)', The History of Bengal (1757-1905), Calcutta, 1967, pp. 318-319; On pretensions to respectability and land-holding, see Sanyal, 'Continuities of Social Mobility'; Bandyopadhay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, p. 106-107.

[53] Bipinchandra Pal in *Bangabani*, Chaitra, 1328 BS (1921); Mohitlal Majumdar, *Bangla O Bangali*, Calcutta: East Light Book House, 1950, pp. 5,121; Matilal Ray, *Hindutver Punarutthan*, Calcutta: Prabartak, 1933, pp. 4-6.

libertinism, gave Bengal's soil is peculiar character.[54] Haraprasad Sastri's 1919 novel, *Bener Meye* ('The Merchant's Daughter', discussed in the previous chapter), catered to this nostalgia. This was how he prefaced it:

> Our story belongs to those times, when Bengal had everything. Bengal had her elephants, her horses, her seagoing vessels, her business, her trade, her manufactures and her arts. The Bengali novel today is occupied with the cult of the courtesan. Why not try a different taste by reading a book on the cult of the Sahajiyas of those times?[55]

While studying individual Swadeshi nationalist thinkers like Binoykumar Sarkar, scholars have sometimes noted their 'nostalgia' for the Pala period in Bengal.[56] The Pala period was the last leg of Buddhist Bengal. The rule of the Senas marked the rise of neo-Brahmanic dominance ("*naba brahmanya pradhanya*") in Bengal[57]. But, as Panchkori Bandyopadhyay put it, it was with the advent of British rule in Bengal that caste really lost its "elasticity" ("*sthitisthapakata*"). Castes in Bengal were always "profession castes" and by taking a different profession, one changed one's caste. Bandyopadhyay cited an adage to establish the point: "*Jat harale kayet*". Many among the artisans, craftsmen and businessmen, who happened to be dissociated from their professions, joined the ranks of the Kayastha. "The abuse of being the profoundly Vedic Aryan cannot be levelled against the Bengali". The British made

[54] Panchkori Bandyopadhyay, 'Bangalir Samaj Binyas', 'Byabsagata Jatibichar', 'Akarsamya', 'Jati Binyas', 'Siddhacharyagan', 'Jatibichar', 'Jatir Paribhasik Artha', 'Jat Harale Kayet', 'Dhane Aman, Jete Bamun', *Bangabani*, Paush, 1929 BS, 1922, 'Sastra Sashan', *Prabahini*, Chaitra, 1320 BS, 1913, Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay and Sajanikanta Das (eds.), *Panchkori Bandyopadhyay Rachanabali* (*henceforth, PBR*), *Vol. 1*, pp. 46-57, and *Vol. 2*, pp. 97-100.

[55] Haraprasad Sastri, *Bener Meye* (originally published in the monthly, *Narayan*), Calcutta: Gurudas Chatterjee and Sons, 1326 BS, 1919.

[56] Satadru Sen, *Binoy Kumar Sarkar: Restoring the Nation to the World*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2015, pp. 32, 70. Binoykumar Sarkar, the eminent sociologist, was a leading figure in the Swadeshi-era National Education milieu. More on him later in this chapter. "The Pala dynasty owed its political legitimacy to the 'election' by the Folk, and it was the 'Folk' that dominated the age in matters of faith." Binoykumar Sarkar, *The Folk Element in Hindu Culture*, London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1917, p. 169. (It perhaps bears mention that within a little more time, Tilis began to take pride in claiming to be descendants of the Pala dynasty, which came to power, they stated, through "*lokamata*" or 'general will'. 'Jiban Sangram', *Vaishya Tili Hitaishi*, Phalgun, 1330 BS, 1923, p. 140.)

[57] 'Byabsaygata Jatibichar', 'Siddhacharyagan', *PBR, Vol. 1*, pp. 47-53.

caste-difference "rigid" in Bengal through their court-rulings and laws. Orientalist scholars worked with notions of essential difference between India and the West and the Fort William college "relied too heavily on the *Pandits* of Navadvip, Tribeni and Bhatpara". Sadly, the English-educated Bengali "took everything from the European scholar". And it was one of the effects of English education in the British period that a peculiar "orthodoxy" of caste was born. The *Mangalkavyas* and the *Panchalis* from Ramai Pandit to Dasharathi Ray, one thousand years of authentic Bengali literature ("*khanti Bangla sahitya*"), all sang "the glories of the Kaibarta and the Banik". Bandopadhyay told a story about the great power of the artisanal and commercial classes even during the early years of Company rule. Bengali *tantis* or weavers had not yet been routed by Manchester. When Maharaja Nandakumar declined to buy cloth from weavers in his native Bhadur at an event, and instead brought clothes from Murshidabad, the Tantubays launched a massive strike against him. It turned into a boycott participated by all other functional castes of northern and southern Rarh Bengal. Nandakumar was forced to do penance. "It was none but the English educated Babu who initiated the culture of looking down upon the shopkeeper, trader, peasant and peddler as *chotolok* and *abhadra* (low and rustic)". It is he who first regarded the "*Bene*", the businessman, with contempt. No wonder the '*Ingriji-nabish babu*", observed Bandyopadhyay, was now offering to save the "Depressed Classes". "If he had any little idea about Bengali society of the past ("*sanatan samaj*"), he would not have desisted from using such an epithet." "Bengal was the land of the "Bene" during the era of Buddhism as well as during the rule of the Mughals and Pathans".[58]

No doubt Bandyopadhyay's theory had its idiosyncrasies, but a good part of it was representative of the general trend of opinion. The native elite developed a new passion for 'folk' traditions and folk literature. Medieval legends like those of the sea-faring businessman Chand Sadagar found fresh enthusiasts.[59] How Bengal's maritime

[58] Panchkori Bandyopadhyay, 'Sri Sri Gandheshwari Puja', 'Bangla Bener Desh', *Nayak*, Baisakh, 1329 BS, 1922, *PBR, Vol. 2,* pp. 386-388. Sumit Sarkar described Panchkori Bandyopadhyay as "a Calcutta-based conservative Brahman journalist", Sarkar, 'Identities and Histories', *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002, p. 51. Labels, however, – as Sarkar's own work shows best – are misleading.

[59] Satadru Sen, for instance, takes note of Binoykumar Sarkar's enthusiasm for the legend of Chand Sadagar. Sen, *Binoy Kumar Sarkar*, p. 15. That it was symptomatic of the times is reflected in 'Bangalir Arthik Svadhinata Labher Upay' (by Prabodhchandra Basu), *Arthik Unnati*, (ed. Binoykumar Sarkar) Calcutta, Baisakh, 1333 BS, 1926, p. 51.

trade became the vehicle of greater-India 'civilizing' missions in Tibet, China, Japan, Java, Borneo, Ceylon, etc., was being rehearsed.[60] A consensus developed by the 1920s that it was a recent affair, of about fifty years (some said, hundred), that Bengal has been put to rout in business. In an interview, Prafulla Chandra Roy was talking about how grain trade – rice, wheat, mustard – was passing into the hands of Marwaris. He explained that all these trades were in the hands of Bengalis thirty years back, when mills and factories were fewer. Asked about why Bengalis failed to master the machines and mills, Roy repeated the cliché that it was because English education suddenly seemed an easy means to earn the bread.[61]

Another Public: A Distinct Idiom

By 1905, intellectual leaders of Subarnabaniks and Gandhabaniks, in different parts of Bengal, were giving shape to an undifferentiated 'Vaishya' history, staking a claim to the nation's narrative.[62] Pramathanath Mallik, a scion of the famous Subarnabanik Mallik family of Jorabagan in Calcutta and member of the Asiatic Society, authored the *History of the Vaishyas of Bengal* in 1902; Abinashchandra Das, Gandhabanik by caste and professor at the Calcutta University, authored *The Vaishya Castes* in 1903; even in faraway Chittagong, a tract called *Letter for the Amalgamation of the Vaishya Communities of Chittagong* was published in 1905. These incorporated individual castes' claims to 'Vaishya' *varna* status, an opposition to being summarily classified

[60] *Ibid.*

[61] 'Molakat: Adhyapaker Mudikhana' ("Interview of Prafulla Chandra Roy, Professor at Carmichael Medical College and Founder-manager of 'Pure Food-stuff Agency' at Entally Market"), *Arthik Unnati*, 1926, pp. 432-433.

[62] The chapter on 'Education' in the Census of 1911 told that Subarnabaniks and Gandhabaniks had a "fair average of literacy", viz., about forty five percent, which was more than the Agarwals (forty-one percent), though less than that of the Baidyas (sixty-nine percent), Kayasthas (sixty percent) and Brahmans (fifty-seven percent). The proportion of literate females among Gandhabaniks and Subarnabaniks was "four times as great as among the foreign-born traders" (like Agarwals). *Census of India, 1911*, Bengal, Chapter VIII, p. 52. Risley, in 1891, had noted not just the commercial but also the educational attainments of the Subarnabaniks and the incongruity of their secular advances with their ascribed social status. Risley observed that "there seems nevertheless to be a tolerably widespread feeling that the standing allotted to them by tradition is ludicrously incompatible with their wealth and abilities, and with the aptitude which they have shown of late years for taking advantage of western education." Risley mentioned that the Sils, Malliks and Lahas were leading citizens of Calcutta. Risley highlighted the "literary distinctions" of Reverend Lal Behari Dey, the author of the "clever *genre* novel" *Govinda Samanta* and Babu Bholanath Chandra, the author of *Travels of a Hindu*. H. H. Risley, *Tribes and Castes of Bengal, Vol. II*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891, p. 266.

as the Sudra, and a staunch critique of the 'neo-Brahmanism' of the Sena era. But these were not ritualistic in their content. These highlighted the business groups' age-old contributions to the country. As Mallik wrote, "it is trade which brings in civilization to a country" and that the "Vaishyas" were the "main cause for the reputed wealth of the kingdom of Bengal".[63] It was the claim to represent the well-springs of liberal traditions within a caste-ridden culture and society. It was the ritually degraded castes' claim to have been indigenous repositories of the very cultural ideals that 'New Bengal' ('*Nabya Banga*') was importing from Europe. The *banik* writers would agree with Panchkori Bandyopadhyay that Bengal was prosperous because of its merchants and they appreciated that Bengali intellectuals were recently turning to the "illustrious names of Srimanta, Chand and Dhanapati"[64] (*mangalkavya* literature). But, unlike Bandyopadhyay who saw "caste rigidity" only in the British period, *banik* intellectuals blamed the Bengali Brahmans of the Sena era for ruining Bengal's liberal assets. Sea-voyage was made sinful by the "frog-in-the-well" Brahmans to degrade the honour of the self-confident merchants, who did not placate the acquisitive Brahmans. The purse strings of the economy were in their hands and Mallik wrote that if the "suicidal Hindu society" had not alienated them so completely, they would not have taken to becoming "*beniyans*" (native intermediaries) to European merchants. "In that case", tells Mallik, "Europeans would never have been able to conquer Bengal and her economy".[65]

It is interesting to observe how human speech retains its "agent revealing capacity"[66] even when the person takes up a topic of general relevance. Pramathanath Mallik's 1931 work, *Kolikatar Katha*, was on the history of emergence of Calcutta. But there was the distinct undercurrent of a voice challenging ascribed social status. If

[63] Promatha Nath Mullick, *History of the Vaishyas of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1902, Reprinted by Usha Jain, New Delhi, 1985, p. 6, Preface.

[64] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[65] Pramathanath Mallik, *Kolikatar Katha: Adikanda*, Calcutta, 1931, p. 39.

[66] Hannah Arendt's observations apply here again. She wrote: "speech is what makes man a political being." The content of speech is always concerned with matters of the world which lies "in between" human beings, interests that "lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together". But, in addition to that "objective reality", speech is "always a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent". Speech "'produces' stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things…They tell us more about their subjects, the 'hero' in the center of each story…" Hannah Arendt, 'Action', *The Human Condition*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, pp. 182-184.

Calcutta was the foundation of '*Nabya Banga*' and 'progress' – which, in turn, was predominantly associated with upper-caste middle classes – Mallik showed how merchant families like his own stood at the very foundation of Calcutta, of the initial development of its *bazaars*. Mallik's was a claim to have a family repertoire to tell the middle classes, moulded by Calcutta, the story of the city's beginnings. It was a claim to know the grosser facts: facts that could embarrass the intelligentsia with instances of greed and perfidy that upper-caste *mutsaddis* engaged in. Mallik needed to prove the absolute moral superiority of his own people. Thus, Nimaicharan Mallik (Mallik's forefather) was supremely pious ("*dharmikagraganya*") when Nabakrishna Deb (Kayastha) and others knew only "money and sycophancy".[67] He also showed that the Malliks did greater charities than the Debs. How keen Mallik was to establish a spiritually immaculate image of the trading castes, and particularly his own people, is evident from his citing Marco Polo in his supposed admiration for the truthfulness and honesty of the traders of Saptagram in medieval Bengal.[68] At the beginning of the work, Mallik cited Lord Lytton's appreciation of his citizenly preeminence, of his "taking much interest in public affairs", of his "connection with various educational institutions" as well as, of his pedigree as a scion of an "ancient family".[69] But he ideologized with the other side – the "people", with all the "revolutionary" content that it conjured up, as against the tyranny of caste humiliation. Thus, he excerpted the following quote at the beginning of his *History of the Vaishyas of Bengal*, which, he said, was a history of "the people themselves": "…The revolutions caused by the progress of truth are always beneficial to society, and are only burdensome to those who deceive and oppress it".[70]

Mahajan Bandhu was a journal edited by Rajkrishna Pal, and sometimes Ramchandra Saha, in the first decade of the twentieth century. This monthly magazine, annually priced at rupee one, was published from the Burrabazar sugar factories of Rajendranath Pal and Ramchandra Kundu since 1901. We began this section with the Subarnabaniks, who were part of the literary elite; but the 'other'

[67] Mallik, *Kolikatar Katha*, pp. 16-18, 98.

[68] *Ibid*., p. 238.

[69] *Ibid*., Introductory pages.

[70] Mullick, *History of the Vaishyas*, p. iv.

public actually emerged with magazines like *Mahajan Bandhu* which, by 1905-1906, took a distinct stance vis-à-vis *bhadralok*/Swadeshi reformer 'intellectualism'. *Mahajan Bandhu* also differed from works like the *History of the Vaishyas* in its complete indifference to matters of Varna status or any sort of caste history. *Mahajan Bandhu* was expressly concerned with more 'practical'/ 'business' ("*kajer*") matters. It claimed command over the bread-and-butter of trade and commerce; a tacit claim of knowing it way better than the Swadeshi *babu*. And this was where caste featured: like the elite Subarnabaniks, the editorial milieu of *Mahajan Bandhu* flaunted the public significance of their hereditary monetary competence as *banik* castes. As a reviewer put it: "*Mahajan Bandhu* fleshed out the glorious feats of business castes and clans".[71] The subjects that it dealt with were summarized under four heads: agriculture, crafts, business and mills and factories. It contained notes on the ideal conditions for the production of cotton fibre, rice, coconut oil, sugarcane and a host of other cash crops. There were essays on general economic matters such as currency, customs, licenses, credit, credibility and *hundi*. There were also occasional essays on famine. The focus was on factory industry and the key industries included sugar, glass, cotton textiles, paper, salt, mica, iron and steel, metallurgy and mining, match-making, etc. Foreign commercial ventures were highlighted and encouraged, as in articles like '*Penange Bangiya Banik*' ('Bengali Traders in Penang'), '*Singapure Bangiya Banik*' ('Bengali Merchant in Singapore'), '*Javay Bangali Mahajan*' ('Bengali Merchant in Java'), '*Japane Bangali*' ('Bengalis in Japan'), etc. The journal contained biographies of successful men from the 'merchant castes'.[72]

There was some significance to the choice of the name *Mahajan Bandhu* by the editors. As is evident, the monthly did not talk just about the 'moneylender', the most common Bengali meaning of *mahajan*. It paid attention to matters of credit, loan and banking but those had little to do with traditional *mahajani karbar*. The subtitle 'Merchant's Friend' made it clear that *mahajan* meant the 'merchant'. In fact, these were the times when the supposedly more honorable names for the merchant, like '*Sadhu*', '*Mahajan*', '*Uttamarna*', were being emphatically recovered. Upper castes reformers, concerned about Bengal's 'lack' of commercial competence, were also

[71] 'Samvadpatrer Matamat', *Mahajan Bandhu*, Calcutta, Phalgun-Magh, 1307 BS, 1900.

[72] *Mahajan Bandhu*, Bhadra, Jaishtha, Paush, Sraban, 1313 BS, 1906, pp. 153-156, 85-90, 256, 128-131.

actively participating in this recovery. Besides, all issues of *Mahajan Bandhu* would show on the title page the well-known *sloka* from the Mahabharata: "*Mahajano yena gatah sa pantha*". It was a precept to follow in the footsteps of 'great men'. It was, thus, an exhortation to its target readers, actual or potential businessmen, to cultivate the virtues of the '*mahajan*', in its double meaning. A 1910 issue advised the 'businessman', in quite a management-guru fashion, to retain his calm during the inevitable slumps that every trade faced at some point or the other. The man of business must be the great-souled '*mahajan*', indifferent to pleasure and unruffled by pain.[73] Interestingly, this essay began with whether business needed schooling. Upper castes, we have shown, thought that business needed to be grounded upon updated 'scientific' knowledge. This article in *Mahajan Bandhu* asserted that business could be learnt only through concrete practice. That is where it was different from classroom-learning. But it was important to cultivate the spiritual virtue of equanimity to pleasure and pain.[74] Thus, financial competence presumed spiritual competence. In other words, spiritual competence was hardly the monopoly of elite castes, who were maladroit in money-matters.

Mahajan Bandhu not just ridiculed the Swadeshi-enthused "*babu* businessman"[75] but mockingly denounced the abstract concepts of economic theory and economic nationalism. The editor(s) marked themselves apart from *babu* nationalism, saying that *babus* took to patriotic talk ("*desher katha*") to ease their digestive systems.[76] But the patrons of the paper and the editorial milieu saw themselves as more effective nationalists: as "*swadeshhitaishi*" or 'those who served the nation'.[77] They rubbished educated parlance and the abstract concepts of 'average annual income' used in the discourse of economic nationalism. 'Abstraction', the basis of all theory, was alleged to conceal the 'concrete'. The paper ironically noted that a suave upper class of educated Indians was debating the 'average annual income'

[73] 'Mahajan', *Mahajan Bandhu*, Magh, Phalgun, Chaitra, 1317 BS, 1910, pp. 202-203.

[74] *Ibid.*

[75] 'Babu Byabsadar', *Mahajan Bandhu*, Ashadh, 1905.

[76] 'Desher Katha', *Mahajan Bandhu*, Jaishtha, 1313 BS, 1906, pp. 39-45.

[77] Title page of every issue of *Mahajan Bandhu*. The "loyalism" ascribed to Sahas, Tilis and Subarnabaniks for this period (before the 1920s) was, therefore, complex. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, p. 153.

of the Indian with the British. "Dadabhai Naoroji, sitting in England" complained that it was "a meagre twenty rupees". But, "had each of us got full twenty rupees a year, we would have known no sorrows!" exclaimed a poor Muslim peasant, in a satire in *Mahajan Bandhu*. "Who is swindling our '*gorer taka*' ('average income')" and the answer was that "Naoroji himself was very rich" and that "Naoroji and Tata together swallowed the so-called average income of about fifteen crores of Indians".[78] Thus, the studied concepts and the economic logic of the 'blue-blooded literati' suppressed the grosser facts of their own exploitation of the 'half-fed masses'. Business expertise, *Mahajan Bandhu* usually asserted, did not derive from studied concepts. Significantly, when an upper-caste person like Bhutnath Bandyopadhyay contributed an essay to *Mahajan Bandhu*, he spoke in exactly opposite lines. Bandyopadhyay, typically for his class, thought that the businessman must be well educated in the 'science of wealth'. "One could possibly cite the examples of traditional businessmen who were illiterate", he remarked, but "even though they made some money, theirs' could hardly be called proper trade and commerce" because they "simply worked as *mutsaddis*" or intermediaries to foreign merchants.[79] *Mahajan Bandhu* was rather eclectic in accommodating perspectives as diverse as this.

While *Mahajan Bandhu* distinctly represented the perspectives and activities of businessmen from traditional trading castes, it did not demarcate any exclusive territory along caste lines. As is evident from the above instance, this public was not closed off to occasional participation from the upper-caste intelligentsia. Like the highbrow literary publics that were hegemonic in Bengal, this was also consciously designed as an open public dealing with matters of general concern for Bengalis. The intention was to restore ghettoized communities like the Sahas, the Pals, the Kundus, or say, *obscure* inferior-caste businessmen of talent like one Taraknath Pramanik, one Maheshwar Das, one Harivamsa Rakshit or one Lalmohan Saha, to the centre of the Bengali community.[80] Caste was, therefore, speaking through unspoken gestures. The content was deliberately 'objective', concerned with matters whose relevance was supposed to relate and bind people of diverse social orders. Its Baisakh issue of 1906

[78] 'Desher Katha', pp. 42-44. J. N. Tata was, however, also celebrated. *Mahajan Bandhu*, Phalgun-Magh, 1307 BS, 1900, p. 213, 232.

[79] 'Byabsayi', *Mahajan Bandhu*, Phalgun-Magh, 1900, pp. 202-204.

[80] *Ibid*., pp. 16, 86, 113; *Mahajan Bandhu*, Paush, 1313 BS, 1906, pp. 260-263.

stated that the amorphous 'people', as a collective, embodied god. It was this plane of the 'universal' ("*sadharan*") that had to be reached out, the editorial emphasized, relegating all particular markers of identity.[81] In fact, many of the early twentieth century caste-publics adopted, for their organs and institutions, names that signified the nebulous concepts of 'people' (*jana*) and 'society' (*samaj*), instead of caste names. By the late 1920s, for instance, the Kumbhakars had founded the Jana-sakti Bank in Natore, Rajshahi. It was a typical caste-associational initiative at mobilizing the savings of ordinary individuals for banking and insurance so as to participate in the "great nationalist act of wealth production".[82] The Kumbhakars had also named their mouth-piece '*Samaj-sakti*'.[83]

The public/national value of the economic activities of different caste organizations found limelight in *Arthik Unnati* (*Economic Progress*), a Bengali monthly introduced in 1926. *Arthik Unnati* focused on financial matters and "the wealth of Bengal" besides forcefully asserting that "all the talk of Bengali (or Indian) cultural ideal was verbose trash".[84] Simultaneously, by positively highlighting the current financial initiatives of inferior castes, *Arthik Unnati* situated these 'people' at the nucleus of Bengal's existence. Though the editor belonged to the very erudite literati, his was not quite the trope of the vanguard seeking to illuminate the masses. Subordinate caste peoples, as decisive and creative economic actors, could often be heard in their own voices in *Arthik Unnati*. They were tacitly recognized as forerunners of the Bengali nation in up-to-date financial innovations. The editor stated the "agenda of Young India" must be the accumulation of ordinary people's small savings in banking, insurance and similar joint-stock companies. A 1927 issue noted that there were only twenty-nine joint-stock banks in India that were owned by Indians. Another issue in the same year appreciatively excerpted a passage from *Nihar*, a Mahishya journal from Medinipur, which informed that a number of Mahishyas from adjacent villages in the Ghatal subdivision founded a new joint-stock bank. It quoted *Nihar* in its observation that the Ghatal Mahishya Bank should be an

[81] 'Sadharan Devata', *Mahajan Bandhu*, Baisakh 1313 BS, 1906, p. 1.

[82] See Prathama Banerjee, *Politics of Time*, p. 142.

[83] *Samaj Sakti* (ed. Sachinandan Pal), Magh, 1336 BS, 1930.

[84] 'Bangalir Bhagyaniyanta', *Arthik Unnati (Economic Progress): Dhanavijnanvishayak Masikpatra* (ed. Binoykumar Sarkar), Calcutta, Baisakh, 1333 BS, 1926, pp. 2-3.

example for setting up similar banks in other villages to further the development of agriculture and industry.[85] *Arthik Unnati* similarly reported the commercial initiatives of the Gandhabanik Mahasammilani since its fifth annual meeting in 1927. The report showcased the variety of the manufactures, spices and other products that were exhibited in the Mahasammilani and the Gandhabanik community's concerted efforts towards the promotion of business and establishing 'limited companies'.[86] It excerpted from caste journals about commercial initiatives, e.g., Akshaykumar Nandi's essay from *Kangsabanik Patrika* (Baisakh, 1333 BS) about bell-metal products from Khagra, Navadwip, Bahirgachi, Santipur, Ranaghat and Calcutta that were sent to London for the 'British Empire Exhibition'.[87] The journal interviewed representatives from leading mercantile families of the nineteenth century like the Rays (Kundu) of Bhagyakul (Dacca), Tili by caste. Jadunath Ray spoke on behalf of 'Raja Srinath Ray and Brothers Managing Agents' and the 'East Bengal River Steam Services'. This family had established a steamer service between Dacca and Calcutta and *Arthik Unnati* noted that the Rays' steamer service was the only one owned by Bengalis.[88]

Arthik Unnati was edited by Binoykumar Sarkar. The journal was introduced as the organ of the Bangiya Dhana Bigyan Parishad, an association for economic research and development, that Binoykumar Sarkar founded upon returning to India in 1925 from a nine-year-long world tour. Among its directors were well-known men from the Subarnabaniks and Tilis, like Narendranath and Satyacharan Law (Laha) and Brajendranath Seal. Binoykumar Sarkar has been aptly described by Satadru Sen, in

[85] 'Bangalay Bangalir Bank', *Arthik Unnati*, Jaishtha, 1927, 'Bank Byabsar Gorar Katha', Aghrahayan, 1927, pp., 624, 630, 'Bharatbasir Boro Boro Adhunik Bank', Baisakh, 1927, 'Mahishya Bank', Paush, 1927. 'Bank Byabsar Gorar Katha' stated that a nation without banking, and the operation of credit in business transactions, was a nation where people knew themselves as lacking in trustworthiness; it was a nation in spiritual decline. Trust, as a moral economic virtue, and credit (including the *hundi*, as time-tested financial practice) were subjects that were gaining substantial attention from manufacturing and trading castes since the first decade of the twentieth century, including predominantly agrarian castes like the Mahishyas. "So long as Bharata's sons were devoted to truth, trade and exchange flourished solely on credit." 'Byabsaye Biswas', *Mahishya Samaj*, 1318 BS, 1911, pp. 94-97. As formulators and performers of this national economic virtue of mutual trust, subaltern caste associations asserted a renewed initiative in banking.

[86] *Arthik Unnati*, Magh, 1334 BS, 1927, p. 745.

[87] *Ibid*., Ashadh, 1927, p. 267.

[88] *Ibid*., Baisakh, 1927, p. 30.

his recent study, as "a notoriously contrarian thinker".[89] Even in the milieu of National Education, filled with nationalists harping on India's other-worldly wisdom, Sarkar highlighted the distinction between 'text' and 'practice'. He spoke of "flesh-and-blood" intermixtures and "blood and iron" competitiveness in "real life histories" of the people of India. In a publication from the Jatiya Siksha Parishat, he wrote that though the phenomena of "adopting the other's dharma" and "miscegenation" were represented as states of "exception" or "emergency" ("*apaddharma*") in ancient Hindu texts, in "actuality", these constituted people's true religion ("*khanti dharma*") and their "normal and commonplace" ("*svabhabik o atpoure*") ways of life. The maintenance of "*svadharma*", Sarkar asserted in his daring style, was exceptional and proved miserable ("*byetirek ba satyasatyai apadbishesh*").[90] This was a far cry from the Hindu-upper-caste-inflected nationalist pedagogy of the usual Swadeshi discourse. This was a perspective unassimilable to the Satish Chandra Mukherjee paradigm, as it were, even though Binoykumar Sarkar was deeply influenced by Mukherjee in his youth.[91] Mukherjee, the founder of Dawn Society, which was the meeting ground of Swadeshi intellectuals, had his convictions about the worth of austerely shielding Brahmanical *sattvika* 'purity' and '*svadharma*' from possible contamination of 'impure' qualities residing in 'Others', defined in terms of the categories of 'character', as well as caste, race and gender.[92] For Sarkar, "the 'formulae' of Varnasrama or *chaturvarnya* or *svadharma* were merely theoretical frameworks conceived so as to classify the varied facts of the sexual and economic lives of men

[89] Sen, *Binoy Kumar Sarkar*, p. 1.

[90] Binoykumar Sarkar, 'Digbijoyir Chittabisleshan', 'Barnasamkara O Apaddharmer Bhitarkar Katha', 'Hadmansher Kosthiganana', *Hindu Rashtrer Garan*, Bangiya Jatiya Siksha Parishat Granthabali, Vol. 2, Calcutta, Year not mentioned, p. 24.24

[91] *Binoy Sarkarer Baithake, Vol. 1* (ed. Haridas Mukhopadhyay), Calcutta: Deys Publishing, 2011, pp. 201-202.

[92] Like Bipin Chandra Pal, Aswini Kumar Datta, Manoranjan Guha Thakurta, all leading Swadeshi nationalists, Satish Chandra Mukherjee was a disciple of Bijoykrishna Goswami. On how Mukherjee followed his Guru's advice in undertaking *akashavritti* (a vow of forsaking all possible livelihood options to depend solely on God's grace) and in maintaining strict rules of commensality with regard to caste and gender, see Gopinath Kaviraj, 'Satishchandra Mukhopadhyay', *Sadhusanga O Satprasanga, Vol. 3*, Calcutta: Prachi, 2006 (reprint; year of publication not mentioned) and Kuladananda Brahmachari, *Srisrisadgurusanga*, 5 volumes (diaries written from 1886-1892), Puri: Thakurbari, reprint:1996, Mukhopadhyay (ed.), *Binoy Sarkarer Baithake, Vol. 1*, Satish Chandra Mukherjee, *Selected Works of Acharya Satish Chandra Mukherjee: Compiled from his Letters on Spiritual Matters*, National Council of Education, Bengal, Calcutta, 1988. Also, Neha Chatterji, 'Submerged Aspects of Bhadralok Culture: Middle-class Engagements with Esoteric Spirituality and the Occult in High Colonial Bengal', M. Phil. Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 2012.

and women".[93] Suggestively, it was from Atharva Veda that Sarkar quoted at the top of *Arthik Unnati*. The Atharva Veda was then in the process of being discovered by scholars, from Haraprasad Sastri to Kshitimohan Sen, as the "ancient repository of folk religion and heterodoxy" ("*ganadharma*").[94] The practice of placing a Sanskrit quote on the cover page of journals was commonplace. *Arthik Unnati* had nothing to do with the Sanskritic tradition except this one quote. The quote was supplemented by a versified Bengali translation. It was: "I am the embodiment of prowess – the world knows me as the 'greatest'/ I have conquered the world – I have taken birth to unfurl the banner of victory everywhere".[95] In this frame, 'to live' (as an entity in the world) consisted in the will to triumph; triumph derived from 'worldly' verve; and the required verve derived from components of *ganadharma*.

Sarkar's oeuvre is replete with emphatic metaphors such as 'flesh-and-bones', 'sweat of the brow', 'vigor of the blood stream', etc. In every instance of the "efficient commanding of troops, extraction of revenue, consolidation of local governments and measurement of land" in ancient India, Sarkar located the workings in tandem of 'peoples' brain and brawn. Those were the fundamental ingredients, Sarkar proclaimed, of the 'science of state'.[96] It implied a critique of the *Purusha Sukta* tradition. Intellection and physical exertion did not belong to separate universes: when exerted, they produced the same 'sweat'. Sarkar seldom spoke of "*deher gham*", it was always "*mathar gham*" for him. The former could connote mindless drudgery but the latter stood for exertion caused by ingenious action. Sarkar felt that these collective exertions of energy and efficiency generated the 'live substance' of a nation. All the rest was verbiage. After returning to India in 1925, he upset Indian 'patriots' by observing that Indian unity was fictional.[97] This was but a running trend in Sarkar's thought who recognized the 'imagined' aspect of all community-

[93] Sarkar, *Hindu Rashtrer Garan*, p. 24.

[94] Saiyad Mujtaba Ali, 'Rabindranath O Tanr Sahakarmidvay', *Gurudev O Santiniketan*, Calcutta: Mitra and Ghosh Publishers, originally published in 1981, Reprint 2002, p. 79; Haraprasad Sastri, 'Jatibhed', p. 83.

[95] Top page of *Arthik Unnati*, every issue.

[96] Sarkar, *Hindu Rashtrer Garan*, 'Bhumika'.

[97] Sarkar, *Naya Banglar Gora Pattan*, Calcutta: Chuckervertty-Chatterjee, 1932, p. 206. Mentioned in Sen, *Binoy Kumar Sarkar*, p. 4.

sentiments: he could, thus, think of the Marwari as not alien, but just another community of Bengali *banias*.[98] Sarkar translated into Bengali the autobiography of Booker T. Washington, the black American leader who rose from slavery. *Negro Jatir Karmabir* (meaning, a Hero of Action from the Negro race) generated a lot of enthusiasm among lower castes in Bengal.[99]

Arthik Unnati, through Sarkar's hands, made an almost obsessional emphasis on the notion of 'solidity' and 'substance'. What was 'solid' and of 'substance'? It consisted, say, in the mathematics of the share market. Heavy engineering, technology, metallurgy, machines, iron and steel – "*jantrapati, kal, lohalakkar*" – were represented as the 'substance' of the nation. In other words, 'solidity' was what 'starry-eyed' Bengal was deficient in: "There are only a hundred and thirty-five engineering factories in Bengal and out of them, only thirty to thirty-five are under the ownership of Bengalis".[100] Browsing through *Arthik Unnati*, one would hardly suspect that Sarkar was a student of English and History at the university. From 1925, though, Sarkar was a lecturer in Economics at the University of Calcutta. *Arthik Unnati* spoke of mercantilism and industrialism, cottage industry and factory-industry, free market and 'government regulation' with a certain eclecticism.[101] The common thread was simply the emphasis on everything that could be spoken of as "hard-core", as belonging to the domain of 'economics'. The basic issue, Sarkar pressed as he spoke of 'social economics'[102], was to save and keep the 'house'. Without owning the 'house', men did not count as they could not participate in the affairs of the world. *Arthik Unnati* and 'Sarkarism' of the 1930s and '40s[103] thus cleared up a commanding space waiting to be conquered by a new set of people. Not armchair intellectuals stuck

[98] 'Karmabirer Jat Bangali' (Interview of Binoykumar Sarkar by Manmathanath Sarkar) compiled in Sri Pramathanath Pal, *Panchas Batsar*, Calcutta, 1351 BS, 1944.

[99] Binoykumar Sarkar, *Negro Jatir Karmabir*, Calcutta: Grihastha Publishing House, 1915. That it generated great enthusiasm among lower castes is evident, for instance, in the writings of Manindranath Mandal, the Paundra leader, *Paundrakshatriya Samachar*, Aghrahayan 1334 BS, 1927.

[100] 'Engineering Karkhana', *Arthik Unnati*, Baisakh, 1334 BS, 1927, p. 1.

[101] *Ibid.*, p. 76.

[102] *Arthik Unnati*, Chaitra, 1334 BS, 1928, p. 881.

[103] Subodhkrishna Ghosal, *Sarkarism: The Ideas and Ideals of Benoy Sarkar on Man and his Conquests*, Calcutta: Chuckervertty-Chatterjee, 1939.

to ‘culture’, but the rough-and-tough *mistri*, creatively engaged in the production of modern forms of living, exemplified the ‘Young India’ of Sarkarism.

‘Who are the real modernizers?’ The Critique from ‘Intermediate and Suppressed Castes’

Challenges to caste dominance can be located in unexpected sites, far away from the world of caste movements as such. Yet it is from some of these that we must unearth the ‘self-disclosure’ of the ‘Suppressed Caste’ political subject as a speaking and acting agent. Consider, for instance, the following booklet: *Panchas Batsar*, compiled by Pramathanath Pal and published in 1944.

Panchas Batsar was priced at two rupees and eight *annas*. It marked the celebration of the fiftieth birthday of Alamohan Das, the rising industrialist of Howrah who was given the title ‘*Karmabir*’ (meaning, ‘a hero of action’) by Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy. Alamohan Das, who has left an illuminating autobiography[104], had suddenly risen to glory for having mastered the ‘machine industry’ and ‘iron and steel’ – ‘*jantra shilpa*’, ‘*kalkabja*’, ‘*lohalakkar*’ – from very obscure beginnings. He had come to the city of Calcutta empty-handed as a boy from his native village in the district of Howrah. His autobiography tells us that he was born to a peasant-trading family with a decent standard of living. While his parents wanted him to become educated and later on take to ‘*chakri*’ (a white-collar job), Alamohan tells us that he was inclined towards ‘*karbar*’ or business from a very early age.[105] By the late 1930s, his achievement was hailed as extraordinary for a Bengali. He converted the malaria-ridden and forested Shanpur, about a thousand *bighas* of land in the outskirts of Howrah, into ‘Dasnagar’, an industrial township. Around 1944, when his fiftieth birthday was being celebrated by a formidable Bengali public – the event that occasioned the publication of the booklet under discussion – Das was at the helm of several organisations with branches all over Bengal and also some other Indian provinces: a flourishing jute mill, a cotton mill, a drug company, Das Bank Limited, the Howrah Insurance Company, Das Brothers (a managing agency) and the

[104] Alamohan Das, *Amar Jiban*, Dasnagar, Howrah, 1356 BS, 1949.

[105] *Ibid*., p. 12.

machinery company which was Das' primary initiative. Bengalis, so far, did own a few mills and factories. But Binoykumar Sarkar, Prafulla Chandra Roy and their compatriots lamented that these mills and factories needed to import machinery worth more than ten lakhs from foreign companies.[106] Das' enterprise was extraordinary because the machinery for Das' mills was produced within factories run by him. He began with the Bengal Weighing Scales and later, through reverses of fortune, emerged the Indian Machinery Company which incorporated the earlier engineering projects. Prafulla Chandra Roy hailed Dasnagar as 'the place of pilgrimage for the dying Bengali'.[107] Alamohan Das was a Mahishya by caste but his caste identity features nowhere either in his autobiography or in this booklet that Pramathanath Pal brought out on his fiftieth birthday. However, Alamohan Das was one of the signatories of the Memorial that was sent by the Association of the Intermediate and Suppressed Castes to the government at New Delhi in 1942, pleading for the abolition of the caste system. The Memorandum of Association attached to the Memorial included that the Suppressed Caste Association wanted to

> …help in the formation of a well united and homogeneous Bengali nation of the natural children of the soil of Bengal and those that have domiciled in Bengal, having Bengali language as their mother tongue, as distinct from non-Bengalees.[108]

Panchas Batsar resembled the same spirit, viz., the urgency to save Bengal from the onslaught of Others and to build a united Bengali community free from social distinctions such as caste. In the preface, Pal described the contributions of Alamohan as a very important chapter in Bengal's movement towards self-reliant industrial modernization. Pal, expectedly, brought a reference to the Marwari community. The 'Marwari businessman' represented, as usual, the adversary as well as the expert. Alamohan stood for the Bengali champion, quick to learn the secret of trade from the Marwari.

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[106] Sri Nanilal Ray, 'Alamohaner Bangaliyana O Shilpa Banijya Prasarer Dhara', *Panchas Batsar*, p. 176.

[107] Das, *Amar Jiban*, p. 31.

[108] 'Memorandum of Association' (point 'b') in Memorial ISCA.

> We speak self-complacently about the Marwari who comes to the city with just a mattress and a metal pot. But we fail to appreciate the Marwari's single-minded devotion to business or his fraternal bonding with his community – something that acts as a great support in business enterprise. People from all over the world are looting Bengal's resources and the Bengalis are being deprived of food simply on account of being all divided and lacking in mutual love.[109]

Pal anticipated two more threads that run through the volume. One was of *realism* versus *romance*: that the Bengali earned a name for being romantic, contemplative and unfit for practical action until somebody like Alamohan Das emerged to disprove it. The other was a discrediting of 'university education' and a concomitant glorification of practical wisdom in a way as if the two were mutually exclusive. "Alamohan has proven that university education is hardly the last word for education".[110]

Pramathanath Pal was the editor of a moderately well-known monthly called *Prabhat*. He later authored a biography of Deshapran Birendranath Sashmal, the nationalist leader from Medinipur, and Binoykumar Sarkar.[111] Pal, like Alamohan Das, did not mention his caste. But, at places, he suggested a 'suppressed-caste' identity as his own. He wrote in the preface to Sarkar's biography that when as a boy in his native Medinipur, he read Sarkar's *Negro Jatir Karmabir*, the book instilled a lot of hope and confidence in him. Pal also mentioned a conversation that he had had with Baneshwar Das. Das was a professor of chemical engineering at Jadavpur College of Engineering and Technology, the Swadeshi-born institution, in the creation of which Sarkar had an important role. Das was a student-cum-friend of Sarkar. The conversation was about how Pal was encouraged by Das to write Sarkar's biography.

[109] 'Nibedan', *Panchas Batsar*.

[110] *Ibid.*

[111] Pramathanath Pal, *Mahamanishi Binoykumar Sarkar*, Calcutta, 1971.

There was perhaps an unspoken dimension of caste in the conversation – "You have written Sashmal's biography; you deserve to write about Binoybabu", Das said.[112]

Panchas Batsar included an interview of Binoykumar Sarkar by Manmathanath Sarkar. It was titled '*Karmabirer Jat Bangali*' because Sarkar had asserted that Bengalis had always been men of heroic action. The other pieces in the volume were mostly words of admiration for Alamohan, in the form of short essays or poems from diverse authors such as the above-mentioned Baneshwar Das, the poet Kalidas Ray, Dr. Meghnad Saha, the poet Kumudranjan Mallik, Kshitishchandra Biswas, Raghunath Ghosh, Harihar Seth, Sasadhar Biswas, Sudhakanta De, Purnachandra Biswas, Nanilal Ray and Gyananjan Niyogi. There was also Alamohan Das's own speech on the occasion. The authors need some introduction. Upper caste people, as evident from the surnames above, remained conspicuous by their near absence. Kalidas Ray, however, was a Baidya by caste. He was a school teacher and a well-known poet. Ray later became particularly well-known for his poem *Chand Sadagar*.[113] Future generations of school-students in Bengal would have this poem as compulsory reading at the secondary level. Adapted from a medieval folk legend, Ray's *Chand Sadagar* extolled the virtues of human agency or '*purushakar*' – the strength of character of the sea-faring businessman Chand – against fatalism. Ray's poem '*Karmayogi Alamohan*' contributed to *Panchas Batsar* was similarly a paean to Alamohan's confidence in human agency.

> You've regularly contested destiny (*niyati*) and brought victory to human agency (*purushakar*)/
> You've brought confidence to the hearts of creatures who see themselves as bound to fate/
> You've stirred in the lethargic the impetus for heroic enterprise/
> Your life opens up a new chapter in national life.[114]

[112] 'Bhumika', *ibid.*

[113] Kalidas Ray, 'Chand Sadagar', compiled in *Bangla Sahayak Path*, Calcutta: Paschim Banga Madhya Siksha Parshad, 1988, pp. 177-178; Ray, 'Chand Sadagar' in *Aharan* (ed. Taracharan Basu), Calcutta: Mitra and Ghosh Publishers, 1950.

[114] Pal, *Panchas Batsar*, p. 46.

Sudhakanta De, another contributor to *Panchas Batsar*, was the Secretary of the Bangiya Dhan Bigyan Parishad, founded by Binoykumar Sarkar. The Parishad had strong links with Satyacharan Laha and Narendranath Laha, Subarnabanik by caste, and most of the meetings took place at Narendranath Laha's house in Amherst Street in Kolkata. It stated that its objective was to research on the 'wealth of Bengal' by studying the economic life of all classes of people: Bengal's peasants, artisans, fishermen, shoemakers, boatmen, weavers, shopkeepers, market-men, wholesalers, *jotdars*, landholders, businessmen, labourers, sailors, 'the modern bankers and industrialists' and even clerks.[115] De wrote about the 'question of morality in economic matters'. He noted that the *arthasastra* had become the bible of the times and education and intellect were no more the ultimate standards of excellence. Still, for the sake of eternal time, moral values must not be dispensed with, even in a world of competition. The science of wealth was not divorced from ethical values and human goodness, De suggested, and referred to Keynes as someone who was making useful propositions on this account.[116]

Sri Harihar Seth, the wealthy merchant, was leader of the Tilijati Hitaishi Sabha. This was an association of Tilis from mufassil towns who differed with the Sanskritizing ritualistic bent of the Tilijati Sammilani in Calcutta.[117] Harihar Seth's piece, '*Karmabir Alamohan*', remarked that Bengalis basked in the glory of men of genius like Bankim, Rammohan, Vivekananda, Vidyasagar, Surendranath, Hemchandra, Jagadishchandra, Cornell Sureshchandra, Chittaranjan and Rabindranath. They undeniably contributed to the community's proverbial 'culture' and national feeling. Yet all that belonged merely to the plumage, Seth believed, while the bird was dying in the real world of competition. Alamohan was thus God's blessing at a time when the Bengali was faced with a life-and-death question. "Will not God bless this dying people with some more Alamohans?"[118] Gyananjan Niyogi wrote an essay titled '*Bangali*'. He was a well-known Gandhabanik.[119] Niyogi's

[115] *Bangiya Dhana Vijnan Parishader Saltamami*, 1931.

[116] Sudhakanta De, 'Arthik Byapare Naitik Prashna', *Panchas Batsar*, p. 118.

[117] The *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika* reflected the difference. See Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, p. 127.

[118] Harihar Seth, 'Karmabir Alamohan', *Panchas Batsar*, p. 93.

[119] Gyananjan Niyogi, 'Bangali', *Panchas Batsar*, p. 182.

account drew a continuum from Akrur Datta and Pritiram Marh of the eighteenth century to Alamohan. Datta and Marh came from 'inferior' castes. Niyogi highlighted that the clever and industrious Datta (as also Marh) was not a comprador; he earned the respect of Europeans but competed with them on a par. "In an era of darkness and despair in Bengal and India, he (Datta) was a lone youth seeking self-respect". Datta did not hesitate, Niyogi tells us, to protest the tyrannies carried out by European merchants. "These families were the pioneers of modern commerce in Bengal".[120]

Raghunath Ghosh's poem '*Karmabir Alamohaner Prati Sraddhanjali*' similarly invoked the opposition between the poetic sensibility, supposedly ubiquitous in Bengal, and the prosaic struggle-for-life represented by Alamohan: 'This is not merely *kavya*, behold, this is *jivan-sangram*'.[121] Adjectives like '*nirasa*' (meaning 'prosaic'), '*kashtha*' (meaning 'wooden'), '*kora-mitha-khanti manush*' (connoting 'a real/living man'), '*shakta*' (meaning, 'rough and tough') were used in Kumudranjan Mallik's poem 'Alamohan Das' as in most other pieces.[122] The repeated deployment of these attributes conjured up the contrast between the intelligentsia who were 'all mind', and thus morbid, empty and bloodless, and real 'living men'. The English writer D. H. Lawrence had drawn up a similar contrast in his 1928 novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* – one of the motifs of which was to highlight the unfair dominance of intellectuals over workers.

Panchas Batsar did not just tangentially refer to the body metaphor by counterposing physical activity against the mental. The reference to the *Purusha Sukta* and the critique of caste was plain. It reproached the "lazy, slavish, parasitic, English-reading Bengali", whose "only capital (was) caste-arrogance".[123] Meghnad Saha observed that:

> the decadence of the Indic civilization began ever since Manu Maharaj, in the name of Brahma, separated 'brawn' from the 'brain', and raised

[120] *Ibid.*, pp. 183-184.

[121] *Ibid.*, p. 92.

[122] Kumudranjan Mallik, 'Alamohan Das', *Panchas Batsar*, p. 88.

[123] Kalidas Ray, 'Karmayogi Alamohan', *Panchas Batsar*, p. 45.

> superstitious men, boastful of their petty learning, to the highest echelons of society while pushing those who worked the sinews to the lowest.[124]

Karmabir Alamohan, observed Dr. Saha, was regenerating Bengal by bringing together the brain and the brawn – something "vital for the vast machine-civilisation of the present-day world".[125]

Vishwakarma, the god of crafts and industries, was privileged in these pages over *Saraswati*, the goddess of speech and learning in the same way as 'hands' were privileged over 'mouth', 'brawn' over 'brain' and 'deeds' ("*kaj*") over 'words' ("*katha*"). Alamohan was the leader whom the Bengalis needed today, "somebody deprived of the badges of honour associated with *Bani*" (meaning both 'speech' and *Saraswati*). "Bengal had had enough of grandiloquent leaders blessed by *Bagdevi*"; while "words might do good politics, they would never bring freedom".[126]

That Alamohan came from 'obscure' peoples, the *hoi polloi*, that he began as a *ferriwala*, was emphasized. Sasadhar Biswas wrote:

Sedin chinini toma, taba pane chahi nai phire/ Sahasra loker majhe sranta pade chole gecho dhire

We did not recognize you then/ You had wandered unseen among the thousands, exhausted by the day.

And then:

Susabhya samaje aj akasmat chinayeche toma![127]

Civilized elites have suddenly turned to you!

It was a Third Estate-like glory of the self-made entrepreneur rising from obscurity to worth. Alamohan was represented as the harbinger of a new age –

[124] Meghnad Saha, 'Karmabir Alamohan Das', *Panchas Batsar*, p. 49.

[125] *Ibid.* Meghnad Saha was a world-famous physicist already since the 1920s.

[126] *Ibid*., p. 47. *Bagdevi* is another name for Saraswati.

[127] Sasadhar Biswas, 'Karmabir Alamohan', *Panchas Batsar*, p. 106.

"*nabajugasrashta*".[128] This was revolutionary because such a tribute was paid so far only to the suave 'Renaissance' intellectuals.[129] Alamohan was the 'real modernizer', in this discourse, because he was initiating industrialization. Here was a certainty about capitalist industrial modernization as the universal historical trajectory and Alamohan was thus playing "a timely music" (as Harihar Seth and others described it) – "the music of the machine".[130] As Alamohan, himself, was later to write in his autobiography, "the Charka movement was as much child's play as the rudimentary technical education disseminated by the British government in Bengal around 1918-19 in the name of helping indigenous enterprise in industry".[131] "Cottage industry" was dubbed as child's-play industry which the maudlin Bengali readily took up following Gandhi. 'Real' modernization, through the taming of the machine, was expected to ultimately integrate the brain and the limbs and bring an end to the Brahmanical discourse of differentiation. Thus, Alamohan was hailed as one of the torch-bearers in the direction of building a caste-less '*mahajati*' and a "*devajati*" (great community, heavenly community), "united by the ties of equality and fraternity".[132]

It is interesting to observe how Alamohan's self-identity evolves into a pan-Bengali identity while retaining the radical content of the experience of caste-subordination. He came to the city from the village with the private ambition of making money through brisk business, "*karbar*", as his autobiography tells us. That would not have been very different from similar ambitions that his father, uncles and so many boys of his background cherished. With time, this private livelihood ambition formulated itself into a nationalistic ambition: to use Arendt's categories, the 'labour' and 'work' that was bound to his private necessity and utility now found a more

[128] Raghunath Ghosh, 'Karmabir Alamohaner Prati Sraddhanjali', p. 92.

[129] Rabindranath Tagore used the expression "*nutan bhavaprabaha*" ("a new stream of consciousness"), while writing about Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and his times. 'Bankimchandra' (1896), *Rabindra Rachanabali, Vol. 10*, Government of West Bengal, Centenary Edition, p. 215. Also, see Tagore, 'Yugantar' (1895), *ibid.*, p. 266; Shibnath Shastri, 'Ramtanu Lahiri O Tatkalin Banga Samaj', *Sibnath Rachana Samgraha, Vol. II*, (ed. Baridbaran Ghosh), Calcutta, 1976, Preface and pp. 290-402; Aurobindo Ghosh, *The Renaissance in India*, (reprinted from *Arya*), Pondicherry, 1973.

[130] *Ibid.*, p. 94.

[131] Das, *Amar Jiban*, pp. 52-53.

[132] Raghunath Ghosh, 'Karmabir Alamohaner Prati Sraddhanjali', *Panchas Batsar*, p. 91.

glorious public purpose and thus became 'action'. The title '*Karmabir*' surely raised him "from privacy to princedom, that is, from circumstances common to all men to the shining glory of great deeds".[133]

We have shown in Chapter One that in early twentieth century Bengal, trading castes were branded (by upper castes and even by themselves) as avaricious and selfish, as caring only for their own purse-strings and unwilling to sacrifice anything for the nation. By the 1930s, they could talk of the public virtue of their private pursuits of wealth. Alamohan represented this ritually inferior class of "*shilpi-byabsayi-arthapati*' (craftsmen, traders and moneyed people) who were telling the upper-caste patriot-politicians, as it were, that "the mastery of the necessities of life in the (national) household" was the chief condition for a sovereign political life.[134] Their highly-charged Bengali nationalism was the political articulation of the 'Suppressed-Caste' self. It became patent whenever Alamohan and his compatriots raised an impassioned call for a "progressive" Bengali society, "free of the perverse and deep-rooted divisions of *jat, kula* (lineage) and Varna".[135]

The discursive denigration of school and university education went further. Purnachandra Biswas, who was ironically himself a professor, advised the benevolent rich not to establish modern schools or dispensaries, but to help the small peasant by donating cows and digging tanks in villages. Biswas was talking about the abject condition of the literate middle-classes: the teacher in the village *pathsala*, teachers in middle and high English schools, the book-keeper in the village-shop, the post-master in the village post-office, the revenue-collector of the local zamindar and others. Many of them had a bit of cultivable land, Biswas noted, which was worked by share-croppers, yielded a little income and met part of the requirements of food. But other necessities had to be met from the salaries of "*chakuri*". Now that their incomes did not increase a bit whereas the cost of essentials increased four-fold, they were having to sell off family jewelry or whatever asset they possessed just to meet the necessities

[133] Hannah Arendt, 'The Public and the Private Realm', *The Human Condition*, p. 35.

[134] *Ibid*., p. 37. See Nanilal Ray, 'Alamohaner Bangaliyana', p. 180.

[135] *Ibid*., p. 181. Alamohan has been quoted by Nanilal Ray from 'Sri Mahendranath Sinha Phukan ed. *Alamohan Daser Bani*'.

of the household. Biswas remarked that they did not even have the money to call the doctor.[136]

In contrast, stated Biswas, the labourer's wages had increased four times, six times and even eight times in some places, and the price of agricultural produce had also increased three, four or five times. "There were many who had sympathy for the wage-worker and the peasant", argued Biswas, but "who cared for the literate middle classes?" He further advised the middle classes not to pay heed to the pretensions of the government, the tall-talk of the Congress or to the "the hammer-and-sickle's socialism". They must rely on their own strength – "*atmasakti*".[137] Benoy Ghose's study of "middle class" Central Government employees in Calcutta in 1946 indeed revealed that seventy six percent of the families were in debt, the highest rate for any major city in India. According to this study, Calcutta Central government employees also had the highest deficit in their family budgets (as opposed to employees living in Bombay, Delhi and Madras), that is, over Rs. 46 per month.[138] Purnachandra Biswas wrote about how white-collar professionals like teachers and clerks and book-keepers squandered and depleted the physical strength that they inherited. (The mention of 'inherited physical strength' indicates that Biswas was referring to first-generation literates from middle peasant-castes, whose fathers tilled the land.[139]) This trope of the 'university' being the alter at which health, time, money, mental and physical strength were all being sacrificed was an old one. Upper caste Bengali essayists since the late nineteenth century invoked it in a mode of self-criticism.[140] But it was the middle castes who characterized university education as positively damaging to the larger interest of caste or community. As late as 1966, the *Gandhabanik Masik Patra* lamented that education merely bred indifference to the caste profession ("*jatibritti*"); that it did not uplift the caste but merely brought an identity-crisis. It regretted that the educated unemployed youth of the community had to move out to different states hunting for jobs. All adult, able members of the caste should have rather taken to

[136] Purnachandra Biswas, 'Banglar Krishi O Madhyabitta Sampraday', *Panchas Batsar*, pp. 122-126.

[137] *Ibid*., p. 125.

[138] Benoy Ghose, 'Crisis in the Bengali Gentility in Calcutta', *Economic Weekly*, July 6, 1957, p. 823.

[139] Biswas, 'Banglar Krishi O Madhyabitta Sampraday', p. 124.

[140] 'Bangali Jatir Bartaman O Bhabishyat' (*Dasi*, 1897).

jatibritti. Then the community could have spread out all over India in fraternally connected giant business enterprises. That was "how the Rajasthani, Punjabi, Madrasi and Gurjati *baniyas* were capturing Indian markets in every product".[141] In his autobiography, Alamohan had made a caustic remark about the "so-called educated sons of successful businessmen" in Bengal. "They reflect their high educational qualifications by closing down the flourishing trades; then they use the rest of the capital to buy zamindaries or shares of foreign companies or a few houses in Calcutta for letting out" – all the associated pretensions of respectability and superiority.[142]

But, of course, Alamohan (who never received formal education) took pride in being attracted to books from an early age. He wrote in his autobiography that as a *feriwala* boy employed by a shop-owner, he took membership in a local library, where he read Bankimchandra's *Anandamath*. He also read "select books on history, geography, commerce and the sciences" from this library.[143] He said that he had shown "brilliant intellectual abilities" at his village *pathsala*.[144] Clearly, these people desired to participate in the terrain of 'learning'. It was also a sociological reality that education was an avenue of upward mobility and the Mahishyas had 6623 persons of their caste in law, medicine and teaching in 1931, while the traditional *banik* castes did better on these accounts.[145] The Memorial sent by the Intermediate and Suppressed Castes to New Delhi in 1942 contained a demand for 'special facilities' in education. Their criticism of 'university education' only revealed the desire for a 'superior' counter subjectivity.

The discursive deprecation of school-and-university education may be comprehended in the context of historical trends and narratives like the successful Mahishya take-over of the small and medium scale engineering industry in Howrah displacing Brahmans and Kayasthas in the field. In Howrah, as in most other places, the Brahmans were traditionally the dominant economic and political group. In 1911,

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[141] Rasiklal Datta, 'Jay Ma Gandheshwari', *Gandhabanik Masik Patra*, Calcutta, Magh, 1372 BS, 1966, p. 75.

[142] Das, *Amar Jiban*, p. 18.

[143] *Ibid*., pp. 19-22.

[144] *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

[145] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, pp. 109-110.

the Kayasthas and the Brahmans each owned twenty percent of all Indian-owned mills, mines and factories in Bengal while the Mahishyas owned only a little above three percent. The Brahmans owned fifty percent of the thirty-four Indian-owned iron foundries and engineering works in 1911, while the Mahishyas owned thirty-one percent of them. By 1967, as Raymond Lee Owens and Ashis Nandy have shown, seventy one percent of the engineering factories in some regions of Howrah were owned by Mahishyas, "the new Vaishyas" as the authors called them. Their study brought out that more than fifty percent "of the premises which had existed in 1915 had had a change in the caste of the owner, and the largest group of these changes had been from Brahman or Kayastha to Mahishya ownership".[146] The self-narrative of the successful Mahishya engineering-workshop-owners regarding the trajectory of this dramatic take-over converges with the thesis put forward by Owens and Nandy in this respect. It celebrates a "worker path to capital".[147]

According to it, upper-caste factory-owners lost ground because of their distaste for the shop-floor work of the *mistri*. It was because of their unwillingness to "dirty" the hands with manual work. In contrast, most Mahishya entrepreneurs started as workmen, and to begin with, as enthusiastic, young apprentices, eager to learn to run the machine. 'Boys', from subordinate castes like the Mahishyas in the rural hinterland of Howrah, aged twelve to sixteen or even less, entered the workshops as apprentices. With time, they graduated into half-*karigars* (semi-skilled technician-worker) and later into *mistris*, who would be well-versed in the art of the trade as well as the science of the machine. Skilled workers, capable of building their own machines, took advantage of the tremendous demand during World War I to set up their own workshops or *karkhanas*, serving initially as their own *mistri* and sole employee. The pool of kinship-and-caste ties was also great and during the tough period of getting started, the 'boys', 'half-*karigars*' and other *mistris*, often village-

[146] Raymond Lee Owens and Ashis Nandy, *The New Vaishyas*, Bombay: Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1977, pp. 68-69 and Chapter 4: 'The Mahishya Take-Over: Some Possible Explanations', pp. 79-109.

[147] *Ibid*. Sarad Chari used the expression to understand tales of 'toil' and 'miracles' from 'peasant-workers' who subsequently became 'fraternal capitalists' in the bustling garment industrial hub of Tiruppur, Coimbatore. The majority of owners, Chari found in the late 1990s, were men from modest caste-class origins, coming from villages 50 km of Tiruppur. "After several months of interviews, I found people would stop in their narratives predictably to say, "there is only one reason for Tiruppur's growth: toil". Sarad Chari, *Fraternal Capital: Peasant-Workers, Self-Made Men and Globalization in Provincial India*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004.

kins, showed tremendous loyalty to the fledgling entrepreneur.[148] Alamohan Das' autobiography tells us how he was supported in his initial enterprises by *mistris* and fund-procurers like Rajendranath Mandal, Rajanikanta Pal, Sekharchandra Hajra and Saratchandra Manna[149] – tied to him, one assumes, through bonds of kin and caste. *Mistri*-entrepreneurs knew how to increase the longevity of old machines and also to develop new machines – a valuable skill which gave them a competitive edge over non-*mistri*, upper-caste entrepreneurs who would have to buy new costly machines and/or employ well-paid skilled workers to devise and run them. Owens had come across a Mahishya entrepreneur, who otherwise seemed very much like a '*babu*' in white spotless *dhoti*, but who would also, when hit by recession, work the lathe, wearing the greasy shirt and *lungi* of the workman: "I can still do it (work the lathe) when I have to", Owens quoted him as saying.[150] Upper castes clearly lacked fraternal supports in the field of engineering enterprise and their boys would much rather go to school than look forward to becoming apprentices in a *karkhana*. And "the turn toward entrepreneurship on the part of a great many Brahmans and Kayasthas (was) a move of desperation in the face of unattractive prospects in white-collar occupations".[151] Even when they took to business, they would prefer to begin as 'order-suppliers', which was still somewhat 'white-collar'[152], and remain completely ignorant about the actual operation of factories.

What is relevant for us is the abiding cultural cleavage, verging on opposition, that led the *mistri* to detest the 'educated/respectable' classes even when they themselves possessed the means of education, and similarly, led the educated-upper-castes to abhor these factory-men, even when they themselves were engaged in a profitable engineering enterprise. One of the "most innovative Brahman entrepreneurs" in the engineering industry of Howrah, whose father was a well-placed government officer

[148] Owens and Nandy, 'The Mahishya Take-Over'.

[149] Das, *Amar Jiban*, pp. 53-80.

[150] Raymond Owens, 'Peasant Entrepreneurs in an Industrial City', in M. S. A. Rao, C. Bhat, L. N. Kadekar (eds), *A Reader in Urban Sociology*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1991, p. 244; Also cited in Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay and Ranabir Samaddar, 'Caste and the Frontiers of Post-Colonial Capital Accumulation' in Iman Kumar Mitra, Ranabir Samaddar, and Samita Sen (eds.) *Accumulation in Post-Colonial Capital*, Calcutta: Springer, 2017, p. 198.

[151]Owens and Nandy, *The New Vaishyas*, p. 106.

[152] *Ibid.*

and who himself was a graduate of Calcutta's prestigious Presidency College, was an unhappy man in the 1960s because he found little common ground with other entrepreneurs or with his workers. He was depressed because he found so little time for reading and felt ashamed to meet his intellectual college-friends.[153] Concomitantly, the improving shop-owning *mistri*, of course, sent his son to prestigious, or at least decent schools.[154] But he would idealize 'mistrification' (to use Binoykumar Sarkar's term[155]) and disparage those who inhabited a life-world removed from manual work.

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To conclude, let us reflect on the points that have emerged from the preceding discussion. This chapter showcases a mode of radical caste contestation, which did not find uniform expression through caste movements, nor through organized politics. We have tried to hint at the collective social thinking that generated among the self-styled 'Intermediate and Suppressed Castes' a distinct and oppositional identity vis-à-vis the *sikshita bhadrasreni*, an estate described by the English civil servants in 1915 as "a despotism of caste tempered by matriculation".[156] The instances narrated in the chapter militate against the commonplace historiographical assumption that so-called 'middle castes' organized their ambitions merely through the usual channels of vertical social mobility, Sanskritization and Westernization. As we have shown, there

[153] *Ibid.*, p. 108.

[154] In fact, the Mahishyas gradually narrowed the educational gap between themselves and upper castes as the twentieth century progressed. In the 60s and 70s, Owens and Nandy tells us, the gap was nearly closed in terms of literacy through the fourth grade, "although upper castes still retained an impressive lead in education through the tenth grade or higher." There was even a positive correlation between education and entrepreneurship within Mahishyas. It also bears mention that it was not that white-collar jobs were unattractive to Mahishyas in sociological terms. Aspirations to upward mobility obviously drew them to it, and between 1911 and 1931, while Brahmans and Kayasthas were the predominant white-collar groups in the Howrah region, the number of Mahishyas in white-collar jobs more than doubled. *The New Vaishyas*, pp. 88-95. This chapter showcases that there was something more to their self-defining (political) postures than what emerged from these regular and predictable exercises of upward mobility.

[155] 'Mistrification' was Binoy Kumar Sarkar's term for a coming together of the 'respectable' executive and the manual labourer in the *karkhana* where both got attuned to each other's work. Sarkar saw it as the basis of democracy. Sen, *Benoy Kumar Sarkar*, p. 6.

[156] It was a description of the *bhadralok* of Bengal by English civil servants. Bengal District Administration Committee, 1913-1914, Report, Calcutta, 1915, p. 176. J. H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal*, California: University of California Press, 1968, p. 15.

were quite a few who denounced these very symbols of high status. They were, on principle, against seeking accommodation at higher levels within the hierarchy of caste. A veritable critique of both Sanskritization and Westernization emerged from their ranks, a critique that sat awkwardly and conflictingly with the ritualistic Sanskritizing tendencies of many of their individual caste movements. This critique of upper-caste-exclusiveness did not necessarily stay away from nationalism. Instead, it deprecated 'cultural' and 'religious' nationalisms as preserves of upper-caste Hindus and alternatively harped on economic nationalism (in particular, Bengali sub-nationalism) as the grave site of failure of the upper-caste, eloquent patriot. This un-institutionalized movement of, what we may call, a non-ritualistic modern Vaishya political subjectivity, remained by and large uninterested in Census classifications and mostly beyond the controversies regarding protective discrimination. Their caste-associations, with Sanskritizing bents, were generally anxious not to have themselves classified as Depressed Classes and many of these were relieved when the 1931 list of Scheduled Castes excluded them. By the 1940s, the attitude to reservations became more ambivalent, as is reflected in the demand for "special advantages", stated among other things in the Memorial of the 'Intermediate and Suppressed Castes (Hindu) Association' addressed to Sir Stafford Cripps. Still, organized demands of this sort were few and far between to come from these groups in Bengal. But, their political attitude of coldness to both the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha found expression through this Memorial of 1942. It stated that only "high caste Hindus" became the office-bearers of the Hindu Mahasabha, whose leaders "adhere even now to the relics of antiquity symbolizing their superiority". It criticized the Mahasabha for having failed to pass even a resolution on paper for the removal of the "bondage of caste system".[157] And it was also a "travesty of truth" to assume that the Congress represented the "millions", asserted the Memorial, for it was "manned by upper classes" and, therefore, failed to "adopt a truly democratic principle by wiping away the invidious distinction of castes".[158]

[157] Memorial ISCA.

[158] *Ibid.*

The discourse of 'economic *energism*' – to use Binoykumar Sarkar's expression[159] – invariably had a strong secular, rationalist content. Whoever spoke of the virtues of entrepreneurship or the need to empower Bengal economically asserted a liberal confidence in the possibility of man's mastery of the circumstances of life. An oft-repeated phrase in this context was that once Bengal was economically energized and self-reliant, "*karmaphal* (fate determined by *karma* in a past birth) would vanish and so would idle tears".[160] The ideal of economic progress in a competitive modern world constitutively incorporated a certain universalism, a connectedness with universal history, science and technology, and a rejection of 'Indian' passivity and fatalism. Wealth was important, in this discourse, because of world historical forces which were sure to break every barrier in an age of capital. The entrepreneurial castes put forward the logic of determinism and necessity to talk about their key roles with the rise of the secular in the modern age. "Even Lenin, towards the end of his life, recognized the importance of the wealthy in society", wrote an essayist in the *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika* of 1925-26![161]

While the reference to myth, history and scripture was very common in early twentieth century caste-literature across the spectrum, contrarian voices could be heard from essayists from the trading and manufacturing castes, who sought to persuade their respective caste publics not to bother about cultural authenticity. Pragmatism and efficiency were of sole importance in a competitive world. Whatever was useful must be drawn in from wherever it was found. Thus, a 1921 issue of *Tili Bandhab* argued that it made little sense to debate about the original, historical or scripture-sanctioned profession of the Tilis: "It was rational to bear in mind that the community had prospered half a century ago through retail and wholesale shop-keeping and that it must improve on those lines today".[162] It proposed that for such improvement, the traditional business acumen of the community must be supplanted with Western knowledge and practices on the subject. The Orientalist narrative of

[159] Benoy Kumar Sarkar, *The Might of Man in the Social Philosophy of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda*, Madras: Sri Ramkrishna Math, 1936, p. 12.

[160] Prabodh Chandra Basu, 'Bangalir Arthik Svadhinata Labher Upay' *Arthik Unnati*, Baisakh, 1333 BS, 1927, p. 51.

[161] *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika*, 1332-33 BS, 1925-26, p. 164.

[162] 'Jiban Maraner Katha', *Tili-Bandhab*, Jaishtha, 1328 BS, 1921, pp. 33-37.

difference (between a spiritually-superior-and-materially-impoverished Indian past and a Western modernity of commercial materialism) hardly appealed to this milieu. That the Brahmans imposed a Brahmanical culture of spirituality upon the non-Brahmans after subjugating them through brute force in a secular contest for supremacy became part of common-sense.[163] As essay, titled '*Jivan Sangram*', in the *Vaishya Tili Hitaishi* of 1923 made the following provocative observations. One, that human history, like biological history, was all about 'struggle for existence', contests for supremacy, 'evolution' and 'survival of the fittest'. Two, that India had been no exception to this universal rule. Three, that, like the Germans under the leadership of Kaiser Wilhelm II before World War I, the Brahmans in ancient times had aggressively prepared for a great war for supremacy under the leadership of Parashuram. While the Germans lost the war, the Brahmans had emerged successful in their blood-and-iron contest. The imposition of Brahmanical culture followed along the lines of forcible erasure of non-Brahman ("*Brahmanetara*") cultures. "Had the Germans emerged victorious in the World War", remarked the writer, "they would have similarly imposed Germanism (*Germanya dharma*) over Europe, erasing all other European cultures and civilisations ("*Germanetara jatisamuher sabhyata*")"![164] Through perspectives such as this, the concept of 'Indianness' was disaggregated. The myth of 'spiritual India' was exploded.

It is perhaps significant that a good part of the criticism directed at the "*Ingraji-nabish Babu*" ("the English-educated gentleman") by these groups was to do with the former's investment in spirituality, in the supernatural and the 'occult'. A connection would be insinuated between reading too much of Shakespeare and falling out of step with the science-world. Sri Sahaji, the prolific Tili essayist, told stories where educated men were particularly reluctant to recognize charlatans disguised as saffron-clad holy men. The "*Ingraji-nabish*" or the "graduate" would rather defy common sense but quote Shakespeare – "There are many things between (*sic*.) heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy" – in these matters.[165]

[163] The awareness that Brahmans wrested power through brute force was highlighted even by respectable orders like the Kayasthas for quite a while. *Kayastha Patrika*, 1917, p. 7.

[164] 'Jivan Sangram', *Vaishya Tili Hitaishi*, Phalgun, 1330 BS, 1923, pp. 137-138.

[165] Sahaji, 'Ekadashi Sabha', 'Dharmarajye Alaukikatar Sthan', *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika*, Phalgun-Chaitra, 1335 BS, 1929, p. 46.

Bijoykrishna Goswami, so highly revered by the Swadeshi era intellectuals, did not find followers from these groups. Hemchandra Kanungo, a Mahishya by caste, was perhaps the only 'revolutionary terrorist' who was extremely critical of the spiritual idiosyncrasies and Hindu-inflected nationalism of leaders like Aurobindo.[166] An article in *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika* observed that Bijoykrishna and similar 'Gurus' were obsolete in the democratic age and that the Ramakrishna Mission was doing better as it concerned itself with secular social-service activities.[167] Alamohan Das, in his autobiography, expressed his loathing for the monks of the Ramkrishna Ashrama who "knew only to lecture".[168] He wrote about his refusal to be spiritually initiated by a Guru when his father wanted him to do so. The *mantra* that he absorbed instead was Tagore's lines: "*Bangalir pan Bangalir asha/ Bangalir kaj Bangalir bhasha/ satya hauk satya hauk he bhagaban*" (meaning, "May the Bengali bring truth to his resolve, dear God").[169] Or, at least, that was the image that Alamohan sought for his self while crafting his autobiography in his fifties.

The world-affirming ethic, the general emphasis of the discourse of 'economic *energism*' on materiality, on 'realism', on fluidity and Machiavellian pragmatism as imbedded in a 'real world of practice' as opposed to text-bookish, scriptural formulae – all helped to undermine the supremacy of Brahmanical values in related sites such as gender. It permitted a contributor to a 1929 issue of *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika* to declare that a woman oppressed and neglected by her husband had the right to remarry even when her previous husband was alive. A rejoinder to a critique of this article stated that "learned men have taught us enough of renunciation, we are only too aware of its bitter fruits; by trying to kill the serpent we have only made ourselves feeble and impotent".[170] Such contestations of Brahmanical ideals, of course, did not span the length and breadth of these caste communities. And thus, by locating them in their scattered places, we come to understand the dialectical tensions within caste movements. For instance, the *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika* included several essays

[166] *Hem Kanungo Rachanabali*, (ed. Swadeshranjan Mandal), Kolkata: Shiropa, 2013, p. 163.

[167] 'Ganayuga', *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika*, Phalgun-Chaitra, 1335 BS, p. 54.

[168] Das, *Amar Jiban*, pp. 53-70.

[169] *Ibid*., p. 25.

[170] 'Hindu Samaje Narir Sthan', *Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika*, Aghrahayan, 1336 BS, 1929, p. 14.

calling to question whether it was worth the while to claim an Aryan Varna identity or recognition as 'Vaishyas'. Many of these articulated the need to look forward to an open future rather than ruminate on a supposed 'Vaishya' past (dubbing it as "*bhuter pujo*").[171] This periodical had strong links with a group of mufassil merchants like Harihar Seth of Chandannagar, organized under the 'Tilijati Hitaishi Sabha'. Its orientation was very different from that of the Tili Sammilani led by the Maharaja of Kasimbazar and similar landed magnates. We have shown in Chapter One how the latter's mode of self-assertion *vis-à-vis* the caste superior was by taking a stock of how far real-life Brahmanas measured up to prescribed Brahmanical norms. Their ideological rivals like Harihar Seth contested the very norms instead.

The challenge to the notion, embedded in the *Purusha Sukta*, of "a subtle hierarchy" between the faculties of intellection and physical labour came more stridently perhaps from these 'Intermediate' caste groups than from Dalits in Bengal. As we have shown, the articulation of a distinct political subjectivity as 'productive classes' attributed 'unproductiveness' to the so-called 'intellectual classes'. By valorizing sweat-and-strain, menial work and manual labour, the combative political subjectivity of the 'Intermediate' castes spoke as the Shudra and theoretically made common cause with the Dalit. Not that any particular solidarity with the Dalit was summoned up. But the *Purusha Sukta* was confronted from the standpoint of a Shudra by typically emphasizing that the "body was paralytic without the legs".[172] The identity of 'the people' was summoned up. As the battle was fought in terms of 'estates' and 'ranks', it obfuscated the question of class. 'Enterprise' and 'physical toil', as well as 'frugality', were uttered simultaneously as if they signified the same qualities, and as if 'toil' itself was 'capital'. (This was similar to the eclectic attitude towards mercantilism and industrialism.) Alamohan Das, for instance, did not think that there was any essential contradiction between labour and capital. He was not convinced about what he heard from "a few labour leaders who returned from Russia".[173] Having begun his career as a minor wage-earner, he shared the conviction about the emancipatory prospects of paid labour, viz., that the determined and

[171] Sahaji, 'Purano Chithi', p. 44.

[172] *Ibid*., p. 40.

[173] Das, *Amar Jiban*, p. 3.

industrious wage earner could one day become a capitalist. Das saw poverty as a problem of distribution of resources. The "capitalist", in his view, was redistributing, through production and exchange, wealth locked in land and securities. He suggested in his autobiography in 1949 that Nehru must pass a law that guaranteed that the lowest labourer in a firm received one-tenth of the "the manager's pay".[174] What Satadru Sen wrote about Binoykumar Sarkar applies to this subaltern-caste denigration of the genteel milieu that dominated politics, education and cultural capital. They detested the 'bourgeois' but the word was almost completely detached from class. 'Bourgeois' stood for the professional classes, who were also traditionally associated with land and feudal modes of respectability, as opposed to the manufacturing and trading classes. Here, "bourgeois was an attitude", signified by crippled and conceited bookishness, "timidity, self-indulgence, know-nothing sloth and unmerited assumptions of superiority".[175] The 'Suppressed Caste' political subject congratulated himself for being the 'dynamic' industrial entrepreneur, helping to usher in bourgeois commercial modernization in the country.

The progressivist-rationalist content of this 'inferior'-caste critique, as we have shown, constitutively derived from social-Darwinist convictions. The theme of competition was, thus, central to it. It was more specifically the theme of 'persecuted Bengal' in a world of runaway 'competition'. The imagined 'others' who were 'persecuting' Bengal, supposedly on account of her own lack of 'competitive' proficiency, were represented as the Marwari, Bhatia and Gujarati businessmen. This theme remained very central to the 'Intermediate' castes' distinct subjectivity till the 1960s. The organ of the Gandhabanik Mahasabha, even in 1966, contained a poem titled '*Jay Ma Gandheshwari*', which reminded its readers that the community's vocations comprised agriculture, moneylending and trade in the good old days of prosperity. But "people from other provinces ("*bhin pradeshir dal*") were stealing" these trades.[176] Back in the 1920s, the community's general meetings (the annual Gandhabanik Mahasammilani) would similarly focus on how to reduce dependence

[174] *Ibid.*, p. 94.

[175] Sen, *Benoy Kuumar Sarkar*, pp. 25-26.

[176] Rashiklal Datta, 'Jay Ma Gandheshwari', p. 75.

on Marwari and Bhatia wholesalers.[177] The Memorandum of Association of the 'Intermediate and Suppressed Castes', attached with its 1942 petition to Cripps, had mentioned that, besides its initiative to "introduce greater unity and solidarity" among the castes forming the Association and to "promote good feelings with other castes", it resolved to "create and maintain a strong, *virile* and self-governing Bengalee nation".[178] The trope of virility, the 'Make in Bengal' sort of accent on growth and prosperity, combined with a populist antipathy for 'those who wielded the pen' – the mix was dangerous! But whether or not they actually grew to chauvinistic proportions must be the subject of another study.

[177] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, p. 148.

[178] Memorial ISCA, 'Memorandum of Association', point no. 5. Emphasis mine.

Chapter 4

Heroes of 'Sacrifice': The Self-respect Movement of an 'Untouchable' Caste

This chapter attempts to understand aspects of Dalit political subjectivity by focusing on the nature of the stirrings of self-respect in an 'untouchable' caste, the Paundras of south Bengal in the early twentieth century. Curiously, however, the early leaders of the caste resisted to being classified as Scheduled Castes. Yet, they had engaged spiritedly in a flurry of consciousness-raising activities to awaken a spirit of liberation and self-determination within their caste-community, as well as within lower castes of Bengal, in general. They were defeated, fortunately, in their protest against being 'scheduled' by some younger men, three of whom clandestinely sent counter-petitions to the British government to ensure that the Paundras finally remained in the list of Scheduled Castes.[1] But the early Paundra leaders always described themselves as '*anunnata*' and '*dalita*'. They created and participated in the earliest cross-caste Dalit solidarity of Bengal – the *Bangiya Jana Samgha*. Why, then, did they reject special protection as Dalits? More importantly, what were their visions of dignity that continue to inspire the staunchly Ambedkarite Paundra activists of today? Today's Paundra leaders, who reject Brahmanical rituals and affirm a *mulnivasi* identity, recall the early twentieth century phase as the 'golden age' of their movement.[2] In which ways, then, was that variant of Dalit vision inspiring? What had been its force? The nature of the overall accents of these early leaders (not their refusal to reservations, as such) reveals some of the most enduring aspirations of humiliated peoples. In this chapter, we explore these sentiments.

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[1] Raicharan Sardar, 'Depressed Ba Tapshilbhukta Jati Samasya' (Chapter 6) in *Deener Atmakahini ba Satya Pariksha* (*An Autobiography of a Poor Man or his Experiments with Truth*), Twenty-four Parganas, 1959 (posthumously published); Rajendranath Sarkar, *Jibankatha*, Calcutta, 1975, reprinted in Sanat Kumar Naskar (ed.), *Paundra Manisha* (henceforth, *PM*), *Vol. 2*, Calcutta: Paundra Mahasamgha, 2013, pp. 70-74. Government of Bengal (henceforth, GB), Appointment, 1R-2 of 1933, B, July 1935, Progs. No. 188-264, Abstract (file destroyed in 1956).

[2] Sanat Kumar Naskar, 'Sangathaner Bhanga-gora O Pitririner Daybaddhata', *Samaj Darshan* (henceforth, *SD*), August, 2015, p. 24.

A significant section of the 'low-caste' leadership was indeed keen to have their castes excluded from the list of Scheduled Castes in the early 1930s.[3] They knew that inclusion in the Schedule would secure for them "concessions and advantages granted by the government".[4] Still, many of them – restricted, of course, to the few who had access to the means of reading, deliberating, and writing – remained eager to free themselves from that *mark*, regarding it as "a blot and a disgrace". They stated that they were "prepared to make sacrifices and to pay the prices for the removal of this blot."[5] These oppositions to being classified as 'Scheduled Caste' appears to suggest an internalisation of the hegemonic values of caste society, if not to downright manipulation by pro-unity Hindu organisations.[6] The colonial state made sense of these appeals in much the same manner and often disregarded these 'petitions' ascribing these to mischief played among the 'low'-caste population by the Arya Samajis or Hindu Mahasabha leaders.[7] But Paundra leaders, as we shall show, remained wary of the politicking of Hindu organisations and rather complained in their autobiographies that the Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha and similar bodies did not come of any help even when their support in the movement against inclusion was solicited.[8]

The enthusiasm of early Paundra leaders about the sacred thread and a Kshatriya heritage appear to be in tune with the theory that for most 'untouchable' caste movements, there was a 'Sanskritising'[9] phase of identity formation till the 1920s –

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[3] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay mentions some of such castes in the context of Bengal. The Suklis, Rajus, Kalwars, Pods, Yogis and Sutradhars forwarded representations to the government. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi, 1990, p. 174.

[4] 'Request by the Khatiks of C. P. for being excluded from the list of Scheduled Castes in the Schedule Caste Order in Council', Government of India, Reforms, File no. 114/46-B, 1946, National Archives of India (NAI).

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Pro-reservation groups, as Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has shown, attributed anti-inclusion agitations in the 1930s to 'mischievous activities' of the Hindu Mahasabha. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, p. 175.

[7] Memorials from the United Provinces Rajak (Dhobi) Association, Lucknow, and Bundelkhand Prantia Kori Sabha, Jhansi, protesting against the inclusion of the Dhobis and Koris among the Scheduled Castes, 29/36-F, Reforms Office, 1936, NAI.

[8] Sardar, *Deener Atmakahini*, p. 263.

[9] The frequent negotiation of caste status and practice in a 'Brahmanic' direction was termed 'Sanskritisation' by M. N. Srinivas. M. N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 1995 (first published in 1966)

falling short of offering a 'doctrinal critique of caste'[10] and lacking in 'effective political force' – which underwent a 'qualitative shift' *afterwards* to a 'mature', broad-based Dalit movement.[11] Yet the two-stage explanatory model does not hold here. The so-called second stage of inclusive, cross-caste Dalit subjecthood was already present in the early Paundra movement. Manindranath's establishing the *Samgha*, one which resolved to be 'as assertive as the Muslim League'[12], has been hailed by the historian Sumit Sarkar as one of those "occasional organisational initiatives" by 'lower castes' that aimed to "achieve cross-caste unity of subordinate groups" instead of raising demands of "a limited and sectional 'Sanskritising' kind."[13] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay also located the foundation of the *Samgha* as a key moment, however short-lived, in the advent of 'depressed classes' politics in Bengal.[14]

Radical historiography locates the most powerful moments of Dalit political assertion in their resolute resistance to mainstream nationalism.[15] Within that frame, again, the story of the Paundras appears tainted by a double lack of autonomy: the Paundra leadership never stood apart from the anti-colonial nationalist struggle. Later day leaders, as we shall show, rather seek acknowledgement of the caste's contributions to the national freedom movement as well as to other social movements in the region.

A recurrent theme that surfaces in the writings of current Paundra leaders is the lament that the youth today, after availing of reservations, become keen to adopt the ways of the upper-caste middle class to ultimately sever ties with the Dalit community of their birth. In contrast, they locate the 'real political moment' of challenge to

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[10] The word was used by B. R. Ambedkar to point out that there could be 'a lot of Brahmanism' amongst those who 'indulged in virulent criticism of Brahmans'. Bhagwan Das (ed.), *Thus Spoke Ambedkar Vol. 1*, Jalandhar: Bheem Patrika Publications, 1963, pp. 88-89.

[11] Ramnarayan S. Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2012*, pp. 122-123.

[12] Manindranath Mandal, *Bangiya Jana Samgha, Bengal People's Association*, Medinipur, Khejuri, 1330 BS, 1923, p. 10.

[13] Sumit Sarkar, 'Identity and Difference: Caste in the Formation of the Ideologies of Nationalism and Hindutva' in *Writing Social History*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 385.

[14] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 121.

[15] Sarkar, 'Identity and Difference', p. 359; Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, pp. 99-135; Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability*, pp. 3-4.

Brahmanical perceptions of caste in their early twentieth century movement. They observe that the early leaders' enormous capacity for self-sacrifice nourished their fiercely independent spirit that resisted co-option by dominant cultural and political forces of the time and sounded a 'powerfully autonomous' voice of protest.[16]

Here we explore that uncharted, non-classifiable and historically specific variant of mobilisation against caste humiliation – one which dominant historiographical modes have largely passed by. If we acknowledge that the lower caste political subject "refused to be mere objects" of ongoing politics, "but sought to author it as subjects"[17], we might pause to explore this variant for what it was without readily labelling it as 'retrograde' or politically 'inadequate'. Instead of either celebrating or downgrading their sentiments, this chapter claims that such sentiments need to be acknowledged as they have continued to surface and have resonance in later times and other forms. It studies a range of polemical tracts, pamphlets, histories and autobiographies authored by early Paundra leaders and essays, articles, reports, poems, plays and stories that they published in organs of the community. These texts bear the concrete associational forms of their public action and propagation. The chapter also moves beyond early twentieth century Bengal to look into the contents of later periodicals of the community to see if there was an idealised political tradition that Paundra leaders of different generations clung to.

Identity and Protest

Commonly called 'Pod' in early twentieth century Bengal, the caste is still predominant in the district of Twenty-Four Parganas. H. H. Risley's 'ethnographic glossary' stated that the caste was also found in large numbers in 'Midnapur, Howrah, Hugli and Khulna'.[18] W. W. Hunter's statistical accounts included the Pod amongst the "lowest" and "utterly despised" castes of Hindus, along with the Chandal or

[16] Prabhashchandra Mandal, *Paundrakshatriya Samaje Krama Prabodhan*, Baruipur, 2001, p. 19; Debangshu Purakayit, 'Pundrajati O Tar Samajik Abanaman' *SD*, August 2014, p. 35. Dilip Kumar Mandal 'Dishahin Paundrakshatriya Samaj', *SD*, August 2012, p. 9.

[17] Ranabir Samaddar, *Emergence of the Political Subject*, New Delhi: Sage, 2010, p. xiv.

[18] H. H. Risley, *Tribes and Castes of Bengal, Vol. II*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891, pp. 176-177.

Namasudra, but above the "semi-aboriginal" castes.[19] It was one of the *anacharaniya/ajalchal* castes whose water was unacceptable to the 'cleaner' castes.[20] The caste was included in the category of 'Untouchables' within lists of 'Depressed Classes' in government reports, at least since 1916.[21] Its population was about five and a half lakhs in the early twentieth century. It has always been numerically smaller than Bengali Dalit communities like the Rajbansi, the Namasudra or the Bagdi and constitutes about twelve percent of the Dalit population in Bengal according to the Census of 2001.[22]

Risley found the majority of 'Pods' engaged in agricultural work as occupancy and non-occupancy *raiyats* and as nomadic cultivators working on freshly cleared land in the Sundarbans. But "a few had risen to be zamindars."[23] Hunter's statistical accounts and Census reports from 1881 to 1911, however, suggested that "fishing and boating" was their traditional occupation from which a few moved into agriculture.[24] The Census of 1911 noted that the Pods, as "an ambitious caste", were making "great strides" in education.[25] Their percentage of literates was greater than that among Rajbansis and Namasudras in 1911.[26] Census operations, Risley's principle of ranking castes according to 'social-precedence', the heightened importance of Varna classifications[27] and a hope of exercising the right of self-determination in a supposedly 'new age', an age in which education and the Shastra were no more sole

[19] W. W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal, Vols. I-VI*, London, 1875-77.

[20] See Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*, Calcutta: Papyrus, 1981, p. 38.

[21] *Census of India, 1931, Vol. V*, Part 1, Chapter XII, pp. 494-501.

[22] Purakayit, 'Pundrajati O Tar Samajik Abanaman'.

[23] Risley, *Tribes and Castes*, p. 176.

[24] Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal, Vols. I, III, IV*; *Census of India, 1891, Vol. III*, The Report; *Census of India, 1901, Vol. VI*, Part I; *Census of India, 1911, Vol. V*, Part I. See Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, p. 103.

[25] *Census of India, 1911, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and Sikkim, Report*, pp. 359-360.

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] See Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia' in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987; Lucy Carroll, 'Colonial Perceptions of Indian Society and the Emergence of Caste(s) Associations' in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2, Feb., 1978, p. 244.

preserves of the Brahman[28] – all contributed to the birth of a quest for identity among a small minority of the people of this caste. Benimadhab Deb Haldar, a Pod[29] from a peasant family in the Twenty-four Parganas who founded a local 'national committee' on the eve of the Swadeshi movement, communicated with Census officials so that the caste be enlisted as 'Bratya Kshatriya' ('fallen Kshatriya').[30] Petitions such as these prompted Census authorities of 1901 and 1911 to make a distinction between a lower class of "fishing Pods" and a higher class "who live by cultivation and call themselves Padmaraj or Bratyakshatriya".[31] Risley predicted that the educated, upwardly mobile section would soon disclaim connections with their more humble caste-fellows to become a relatively higher caste with "a distinctive name, a pretentious Sanskrit derivative" and "in a generation or two their humble origin will be forgotten".[32]

By the second decade of the twentieth century, Raicharan Sardar (1876-1942) from the Twenty-four Parganas, came together with Manindranath Mandal (1879- 1943) and Mahendranath Karan (1886-1928) from Medinipur, to build up a movement of solidarity under the new name 'Paundrakshatriya'. Strongly resenting Risley's view of a narrow, exclusivist sectional mobilization, the movement sought to build a unified self-conscious community out of scattered peoples known by names as

[28] The 'revolutionary' impact of the printing machine that "brought the Shastras out of the iron chest of the Brahman for it to breathe free" was stressed by Digindranarayan Bhattacharya in *Hindur Nabajagaran*, Calcutta, 1338 BS, 1931, p. 45.

[29] Here I use the word 'Pod' to refer to the caste group because that was the name by which they were commonly known in the early twentieth century. At other places, I consistently use the word 'Paundra', the name preferred by the caste-group and in vogue today. A good part of their caste movement till the mid-twentieth century was devoted to petitioning to the state to recognise them as 'Paundrakshatriya' instead of 'Pod'. Copy of 'Letter to the Hon'ble President, Indian Union from Sakti Kumar Sarkar, Poundrakshatriya Name Legalisation Committee' dated 24th March, 1956 in private collection of Dr. Sanat Kumar Naskar, Baruipur, Kolkata. The Scheduled Caste certificates bear the name 'Paundra/Pod' or just 'Pod'. Present leaders do not want the 'Kshariya' suffix but they resent the persistence of the name 'Pod' which they deem humiliating. Gayen, ''Pod' Sabder Ucched Chai', *SD*, May 2010, pp. 9-10.

[30] Haripada Burman Mandal, *Jatibibaran*, Howrah, 1914, pp. 168-169. The Parasuram legend was invoked in this claim of a respectable past. Thus, they could ascribe their 'low' status to the aggression of the Brahman. Their ancestors, as they claimed, were Kshatriyas who forgot their high origin and customs as they had to flee to new places to escape the wrath of Parasuram, a Brahman. The legend was repeatedly invoked by several 'low' castes and even 'high' caste Kayasthas during the time to establish that Brahmans established their dominance primarily through brute force. Harakishore Adhikari, *Rajbansi Kulapradip*, Goalpara (Assam), 1910, *Kayastha Patrika*, 1324 (1917), p. 7.

[31] *Census of 1901, Bengal*, p. 373.

[32] H. H. Risley, *The People of India*, Calcutta, 1908, p. 127.

different as 'Pod', 'Padya', 'Padmaraj' or 'Balai' and distributed over a number of regional sub-sects.[33] Caste-hood was in the process of being forged. Census enumerations and government sponsored statistical accounts did make a finite total of the caste's population but that was not at all to the satisfaction of these men. For instance, Hunter's accounts grouped a certain 'Balai' caste of Medinipur as 'cultivators' and as socially ranking above the 'Pods'.[34] Mahendranath Karan was keen to convince the 'Balai' people to 'return' their caste as 'Paundrakshatriya', explaining that "'Balai' was a distortion of 'Baleya Kshatriya', meaning the descendants of King Bali," which was "exactly what 'Paundrakshatriyas' were".[35] So caste-identity, like national identity, had to be narrated and imagined into existence through a conflicted discourse. Simultaneously now, these men were talking of a greater level of solidarity between different *anacharaniya/ajalchal* castes.

Born to a peasant family, Raicharan received English education through enormous hardship.[36] Manindranath came from a landed family known for its literary pursuits; his grandfather had earned the rare designation of a '*Shudra Pandit*' (a Shudra scholar).[37] Mahendranath was related to Manindranath; both these men had little institutional education but honed their creative and scholarly talents through vigorous literary participation in the contemporary Bengali public sphere. Mahendranath's literary excursions began when he was swayed by the Swadeshi movement. His first composition was *Bangalakshmi Bratakatha*, which implored Bengali women to reject foreign articles, and a number of patriotic songs which he sang with his group *Bande Mataram Bhikshu Sampraday*, ferrying Swadeshi goods from door to door, during the Swadeshi movement.[38] For Mahendranath, *samaj-seva-vrata*, the vow to serve the caste community, took over from the preceding sentiment of *desh-seva-vrata*, the resolve to serve the country. Jadunath Sarkar, the acclaimed historian who came in touch with Mahendranath, appreciated the parallel between Mahendranath's love for

[33] Mahendranath Karan, *Paundrakshatriya Banam Bratyakshatriya*, Medinipur, 1927, p. 132.

[34] Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal, Vol. III*, p. 55.

[35] Karan, *Paundrakshatriya Banam Bratyakshatriya*, p. 132.

[36] Sardar, *Deener Atmakahini*.

[37] Manindranath Mandal, *Pallikabi Rasikchandra*, Medinipur, Khejuri, 1336 BS, 1929, pp. 6-7.

[38] Manindranath Mandal, 'Mahendranather Jibankatha' (1928) in Kohinurkanti Karan (ed.), *Mahendra Charit*, Medinipur, 1978, p. 6.

the country and his concern for his caste.[39] As part of a sacred calling, these men worked towards introducing periodicals as the voice of the *jati* and organising in the form of associations. For a low-caste group like this, there was hardly any hope of financial return from caste histories, polemical tracts attacking dominant Brahmanical narratives, and periodicals. Raicharan or Mahendranath, who did not have the financial means to sponsor the projects they conceived (they described themselves as '*deen sevak*'), had to cast around for a patron. Landed Paundras – though often not the prime initiative-takers – were, therefore, deemed indispensable to the caste movement. The editors of the *Paundrakshatriya Samachar,* in 1924, noted that the "Rajbansi Kshatriyas of north Bengal" were exemplary in terms of "having pooled a social capital of seven to eight lakhs of rupees, which they could now utilise in welfare activities for their community."[40]

With the *Paundrakshatriya Samachar,* introduced in 1924, the inclusive Dalit identity and horizontal solidarity was palpable. The journal showed no interest in the genealogical histories of ritual status, castigated *Manusmriti* ("'*Manur' anusashan rekho astakunre dhulir majhe*") and sounded a note of warning to Hindu society ("*Samal samal dak poreche Hindu samaj dekhcho ki?*").[41] This was a moment charged with Manindranath's idea of building a Samgha, a rebellious solidarity of '*anunnata*' peoples to wrest human rights of dignity and equality from the '*abhijata barga*' or superior classes. Manindranath had been communicating with leaders of 'low' castes of Bengal since 1918. He published a series of articles, both in papers like *Nabyabharat, Sanjibani* and *Basumati* where he addressed a supposedly upper caste audience, and those like *Namasudra Hitaishi*, *Pataka* and *Samaj-bandhab* where

[39] Jadunath Sarkar, 'Mahendra Parichay', *Mahendra Charit,* p. 2.

[40] Anonymous, 'Samitir Abashyakata', *Paundrakshatriya Samachar* (henceforth, *PS*), Kartik 1331, reprinted in *PM*, Vol. 2, p. 234. The annual subscription for the *Paundrakshatriya Samachar* was fixed at two rupees. Articles like 'Samacharer Uddeshya' in the 1924 issue of the *Samachar* bring out how difficult it was for the publishers to get the payment. Zamindar Paundras like Hemchandra Naskar, Sridhar Chandra Ray and Anukul Chandra Das of Twenty-four Parganas, Annadaprasad Das of Medinipur and Saradacharan Bachar and Debnarayan Halder of Khulna were its patrons. At least eight periodicals were launched by Paundra leaders between 1918 and 1951 (*Pratijna* in 1918, *Kshatriya* in 1920, *Paundrakshatriya Samachar* in 1924, *Satyajug* in 1927, *Dipti* in 1930, *Samgha* in 1935, *Paundrakshatriya* in 1938 and *Paundrakshatriya Bandhab* in 1951), all of which were short-lived.

[41] Literally, "Throw Manu's injunctions to the dust" and "Did Hindu society hear the sound of warning?", Mandal, 'Samjhe Chalo', *PS*, Ashadh, 1331, *PM Vol. 2*, pp. 230-231.

he addressed the lower castes[42], affirming the necessity of forming this separate bloc. The idea was executed through the foundation of *Bangiya Jana Samgha* or Bengal People's Association in 1922, where representatives from Rajbansi, Namasudra, Saha, Mali, Patni Mahishya, Adi Kaibarta, Rajak, Jhalla-malla, Sacchasi, Nat, Pradhi-karmakar and some other castes, all very lowly ranked, came together for the first time. Manindranath envisioned a rebellious solidarity of the '*dalita*', '*anunnata*' (meaning, 'depressed' and 'backward') and '*adhikarchyuta*' ('dispossessed') peoples; he visualised a "new Mahabharata" to be enacted through this "epic battle".[43] No more would they beg, they resolved, to secure respectability from upper castes. "*Bhikshayam naiba naiba cha*"[44] was a standing reminder in the *Paundrakshatriya Samachar* of the '20s. In the *Samgha*'s first meeting in February, 1922, in Calcutta, addresses were made by Namasudra leaders, leaders of the Mali, Jhallamalla, Rajak and Saha castes and Manindranath himself.[45] A resolution was taken to educate the depressed classes, to fight for their social and political rights, their adequate representation in the self-governing bodies, legislative councils and public services. But 'self-respect' was most important and, Manindranath stressed that, 'self-respect' could not be reduced to these material markers of improvement.[46]

It was urged that questions of relative superiority and inferiority be forgotten to come together in an emancipatory human solidarity, an 'unbound seriality'[47], as it were. If upper castes were preventing "Musalmans, Paundrakshatriyas and Mahishyas from entering a high school" in Magrahat (Twenty-Four Parganas), the

[42] On Manindranath Mandal's addressing two sets of readers, see Pradip Kumar Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 43.

[43] Manindranath Mandal, *Bangiya Jana Samgha, Bengal People's Association*, p. 17.

[44] 'Samayik Mantabya', *PS*, 1330-31 BS, 1923-24, p. 63.

[45] Mandal, *Bangiya Jana Samgha*, 'Mukhabandha'. That it was a forum of the most degraded castes was indicated by the subtle reference to Birendranath Sashmal, of the Mahishya caste, who, "despite his initial words of encouragement", remained too busy with national activities to find time to attend the *Samgha* meeting. *ibid.*

[46] *Ibid*. p. 43.

[47] On 'bound serialities' and 'unbound serialities', see Partha Chatterjee's discussion (with reference to Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World*, London: Verso Books, 1998), 'The Nation in Heterogeneous Time', *Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, pp. 5-6. The solidarity of humiliated peoples seeking dignity transcended the bounds of the census-enumerated finite totals of populations of particular communities.

Paundrakshatriya Samachar upheld a united political resistance cutting across bounds of community and caste.[48] Even caste-histories like Mahendranath's *Paundrakshatriya Kulapradip* upheld a general critique of Brahmanical discriminating concepts like *varnasamkara* that applied to all 'low' castes. It affirmed the heritage of a rich Buddhist past in Bengal, "an era", as Manindranath said, "of a great union".[49] After the Muslim conquest, asserted Mahendranath, favourably quoting contemporary social historians like Nagendranath Basu, Brahmanical discrimination was "superimposed on the Buddhist ideals of society".[50] Great communities were subsequently made to forget their distinctions by "self-seeking, parasitic Brahmanas" who lived on the labour of the "productive classes".[51] The same narrative of historical origins of untouchability with the political defeat of Buddhism was enunciated by Ambedkar later on in his works *Who were the Shudras?* (1946) and *The Untouchables* (1948).[52] Mahendranath brought the woman and Shudra together in his polemic against caste. Refuting the theory of *karmic* retribution as the cause of 'low' birth, Mahendranath asked, "Is India a sort of Andaman (deporting island) where sinners, the world over, are condemned to be reborn as humiliated castes?" Mahendranath noted that no caste could boast of pure Aryan blood: "Scientific discussions have established beyond doubt that cross-breeding was ubiquitous and, in that sense, all castes from the Brahmana to the Pariah were *varnasamkaras*".[53]

Why, then, did these men claim a high Varna status and adopt the sacred thread? Here it is important to distinguish between two logically distinct tracks through which a Dwija (twice-born) Varna claim expressed itself during this time. A lower caste movement claiming 'purer' status within the Varna hierarchy might instantiate the

[48] Anonymous, 'Jati Bidvesh', *PS*, Kartik 1331, *PM Vol. 2*, p. 236.

[49] Mandal, *Bangiya Jana Samgha*, p. 28.

[50] Mahendranatha Karan, *Paundrakshatriya Kulapradip*, Twenty-four Parganas, 1928, p. 57.

[51] *Ibid.* p. 39.

[52] B. R. Ambedkar, *Who Were the Shudras? How They Came to be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society*, 1946, Reprint: Bombay: Thackers, 1970; *idem.*, *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables*, New Delhi: Amrit Book Company, 1948.

[53] Karan, *Paundrakshatriya Kulapradip*, pp. 32-58.

"remarkable vitality of caste"[54] and "in effect strengthen overall hierarchy".[55] On the other hand, some of these movements were truly anti-exclusionary. They sought to detach the notion of 'purity' from birth, ascribed status, custom and ritual practice and attach it to an achievable moral target so that Dwijahood became something that could be claimed by one and all.[56] Colonialism "refigured caste as a distinctly religious system", a religious form encapsulated in the "dharmic idea of Varna"[57]; and the colonial state gave an "enhanced" importance to Varna status in its statistical projects, its administration of family law and even in granting public appointments[58]. The first generated a possibility of radical re-evaluation of all existing concepts and assumptions about caste; the second created a necessity which provoked the Indian concern with Varna status. The emphasis on *dharmic* or moral codes as defining features of the Varnas enabled a critique of divisive ritualism. The sacred thread could be adopted as an equaliser in a revolutionary gesture.[59] Digindranarayan Bhattacharya, a Brahman social reformer close to Mahendranath, Manindranath and Raicharan, who "across three decades wrote copiously against the evils of caste"[60], was a cardinal presence in the sacred thread movement of the Paundras. He envisioned a society in which Dwijahood was universal.[61] And Digindranarayan, as

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[54] Risley, *The People of India*, p. 110.

[55] Sarkar, 'Identity and Difference', p. 385.

[56] Manindranath wrote: 'Times have changed and Hindu society is about to break down...To claim high birth is ridiculous in the present day. Everybody is a Shudra by birth. The quality of the 'twice born' is no more given. It can only be earned through efforts. That was how it was in very ancient times. If we have the merit to earn it, we may also become a Brahman, a Kshatriya or a Vaishya. The western peoples have developed the qualities of the three Varnas together." Mandal, *Bangiya Jana Samgha,* p. 24.

[57] Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, pp. 12-60.

[58] Carroll, 'Colonial Perceptions of Indian Society and the Emergence of Castes(s) Associations'.

The Calcutta High Court ruling of 1921, which gave the 'illegitimate son of a Shudra the right to inherit the father's property', spurred an anxious concern with getting rid of the 'Shudra' designation. Sardar, *Deener Atmakahini*, p. 137.

[59] Raicharan's autobiography suggests that those who opposed the adoption of the sacred thread, like Hemchandra Naskar, were afraid of the wrath of Gods and Brahmans. Those, like Raicharan, determined to adopt it without begging Brahmans for a *vidhan* were, in that milieu, taking a defiant and radical step and leading a bitterly contested struggle against orthodoxy. Sardar, *Deener Atmakahini*, pp. 157-185.

[60] Sarkar, 'Identity and Difference', p. 384.

[61] Digindranarayan Bhattacharya, *Hindur Nabajagaran*, Calcutta, 1338 BS, 1931, pp. 63-65.

Sumit Sarkar noted, was "particularly sharp in his critique of 'Sanskritisation' for its divisive and patriarchal implications".[62]

Manindranath Mandal and his colleagues, however, had sought to prove the Aryan identity of the Paundra. Manindranath critiqued Bankim's classification of the "Pod" as "non-Aryan Shudra".[63] Besides, Manindranath and Mahendranath Karan were at pains to establish that 'agriculture' and not 'fishing' was the 'traditional' occupation of the caste.[64] However, Dalit histories invariably encounter this. As Ramnarayan Rawat showed in the case of Chamars in Uttar Pradesh, Dalits often emphasize that 'agriculture' is their primary occupation and their claims are not false. Rawat also makes the valuable point that colonial ethnography stereotyped 'low' castes with some 'degrading' occupation. The social 'degradation' of certain castes was sought to be explained away by attributing to them a 'degrading' occupation, following upper-caste stereotypes.[65] Haridas Palit, an ethnographer, had stated in a 1927 issue of *Arthik Unnati* that "the Pods were originally associated with fishing and agriculture in the peripheries of forested lands until a section of them rose in terms of some education and wealth" and took to genteel habits; "this section no more directly engaged in fishing" though they still managed business in fisheries and agriculture".[66]

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[62] Sarkar, 'Identity and Difference', p. 384.

[63] Manindranath Mandal, *Arya Paundraka*, Khejuri, 1910. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, 'Bange Brahmanadhikar' (1892) in *Bankim Rachanabali* (Sahitya Samagra), *Bibidha Prabandha*, Dvitiya Khanda, Calcutta: Basak Book Store, 2003, p. 816. The 1921 Census described the 'Pod' as a caste under 'Depressed Classes' and as 'the aboriginal race of the lower Hooghly delta'. *Census of India, 1921, Volume V*, Bengal, Part 1, Report by W. H. Thompson, Chapter XI, 'Caste, Tribe and Race', Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1923, p. 366. On how caste came to be related with the Aryan/non-Aryan divide and how the assumption of an evolutionary sequence from an 'aboriginal', 'non-Aryan', 'caste-less' state to a Brahmanised, Hinduised state, in a 'civilising process', came to be solidified through H. H. Risley's ethnography, see Sumit Sarkar, 'Identities and Histories' in *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002, p. 58.

[64] Mahendranath Karan, 'Sahityacharchay Jatibidvesh', 'Bhratritva banam Jati-bidvesh', *PS*, Sraban-Agrahayan, 1334 BS, 1927; *idem*., *Paundrakshatriya Banam Bratyakshatriya*; Manindranath Mandal, *Arya Paundraker Britti Bichar*, Medinipur, 1920. In a table prepared by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, compiling information from sources such as the *Census of India, 1891, Census of India, 1901, Census of India, 1911,* W. W. Hunter's *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, H. H. Risley's *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Hitesranjan Sanyal's *Social Mobility in Bengal*, the 'traditional occupation' of the Pod was designated as 'fishing and boating' while the 'new occupation' was 'agriculture'. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, p. 103.

[65] Ramnarayan S. Rawat, 'Colonial Archive Versus Colonial Sociology: Writing Dalit History' in *Dalit Studies* (eds. Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana), Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016, pp. 53, 57, 59-60.

[66] *Arthik Unnati* was a contemporary journal sponsored by the Subarnabanik caste. Its editor was Binaykumar Sarkar. (More references to it in Chapter 3.) Focussing on economic matters, it had a section called 'Arthik Nritatva' or 'Economic Anthropology'. Haridas Palit contributed a piece to this

The idea of sectional upward mobility was, however, perceived as an insult by Mahendranath and others of this caste.[67] Mahendranath emphasised that if there were to be found a few men of this community associated with fishing or its business, it should be understood as induced by poverty and not "sanctioned by the tradition of the caste". Such digressions were not uncommon even in case of the higher castes, he argued: "Dasharathi Chakrabarti, the Rarhi Brahman of Beliaghata in Calcutta, has also made a living out of fishing and the business associated with it".[68] If these occupations did not "stick" to Brahmans and Kayasthas, 'fishing' should not stick to his caste. These claims received support from social and intellectual elites such as Prafulla Chandra Ray[69], who wrote to Mahendranath that "one wondered how such a strange description of the occupation of Pods as 'fishing' found its way to the Census Report"[70]

The *Bangiya Jana Samgha* did not have a long-term staying capacity but, as we shall show in a subsequent section, it defined the political horizon in its moment.

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section with the title 'Panchannagramer Pod, Bagri O Anyanya Jati' in the Bhadra-Aswin issue of the journal in 1927. Palit was the author of *Bangiya Patit Jatir Karmi* ('A Worker among the Downtrodden Castes of Bengal'), in the voice of a Namasudra, and some other books all of which demonstrated his populist sympathies. Palit's words were quoted in Mahendranath Karan, 'Sahityacharchay Jatibidvesh', *PS*, Sravan, Bhadra, 1927, p. 57.

[67] Mahendranath Karan, 'Sahityacharchay Jatibidvesh'. The Paundras, comprising "12 percent of the Dalit population according to the 2001 census", have been described as "erstwhile aboriginal" (*janajati*) and its occupation as agriculture and fishing in present-day studies. See Santosh Rana and Kumar Rana (eds.), *Paschimbange Dalit O Adivasi*, Calcutta: Camp, 2009. A 2010-2011 field-work conducted in a Kakdwip village (24 Parganas) in West Bengal had introduced me to many fisherman people, locally called '*Jalia*', who gave the name 'Paundrakshatriya' for their caste identity. On the contrary, interviews with some Paundrakshatriyas from Budge Budge in 2015 brought out that 'agriculture' was their sole caste-occupation as recorded in land deeds and titles, even though they had diversified into business and other occupations at present.

[68] Mahendranath Karan, 'Bhratritva banam Jati-bidvesh', pp. 118-123.

[69] Subtle differences notwithstanding, reformist caste-Hindus like Prafulla Chandra Ray, the novelist Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, Digindranarayan Bhattacharya and U. N. Mukherji functioned in a shared network of contacts and mutual supports with lower caste leaders like Manindranath Mandal, Mahendranath Karan and Damodar Das, leader of the Mali caste. Manindranath wrote a biography of Digindranarayan, titled *Bange Digindranarayan*, in 1926 in praise of the latter's efforts in regenerating new life among the oppressed castes. For a reference: Pradip Kumar Datta, 'Hindu Unity and the Communal Common Sense of the 'Dying Hindu'' in *Carving Blocs, Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth-century Bengal*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 42-44. Prafulla Chandra Ray distinguished between 'caste' in India and 'class' in the West and noted that caste-difference was worse than class-difference as the former pertained solely to 'birth'. Prafulla Chandra Ray, *Jatibhed O Patitya Samasya*, Calcutta, 1920. Like other Hindu reformists in Bengal, however, he opposed separate electorates when the proposal came in 1932 fearing a mortal dissection of Hindu society.

[70] Cited in 'Arya Paundraker Britti Bichar Sambandhe Abhimat', Manindranath Mandal, *Pallikabi Rasikchandra*, Khejuri, 1336 BS, 1929.

Manindranath, Mahendranath, Raicharan and their many compatriots for, at least, a couple of generations were against the availing of reservations. But even when times changed, and the early twentieth century *Sarba Banga Paundrakshatriya Samiti* moved through the *Paundrakshatriya Unnayan Parishad* (founded in 1970) to the *Paundra Mahasamgha* (founded in 2008), Paundra writers of various hues remembered these men as leaders whose almost 'spiritual quest'[71] defined the benchmark in the struggle for dignity. In the next section, we shall see how enormously the subaltern caste political subject counted on self-renouncing '*sadhana*' as the modality of resistance and the resilience of such a perspective. (To understand its legacy, or, alternatively, to trace the genealogy of the present absence of Dalits as a separate political formation in Bengal, we shall have to move backwards and forwards in time in this chapter.) To use a useful theoretical distinction made by D. R. Nagaraj, the resistance put up by Manindranath, Mahendranath and Raicharan constituted the "transcendental aspect of fighting caste ego", as distinguished from the "mundane reality of fighting for real opportunities in education and jobs."[72] The latter form of Dalit movement may have, to some extent, improved the quality of Dalit life but, as Nagaraj noted, it is doubtful whether that has effected any change in "notions of caste-system among caste-Hindus"— they are "only scared of the militancy of Dalits."[73]

The Metaphor of Self-Cultivation: '*sadhana*'[74]

Around 1925-26, when the ailing Mahendranath Karan got in touch with the leading historian Jadunath Sarkar and showed him his research on the local history of coastal

[71] See the distinction and overlap suggested by D. R. Nagaraj between 'social rage' and 'spiritual quest' as modalities of Dalit protest. D. R. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2010, p. 218.

[72] *Ibid*. p. 30.

[73] *Ibid*. p. 79.

[74] And there was this underside to Ambedkar as well – "...there was something else he wanted to tell his followers: 'lead such a life that you will command respect.' The idea of character suggests that the notion of strength had undergone a subtle change: it was a willingness to fight for one's honour honed and tempered by righteousness and fortitude. In writing 'The Buddha and his Dharma', Ambedkar can be seen to be moving away not only from the unqualified acceptance of the bourgeois values of liberty and equality to the new ground of *mitrata* and *karuna*, but also from a simple notion of aggressiveness to power born out of probity, determination and temperance." Sanjay Palshikar, 'Understanding Humiliation', in Gopal Guru (ed.) *Humiliation: Claims and Context*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 86.

Medinipur, Sarkar was unusually impressed. As Sarkar wrote three decades later in a preface to one of Mahendranath's historical works, he was attracted to Mahendranath because he found the rare 'truth-seeking' historian in him who made indefatigable efforts at chasing every possible fragment of the region's "history, geography, trade, industry, religion and other matters" from obscure rock edicts and inscriptions to literary sources in Bengali, English, Sanskrit and Persian. The work aimed at "regenerating self-esteem in a community by recovering its lost past" (to use Sarkar's own words),[75] and Sarkar was otherwise extremely averse to histories born of the passions of "false provincial patriotism".[76] Sarkar met this 'amateur' historian, when Mahendranath, sixteen years his junior, already in broken health, was still doing research despite suffering from a fatal ailment for about five years. He remembered Mahendranath till many years later as the ideal-type 'disengaged' historian who had no desire for personal gains or popularity.

Mahendranath's dedication exemplified the ideal cultivated self for the community. The early organisers of the caste-movement identified the source of their enslavement in being 'deprived of knowledge'. Manindranath Mandal, in a 1924 issue of the *Paundrakshatriya Samachar*, expressed sorrow over the "glaring absence" of "scientists, philosophers, historians, artists, litterateurs, archaeologists, professors, philologists or sociologists" within the community.[77] Having received very little formal education like most people within the caste and yet reaching a scholarly distinction, Mahendranath had epitomised the ideal. Manindranath saw him as having accomplished the work of a hundred men for the uplift of the community.[78] The glory of austere endeavour – '*sadhana*' – mattered greatly to them. Kshirodchandra Das wrote that the racial origin of a community was not important and that *merit* was born of arduous effort alone. He cited the example of the warriors of ancient Greece and Rome who bore personal hardship to bring glory to the community.[79] Taking the vow

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[75] Acharya Jadunath Sarkar, 'Dwitiya Sangskarane Sampadaker Prakkathan', *idem.*, 'Granthakarer Sankshipta Jibani', in Mahendranath Karan, *Hijlir Masnad-i-Ala* (ed. and rev. by Sir Jadunath Sarkar), 2nd Edition, 1958 (originally published in 1926), pp. 7-11.

[76] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Calling of History: Sir Jadunath Sarkar and His Empire of Truth,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015, p. 136.

[77]Manindranath Mandal, 'Samajik Abasad', *PS,* Baisakh 1331, *PM Vol. 2*, p. 182.

[78]Manindranath Mandal, 'Mahendranather Jibankatha', *Mahendra Charit,* p. 17.

[79] Kshirodchandra Das, 'Jatir Sadhana', *PS,* Sraban 1331, *PM Vol. 2*, p. 195.

of '*sadhana*' implied the cultivation of '*tyaga*' or an ethic of self-denial. It was "the ethics", as Ranajit Guha put it, "of overcoming the resistance of what stands in the way of becoming" and it was supposed to work "in this role, closely with *sraddha*, the respect an individual owes to others as one who is adequate to his own possibility and entitled to his own respect."[80] Kshirodchandra deplored that "the six lakhs of Paundrakshatriyas" were hardly stirring to take such a vow: to go by census records, "the percentage of educated people had declined between 1911 and 1921" and on top of that "selfish in-fighting was eating into the vitality of the community".[81]

Moreover, they saw 'sacrifice' as constituting the essence of the 'proper' political subjectivity that could fight the social injustice of caste. Manindranath emphasised that volunteers of the proposed association must not be moved by the desire for personal gains, factional rivalries or self-importance. Manindranath quoted Tolstoy: "All men live, not by the care they take of themselves, but by the love that there is in men." They may need to go from door to door, move between antagonistic social groups, to persuade people about the need for the movement. "They must conquer themselves before they can hope to conquer the minds of people".[82] Paundras of different *thaks* or sub-sects and peoples of other oppressed castes had to be united in protest; they were thus always *in the making*. The figure of the 'mother' would be invoked in the same way as in nationalist pedagogy. "How can you forget our poor mother who is being tortured?" asked Manindranath in the poem, '*Mayer Dak*': "Upper castes belittle her and trample her underfoot/ Shall you still stay silent?"[83] The leader of a broad, inclusive resistance against Brahmanical power must be the selfless *samajsevak*, the 'servant of society', who must sacrifice his own pleasures to plunge into revolutionary action. And, Manindranath brought the example of Booker Taliaferro Washington (1856-1915), the black American leader of prominence, who, born a slave, painstakingly learned to read and write and asked blacks to demonstrate 'industry' and 'intelligence' to gain equal social rights: "*Booker ekta 'negro' chele/*

[80] Ranajit Guha, 'Nationalism and the Trials of Becoming', *The Small Voice of History*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2009, p. 533.

[81] Kshirodchandra Das, 'Jatir Sadhana', p. 196.

[82] Mandal, *Bangiya Jana Samgha*, p. 36.

[83] Manindranath Mandal , 'Mayer Dak' (no page no.), *PS*, Agrahayan, 1334 BS, 1927.

ekai tulle samajtare/ 'Kritadas Kafri' aji/ Sammanita biswadvare"[84] (Booker singlehandedly raised the position of former African slaves to one of international respect).

The dichotomy between 'self-sufficiency-as-truly-consisting-dignity' and 'begging-for-favours' was so heavily emphasised in this discourse that it obfuscated the difference between the limited kindness that could be forthcoming from upper castes, and the legitimate constitutional rights that could be bestowed by the state. Manindranath argued in *Bangiya Jana Samgha* that concessions received through 'begging' could be taken away any moment by the givers: "several boundary lines are invariably drawn up in the protection that is offered at mercy" and "the depressed classes must let society know that they do not seek mercy, refuge or protection".[85] The *Paundrakshatriya Samachar* of the 1920s also reiterated: "*bhikshayam naiba naiba cha*", on not "succumbing to the temptation of a few grains of rice" offered by the colonial government.[86] Even thirty years later, in the 1950s, the *Paundrakshatriya Bandhab* would ask: what good could possibly accrue to a highly downtrodden community through "a small number of jobs, scholarships and legislative positions secured through the grace of reservations, which would, anyway, be called off within ten years"?[87]

The early leaders sought education by mobilising the community's own resources. Raicharan Sardar, whom present-day Paundra leaders call 'the *mahatma*'[88], represented the endeavour. He was the first graduate (1900) and the first to receive a degree in law (1906) in the community. He faced enormous odds as a student both inside and outside his community because it was unthinkable for a poor, 'untouchable' caste student in that place and time to aim so high.[89] His autobiography

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[84] *Ibid*.

[85] Mandal, *Bangiya Jana Samgha*, p. 37.

[86] Anonymous, 'Samayik Mantabya' *PS*, 1330-31 (month not known), p. 63.

[87] Anonymous, 'Sampadakiya', *Paundrakshatriya Bandhab* (henceforth *PB*), Jaishtha 1358, reprinted in *PM Vol. 3*, p. 198.

[88] Dilip Gayen (ed.), *Mahatma Raicharan Sardar O Paundra Samaj*, Calcutta: Paundra Mahasamgha, 2011.

[89] Compare Raicharan's attainments and ambitions with the words that Bankimchandra used, albeit with a lot of sympathy and concern, to describe a typical 'Pod' in his essay 'Ramdhan Pod': "*E to gorib Poder chele, bidyabudhir kono ilaka rakhe na*" ("Son of an indigent Pod, he was naturally

Deener Atmakahini is perhaps the first Dalit autobiography in Bengal.[90] Very few families of his caste, in the villages of southern Bengal, sent their sons to the village school in the late nineteenth century. Sardar's parents, however, sent all three of their sons to the *pathsala*.[91] But, going to middle school and high school required leaving the village. A series of complex interactions and experiences would follow that would cumulatively ignite caste-protest and also contour its limits. I shall just hint at some of them.

Notably, the 'untouchable' boy would not eat at the Kayastha's, for the Kayastha was a Shudra. "We do not eat food cooked by the Kayastha" ("*amra kayeter bhat khai na*"), knew Raicharan as a young boy.[92] This testifies to Tanika Sarkar's observation about the salience of internecine configurations among Shudras in Bengal.[93] The young Raicharan's statement did not mean malice for the Kayastha. It was just a sort of scrupulousness that a familial observance must not be renounced merely for the sake of material convenience. Thus, the 'untouchable' student would, by necessity, come in close contact with the Brahman, in whose place alone he would take food and lodging – an experience of proximity that would unleash unpredictable and momentous effects. In the Brahman's house, Raicharan would teach Brahman students, often a number of them. 'Teaching the Brahman' was a liberating experience that immediately sparked a new self-awareness.[94] If he was the tutor for younger Brahman boys, he was also sent for errands and seen as a household help by the adults.[95] He was, as he said, both loved and exploited.[96] Raicharan was first subjected to direct caste-humiliation as an 'untouchable' when his mattress touched the mattress

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beyond the territory of knowledge or wisdom"). Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, 'Ramdhan Pod' (1892), *Bankim Rachanabali, Bibidha Prabandha*, pp. 863-865.

[90] Prof. Kalipada Mani, 'Revered Raicharan Sardar: A Great Name in the History of Dalit Movement', *SD*, August, 2015, pp. 7-8.

[91] Sardar, *Deener Atmakahini*, pp. 1-3.

[92] *Ibid*., pp. 20-22.

[93] Tanika Sarkar, 'Holy infancy: love and power in a 'low caste' sect in Bengal', *South Asian History and Culture*, Vol. 2, No. 3, July, 2011, p. 341.

[94] Sardar, *Deener Atmakahini*, pp. 11-12.

[95] *Ibid.* pp. 12-22.

[96] *Ibid.*

of a Brahman boy in course of their studying together. He was insulted by a lady of the house, a young widow, herself a prey to Brahmanical injustice.[97] Another remarkable instance was Raicharan's being thrown a slipper on his face by one Nabinbabu (Brahman), one of his guardians. However, Raicharan's tale was far more layered than a Brahman-'untouchable' confrontation. This Nabinbabu was not always harsh to Raicharan. In fact, Nabinbabu had reproved his father when the latter was found employing Raicharan in the middle of the night to massage his legs. But, Nabinbabu was addicted to drinking. Some money, he had taken from Raicharan with the word that he would buy him books, was misappropriated by Nabinbabu to buy liquor. Not getting the books and losing his little money, Raicharan told his woe to Nabinbabu's wife, who was highly affectionate towards the meritorious 'untouchable' boy. The beating happened when Nabinbabu, in an inebriated state, was chastised by his wife for stealing the money.[98] It was the classic case of the 'afflicted', 'degenerate' Brahman, who elicits contempt even from his own people. Raicharan's moral victory was always acknowledged by Brahmans. (Or, that is how Raicharan wanted readers of his autobiography to see the story of his life). Even Nabinbabu was *repentant*.[99] If these were two instances of humiliation received from Brahmans, there were countless instances of good Brahmans, school-teachers and headmasters, who loved him as their "own son".[100] Moreover, he was no less tormented by people of his own community who sneered at Raicharan's high ambitions.[101]

Around 1901 when Sardar entered the Bangabasi College in Calcutta as a student of Law, he formed some idea about "the real nature of spiteful caste animus" that prevailed in society, even in the metropolis. Living in a 'mess', Sardar narrated, he faced antagonism from a "*Kaibarter Brahman*" and from persons who identified themselves as "*Uttar-ari Kaibarta*", a distorted form of 'Uttar-Rarhi Kaibarta'. Sardar thought that ritually degraded people like intermediate-caste Shudras and Brahman-priests of 'inferior castes' were greater enemies than upper-castes for 'untouchable'

[97] *Ibid.*

[98] *Ibid.*

[99] *Ibid.*

[100] *Ibid.*, p. 19, in particular.

[101] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

communities.[102] However, a rich, upper caste gentleman told Raicharan that "if the Pod took to education, the country would go up in flames" and, when he was seeking a job in the railways, a Rarhi Brahman asked him, "Do you not have the plough?" Sardar knew how to reply. He reminded the latter that lower castes had been unduly deprived of their shares in government services "for a hundred and fifty years" and said that he aimed to break upper-caste monopoly in that profession.[103]

In June, 1901, Sardar was "delighted" to "see for the first time" some aspiring students from his own caste.[104] When a number of men of his caste came to share the same accommodation, Sardar felt "a sense of untold joy".[105] For the first time he felt "at home" with people of his own caste because these men shared similar traumas (associated with the struggle of poor low-caste boys to find a place in the city and its institutions), anxieties as well as ambitions. As Sanjay Palshikar observed, "The presence of those who share the hurt with you can turn the traumatic situation into a battle and that is the first move from solitary and purely psychological suffering to collective action".[106] The feeling that "something had to be done" – reform within and assertion outside – to contend and claim one's fair place in society dawned upon Sardar and his mess-mates from the same caste. The trials of coming to stay in the city were not unique. No wonder, the idea of setting up hostels was common to the agenda of all subaltern-caste associations. Sardar also nurtured this dream till late in his life.

Raicharan's autobiography recounted several instances in which erstwhile antagonists became admirers, and upper caste men and women, won over by his merit and dogged perseverance, readily paid the costs of his education. Raicharan thought that 'Scheduled Castes', as such, were deprived of such instances of divine love – '*divyapriti*'[107] – that washed away social differences between men.

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[102] *Ibid.*, pp. 44-48.

[103] *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 50.

[104] *Ibid.*

[105] *Ibid.*

[106] Sanjay Palshikar, 'Understanding Humiliation', p. 83.

[107] *Ibid.*, p. 26.

A letter he wrote to Manindranath Mandal in 1922 shows his enthusiasm for cross-caste solidarity of downtrodden castes "to resist attacks and persecutions from upper castes."[108] But he thought that 'scheduling' would foreclose the possibility of earning genuine appreciation of merit from mainstream society: it would "seal the fate of a backward boy who only gets hatred and no love".[109]

Enlisting the support of the reluctant in constructive projects through moral persuasion was what Raicharan saw as his task. As a *samajsevak*, he set up a primary school and a night-school in his own village and a hostel for students of his caste in Calcutta in 1919; he made unrelenting efforts at imploring Paundra land-holding families of his district, the affluent Mandals of Kotalpur, Naskars of Beliaghata, Naskars of Sarsuna, the Kayals of Gobindapur and others, to contribute to the founding of schools in their respective localities. They often turned him down. Still, Raicharan's initiatives brought up five English high schools in his district, the most prominent one being the Sitikantha Institution, in the Jagadishpur village in southern Twenty-four Parganas, which received affiliation from Calcutta University in 1927. His son, who published Raicharan's autobiography, tells us that he sacrificed fees from his clients, most of them Paundras, and prevailed upon them to contribute to the school funds. Funds, collected through door-to-door campaign, also paid for the Provident Fund for teachers.[110] Present day leaders cherish Raicharan's vision and hard work: "to serve is to toil hard" ("*sram chara seba hoy na*").[111]

The *Sarba Banga Paundrakshatriya Samiti*, with Raicharan as vice-president, had convened two general body meetings, one in late 1933 at South Suburban School and the other in April 1935 in the Ballygunge Jagabandhu Institution in Calcutta, to protest against the caste's inclusion in the Schedules. Resolutions were unanimously passed in both, and deputations were sent to the government requesting the removal of the caste from the list of Scheduled Castes. A third meeting of Paundra leaders including leaders from Khulna, who had sent a counter request to the government,

[108] Sardar, *Deener Atmakahini*, p. 184.

[109] *Ibid*., p. 250.

[110] Dr. Suranjan Midde, '"Deener Atmakahini Ba Satya Pariksha" Banglay Pratham Dalit Atmajibani' in Gayen (ed.), *Mahatma Raicharan Sardar O Paundra Samaj*, p. 39.

[111] *Ibid.*

was convened in Tollygunge in May 1935. A unanimous resolution against inclusion was passed even here.[112] Hemchandra Naskar, soon to contest elections in a reserved seat, consistently maintained that 'reservations' would be a "disgraceful burden".[113] Rajendranath Sarkar, later to serve as Congress minister in East Pakistan, and the most important of the three from Khulna to effect the 'scheduling' of the caste, wrote in his autobiography four decades later that he and two of his supporters could send a separate deputation to the government only under concealment to communicate their preference for inclusion in the 'schedule'.[114]

Around 1935, Raicharan Sardar, Manindranath Mandal and Kedarnath Mandal exchanged some twenty-five letters between themselves discussing possible ways by which to remove the caste from the 'schedule'! Kedarnath, who was Manindranath's brother, suggested a consultation with Adisvar Das of the Sutradhar community. Das had succeeded in getting the Sutradhars excluded from the list in the 'penultimate stage'.[115]

The *Paundrakshatriya Bandhab* of the 1950s continued to critique the policy of 'scheduling' particular groups for state patronage. It was an 'alluring trap', the editors of the journal argued, designed by superior classes to curb the challenge of Dalit emancipation and limit it to some restricted instances of social mobility.[116] Why were not boys and girls of the caste, the journal asked, scoring distinctively high marks in the public examinations? It reminded its readers of the stellar grades of Raicharan Sardar and the accomplishments of many others of that earlier generation.[117] Was

[112] Raicharan Sardar, 'Depressed Ba Tapshilbhukta Jati Samasya', *Deener Atmakahini*; Rajendranath Sarkar, *Jibankatha*, pp. 71-72.

[113] Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Rabindranath, Gandhiji o Ambedkar*, Calcutta: Mahapran Publishing House (year not found) p. 61. See Sarkar, *Jibankatha*, pp. 73-74.

[114] Sarkar, *Jibankatha*, pp. 73-74.

[115] Sardar, *Deener Atmakahini*, pp. 273-275.

[116] Radhakanta Das Barman, 'Chetaner Britti' and other anonymous and unnamed articles, *PB*, Bhadra, Aswin, Agrahayan, 1358, Paush, 1359, Aswin, 1361, *PM Vol.3*, pp. 202-215.

[117] *PB*, Aswin 1361, *PM Vol. 3*, p. 211. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has mentioned that "the Pods or Paundrakshatriyas" awarded a gold medal every year from 1910 to the boy of their community who would stand first in the 'Middle English examination' in the district of the Twenty Four Parganas, "an example, followed by the Baruis as well." Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, p. 148. That initiative could well have been Sardar's – Sardar had scored the highest marks in the Second Division and stood third among all successful candidates in the Presidency Division when he passed the 'Middle English examination' at fifteen. *Deener Atmakahini*, pp. 11-13.

special patronage then eating into the individual's determination to achieve the extraordinary? The journal harped on the acute necessity of a united *Samgha* to uproot discrimination and exclusion – the administration of 'reservations' had become an excuse, it observed, to forget the extent to which the so-called lower castes continued to be discriminated against. It articulated class-like grievances on behalf of the "rural peasant", "preyed upon by the urban upper caste middle class" in countless ways, both manifest and insidious.[118] The editorial of the *Aswin* issue of 1954 supported Ambedkar's complaint that the depressed classes were not undergoing any genuine development. It reported that Ambedkar recently expressed a demand for a separate state for the depressed castes if things did not change, and that prominent newspapers had already begun to talk about Ambedkar developing the "pathological symptom of Jinnah". "We ask", the editorial retorted, "How did Jinnah contract the so-called 'disease' in the first place? And how is it that Ambedkar is contracting the same 'disease'? The weather must be terrible, why else?"[119] The journal was reverent towards both Gandhi and Ambedkar while it denounced the terms '*harijan*' and 'Scheduled Caste' alike.[120]

Valerian Rodrigues has written on how Ambedkar commended 'energetic action' and subsequently encapsulated it in "the Buddhist notion of *virya*".[121] Similarly, the trope of the 'warrior' – an image of 'fire and strength' – persists since Manindranath into today's Paundra movement. It is worded in masculine terms. Taking his cue from Vivekananda, Manindranath referred to the Upanishadic dictum, '*nayamatma balahinena labhya*', to suggest that the 'weak' could never realise the 'true self' or fight against upper caste arrogance.[122] Neo-Buddhist leaders today have authored the following motto: "O valiant Paundra ("*He bir Paundra*"), come forward and take the resolve to cultivate strength".[123] We find the *Paundrakshatriya Bandhab* quoting

[118] *PB*, Paush 1359, *PM Vol. 3*, pp. 208-209; Sri Ojha, 'Barna-Hindur Bhut', *PB*, Paush 1358, *PM Vol. 3*, pp. 239-244.

[119] *PB*, Aswin 1361, *PM Vol. 3*, p. 212.

[120] 'Sampadakiya', *PB*, Jaishtha 1358, *PM Vol. 3*, pp. 197-199.

[121] Valerian Rodrigues, 'Making a Tradition Critical: Ambedkar's Reading of Buddhism' in Peter Robb (ed.), *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 299.

[122] Mandal, 'Anunnata Samasya', *PS*, Aswin 1334, p. 89.

[123] 'Bodhikalpya', *PM Vols. 1-4*.

Edward Pulsford, an Australian politician noted for his racial tolerance, in a 1951 issue: "Be men, more than men you cannot be; if you are less, your own nature will never forgive you."[124] The suggestive image coalesces righteous protest, manliness, self-development and self-sacrifice. 'Sacrifice', as we show later, was also celebrated in many forms in *Paundrakshatriya*, a periodical started by the pro-'scheduling' Rajendranath Sarkar in 1938. Each issue bore Tagore's lyrics on the cover page: "Who do I hear in the first flourish of dawn, saying, fear not, Oh, fear not/ He, who gives away his all, remains truly inexhaustible".[125]

Representing a Totality

What was the political potential of an untouchable self-respect movement, overlaid with the inward-directed pedagogy of austere self-preparation, sacred duty and sacrifice? Was the need to painstakingly earn respect, '*adhikar arjan*'[126], a sign of a loss of nerve in a protest against caste humiliation?

The salience of this stoical, renunciatory mode of critique of hierarchy was twofold: it at once incorporated the traditional virtue of *tyaga* and the modern demands of rationality and objectivity.[127] By invoking a self that is above the compulsions of petty 'interest', the critique claimed to speak for the total good (*'samagrik mangal*'[128]) and the *whole* people. It made a formidable bid to hegemony. Manindranath and Mahendranath made contacts with various public writers and

[124] Barman, 'Chetaner Britti', p. 214.

[125] '*Udayer pathe suni kar bani, bhoy nai ore bhoy nai/ Nihsheshe pran je koribe dan, kshay nai tar kshay nai*'. *PM, Vol. 4*, p. 'tha'.

[126] Prabhash Kumar Mandal, a Paundra leader, reflected in 2001 on how the '*adhikar arjan*' of earlier times mutated into the '*adhikar dabi*' of recent times. Mandal, *Paundrakshatriya Samaje Krama Prabodhan,* p. 17.

[127] On the ascetic self of the political subject, see: Prathama Banerjee, 'Between the political and the non-political: the Vivekananda moment and a critique of the social in colonial India, 1890s-1910s' *Social History*, 39:3, 2014, pp. 323-339. Banerjee writes about how Vivekananda formulated renunciation as a privileged position of critique *vis a vis* the social. Also, Rajarshi Dasgupta, 'The Ascetic Modality: A Critique of Communist Self-fashioning' in Nivedita Menon, Aditya Nigam and Sanjay Palshikar, eds., *Critical Studies in Politics: Exploring Sites, Selves, Power*, New Delhi, 2014. On how the ideal of the 'disengaged self' incorporates both the 'ancient variant of stoicism' and the 'modern, scientific, rational worldview' as it is supposed to help the subject to rationally objectify his own fears, emotions, compulsions, see Charles Taylor, 'Inescapable Frameworks' in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 21.

[128] Manindranath Mandal, 'Bangiya Jana Samgha Sambandhe Abhimat' in *Pallikabi Rasikchandra.*

intellectuals of the time to influence public opinion. Manindranath's *Bangiya Jana Samgha* received acclaim principally because it expressed a synoptic view, a transcendent universality, rather than "a psychology of division"[129]. A social reformer and lawyer of Medinipur wrote to Manindranath in 1924 that his essays were pieces of diamonds; every Hindu must read them, advanced and depressed classes alike.[130] Another lawyer and local writer remarked: "the distinction of this book lies in its being completely free from malice" ("*sampurna bidvesh-parishunya*").[131] A larger-than-life rationality was claimed on behalf of the "expedition of the despised" ("*abajnater abhijan*"[132]) by identifying it as providential. Manindranath often referred to the advent of the springtime of peoples and the 'spirit of the age' to speak of the inevitable new awakening. "The hearts and minds of the despised multitudes, which were hitherto in shackles and lying fallow, are throbbing with a new hope; it is the sign of India's future well-being."[133]

Kshirodchandra Das, the co-editor of *Paundrakshatriya Samachar* with Mahendranath Karan in the 1920s, specifically addressed the question of whether the untouchable movement was anti-Hindu. He made a distinction between religion that was eternal and rules of society that were man-created and thus subject to change. This enabled him to speak against the prevailing common-sense that *jatibhed* was integral to Hinduism. Kshirodchandra argued that ancient India had different castes in the sense of different classes of professions and the son of a sage could well be a tanner while the son of a tanner would not be denied sainthood. Hereditary caste, ("*janmagata jatibhed*") unrelated to subjective qualities or acts ("*guna o karma*"), was not 'original' to Vedic Hinduism; it came about later. Hereditary *jatibhed* was just a strategic contrivance of a minority to consolidate their power over the majority. It

[129] Rabindranath had written to Prasantachandra in 1928 that the "psychology of politics" in the country was a "psychology of division". Prasanta Kumar Pal (ed.), *Kalyaniyeshu Prasanta: Rabindranath-Prasantachandra Mahalanobis Patrabinimoy*, Kolkata, 2005, p. 68. The *Bangiya Jana Samgha*'s politics could claim to be different.

[130] Mandal, 'Bangiya Jana Samgha Sambandhe Abhimat' (quoting a letter from one Bhagabatchandra Das).

[131] *Ibid.*, quoting a letter from one Ishanchandra Mahapatra.

[132] The title of a piece Manindranath contributed to the *Namasudra Hitaishi* of Phalgun, 1920, to propose the *Samgha*. Mandal, *Bangiya Jana Samgha*, p. 12.

[133] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

followed, therefore, that the new social movement, rather than being in conflict with Hinduism, would resuscitate 'pure' religion. "Only those who castigated logic and reason, and recited the Shastras without recognising that their laws lost validity with time, would call us anti-Hindu", remarked Kshirodchandra.[134] Their critique of the Brahmanical order was consolidated by exchanging ideas with caste Hindus. So, if Ambedkar's burning of Manusmriti in 1927 "cost (him) the approval of all but the most radical of his caste Hindu supporters"[135], the *Paundrakshatriya Samachar* made common cause with reformist papers like *Prachi* to denounce the *Manusmriti* by showing its inherent contradictions. "Manu contradicted *jatibhed* by talking about the universal sameness of things and the all-pervading presence of Brahma" and, "if Indians were a living species, they would have given up Manu's rules long ago".[136]

They retained their Hindu identity perhaps more to assert their estranged, borderline existence – as simultaneous threat and reassurance. Manindranath dared Hindu upper castes to envision a situation in which all classes of servile labourers have boycotted their useful service to society: "Imagine the fields lying fallow, streets filled with filth, night-soil left un-removed, and shoes no more available for the *babu*".[137] It was a reminder of the services the oppressed rendered to society with its contrast to the humiliation they received in return.

Manindranath's distinctive political style finds eloquent expression in his play *Prayaschitta*, meaning 'penance'.[138] It came out in a periodical, named *Adhikar,* in the mid-nineteen-twenties which gave voice to the 'social rage' of the "dispossessed peoples".[139] All the editors were Namasudras and the periodical warned its lower caste readership against the "grave conspiracy" of upper caste Hindus, who were

[134] Kshirodchandra Das, 'Anunnater Andolan O Hindutva', *PS,* Kartik 1331, *PM Vol. 2*, pp. 209-212.

[135] Eleanor Zelliot, 'Gandhi and Ambedkar – A Study in Leadership' in J. Michael Mahar (ed.), *The Untouchables in Contemporary India,* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1972, p. 82.

[136] Anonymous, 'Manusamhitay Jatibhed', extract from *Prachi* in *PS,* Baisakh 1331, *PM Vol. 2,* pp. 247-248.

[137] Manindranath Mandal, 'Anunnata Samasya', p. 87.

[138] Manindranath Mandal, 'Prayaschitta', *Adhikar* (eds., Revatimohan Sarkar, Rasiklal Biswas, Saratchandra Majumdar, Madhabchandra Biswas, Jogendranath Sarkar), Year 1, Nos. 6-7, Aswin Kartik, pp. 4-20.

[139] The editors described the journal as "the mouthpiece of the dispossessed peoples". Below this would be written, "*Nayamatma balahinena labhya*" in every issue. *ibid*.

instigating them against Muslims by spreading false rumours of abduction of Namasudra women by Muslims.[140] Manindranath's play represented the "abductions, loot and plunder carried out by the Muslim" as solely targeting upper castes. It thus affirmed that the "theme of abductions" could not be used by caste-Hindus to rope in the lower castes to orchestrate Hindu unity against Muslims.[141] The lower castes not only had formidable muscle power to protect themselves and their women from possible attacks but were, above all, friends of Muslims. The play included a scene in which a number of Namasudras decided in a meeting that the "only way to fight social humiliation was conversion to Islam."[142] In another scene, a bunch of 'low'-caste people resolved to sit and watch the distress of upper castes at the hands of Muslims without lending the former a helping hand. A reactionary Brahman whose daughter was abducted by Muslims eventually begged for mercy from a Namasudra leader, Biratchandra Mandal (a real person who found place in Manindranath's fiction) so that the latter arranged for the rescue of his daughter.[143]

Manindranath and Mahendranath noted that "a few crores of Paundrakshatriyas, Byagrakshatriyas and Namasudras" had converted to Islam.[144] They also noted that the services of barbers and washer-men could be regained upon conversion. Thus, by strategically associating with the reformist caste-Hindu and retelling the decreasing numbers of the "dying Hindu"[145], they succeeded in demonstrating the formidable political challenge posed by depressed castes while claiming to speak for the well-being of the entire Hindu community. They implied that the impending 'revolution' would be a *purging* of Hinduism and Hindu society induced by the ritually impure and willed by none but God.[146]

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[140] 'Bhishan Sharajantra', *Adhikar*, Jaishtha, 1334 BS (1927), p. 4.

[141] On how the theme of 'abductions' was employed in projects of Hindu unity, see Pradip Kumar Datta, ''Abductions' and the Constellation of a Hindu Communal Bloc', *Carving Blocs*, pp. 148-238.

[142] Manindranath Mandal, 'Prayaschitta', p. 24.

[143] *Ibid*., p. 13.

[144] Manindranath Mandal, 'Prayaschitta', pp. 4-20.

[145] Datta, *Carving Blocs*.

[146] Mandal, 'Anunnata Samasya', *PS*, Kartik 1334, p. 102.

The logic of the movement was emphatically holistic. It deliberately differed from contemporary untouchable caste movements like that of the Namasudras in Bengal which were apathetic to nationalism.[147] Manindranath's Samgha assured that it did not wish to ignite animosity. "Its objective was rather to infuse life within the nation".[148] By exemplifying both the "'happy consciousness' of the subordinate castes under colonialism"[149] as well as the 'unhappy consciousness' of the patriot, they offered to define the new normative for national liberation. They challenged the binary opposition invoked by upper caste nationalists between 'patriotism' and 'sectarianism' or between 'national interest' and 'sectional interest'. "It could be asked", wrote Manindranath, "why a separate political formation is still necessary for the present?" He used the metaphor of an oceanic storm to talk about the waves of discontent and hope that moved specific groups of people within the nation in this 'new era'.[150] The regeneration of the country would achieve fullness only when lower castes spoke for themselves and not allow upper caste nationalists to rely on their uncompensated support. "You cannot hush up an oceanic turbulence...and the nation should have no reason to fear if we acquire a strong foothold".[151] The *dual identification* – with the expanded self of the patriot and the 'untouchable' caste rebel – had the potential to counter the "profound ethical halo" that "envelop(ed) the caste Hindu reformer".[152]

Their politics of making a so-called sectional claim into a popular claim, a 'universal signification', characterises the naming of the *Samgha*. It was initially referred to as the *Sarba Banga Anunnata Jati Samgha*, or the All Bengal Depressed Classes Association by Manindranath and his lower caste correspondents. Manindranath finally chose the name *Bangiya Jana Samgha*, or Bengal People's

[147] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Continuing Alienation in an Age of Mass Politics, 1912-1925' in *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India.*

[148] Mandal, *Bangiya Jana Samgha*, p. 44.

[149] Dilip M. Menon, 'Caste and Colonial Modernity: Reading *Saraswativijayam*' in *The Blindness of Insight: Essays on Caste in Modern India*, New Delhi: Navayana Publications, 2006, p. 112.

[150] Mandal, *Bangiya Jana Samgha*, p. 44.

[151] *Ibid.*

[152] I owe the expression to D. R. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 45.

Association. The introduction of an 'empty signifier'[153] like the 'Bengal People' in the name is significant. Manindranath implied that the 'depressed classes' constituted the majority population, the 'real people' of Bengal. But, the concept of 'people', vague as usual, performed a greater political function.

On the one hand, the transcendent appeal of 'the people' made a subversive claim about human dignity. To be designated a minority as opposed to a broad 'popular' identity would make upper castes nervous. On the other hand, the signifier 'Bengal People', being indeterminate in its social content, did not prohibit anyone, whatsoever his caste-location, from joining its ranks. Jogeshchandra Basu, an upper-caste reformist anxious about the "steadily declining numerical strength of the Hindus", suggested in an article to *Paundrakshatriya Samachar* in 1924, that the "*Hindu bhadralok sreni*" ("genteel classes") must take the lead in joining the *Samgha* uninvited. Like "elder brothers" they must express their solidarity with the majority.[154] Upendranath Mukherjee, of *Hindus: A Dying Race* fame[155], thought that the name was well-chosen, and "that it hinted at a profound social and historical riddle."[156]

Upper caste enthusiasts for Hindu unity perhaps saw in the empty signifier 'people' a hope of reabsorbing and neutralising the separate identification of the 'depressed classes'. But the *Samgha*, by initiating vigorous correspondence between leaders of so many 'depressed' castes, was already too formidable a space. Upper caste reformist support to the movement did not oblige lower caste leaders to parrot the themes of a Hindu communal common-sense or even of Hindu unity. Instead, the coming together obliged upper-caste champions of 'Hindu' and/or 'national' unity to repeat a set of anti-status-quo discourses that evolved from lower caste dissent. We know that solidarity between dissimilar social groups becomes possible through common hatred. Here that antagonistic frontier was *not* constituted by the Muslim or the religious other; the enemy was constructed as the "numerically microscopic,

[153] See the discussion on why 'empty signifiers' like 'people' matter in politics, Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London: Verso Books, 2005, p. 70.

[154] Jogeshchandra Basu, 'Bangiya Jana Samgha', *PS*, Agrahayan, 1331 BS, 1924, p. 309.

[155] U. N. Mukherjee's series of articles in the *Bengalee* entitled 'Hindus: A Dying Race' (1-22 June 1909) was extremely influential in the times. See Datta, *Carving Blocs*.

[156] Anonymous, 'Jana Samgha Sambandhe Upendranath', *PS*, Kartik 1331 BS, 1924, p. 294.

exploitative *bamun*, a distortion of the Brahman, who only brought evil to society by clinging to Manu".[157] Anti-Muslim insinuations did not find many takers here and such notes were hardly sounded. Prafulla Chandra Roy, in his addresses to them, lauded the fraternal ideal of Islam[158]. In order to connect to the movement, caste-Hindus – as reflected in their contributions to the *Paundrakshatriya Samachar* of the 1920s – reflected on the obsoleteness of Manu's rulings and about upper-caste 'hypocrisies' and 'evils', like dowry.[159] Thus, Manindranath's movement measured up to a hegemonic formation. It represented "the ultimate historical horizon"[160] in its moment.

The Larger Social Awakening

So far, we have dealt with the ideas of the more remarkable Paundra leaders of the early twentieth century. But as Mark Juergensmeyer put it, "movements are not created by a few leaders; they are stirrings within a social order, upheavals of new awareness and aspiration".[161] What was the larger "social dimension" of the Paundra movement?

A study of reports of Paundra social congregations published in a single year (1924) in the caste journal, *Paundrakshatriya Samachar*, reveals the nature of this wider social participation. It is remarkable that in this year, there were thirty Paundra

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[157] Anonymous, 'Bamun Pandit Ba Hindu Samaj', *PS*, Ashadh 1331 BS, 1924, *PM Vol. 2*, pp. 251-252.

Even in other places in India, Hindu social reform initiatives during this time were reacting and responding to an agenda of reform outlined by 'untouchable'- caste subjects "rather than the other way round". Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability*, pp. 136-144. Rawat shows that Chamars in north India were not the passive 'targets' of Arya Samaj initiatives to Hinduise Dalits. Chamar activists had their own agendas. They chose to negotiate with sections of Hindu society, like the Arya Samaj, who were receptive to some of their concerns to make their autonomous movement more effective. And despite intimacy with Digindranarayan, who was associated with the Bengal Hindu Mahasabha, Manindranath Mandal, the Paundra leader, criticised the divisiveness that was encouraged by the Hindu Mahasabha in a 1927 issue of *Paundrakshatriya Samachar*. Mandal, 'Anunnata Samasya', p. 101.

[158] *Ibid.*

[159] Rajendranath Shastri, 'Hindu Samaje Nimna Srenir Sthan Kothay?', *PS*, Chaitra 1330, 1924, *PM Vol. 3*, pp. 177-178.

[160] In Laclau's words, "The moment of fusion between partial object (here, the demands of the lower caste rebel) and totality (say, the demands of the community as a whole, Indian or Hindu) represents, at one point in time, the ultimate historical horizon." Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 226.

[161] Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in 20th-Century Punjab*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, p. 279.

conferences in thirty different venues, evenly distributed between Khulna, Medinipur and the Twenty-four Parganas. In each of these conferences, Paundras participated from other districts. The number of participants in some meetings was, reportedly, above thousand, the strength of one meeting in Amirpur in Khulna being 2500. In the districts of Medinipur and the Twenty-four Parganas, the meetings were as frequent, but average participation was around 300/400.[162] Wealthy Paundras often became hosts to such meetings and arranged them in the premises of their houses. But some meetings happened on school premises, booked for the purpose, by enthusiastic, not-so-wealthy Paundras. The thirty meetings were reported by nineteen different reporters from Khulna, Medinipur and the Twenty-four Parganas, including a Muslim named Muhammad Garibullah from Swarupnagar in the Twenty-four Parganas.[163] Garibullah was the head-master of an upper-primary school, founded especially for the education of Paundra and Muslim students. The school's name was Nirman Hitasadhini Paundrakshatriya Uchha Prathamik Bidyalay.[164] Muslim participation was not uncommon in Paundra meetings. And, the figure of the school-teacher, both Paundra and non-Paundra, emerges frequently in these reports of associational activities.

Ritual reforms hardly formed the content of the issues discussed, or the resolutions taken. The emphasis was on secular reform: on education, including female education, on establishing primary schools for children and night-schools for adults, on preventing child-marriages, getting rid of dowry and arranging for widow-remarriage in the case of child-widows, on improving agriculture and trade (proudly emphasizing that agriculture was the backbone of the caste and the nation), on establishing co-operatives and hostels and on securing rural health and hygiene. Improvement of local schools, facilitating the education of students (Hindu and Muslim) from deprived backgrounds, was a common issue for discussion. Youth volunteers played an important part. Youth associations were steadily emerging among Paundras – the Khulna Paundrakshatriya Chhatra Samgha and the Paundrakshatriya Chhatra Juva

[162] This is a summary account from reports titled 'Samajik Sabha-samiti', 'Samayik Prasanga', etc., found in *PS*, 1330-31 BS, 1924 (entire year).

[163] *Ibid.*, p. 335.

[164] *Ibid.* Some of the other Muslim participants in this meeting, reported by Garibullah, in Twenty-four Parganas, were Maulavi Muhammad Ali, the headmaster of the Bayarghata Upper Primary School, and Maqbul Ali Khan, the headmaster of the Bithari Lower Primary School.

Parishad being founded in 1922 and 1926, respectively. Paundra students' conferences – *chatra sammilani* – comprised some of the meetings reported in this year. The need to subscribe to the caste-journal and to raise funds was addressed. One Paundra students' conference in Doro, Medinipur, resolved to take collective initiative in cultivating paddy and Ravi crops on land taken on lease to raise funds for the community's '*Daridra Bhandar*' ('Poor People's Fund').[165]

The secular and the ritual/religious remained intertwined, however. Kshatriyahood would, in many cases, be restated in the congregations as a matter of boosting confidence and self-respect. On occasions, the priests of the Paundras, whose ritual status was knotted with that of the Paundras, became important participants in the meetings. These priests invoked the cliché of the 'degenerate Brahman' and argued that their patrons, the Paundras, must support the education of their sons. Education, alone, could 'regenerate them'. A handful of meetings happened on ritual occasions – occasions which were assertions of Kshatriyahood, like the death-rite (*Shradh*) being conducted on the thirteenth day. It needed some daring within rural society to do this for it was customary for the Shudra to observe a month-long ritual mourning. One of these occasions in Nilagram in Diamond Harbour was graced by Brahmans (not just the priests of Paundras), Mahishyas, a representative of the Byagrakshatriyas (Bagdi) and Digindranarayan Bhattacharya – all of them came to show solidarity.[166]

Women of the locality arranged a women's meet the following day in the same venue to make the best of Digindranarayan's presence. This initiative of women carries significance. When Paundra males harped on women's education, that was undoubtedly from the perspective of raising good mothers. But the Paundra movement – like all movements whose watchword is self-respect – brought in its wake a stirring that "made it impossible for the notion of emancipation to keep standing where the leadership had put it."[167] It exceeded the initiatives of Paundra males when women like Prafullabala Mondol, Ushabala Mondol, Manikmoti Koyal and Suhashini Mondol asserted themselves as agents of their own emancipation by

[165] *Ibid*., p. 153.

[166] *Ibid*., pp. 336-337.

[167] Ranajit Guha, 'The Small Voice of History' in *The Small Voice of History*, p. 314.

calling a women's meeting ("*narisabha*") with Digindranarayan as the sole male participant and the elected president.[168]

A striking feature of the Paundra caste congregations in the 1920s was the frequent presence of persons from other castes, higher and lower. The reports mention some Mahishyas, Barujibis, Bagdis, Napits as well as Brahmans and Kayasthas as participants in a number of meetings. Manindranath, we must note, always mentioned very 'low' castes like the Hari ("Haddik"), Chashatti, Khasnat, Bani, Khyal, Koch, Tibar, Bairagi, Bagdi ("Byagrakshatriya") along with the "Paundrakshatriya", Namasudra, Rajbangshi, Kapalik, Mali, Jogi, Jhalo-Malo, Rajak and Sachhashi as collective organizers of the *Bangiya Jana Samgha*.[169] These solidarities flowed into the Paundra movement to some extent. Some persons from other castes, the reports mention, even contributed money to the Paundrakshatriya community-fund as part of general social service.[170] In Diamond Harbour, in particular, Mahishyas and Paundras showed mutual solidarity and respect. Brahmans and Kayasthas were often present because many of the meetings, as already said, were intended to improve the conditions of schools. In early January, 1924, Gangaram Mandal arranged a meeting in the Madhukhali village of Satkhira, Khulna, to better the condition of the Maukhali Middle English School. Paundra teachers of the school like Ratikanta Mondol and Mohanlal Biswas sang anthems for the caste community. The Brahman headmaster, Sachindrakumar Bandyopadhyay, and some other Brahmans like Santoshkumar Bhattacharya and Bijoymadhab Ghoshal were important participants.[171]

Nationalist upper-castes were invited in some Paundra gatherings, where Muslims also took part. Thus, Anilchandra Bandyopadhyay, the headmaster of the Nakipur High School in Khulna, along with other Brahman nationalists, preached the need to rejuvenate the cottage industry, adopt the *charka*, eradicate superstitions, and develop Hindu-Muslim communal harmony as well as unity among Hindus. As usual, the Upanishadic philosophy of monism – "*advaitavada*" – was invoked by Anilchandra to

[168] *PS*, 1331 BS, 1924 [the meeting happened on 13 Magh (end of January), but the month in which the report came out is not known], p. 337.

[169] Manindranath Mandal, *Bangiya Jana Samgha*, 'Bhumika'.

[170] *PS*, 1331 BS, 1924 (month not known), p. 269.

[171] *Ibid*., pp. 335-336.

say that the Hindu was equal to the Muslim, and that people of all castes were part of 'the supreme one'.[172] Anilchandra's was the typical trope of upper-caste 'penance' and repentance. The theme of communal and inter-caste unity, as indispensable for the birth of a new India, was also reiterated in the *Bangiya Jana Samgha* meeting of November, 1923.[173] Besides the Paundras, other participants were from the Namasudras, the Bagdis and the Malis. It was held in the publishing office of the journal, *Bharatbandhu*. Significantly, Biharilal Shastri, the Hindu reformist, was the editor of *Bharatbandhu*, and the *Samgha's* meeting happened on the premises of his house. Manindranath was the elected president of the meeting. The meeting affirmed the *Samgha's* support for the movement for Indian independence, while it also asserted that deserving candidates from the 'depressed classes' must be appointed to high government offices.[174]

In one of the Paundra gatherings, the issue of 'class' or 'redistribution of wealth' was raised in a queer manner. Anukulchandra Das was the speaker. He sought to make the Paundra audience conscious that while a large number of Paundras were engaged in the actual work of cultivation, they were filling the granaries of other castes: "*amader krishilabdha dhanya porer golay tuliya deoya ki thik*? *Samajer taka hatchara korite deoya sangata noy*." Das exhorted Paundras to develop the ambition to become *aratdars* or warehouse-owners, who stocked and traded in grain. The more the number of *aratdars* within a caste – it was implied – the more the fruits of labour stayed within the bounds of the caste.[175] A politics of redistribution could thus be variously imagined. Here class-power within caste was left as unproblematic; only class-power outside caste was targeted as exploitative.

Relations with Nationalism: The Remembered Story

Present-day leaders of the Paundra Mahasamgha imply a distinction between the lower caste leaders' embrace of nationalism as an ideal, and being co-opted and

[172] *Ibid*., pp. 318-319 (month of report not known, but the meeting happened in Aghrahayan / November-December).

[173] *Ibid.*, p. 254 [the meeting happened on 9th Kartik (around 24 October), 1924, in Howrah].

[174] *Ibid.*

[175] *Ibid*., p. 84.

neutralised by dominant nationalist political parties. Here the concept of self-sacrifice played a distinctive political role: it enabled the lower caste leader to reject tokenistic gestures of appeasement placed on offer by the dominant nationalist leadership. Even while endorsing nationalism, they could retain the cutting edge of political self-assertion by refusing temptations of personal promotion. Anukulchandra Das Naskar is remembered by the community as having demonstrated this in the aftermath of the Non-Cooperation movement. This is remembered history. I do not use 'remembered history' as a corrective to 'archival history'. There are, one suspects, elements of myth in remembered history. But the nature of remembrance reflects the predominant ideological legacies of the early movement. It provides a window to how a Dalit group desires to be seen by the rest of society.

A brief recapitulation of the context may be useful. By the 1920s, the Congress party's claim to represent the 'people' had been facing serious challenges. The Namasudras remained alienated since the Swadeshi movement, and Nirodbehari Mallik, their leader in the Legislative Council, had declared in 1921 that the term 'nation' was a misnomer in India.[176] Manindranath, the Paundra leader, was close to Namasudras such as Mallik and founded the *Bangiya Jana Samgha* with them. Manindranath regularly contributed to *Namasudra Hitaishi*. Here and in articles in *Nabyabharat* (where he spoke to a different upper-caste audience) from 1919 to 1921, Manindranath categorically stated the need of the depressed classes to organise "as per the principles and policies of the Muslim League" and "like the 'Panchamas' of Madras".[177] The distrust for Congress politicians was palpable. Only a *Samgha* would ensure, Manindranath noted, that the Congress did not make puppets of lower castes: by 'puppet-dance', he referred to the Calcutta Congress of 1917 where a seemingly meek and compliant Namasudra Congressite was applauded as the representative of the depressed classes.[178] Manindranath stated that *swaraj* was an impossible project without first mitigating the grievances of the depressed classes. However, he said that, "the same was indeed the message of Gandhi Maharaj". To integrate his cause further with nationalism, he also mentioned Prafulla Chandra Roy, Annie Besant and

[176] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India*, p. 119.

[177] Mandal, *Bangiya Jana Samgha*, p. 10.

[178] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Rabindranath Tagore.[179] Even as they befriended and collaborated with Namasudra leaders, Paundras like Mahendranath Karan and Raicharan Sardar noted their discomfort about being 'eclipsed' by 'dominating' Namasudras. Mahendranath Karan, in a 1924 issue of *Paundrakshatriya Samachar*, strongly resented Nirod Behari Mallik's claim to represent the backward classes as a whole before the Lee Commission. Mahendranath was displeased with Nirod Behari's statement that the depressed classes were averse to national autonomy or even the Indianisation of superior Indian public service. While Paundras, as "loyal subjects", were grateful to the British "for having acted as trustees so far", they were also patriots "who did not want the British to continue to rule the country."[180] Mahendranath noted that the political weight of the 'lower' castes had become palpable to the nationalists: "We would deem it sinful to speak obliquely of the character of the Mahatma. But nobody will doubt that it is because they are not left with any choice that his retinue of followers is reaching out to us today?"[181] However, Mahendranath's patriotism was long-established; during the days of Swadeshi, as Manindranath proudly wrote in a biography of Mahendranath after the latter's death, the two of them had worked together to make the Swadeshi movement in Khejuri rank second in salience in the entire subdivision of Kanthi (in Medinipur).[182] So the Paundras were nationalists in conflict with the nationalist camp; they were friends of Namasudras but also differed with them.

Anukulchandra Das Naskar, a young man of twenty-five in 1923-24, a lawyer from a Paundra landed family in Garia, was close to Subhas Chandra Bose and C. R. Das.[183] Anukulchandra was also involved in the *Bangiya Jana Samgha*. Despite Das' attempts to win the support of the backward classes, the Swarajists lost the crucial support of the Mahishyas of Medinipur – who were the most numerous caste of south west Bengal – when upper-caste Congressites prevented Das from making Birendranath Sashmal, the prominent Mahishya, the Chief Executive Officer of the

[179] *Ibid.,* p. 25, p. 1.

[180] Mahendranath Karan (as editor of the *Samachar* in 1923-24) 'Samayik Mantabya', *PS,* 1330-31, p. 62.

[181] *Ibid.*

[182] Mandal, 'Mahendranather Jibankatha', p. 6.

[183] Naskar, 'Paundrasamajer Rajnaitik Byaktitva Anukulchandra Naskar', *SD,* August 2011, p. 5.

Calcutta Corporation because of his low caste status. Instead, Bose was made the CEO in 1924. But "Sashmal's resignation made the situation calamitous for the Swarajya party"[184] because the Mahishyas of Medinipur now withdrew their support. At this juncture, Bose requested Anukulchandra, a rising leader of the second-most important subordinate caste of south west Bengal, to join the Swarajya party to contest election from Diamond Harbour, the constituency left vacant by Sashmal.

Sanat Kumar Naskar, a Paundra leader, writes, "Anukulbabu seized this opportunity. But he was unlike the self-aggrandising politicians of today; he used the occasion, not to further his individual interest, but as a bargaining counter for his caste-group."[185] Anukulchandra told Bose that he would join the Swarajists only if four educated Paundra youths from his district (Twenty-four Parganas) were given jobs in the Calcutta Corporation every year. When Bose declined this proposal, Anukulchandra decided to stand as an Independent candidate. C. R. Das was "alarmed" and requested Anukulchandra to withdraw his nomination paper. Anukulchandra, we are told, made Das realise the formidable political weight of his caste-group by saying, "Let me consult my people first and then withdraw." According to Prabhas Chandra Mandal, an aged leader at present,

> Das took the hint and toured the area along with Raicharanbabu, Anukulbabu and Birenbabu, together with his own men, to acquaint his candidate Byomkesh Chakrabarti, barrister at the Calcutta High Court, to the people. Anukulbabu withdrew his nomination only after that. It was obvious that the 'barrister-babu' was in no position to speak of the voters as "my people". This is politics.[186]

Anukulchandra thus indicated to the nationalist camp that tokenistic political offers would not buy leaders like him who had real hold over "the people" of the caste.

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[184] *Ibid.*

[185] *Ibid.*

[186] Mandal, *Paudrakshatriya Samaje Kramaprabodhan*, pp. 7-8.

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay notes that C. R. Das was, at this time, able to win over a Namasudra leader, Mohinimohan Das and a Paundra leader, Hemchandra Naskar.[187] The negative presence of Hemchandra Naskar as a political representative in the memory of caste movement is notable. A Paundra leader today says that Hemchandra Naskar was "sold out to the Congress".[188]

We cannot, however, reduce the Paundra movement to one voice or a unified perspective at any given time. But central organisations of the identity-movement continue to commemorate the social contributions of many a forgotten Paundra individual and group, of diverse political and ideological persuasions. Hemchandra Naskar remains conspicuous by his near-absence within these commemorative writings, even if the financial contributions of the Naskar family are acknowledged. Hemchandra Naskar is mainly remembered for his charity to many a young student.[189] He was the maternal uncle of Anukulchandra. The latter is fondly commemorated as a determined political personality and as '*janasevak*' by Paundra activists. The relative marginalisation of Hemchandra Naskar in the later-day discourse of the movement says something about the kind of political cultural heritage it chooses and what it rejects.

Anukulchandra is remembered for his hard labour. He was the Vice Chairman of the district board of Twenty-four Parganas from 1927 till his death in 1947. It is said that he "walked eighteen miles every day while supervising the construction" of a very important road (the extension of Kulpi Road to Kakdwip).[190] The toil and fatigue that it involved seems to have slowly consumed him; he could not move or even get up, and before his death he was also hard-pressed for money.[191]

Anukulchandra maintained a striking silence, it is said, when the issue of whether Paundras should be 'scheduled' was being debated within the community. Present

[187] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India*, p. 126.

[188] Author's conversation with Sanat Kumar Naskar on January 14, 2016.

[189] The Naskar family remains entirely cut off from any of the current Paundra associations and even unaware of their present existence. Author's conversation with Ashok Naskar, grandson of Hemchandra Naskar, on November 5, 2015.

[190] Naskar, 'Paundrasamajer Rajnaitik Byaktitva Anukulchandra Naskar', p. 8.

[191] *Ibid.*

leaders explain that while he, like Rajendranath Sarkar, thought that reservations would benefit the community, he had too much regard for Raicharan Sardar to oppose him directly. Anukulchandra entered the Legislative Council in 1937 as a Congress Scheduled Caste representative winning "a huge number of votes from Diamond Harbour, Barasat and Barrackpore".[192] Significantly, he was aligned to the Congress and the nationalist movement at a time when, as Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has shown, the Scheduled Caste movement remained alienated and distanced from them. He stood by freedom-fighters in the South Twenty-four Parganas who broke the Salt Laws at Gandhi's call in 1930. Today's leaders take pride in pointing out how 'Anukulbabu' always walked against the prevailing current.

Rather than a political move from "alienation to integration" into "the dominant political structure in the country" that characterised the trend of the Namasudra movement or the Scheduled Caste movement as such[193], Anukulchandra moved from initial 'integration' with Congress nationalism to subsequent unyielding 'alienation'. When in 1946, after he moved into Ambedkar's All India Scheduled Caste Federation, he contested elections and was defeated in his area, Congress leaders tried to bring him back to their camp. Surendramohan Ghosh, we are told, wrote to him personally that the Congress would be greatly benefited to win back a worker "as dedicated as him". But Anukulchandra declined. As Sanat Kumar Naskar writes, "Anukul babu's was a politics of idealism, not one of personal convenience."[194]

Not only did Anukulchandra remain unbending to co-option by dominant political camps around 1946 when "the Congress had effectively appropriated the Scheduled Caste movement"[195], but he remained opposed to the Partition campaign.[196] Thus he remained a 'disruptive' voice speaking against the communal common-sense that largely gripped the Bengal Scheduled Castes at this time. Anukulchandra was

[192] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[193] Bandyopadhyay, 'From Alienation to Integration, 1937-1947: The Leaders' in *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India.*

[194] Naskar, 'Paundrasamajer Rajnaitik Byaktitva Anukulchandra Naskar', pp. 7-8.

[195] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India*, p. 203.

[196] Naskar, 'Paundrasamajer Rajnaitik Byaktitva Anukulchandra Naskar', p. 8. See, in contrast, a study of how the Hindu 'partition' campaign appropriated Dalit autonomous politics and how the 'communal convulsion' in the pre-partition days drew significant Dalit participation in Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony*.

physically assaulted in a popular assembly in Calcutta in 1947 where he spoke against Partition. Six months later he passed away. He did not get his due: the proposal raised in 1956, in the district board of Twenty-four Parganas, to rename the road connecting Garia Railway Station to the Kulpi Road as 'Anukulchandra Das Road' never got to be passed, purportedly "owing to the negative attitude of upper castes".[197]

Legacy of the early Paundra movement

Periodicals of this community invariably avowed a non-sectarian identity of the national-popular with a critical standpoint: "*Paundrakshatriya* is not just the diary of the Paundrakshatriya community...The mouthpiece of a brave and significant community of Bengal, this journal has never remained simply concerned with itself."[198] Approximately around 1956, we find these lines in *Paundrakshatriya*, the periodical started by Rajendranath Sarkar. It said that the community was part of society, nation and state; that it was obliged to participate in wider solidarities as well as entitled to partake of state power. "It will show its rage if need be" but "will offer its love and friendship in return for the same".[199]

Obituaries on Kaustubhkanti Karan, the son of Mahendranath Karan and a Congress MLA since 1951, in the 1956 issue of *Paundrakshatriya*, celebrated his patriotism. Though the founder-editor of this periodical was the key person to include the caste within the 'schedules', the obituary saluted the young Kaustubhkanti's participation in the movement against inclusion of the caste in the schedules. It described the financial hardship that the family was passing through when Kaustubhkanti joined the Ripon (later Surendranath) College in 1936. "Still he refrained from availing of the scholarship offered to the Scheduled Castes" and rather joined Raicharan, Basanta Kumar Das and other leaders of the *Nikhilbanga*

[197] Naskar, 'Paundrasamajer Rajnaitik Byaktitva Anukulchandra Naskar', p. 8. The above is the idealised portrayal of Anukulchandra. If Anukulchandra has been celebrated by later generation Paundras for his self-less social service, he did not meet Raicharan Sardar's standards of self-less-ness! Sardar, 'Depressed Ba Tapshilbhukta Jati Samasya'. The question is not about what Anukulchandra or anyone 'truly' was like, it is about the common ideological emphasis of all these different persons of different generations – extending to current Paundra leaders – on courageous self-sacrifice.

[198] Anonymous, 'Sampadakiya', *Paundrakshatriya* (henceforth, *P*), 1952 (month not known), reprinted in *PM Vol. 4*, p. 203.

[199] *Ibid.*

Paundrakshatriya Sevak Samiti to move against the inclusion.[200] On receiving the Bachelor's degree, he went back to his native Medinipur "to serve the motherland". Under his leadership, the Hijli Youth Association formed a national-self-government in Khejuri during the Quit India movement in 1942 for about two weeks. When the British forces brutally crushed the movement, "his father, the late Mahendranath's precious library was burned down". The family had to abscond and a prize-money of five thousand rupees was declared for anyone who would help apprehend this "young and capable national leader". The obituary noted that "Sri Karan participated in relief efforts following the great cyclone in Midnapur in 1943 even though he was in hiding, thus risking his life".[201]

While Kaustubhkanti was celebrated for being a dedicated Congressite, the *Paundrakshatriya* maintained a constant critique of contemporary Congress leaders. In the same issue was a report of a certain Scheduled Caste conference in Howrah in the mid-1950s convened by the Congress and presided over by Atulya Ghosh, the then President of the State Congress Committee. Describing Ghosh's speech as "merely patronising" and "infantilising the Scheduled Castes", the article asked, "Will it suffice to lecture the blind?" It remarked that if the greatest political organisation in the country took up the task of giving the downtrodden peoples their due rights, a day would come when the Scheduled Castes would no more exist as a separate faction. But the president's speech did not bring out any practical scheme of action: "It is sweet indeed to hear Ghosh's advice that Scheduled Castes must think of themselves as Indians above all; but, have Indian upper caste Hindus really allowed them to think thus?"[202]

The criticism of the Congress party was part of the general criticism of party politics. Sakti Kumar Sarkar, a Congress MP from Joynagar in 1971 and re-elected as Independent candidate (when he left Congress) from the same place in 1977, remembered as an ardent Ambedkarite, never ceased to point out that it was only the "parasitic middle classes, smug and complacent," that were at the helm of all political

[200] Anonymous, 'Kaustubhkanti Karan', *P*, 1956 (month not known), *PM* Vol. 4, p. 193.

[201] *Ibid*., pp. 193-197.

[202] Anonymous, 'Tapshilijati Sammelan', *P* (exact month and year not known), *PM Vol. 4*, pp. 205-206.

parties in Bengal.[203] Having worked closely with Jagjivan Ram, D. Sanjivyyah and later Kanshi Ram, Sarkar felt that in other Indian states, political power was not as concentrated in the upper-caste-middle-class as it was in Bengal. He named leaders like Bidhan Roy, Prafulla Sen, Prafulla Ghosh, Ajay Mukherjee and Siddhartha Ray as either useless or utterly corrupt and entirely cut off from the soil.[204]

Paundrakshatriya Bandhab, we have said, retained the anti-reservation stance. But it was highly critical of mainstream politics. In 1951, it criticised the then Chief Minister Bidhan Roy of the Congress party for his '*madhyabitta parikalpana*', his favouring the urban middle classes at the cost of the backward people of rural Bengal.[205] A poem '*Barna Hindur Bhut*' ('The Ghost of the Caste Hindu') equated the caste-Hindu with the urban middle classes, comfortably belonging to an exclusive elite space of civil society ("*sishta samaj*"), as urban predators upon rural society and as extreme hypocrites. It was the trick of the "*madhyabitta barnahindu*", the *Paundrakshatriya Bandhab* frequently noted, to keep a number of castes forever in the fringes of society as weak population groups in perpetual subordination. The rather longish poem noted that the "*madhyabitta barnahindu*", being entirely bereft of sincerity, "could dress up as Communist with a sickle in hand", could sign the Congress creed, and could even join the right-wing Jana Samgha if that promised some personal gain. Since that class was ubiquitously dominant in Bengal's political affairs, the subordinated remained disentitled.[206]

The same strain continues in the present-day Paundra periodical *Samaj Darshan*. A number of articles lament that even though quite a few Paundras have occupied political posts in recent times, the "high command" of their respective parties have not

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[203] Sakti Kumar Sarkar, 'Chinna Chinta', *PM Vol. 4*, p. 226. On how Sakti Kumar Sarkar is remembered today, see Kalipada Mani, 'Saktidake Jemon Dekhechi', *SD*, August, 2014, pp. 19-25.

[204] Sarkar, 'Chinna Chinta', p. 226.

[205] Anonymous, 'Vote Sandesh', *PB*, Magh 1358, *PM Vol. 3*, p. 218; Sri Ojha, 'Barna Hindur Bhut', pp. 239-244.

[206] Sri Ojha, 'Barna Hindur Bhut', pp. 239-244. The poem begins thus: "*Amra Ray er 'Madhyabitta'/ 'Barna-Hindur Dal/ Moder kathai bhebe bhebei/ Tanr matha pagal!!*" ["We (parodying the "ghost of the Caste Hindu") are the middle-class Caste Hindus, of whom Ray thinks so much."] The last seven years of Bidhan Roy's rule were indeed marked by his pronouncements of solicitude for the 'middle-class'. Roy recognised the "intellectual and emotional qualities of this class". He also tried to adjust economic policies to the special aptitudes of the middle class. K. P. Thomas, *Dr. B. C. Roy*, Calcutta, 1955.

let them voice the particular wants of the Paundra community. They have remained "powerless post-holders", yielding to the "diplomacy and duplicity of the upper-caste-middle-class".[207] Raicharan Sardar's words are regularly commemorated as "undying words of wisdom" ("*amar bani*") in today's *Samaj Darshan*: "Diplomacy and shrewd politics have broken your backbone".[208] It amounts to decrying party-politics altogether, at least in the form that it has been played out so far, as "filthy". Anukulchandra Das is invoked, in this context, as a political personality of the past who "kept his backbone straight".[209] Sakti Kumar Sarkar, one of the few other political personalities celebrated by contemporary Paundra leaders, is remembered for having finally left the arena of electoral politics following extreme disillusionment. In 1988, Sarkar formed a group called 'Free Society' in the ideals of M. N. Roy's 'radical humanism'.[210] Anukulchandra Das and Sakti Kumar Sarkar both, then, represent the roles of unbending tragic heroes in the memory of the caste movement.

The Paundra caste movement was apathetic to the Left in Bengal. Part of the apathy derived from the upper caste[211], urban "*madhyabitta*" character of the Left leadership.[212] Left-induced redistribution of the resources of the Garia marshlands since 1969 was perceived as targeted by upper castes to emasculate the Paundra

[207] Mandal, 'Dishahin Paundrakshatriya Samaj', p. 9.

[208] See the boxed highlights in almost every issue of *Samaj Darshan* from August 2008 to August 2015. Sardar's words, quoted as "memorable message" or "undying message", are: "*Mone rakhiyo ekatai bal, samgha sakti-i bal. Mone rakhiyo kutniti tomar merudanda bhangiya diyache, tomake sabdhan hoite hoibe...pralobhane banchita hoiyo na, atmabikray koriyo na, nije supratishthito hao*" (meaning, 'United we stand, our power rests in the collective Samgha. Shrewd politics has broken your backbone. Be careful not to sell yourself to temptation, assert yourself.")

[209] Mandal, 'Dishahin Paundrakshatriya Samaj', p. 9.

[210] Mani, 'Saktidake jeman dekhechi', p. 23.

[211] As Sekhar Bandyopadhyay shows, of the two communist parties in West Bengal in 1969, twenty-four out of thirty three members of the State Committee of the CPI (M) belonged to the Brahman, Kayastha and Baidya castes and in the CPI, eight out of nine members of its State Secretariat were of high caste origin. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony*, p. 244.

[212] The Paundra story is contrary to the characterization of the West Bengal Dalit (see interview with Partha Chatterjee in 'Ambedkar 125', *Rabibaroyari*, *Ei Samay*, 14 August 2016 p. 7) as mainly the refugee from East Bengal, who took to urban life in and around the city of Kolkata, and leaned towards the Left or other mainstream political parties, either as urban middle class or urban poor. The Paundras are, in the main, the rural and semi-rural poor who continue to suffer caste discrimination in the villages. Caste associations like the Paundrakshatriya Unnayan Parishad drew its resources from landed Paundras of western Bengal who again did not quite identify with the urban middle or lower-middle class. There are refugees, however, from Khulna, many of whom reside in the villages and semi-urban areas of the Twenty-four Parganas.

movement. Wealthy Paundras, seen as the benefactors of the community, were the owners of the lucrative fisheries in the area. By "plundering" these resources and "playing up the poor, landless Paundra against the few wealthy Paundras through dirty politics", the Left leadership was seen as having conspired against the erstwhile-untouchable castes, abusing them openly with casteist slurs and exploiting them economically.'[213]

The Paundra activists take pride in what the community has done for the uplift of the larger '*krishijibi, jalajibi, jangaljibi*'[214] (people living on agriculture, fishing and on forest produce) populations of the South Twenty-four Parganas. A present-day Paundra activist, Kalipada Mani, to cite an example, writes about one Satyendranath Naskar, who contributed a sum of seventy-thousand, to be submitted to the government, for the foundation of the Dhrubachand Halder College in 1964-65. "For that he even mortgaged the family jewellery", emphasizes Mani.[215] To found the Gourmohan Sachin Mandal College in 1968, in an even more remote part of the Sundarbans, "Satyendranath mortgaged his land and homestead".[216] These two colleges made the bachelor's degree achievable for the vast masses of the Sundarban poor. *Samaj Darshan* emphasises that most of the schools, hospitals, dispensaries, temples, crematoriums, roads and water reservoirs of the South Twenty-four Parganas were constructed by Paundras.[217] Only a relatively affluent minority from within the Paundras could accomplish these. The movement's bitterness for the Left in Bengal relates to the allegation that the Left regime of land-reform dried up these 'resources'.

The participation of "Paundra men and women like Ahalya Das and Kangsari Halder in popular Left movements like the Tebhaga" is, however, cherished.[218] In these commemorations of heroism, the particular political persuasion of the hero ranges from left to right. He could be a staunch Ambedkarite. He could be a freedom-

[213] Bimalendu Halder, 'Paundrasamaj O Paundrakshatriya Unnayan Parishad', *SD,* August 2009, pp. 4-6.

[214] *Ibid.* See 'Sampadakiya', *SD,* August 2015 (no page no.).

[215] Kalipada Mani, 'Diner Sonali Surjo gelo Astachale', *SD,* August, 2013, p. 26.

[216] *Ibid.*

[217] Halder, 'Paundrasamaj O Paundrakshatriya Unnayan Parishad', pp. 4-6.

[218] Author's interview with Sanat Kumar Naskar on January 14, 2016.

fighter who disseminated the message of patriotic love among "Paundras, Namasudras and Muslims during the Quit India movement of 1942" – a freedom-fighter later condemned to the margins of the nation, say as "a refugee (from Khulna) fighting poverty in an obscure Sundarban village".[219] The sublimity of patriotic service as well as subsequent hardship is sharply featured, so often in these stories, against a background of one-time prosperity. Thus, the austerities of the freedom-fighter Tarapada Mridha, born to a thriving Talukdar family in Khulna, is recalled as: "the prince turned into a pauper".[220]

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There was (and still is) a paradox in the understanding of 'respect' in the self-respect movement of the Paundras. The paradox is significant because it is hardly peculiar to this caste-community. It points towards Dalit aspirations that elude a precise political formulation. On the one hand, the Paundra movement has always upheld the *abstract* identity of the 'Dalit' as a tyrannised, deprived and suffering class of people. Manindranath Mandal thus innovated the first *Samgha* of the *dalita* (downtrodden)/ *upekshita* (neglected) peoples in Bengal. Editorial articles in *Samaj Darshan* today begin with slogans such as: "*Hate hat dhoro bhai/ Dalit muktir gan gai*" ("Brother, let us hold hands/ and sing for the liberation of the Dalit").[221] In this mode, it is a fight to ensure 'respect' for human life as such, its integrity, autonomy and intrinsic worth. The same understanding of 'respect' for human well-being induces their present unambiguous championing of affirmative action as a corrective to the historical violence of caste. However, besides affirming the truth of the universal principle of human dignity, their self-respect movement has consistently sought to win respect, i.e., recognition for 'achievements' as a *particular* caste. The motivation to *command* admiration[222] as 'heroes' and 'exemplars' has been in place since Raicharan Sardar who wanted his community to contribute "at least one among

[219] Sasankasekhar Mridha, 'Swadhinata Sangrami Paundraneta Tarapada Mridha', *SD*, August 2009, p. 20.

[220] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

[221] 'Sampadakiya', *SD*, August 2015 (no page no.).

[222] See the distinction drawn between two senses of the word 'respect' in Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 15.

the ten best people in society".[223] As we have shown, 'heroism' and 'exemplariness' have been conceived chiefly in terms of accomplishments of pain-staking work.

'Sacrifice' – traditionally wedded to the Brahmanical renunciate ethic – continues to remain a statement of Dalit pride. (A senior Paundra leader wrote in 2001 that the "current chapter of traditional Brahmanism" is marked by the design to maintain status-quo by promoting a culture of "individual private interest".[224]) Take a recent example. Ginni Mahi, a seventeen-year-old Punjabi folk-cum-pop singer, who 'reinvents' today the music of the Dalit movement, has worded her 2015 hit 'Danger Chamar' thus: "We don't need any weapons, we don't fear any struggle, we are always ready for *sacrifice*."[225] She says that she got the idea for this song when she was asked by her classmate in college about her caste and when, upon hearing that she was a Chamar, her classmate remarked that Chamars were 'dangerous'. The social stigma of Chamars being 'dangerous' (to society) provoked a protest in the girl.[226] At the same time, by pronouncing that theirs' is a *war without weapons*, the song critiques the notion that Chamars bring harm or any real 'danger' to larger society.

Similarly, one of the cardinal aspects of the Paundra movement have been the assertion of a moral high ground: that they are not foes but saviours of mainstream society. Their struggle has sought to define an organically embedded inclusive nationalism as a counterpoint to anti-social, exclusionary chauvinistic patriotism. Fraternity or *maitri* was what, as Ambedkar pointed out, was absent in caste-ridden Hindu society.[227] Against that anti-social element of caste, it is the proclamation of moral victory by an 'untouchable' caste movement when it emphasises its fraternal contributions to society.[228]

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[223] Sardar, *Deener Atmakahini*, 'Bhumika'.

[224] *Ibid.*

[225] Rahi Gaikwad, 'An Equal Music', *The Hindu Sunday Magazine*, August 21, 2016, p.1.

[226] *Ibid.*

[227] See V. Geetha, 'Social Suffering and Salvation: The Relevance of The Buddha and His Dhamma' in Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar (eds.), *Caste in Modern India: A Reader, Vol. 1*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2015, pp. 433-435.

[228] The protesting lower caste subject has always highlighted lower caste people's ability for love and compassion as against the heartlessness of upper castes who do not know to love. The 1893 Malayali novel *Saraswativijayam* by Potheri Kunhambu featured, as Dilip Menon has shown, how a Nambuduri Brahman approved of the killing of a Pulaya (a very low caste) for singing a song proclaiming the

The early Paundra movement was a fight against *boundary lines* that separated the Dalit from the Dwija or mainstream/respectable society. That was why they resisted classification as a "scheduled or demarcated group of castes" ("*prithak jatimala*").[229] That idea became obsolete within the caste movement with time. What persisted, however, was the impulse to represent an enlarged self that comprised but exceeded the "limited self-definition of a Dalit".[230] It is difficult to tell whether this universal Dalit impulse weakens the political force of particular Dalit movements. But, in this case, it has certainly released a contradictory dimension to the character of the movement: while the Paundras reach out for broad political solidarities as the 'suffering' subject, their accent on the community's distinctive social worth confines their purview to the *boundary lines* of the particular caste.

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presence of god in everything, and how, in contrast, the same Pulaya, later-turned-judge-in-a-court-of-law, showed compassion to the same Nambuduri in acquitting and forgiving him. Menon, 'Caste and Colonial Modernity: Reading *Saraswativijayam*'.

[229] Rajendranath Sarkar, 'Mahendra Charit', p. 33.

[230] Prithvi Datta Chandra Shobhi, 'Introduction: *Khadgavagali Kavya*', in Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 4.

Epilogue

Reflecting on the public lives of history, Dipesh Chakrabarty spoke of how new memorial museums often emerge to give expression to forms of 'identity politics'.[1] These museums conjure up lost worlds of identity, memories of oppression and also people's triumphs against it. The Mahishyas and the Paundras, I knew, had their own historians, histories of subordination, their own anthems, distinct flags and emblems, at least by the 1970s. Their emblems expressed alternative or silenced histories. For instance, the Mahishyas adopted the 'Divyak Pillar' as a motif in their flag: the eleventh century pillar was a memorial of the victory of the Kaivarta revolt against the Pala regime. Mahishyas have been articulate about their alternative stance – that Divyak, the Kaivarta king, was represented in mainstream tradition as 'ugly' because he was insubordinate and indomitable.[2] Artefacts like these – which they proudly exhibit – could well have gone into their own museums, I thought, reading Dipesh Chakrabarty's essay.

But the memorial museum, that Mahishyas indeed associate with, attaches to the struggle for freedom against British rule. It is the Nimtouri monument, museum and library, established in 1965 in Medinipur.[3] It has preserved documents, pictures and photographs of the Quit India movement in Tamluk, where a 'national government' had been declared in 1942. It is thus part of the nation's history. Yet it 'belongs' to this specific community, the Mahishyas. It is fondly referred to in the pages of the *Mahishya Samaj*. Just as Sushil Dhara and Satishchandra Samanta are their 'own' men[4], this museum – established by Dhara to preserve the history of the freedom

[1] Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Itihaser Rakampher', *Itihaser Janajiban O Anyanya Prabandha*, Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 2011, p. 113.

[2] 'Hooghly Jela Mahishya Sammelan', *Mahishya Samaj*, Ashadh, 1384 BS, 1977, p. 39; Subodh Chowdhuri, 'Mahishya Sampradayer Manushjan', *Mahishya Samaj*, 2010, p. 119; Sanat Kumar Naskar, 'Parishad-pratik Katha', *Samaj Darshan*, May, 2010, pp. 4-8.

[3] Amiya Kumar Samanta, 'He Mahajiban' (remembering Sushil Kumar Dhara), *Mahishya Samaj*, 2010, pp. 38-39.

[4] *Ibid*. However, though Mahishyas were predominant in the freedom struggle in Tamluk, a few important figures were non-Mahishya, like Ajay Mukherjee. The 'Sarbadhinayak' or the supreme leader of the Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar, that lasted for two years in Tamluk, was Satishchandra Samanta, Mahishya by caste. Other important figures in the Tamluk freedom struggle were Iswardas Mal, Rajanikanta Pramanik, Amulya Charan Maiti, Gunadhar Hajra. Sushil Dhara was the Commander-in-

movement in Tamluk, in which Dhara was a key figure – is, sort of, the community's very own thing. Similarly, Paundra activists look forward to collecting and preserving a history of the Paundras who went to jail or laid down their lives fighting the repressive state-power in the country's revolutionary movements – be it the freedom struggle or the Tebhaga movement.[5] They might soon come up with a little museum in some place in the Twenty-four Parganas, as part of their very identity politics, to memorialise the 'undeservedly forgotten' Paundra martyrs for these greater national and social causes.

This, I think, provides a basic clue to the understanding of the nature of the identity politics of these groups. I should not be misread as attempting to "appropriate" Dalit-bahujan histories "into the nationalist narratives"[6] in the frame of *they-also-ran*. Throughout the dissertation, I have tried to show instead how these groups stood wary of the nationalists' embrace. They sounded contrary voices that challenged the univocity of the nationalist discourse. But even as they ruptured the seamless narrative of nationalism (and vanguard communism) and regrouped as distinct identities, they have always desired public acclaim for their wider public roles. In a sense, every "subaltern counter public", to use Nancy Fraser's expression, seeks to win a place within "that indeterminate empirically counterfactual body we call 'the public at large'".[7] To become a separate "enclave" is the aspiration of none, "which is not to deny that they are often involuntarily enclaved".[8] Mark Juergensmeyer had observed among the caste-radicals of Punjab a similar "longing to participate in the mainstream of society and tradition".[9] The fundamental aspiration of the "children of

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chief of the famous 'Bidyut Bahini', the 'Lightning Troopers', which was the army of the national government.

[5] Author's conversation with Sanat Kumar Naskar and Sanat Kumar Sardar at Baruipur on May, 21, 2016.

[6] Rawat and Satyanarayana write: "…Dalit histories, as Neeladri Bhattacharya has argued, were appropriated into nationalist narratives for their opposition to colonialism, in much the same way as that of peasant and working classes." Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana (eds.), *Dalit Studies*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, p. 11.

[7] Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy' in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, Ms.: MIT Press, 1992, pp. 123-124.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in 20th-Century Punjab*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, p. 280.

India's ghetto"[10] is to break out of these enclaves or ghettoes into which they have been involuntarily imprisoned.

Caste-subalterns in Bengal recurrently ask: "Why have the best of our men and women not found place within mainstream Bengali cultural memory?"[11] Whether they are wrong-headed to bother about this, rather than the 'more pertinent' questions of social-material inequalities, let us not judge here. But it is true that while we do remember – in our every-day lives, conversations and anecdotal exchanges – a number of 'great men/women', we do not remember significant others. And these 'others', more often than not, belong to the 'inferior' castes. Dipesh Chakrabarty writes about the place of 'anecdotes' in genteel Bengali 'public culture'.[12] We remember 'great men' primarily through anecdotes that are circulated within spaces of homes, schools, colleges and peer-groups where we grow up. To tell or to listen to anecdotes is part of our habitual 'social pleasure'. Our anecdotal culture does not demand documentary proofs of 'truth'. These fragments of stories simply generate an emotional or aesthetic impression, a particular *rasa*, as Chakrabarty calls it.[13] We become patriotically animated, for instance, with that well-known anecdote about Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee – his flinging the conceited Englishman's coat out of the window of the running train.[14] Caste subalterns point out that it is their caste-subalternity that has banished them from these widely shared anecdotal spaces. 'Their anecdotes' survive within 'involuntarily enclaved' pockets, even though they relentlessly seek to reach out to the wider public.

Let me cite one or two specimens of 'their anecdotes'. Veteran Mahishya activists of Howrah speak glorious words about one Mahendranath Roy (1862-1925) of their

[10] B. R. Ambedkar used the expression, "the children of India's ghetto", for the Untouchables. B R Ambedkar, 'Untouchables or The Children of India's Ghetto', unpublished manuscript, in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches, Vol. 5*, Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1989. I use it here in a slightly broader sense to denote all those who have been rendered marginal in different ways and spaces for being born in relatively 'low' castes.

[11] This is a frequent and common refrain. To cite a few instances: Subodh Chowdhuri, 'Mahishya Sampradayer Manushjan', p. 121; Phani Ray, *Mahishya Manisha Tatha Jatiya Gaurab*, Howrah: Ray Prakashani, 2012, 'Mukhabandha'; Atul Sur, *Sadgop Jatir Itihas O Aitihya*, Calcutta: Sahitya Lok, 1980.

[12] Dipesh Chakrabarti, 'Smriti O Bangalir Public Culture', *Itihaser Janajiban*, pp. 94-106.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 104.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 95.

caste, who was an advocate, a professor, a scholar of mathematics and a Senator in the University of Calcutta. Mahendranath's intellectual calibre had generated 'legends'. There was a story that once he had concentrated so much in solving a mathematical problem, that he remained unaware of the noisy religious procession passing by his house. Later when he heard that the procession was gone, he was astonished and sad for he had wished to see it. It was one of the biggest festivals of Howrah.[15] Another anecdote tells how Roy, as Senator of Calcutta University, secured the appointment of CV Raman to the Taraknath Palit post in Chemistry by dint of his powerful argument in the face of opposition from 'white men' in the Senate.[16] These are anecdotes which were never in general currency among the Bengali intelligentsia. While 'we' do not know 'their' anecdotes, 'they' know 'ours'[17]: the anecdotes about Ashutosh Mukherjee are, for instance, well known to 'them'. Thus, there are 'involuntarily enclaved' anecdotes, just as there are 'general' anecdotes. I have included some of 'their anecdotes' – ways of remembering – in this thesis. Even if there are elements of myth in them, they "refer to reality" – as Ranajit Guha put it – "a few removes away".[18]

True to the life of anecdotes, some of these have developed interesting variations from mouth to mouth, and from one caste-public to the other, in the course of their circulation between Dalit-bahujan groups. One illustration will suffice. Birendranath Sashmal's son Bimalananda had recounted that Chittaranjan Das wanted Birendranath to become the CEO of the Calcutta Corporation in 1924 with a monthly allowance of 500 rupees. But, secret-society terrorists, who always enjoyed the tacit support of the

[15] Author's conversation with Mahishya men and women at Phani Ray's house in Howrah, Kadamtala, on November, 20, 2016. The anecdote has found place in Phani Ray, *Mahishya Manisha O Jatiya Gaurab*, pp. 27-28.

[16] *Ibid*., pp. 34-36.

[17] I use the word 'we' (as distinguished from 'they') to refer to the metropolitan academia, especially in the social sciences and history. Not only is the cream of this academia exceedingly upper-caste but these caste-movements, their historians and history-writing are at a remote distance from the leading historians and historiography of our times. The distance is evident from the fact that, as Sekhar Bandyopadhyay wrote in 1990, it was Pradip Sinha's 1965 book, *Nineteenth Century Bengal: Aspects of Social History*, that first drew academic attention to the development of caste based social mobility in Bengal. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi, 1990, p. 17 (fn. no. 4). In 'their' world, however, 'they' were always historically aware of their movements, and also frequently writing about them. Clearly, they remained remote from academic history research and writing that happened in the leading universities of the country.

[18] Ranajit Guha, '*Neel Darpan*: The Image of a Peasant Revolt in a Liberal Mirror', in *The Small Voice of History: Collected Essays* (ed. Partha Chatterjee), New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2009, p. 130.

Congress, approached Birendranath with the proposal that he demand a greater salary as CEO and then give over half of the money to their fund. Birendranath had refused. From this point of his narration, Bimalananda cited Hemanta Kumar Sarkar, who was Subhas Bose's childhood friend and first biographer.

> The moment the word spread that Chittaranjan was thinking of making Birendranath the CEO, a grave conspiracy started getting hatched. One of the Calcutta bigwigs was even heard saying: "Ah! The '*Kyaoi*' from Medinipur will come to rule Calcutta!" In order to oust Birendranath, Subhas's name was proposed under devious pretexts. They voted against Sashmal. Fearing a split in the party, Deshbandhu Chittaranjan could not press any further.[19]

Bimalananda just added one point to this long quote from Sarkar: that the contemptuous expression "*Medinipurer Kyaoi*" was used by Nirmalchandra Chandra.[20] Bimalananda publicly spoke as well as wrote about this.[21] Versions of this story appear in the writings of Paundra activists. The Paundra activist Dilip Gayen, writing in 2010, refers to this episode, that has subsequently become an oft-narrated anecdote among Dalit-bahujan groups. He brings a variation in the language and detail but retains the essence. He writes that Birendranath was prevented from becoming the "*Mayor* of Calcutta" for being the "*keotar bachha*"![22]

What do 'their anecdotes' reveal for a study of caste-radicalism in twentieth century Bengal? A characteristic feature is that they emphasise the *mental talents* of caste-subalterns. We do not find anecdotes about dimensions of wealth as such (though some 'low'-caste families were proverbially rich), but we find anecdotes

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[19] Bimalananda Sashmal, *Bharat Ki Kore Bhag Holo*, Calcutta: Tin Songi, 1981, p. 89 (He cited Hemanta Kumar Sarkar from *Deshbandhu Smriti*, Calcutta, 1931, p. 50).

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] That he spoke about it in large Mahishya gatherings in the 1970s is evident from the following report: 'Hooghly Jela Mahishya Sammelan, Nalikul Hooghly', *Mahishya Samaj*, Ashadh, 1384 BS, 1977, p. 40. Bimalananda's written works are scrupulously authenticated by documentary references.

[22] Dilip Gayen, 'Paundra Mahasamgha Gathan Kora Uchit Hoyeche Kina' in *Paundra Samaj Parichay* (ed. Dilip Gayen), January, 2010 (Issue 1, Year 1), p. 55.

about extraordinary charity and generosity. A lot of anecdotes highlight the powers of intellect of particular persons (usually men) among caste-subalterns. One might guess that in the course of the twentieth century, 'their anecdotes' have undergone a change. Older anecdotes about legendary skills in weaving, tailoring, artistry, handicrafts, manufacturing, agricultural knowhow, or expertise in traditional martial arts such as stick-fighting have come to be progressively displaced by anecdotes about moral-intellectual virtues, far-sightedness and leadership talents. Even when Alamohan Das (see Chapter 3) is seen as representing the *karigar* classes, he is glorified by caste-subaltern ideologues for excelling the so-called Bengali 'intellectuals' as a more astute guide (entrepreneurial leader) for the 'dying' Bengali nation. Productive labour is celebrated in their poetry – at an abstract level – but almost never in their modern anecdotes.

In other words, these anecdotes invariably and spontaneously embody spirited critiques of *adhikar-bhed*. The most sophisticated versions of the reconstituted Brahmanical ethic in the early twentieth century spoke in terms of inevitable natural differences of capacities between people; and of caste as the 'Indian' design to accommodate these 'natural' differences within a synoptic whole. "India", wrote Tagore, "had attempted to unite the dissimilar, the unequal…You cannot erase differences by enacting a law…Where there are real differences, these can be harmonized only by allocating to different people different domains of *adhikar*".[23] In Chapter 3, I have cited a text published by the National Council of Education (the Swadeshi institution) on the "science of Hindu society". This text was just another clear articulation of the Varna design and *adhikar-bhed*: that "the great Shudra collective" constituted "the non-intellectual and uncultured masses", who must serve society in their capacity as workmen, while being entitled to a guarantee of protection, even a degree of prosperity by "the intelligent leaders of society".[24] Lower caste anecdotes in the last century have instinctively targeted this notion of complementarity of social functions. Nationalists had always hyped the role of lower castes as the 'muscles' of society. But, lower castes speak of their superior 'mind',

[23] Rabindranath Tagore, *Bharatvarsher Itihas*, Bhadra 1902, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Centenary Edition, Vol. 12, Calcutta: Government of West Bengal, 1961, p. 1029.

[24] Kaliprasanna Das, *Hindu Samaj Vijnan, A Comparative Study of the Hindu Social System*, Bangiya Jatiya Siksha Parishat Granthabali, Vol. 1, Calcutta, Year not mentioned, pp. 645-647.

their genius – 'minds' that are nonetheless well-connected to 'muscles', unlike 'the upper-caste parasitic mind'. No wonder, writers and leaders from Dalit bahujan castes in Bengal publish volumes, whose titles so often bear the word "*manisha*"[25] –meaning 'a sharp intellect'. Their anecdotes remember 'their' people as 'the more intelligent leaders of society'. They are recounted for virtues and victories, where they have *excelled* upper castes.[26] Intrinsic to these claims of superior intelligence is a radical objection to the ideology of sanctity of ancestral callings.

There was one fairy-tale, of uncertain provenance, about a young prince and a tailor's son, who could not be told apart from each other. A wizened, old woman intervened to solve the quandary. She asked the boys to choose between two parcels – one was labelled 'the comfort of wealth' and the other, 'the glory of courage'. Instantly, – thus the tale went – the prince could be identified for he preferred the 'glory of courage' while the other boy had promptly grabbed 'the comfort of wealth'![27] (Of course, the fairy-tale did not encourage asking whether it couldn't be, after all, the prince – and not the tailor's son – who chose wealth.) It is this notion of innate difference – unbelievably resilient and persistent to this day in different guises – that caste-subalterns never tire of seeking to disprove. This explains their overwhelming emphasis on 'courage' – the predominant *rasa* in their anecdotes. In Chapter 4, I have cited a Paundra writer (Kshirodchandra Das) of the early twentieth century, who referred to the ancient Greek warriors as exemplars of courage.[28] Like the ancient Greeks, caste-subalterns in their self-narratives always appear to identify

[25] The *Paundra Manisha* series published by Paundra Mahasamgha since 2012. Another example is Phani Ray (a veteran organizer/leader associated with the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti and *Mahishya Samaj*), *Mahishya Manisha Tatha Jatiya Gaurab*.

[26] Birendranath Sashmal is remembered as someone, who unlike upper-caste Congressites, would never connive the terrorists and would have fought till his last breath to prevent the Hindu Muslim communal conflagration. The desire to excel, wrote Hannah Arendt, is "in fact the chief virtues and vices of the political man". It is only the tyrant who has no desire to excel. "Conversely, it is the desire to excel which makes men love the world and enjoy the company of their peers, and drives them into public business." Arendt, 'The Pursuit of Happiness', *On Revolution*, Viking, Penguin, 1965, 1973, p. 120.

[27] 'Dushtu Darjir Galpa' in 'Desh Bidesher Galpa', *Sukumar Rachanasamagra*, Calcutta: Saksharata Prakashan, 1976, pp. 73-75. Sukumar Ray narrated the tale but the tale is perhaps not Indian. The root concept of *adhikar-bhed* has been, after all, not so peculiar to India. In different forms, it has informed caste or estate-like distinctions in many places in the world. The box labelled 'the comfort of wealth' was found to contain a needle and a thread, so the tale went. The other box, labelled 'the glory of courage', bore a miniature royal scepter and a tiny crown. *Adhikar,* symbolized by the contents of the boxes, thus followed from innate predispositions, distinguished by the labels.

[28] Kshirodchandra Das, 'Jatir Sadhana', *Paundrakshatriya Samachar*, Sravan, 1331 BS, 1924, reprinted in Sanat Kumar Naskar (ed.), *Paundra Manisha Vol. 2*, Calcutta: Paundra Mahasamgha, 2013, p. 195.

courage, that risks life and survival, with "the political virtue per excellence".[29] But exceptional courage – that transcends the "urgencies of life"[30] – is valorized always at the cost of relatively downgrading the everyday, the average life and its desires and ambitions. And this conundrum lies at the heart of these deprived peoples' movements and self-imaginings.

But, of course, there is no real contradiction between celebrating the selfless courage of exceptional men and women of a community and urging the state to secure the protection of the multitudes languishing in poverty. In other words, 'social justice' on behalf of the faceless 'populations' – who are the objects of surveys that determine poverty levels and development – has been the watchword of both the Mahishya and the Paundra movements. Since 1960, at least, there has been a persistent – though not united – effort to secure 'reservation' for the Mahishyas.[31] It is poverty, landlessness, backwardness in education and malnutrition that are highlighted while arguing in favour of why the Mahishyas must be regarded as a deserving "beneficiary", a suffering subject, by the state.[32] And yet the Mahishyas have still not become 'beneficiaries' of state protection because a considerable number of Mahishyas, till 1996, at least, thought that by securing benefits in jobs and education, they would be "throwing aside the noble and lofty ideas which the Late Birendranath Sashmal cherished about this class (*sic*)".[33]

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[29] Analysing ancient Greek political thought, Arendt remarked on a recurrent Greek theme in which "the free man distinguishes himself from the slave through courage": "…only those men who possessed it (courage) could be admitted to a fellowship that was political in content and purpose and thereby transcended the mere togetherness imposed on all…through the urgencies of life…The 'good life', as Aristotle called the life of the citizen, …was no longer bound to the biological life process." Arendt, 'The Public and the Private Realm', *The Human Condition*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 36-37.

On how intellectual and sword-wielding, warrior-like qualities are exclusively emphasized (at the cost of other kinds of talents such as those of productive enterprise), see the following lines from a poem composed by the Paundra poet, Kishorimohon Naskar, in 2010 (my translation) : "So many stories of valour have we heard/ Alexander, the Greek warrior, had been defeated by the Paundra/ ...There was never a dearth of men of genius in our community/ They have always held their heads high", 'Paundra Mahasamgha', *Paundra Samaj Parichay*, p. 56.

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] 'Editorial', *Mahishya Samaj*, Sraban-Bhadra, 1366 BS, 1959, cited in Shyamadas Mallik, 'Mahishya Samiti Keno? Itihaser Prekshapate Kichu Bhabna', *Mahishya Samaj*, 2010, pp. 58-59.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 66.

[33] West Bengal Commission For Backward Classes, Seventh Report, submitted on 17th April, 1997, e source: http://wbcbc.gov.in/advice/7th-rpt.pdf

The Paundras, as Dalits, are entitled to receiving the benefits of reservations. The activists assert that they are vigilant about protecting their constitutionally enshrined rights. But the major activity that the caste-association engages in is to recover the intellectual/literary creations of the predecessors. They are keen to have an English-language history of their particular "achievements".[34] They have their stories of how some Paundra political candidates in the past showed the daring to contest elections from general seats.[35] The wife of a staunchly Ambedkarite Paundra activist talks about how her son obstinately refused to appear as an SC candidate in the M. Phil. admission test in Bengali at Jadavpur University. "He had to prove himself to his caste-Hindu peers, who sometimes taunted the SCs, and excel them", tells the mother.[36]

In all these cases, these deprived and humiliated groups have worked with a notion of excelling the caste-Hindu on an 'open' and level playing field, "as if they were social and economic peers".[37] As Nancy Fraser said, "the operative phrase here is 'as if'", since the social inequalities are "not eliminated but only bracketed".[38] Though the student emerged highly successful, the election candidates, who stood for general seats in yesteryears, were, of course, defeated. And these groups – Mahishyas and Paundras, all of them without exception – have been acutely aware of what Fraser called "the informal impediments to participation parity".[39] Throughout the twentieth century till date, caste associations of Dalit-bahujan groups have noted their absolute marginality in the decision-making processes of the state.[40]

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[34] Author's conversation with Sanat Kumar Naskar on January 14, 2016.

[35] Apart from orally narrated stories, there is an admiring reference to one Motilal Saphuin, who contested from a general seat in the 1952 elections in an old Paundra periodical. 'Vote Sandesh', *Paundrakshatriya Bandhab*, Magh, 1358 BS, 1952, reprinted in *Paundra Manisha Vol. 3*, (ed. Sanat Kumar Naskar), Calcutta: Paundra Mahasamgha, p. 216.

[36] Conversation with wife of Sanat Kumar Naskar on may, 21, 2016.

[37] Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', p. 118.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 119.

[39] *Ibid.*

[40] On how the Paundras have felt it, see chapter 4. To cite one instance of how the Mahishyas have registered it: Rekha Ray, 'Paschimbanga Bidhan Sabhar Nirbachan O Mahishya Samaj', *Mahishya Samaj*, Baisakh, 1384 BS, 1977, pp. 45-46.

Caste violence in Bengal manifests itself today, predominantly, through a culture that dichotomizes between 'merit' and the availing of reservations, as if the two were mutually exclusive categories. As Sanat Kumar Naskar, the Paundra leader, wrote in 2012,

> Upper castes terribly envy the essential constitutional safeguards for the Scheduled Castes. Their apathy shows itself in their words and demeanours, in countless ways every day in colleges, offices and workplaces. The Scheduled Castes are habitually referred to as incapable and worthless. Aspersions are cast, saying: 'Thanks to the laws of the land, the SCs are doing well. Their only capital is their caste-certificate…They are favoured with all the comforts by the state.'[41]

In other words, upper castes see the 'tailor's son' in them, who greedily grabs 'the comfort of wealth'. However, the non-reserved Shudras are equally ghettoized and denigrated, as the case of the Mahishyas show. Consequently, all these caste communities remain ever keen to exhibit their princely preference of the 'glory of courage'. The passion for distinction serves to harden community-distinctions – with each community emphasizing, above all, its own distinct 'glory'. As a result, multiple "weak publics" – almost competing each other – proliferate within the "weak public"[42], that is the Dalit bahujan aggregate of Bengal.

[41] Naskar, 'Jatpat O Samajik Nipiran', *Samaj Darshan*, August, 2012 (Special Issue, 15th August), p. 6.

[42] Fraser defined 'weak publics' as those whose deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion formation and does not also encompass decision-making. Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', p. 134. This applies to Dalit bahujan publics in Bengal as a whole.

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Kayastha Patrika

Karmakar Patrika

Mahajan Bandhu

Mahishya Samaj

Masik Basumati

Nabyabharat

Nayak

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Paundrakshatriya

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