

**An Intermediate Caste History:
The Mahisyas of Bengal 1886-1921**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the award of the degree of*

Master of Philosophy

ANIRBAN BANDYOPADHYAY



**Centre for Historical Studies
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi-110067
2009**



Date:

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the M.Phil Dissertation submitted by Anirban Bandyopadhyay, entitled **An Intermediate Caste History: The Mahisyas of Bengal 1886-1921** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy of the Jawaharlal Nehru University, is his original work. No part of this work has been published, or submitted to any other university. We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

Prof. Tanika Sarkar
(Supervisor)

Professor
Centre for Historical Studies
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi - 110067

Prof: Neeladri Bhattacharya
(Chairperson)

CHAIRPERSON
Centre for Historical Studies
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi-110067

Chairperson
Centre for Historical Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi - 110067, India



Date:

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tanika Sarkar', written in a cursive style.

Prof. Tanika Sarkar
(Supervisor)

Prof: Neeladri Bhattacharya
(Chairperson)

Acknowledgement

These last two years have been the most eventful in my life, in all senses of the term. I have pestered some of the most respected historians of modern India with my inane queries and they have been kind enough to clarify many issues. I have made and renewed some really special friendships that I feel would outlive many shoddier M.Phil dissertations and all my limitations and irresponsibilities put together. I have got a kid sister for free (except for her frequent overestimations of my generosity!). On the credit side, I have formally lost touch with the single most important person—and relationship—in my life, and I do not know how to react.

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Introduction: Situating the Mahisyas

I begin with a personal anecdote. A year ago I had been sitting at the Headquarters of the *Bangiya Mahisya Samiti* in Calcutta, poring over some of their old journals, when a gentleman in his sixties walked in. He dropped in to invite the *Samiti* to a convention of a body called All India Mahisya Mahasabha, formed to mobilize the Mahisyas on the issue of inclusion within the Other Backward Classes (OBC). While talking to him I realized, among other things, that he is a member of both *Bangiya Mahisya Samiti* and The Association of The Chashi Kaibarta Community. Indeed, he happens to be the President of the latter. Now, for the last couple of years I had been laboring under the impression that by 1921, the Chasi Kaibartas had more or less dissolved into the Mahisyas. In point of fact, I was not terribly wrong—the Association of the Chashi Kaibarta Community had been registered only in 2001. The Chashi Kaibartas, incidentally, are officially listed as one of the sixty four OBC caste groups in West Bengal. His organization wants all the Mahisyas to set up local branches of ACKC in their localities and approach the local Panchayat or MLA to collect their OBC certificates. If he had his way, all Mahisyas would now have to disown—officially at any rate—the very name they had launched a vigorous movement to acquire and revert to the one which they then discarded. It's a rather simple procedure, explained the gentleman. All the Mahisyas have to do is look for their old title/registration deeds. If in those deeds their family had been referred to as belonging to the Kaibarta caste, they could cite that reference as sufficient proof of being

Chashi Kaibartas. If they did so, said the pamphlets of ACKC, they would be provided with government grants for students from the primary level right up to the postgraduate degree.

This gentleman, it turns out, heads an organization that seeks to invert the very process I wish to study in my dissertation—the transformation of the Chashi Kaibartas into the Mahisyas. In doing so, I hope to show that he is in fact looking to capitalize on a faultline within the Mahisyas themselves the origin of which goes back to my period. One thing led to another and he shared quite a few other crucial details but the encounter reaffirmed that caste remains as much of a conundrum to us today as it had been a hundred years ago.

In hindsight I realized I was watching a live demonstration of what Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has perceptively formulated as de-imagination and re-imagination of community boundaries corresponding to shifting historical contexts as they figure in the political space of contestable power.¹ Is a caste identity then, I wondered, not quite analogous to an open source code, a particular configuration composed of a series of software without any patent restriction that, once released in the public space, leaves all stakeholders free to impart their own imprint to the given configuration and refigure both themselves as well as the configuration? It is within this broad conceptual framework that I propose to map the transition of Chashi Kaibartas of Bengal into the Mahisyas roughly between 1886 and 1921. This was no linear transformation at all, having to contend with

¹ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal*, New Delhi, 2004, p 36.

a whole range of internal and external tensions and ambiguities all along the period, and, as the anecdote above shows, remains beset with such contradictions even now.

II

Since the late nineteenth century, the Mahisyas have been the single largest caste in Bengal. According to 1921 census report, '(i)n numbers (22,10,684) the Chashi Kaibartas or Mahisyas are the largest Hindu caste in Bengal, beating the Namasudras by nearly 200000 and Rajbansis by nearly 500000.² They were distributed across a number of districts. Most densely concentrated in the western districts of Midnapore, Howrah, the 24 Parganas, Hooghly, Nadia and Murshidabad, they were a conspicuous presence also in the eastern districts of Rajshahi, Mymensingh, Dacca, Tippera, Noalkhali and Sylhet, their numerical disadvantage often offset by their material and educational attainments.³

The *Kaibartas*, one section of which subsequently became the Mahisyas, were no upstart caste. They had reportedly founded five kingdoms in Midnapore district at a very early date and members of three of those dynasties still survived into the twentieth century, albeit in a much more modest position. They were known for their forthright ways, as was witnessed in medieval Bengal during the Kaibarta rebellion and the reported representation to Ballal Sen for a Brahmin of their own. The zamindaris of the large Kaibarta chiefs were eventually divided into many small plots held by a great mass of small Kaibarta landholders. They constituted the backbone of the population in the

² *Census of India*, 1921, vol. v, part I, p. 360.

³ *Ibid*

Tamluk and Contai subdivisions of Midnapore and united by common caste ties, they could be rather easily mobilized on any political issue. Unchallenged by any significant service class penetration in the rural areas, the tenant, landlord and the agricultural laborer were contained within a single caste cluster. The poor Kaibarta cultivators owned small parcels of land which gave them a status in local society and probably also muted the economic distinctions within the community to an extent.

A good number of them were zamindars and substantial landlords. A second group of Mahisya land controllers were big *Jotedars*, forest settlers and salt-land reclaimers who controlled most of the agricultural lands in Tamluk and Contai. According to Jogendranath Bahhatcharya, whom Nirmal Kumar Bose commends for his impeccable command over textual knowledge of the caste-system, they formed the local aristocracy in Midnapore where the number of Brahman and Kayasthas was not very large.⁴ In Nadia and 24 Parganas, they belonged to the lower layer of the middle classes. Although he says their rise in Nadia was due partly to their oppression of the hapless riots as agents for the European indigo planters, the reality was more complicated. Some Chasi Kaibarta landholders were active participants in the Indigo rebellion as well. For instance, two of the major leaders of the rebellion—Digambar Biswas and Bishnucharan Biswas, were small-scale Chasi Kaibarta landholders who took up arms against the planters.⁵ By 1896 Bhattacharya found that some of the Kaibartas of Nadia had also been competing for

⁴ Jogendranath Bhaattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, Calcutta, 1968 (first published in 1896) p. 222. N.K. Bose wrote an introduction to this edition.

⁵ Blair.B.King, *The Blue Mutiny: The Indigo Disturbances in Bengal: 1859-1862*, University of Pensilvania Press, 1966. In a chapter titled 'the conspirators' King provides the biographical details of the major leaders.

university distinctions while the Millionaire Marh family of Calcutta owned its Kaibarta identity on its sleeves.⁶

The Chasi Kaibartas had been a fairly enterprising community in the nineteenth century. They had played an active role in the reclamation of the densely afforested Sundarbans in the 24 Paraganas, where they built up forest settlements and agricultural farms with the help of dependents and servants from their own caste. When salt ceased to be made on the low-lying on the low-lying *jalpai* lands of Tamluk and Contai, they took over the blocks (*Chak*) of brushwood lands on which salt was formerly manufactured and built up splendid farms yielding large crops of winter rice in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In Calcutta, too, a considerable middle stratum of the Chasi Kaibarta businessmen, manufacturers, and professional men had grown up, counting among them nearly six hundred tax-assessees by the early twentieth century.⁷

The story of the dynamism of the Chasi Kaibartas goes still further back in history. Right from the time the caste appeared in Bengal in the mid sixteenth century, it had been

⁶ Bhattacharya mentions four distinct groups—Chasi, Lakshminarayan, Jeliya and Tunte—of the Kaibartas but actually discusses about the first group only. It is clear that by 1896 the Chasi kaibartas had become influential enough to force the Nadia pandit to pay some close attention to their social position. I am not sure whether the Kaibarta mobility was entirely welcomed by the higher castes. Bhattacharya himself mentioned the dark past of the Nadia Kaibartas and appeared not to be entirely pleased with their rapid ascent. Again, Pritiram Marh had no easy access to respectability in Calcutta society. He had to buy his way up and in popular lore he was envisaged as an upstart millionaire. But I suspect his daughter-in-law Rani Rasmani's patronage of Sri Ramakrishna must have brought the Kaibartas some prestige. For contemporary perception of Pritiram Marh, see Sumanta Banerjee, *Parlour and the Street*, Calcutta, 1988. Overall, I think, the Chasi Kaibartas were not considered to be very threatening, but neither were they regarded as completely docile.

⁷ Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal: 1872-1927*, New Delhi, 1984, p. 76. However, Jogendranath Bhattacharya was of the opinion that the Chasi Kaibartas' position in Midnapore was not rising, but declining, following the government's abolition of the East India Company's monopoly of salt manufacturing. Jogendranath Bhaattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*

relentlessly seeking upward mobility.⁸ In those days, agriculture was the main refuge for those looking to shift their traditional occupation, possibly because the land-man ration was still favourable. Nonetheless, generally speaking, agriculture was not a highly profitable occupation during the Mughal period in Bengal. Therefore, having made the shift to agriculture, the Chasi Kaibartas extended their activities to trade and established control over land in areas of their settlement, where their leaders succeeded in acquiring political power at the local level. 'It is the combination of economic control and political power that placed theChasi Kaibartas in a position of advantage *vis-a-vis* the other castes and ultimately helped them to raise their social position in the local society.'⁹

The political and economic developments of the 18th and 19th century facilitated mobility movements on a larger scale and with a rapid pace. The expanding scale of the European commerce and the consequent increase in the demand for industrial products enlarged the scope of alternative job opportunities for the different functional castes. Those who were already engaged in production and trade of these articles¹⁰ —like jute, rice, silk, iron and brass-metal ware—had a better chance to take advantage of this new route to prosperity. Thus the agriculturalist Chasi Kaibartas, along with Telis and Napits, engaged themselves in the production and trade of silk. They took also to iron trade and running small-scale engineering enterprises.¹¹ These economic opportunities and changes in occupation helped several *Nabashakh*, *Ajachal*, and intermediary and *Antyaj* castes to

⁸ On the first appearance of the caste, see Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1981, p. 75

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ These articles were, for instance, jute, rice, silk, iron and brass-metal ware, cotton textile and sugar. *Ibid*

¹¹ Sanyal provides a list of 14 such Chasi Kaibarta families that took to silk trade and eventually became prosperous. The Chasi Kaibartas of Howrah were particularly successful with engineering enterprises and iron trade. *Ibid*

acquire prosperity. Many of these new rich were ultimately interested in land rights because only that gave them a standing in the traditional social system through acquiring the title of *zamindar* and the power and prestige that followed it. The successive land revenue reforms of the East India Company's government in Bengal, culminating in the Permanent Settlement of 1793 provided the opportunities to realize such ambitions, by gradually breaking the old and large landholding families and replacing them by numerous small land holders and subinfeudators who were also popularly known as *zamindars*.

Yet, 'the land system throughout (Midnapore) district was comparatively simple' and subinfeudation, as understood in East Bengal, more especially that variety of it which consisted of leasing out undivided shares, was hardly practiced. The proprietors on the whole lived in their estates and would manage their lands personally, with the help of *Gomastas* and *Tahsildars*. As such, there were few opportunities for the growth of a class of intermediate tenure holders. Midnapore thus offered a rather poor field to the adventurers from outside. Moreover, some large estates, like *Tamluk* and *Mahisadal*, were somewhat lightly assessed and easily able to maintain themselves. In some other cases, the new proprietors of those estates that were eventually dismembered often were the agents or servants or *benamdars* of the former *zamindar*.¹² However, comprehensive research on the changes in Bengal agrarian scenario following the Permanent Settlement

¹² Gouripada Chatterjee, *Midnapore: The Frontrunner of India's Freedom Struggle*, Calcutta, 1986 pp. 110-125. According to Risley's *Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, the *Kaibartas* in Midnapore were of the *Hele-Kaibarta* sect and divided into two sub-castes: *Uttar-Rarhi* and *Dakshin-Rarhi*, having the following sections—*Lal-Chatai*, *Ekside*, *Doside*, *Makunda*, *Almal*, *Kaster-Risi*, *Kasyapa*, *Madhukulya*, *Sandilya* and *Vyasa*. These sections appear to be Brahmanical *gotras*. The irony is that Risley was one of the three authors of the 1885 concept note that dismissed *gotra* as indicative of Bramanic manipulations. For more on this point see chapter 1.

appears to suggest that the old zamindars and their Gomastahs in Midnapore successfully managed to thwart the creation of a perfect land market through their manipulation of auctions.¹³ Be that as it may, it is clear that Midnapore did not witness large scale change in the pattern of land ownership. At best, huge zamindaris were on occasions divided into smaller holdings by men from the same caste. This phenomenon probably explains why there was no great presence of upper caste people in the countryside of Midnapore.

Now as agriculture became the major economic activity that employed the highest number of people in the district, a vast tract of the district fell under the domination of the agricultural communities, among whom the Kaibarats were the most important, forming both the upper (zamindar) and lower sections (ryots) of the cultivating society. Divided into mainly two classes, Chasi or Halia and Jalika or Jeliya, in 1871 they numbered 6,92,140 persons out of a total population of 2,540,963 in Bengal.¹⁴

W.W. Hunter thought they were descendants of one of the aboriginal hill tribes of Chotanagpur who had embraced Hinduism almost immediately after the Aryans made their appearance in Bengal and made an honorable entry into the folds of Hinduism. But according to some local traditions, the Kaibartas were original settlers of Oudh who had conquered Midnapore and established the five kingdoms of which three still survived into the twentieth century. As land had gradually been reclaimed from the waste and brought into cultivation, the superior section of the Kaibartas devoted their energy exclusively to

¹³ Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society*, New Delhi, 1979, pp 131-173

¹⁴ Gouripada Chatterjee, *Midnapore: The Frontrunner of India's Freedom Struggle*, p. 157

agriculture and eventually drew away from the rest and set up a higher caste. So much for a bird's eye view of the history of the Chashi Kaibartas up to the mid nineteenth century.

III

In the very recent past, two excellent historiographical essays have appeared on the issue of caste studies by historians.¹⁵ The earlier one—by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay—begins with evolving sociological trends in studying caste, and then proceeds to a thorough chronological discussion on systematic studies on caste in Bengal since the time of early Christian missionaries and ‘orientalist’ observations of the native society down to his own. I can only express my silent admiration by refraining from repeating most of the points he has already made. The second—by Ishita Banerjee Dube—seeks to ‘highlight the mutual articulations of caste and history in modern India, to underscore, necessarily selectively, the terms of such dynamics while indicating also themes and issues for further research.’¹⁶ While she has spoken about the sociological and the political strands of scholarship on caste over the years, I particularly appreciate her survey of the genealogies that have shaped the debates surrounding caste. However, her statement that the immediate context is provided by the colonial encounter and the policies and the politics of the colonial state, it seems to me, credits the colonial state with far more decisive agency and intentionality than it possessed. Recent research has shown, for instance, that it was the emergence of a Bengali public sphere since the early nineteenth century, at best an indirect contribution of the colonial state, that had spawned serious

¹⁵ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Domination in Colonial Bengal*, New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London, 2004, pp 11-39 and Ishita Banerjee Dube, (ed) *Caste in History*, New Delhi, 2008, pp xv-ixiv

¹⁶ *Caste in History*, xvi

debates among the Bengalis themselves over several issues, including caste, well before the colonial state rolled out its censuses and the associated 'policies and politics'.¹⁷

In this connection it is important to engage with the works of Nicholas Dirks, one of the most influential historians of caste in recent years.¹⁸ It is difficult to ignore his suggestion that 'it was under the British that 'caste' became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all 'systematizing' India's diverse forms of social identity, community and organization.'¹⁹ This is, of course, an elaboration of a point first made by Bernard Cohn's study of the colonial census.²⁰ However, when the reach and power of a discourse is assumed to be effective all over India, it is obvious that several important specificities at regional levels are left unattended. As John Rogers points out, there is a remarkable convergence in the periodization and coverage of the accounts of Dirks and Susan Bayly.²¹ They begin with seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and see considerable divergence in patterns of social organization across the subcontinent. They agree that early colonial accounts of caste were uncertain and confused, and did not dominate the British perception of 'India'. Both date the more intense objectification of Indian identities in general and caste in particular, to the 1860s, and give similar accounts of colonial policies and discourses that reified caste over the following half century. But

¹⁷ S.N. Mukherjee, 'Daladali in Calcutta in Nineteenth Century', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 9, no.1, (1975) pp 59-80; Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, New Delhi, 1997, *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, New Delhi, 2002; Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, New Delhi, 2007

¹⁸ Nicholas B Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: the Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*, Cambridge, 1987 and *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, New Delhi, 2001

¹⁹ *Castes of Mind*, p. 5

²⁰ Bernard.S.Cohn, 'Census, Social Structure and objectification in South Asia' in *An Anthropologist Among the Historians*, New Delhi, 1987

²¹ John Rogers, Introduction, *Indian Economic and Social History Review: Special Issue Devoted to Caste, Power and Region in South Asia*, vol. XLI, no.1 (January-March, 2004); Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in South Asia from Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, Cambridge, 1999

Bayly insists that caste is real, and not a colonial 'invention', as it were. They differ also on the question of the origin of Indian nationalism, Bayly seeing it as a response to British rule but Dirks portraying it as a response to British discourses on India. Dirks as such would seem to point to the illegitimacy of an Indian nationalism that is forever tainted by its colonial origins. Bayly's position seems to derived from her commitment to understand caste as social practice, and to giving Indians a significant role in nineteenth and twentieth century Indian history. Dirks, on the other hand, seems to suggest that struggles over caste hierarchy only reinforced the epistemological power of colonialism. For him, attempts to give agency in colonial history are necessarily motivated by a desire to justify British rule. I suggest that while we continue to question the power of discourses, we must also interrogate the founding assumption that scholars should necessarily begin with a pan-Indian notion of caste in the first place. There is therefore an attendant need to start delinking the history of caste from that of Indian nationalism at the same time.

Prachi Deshpande's work offers a discursive and political history of caste that puts great emphasis on how Indian writers and politicians employed the language of caste for their own respective interests. She acknowledges that colonialism produced epistemological changes in notions of identity, which included the creation of a new 'category' of caste, but she portrays the process that turned 'Maratha' from a premodern regional and political label in to a 'caste' identity as one that stemmed primarily from debates among Indians rather than the dictates of the British power.²² I derive my historiographical

²² Prachi Deshpande, 'Caste as Maratha: Social Categories, Colonial Policy and Identity in early Twentieth Century Maharashtra' in *Indian Economic and Social History Review: Special Issue Devoted to Caste*,

model partly from hers. At the same time we must remember that Deshpande also acknowledges the emergence of a newly empowered elite among the Indians following some processes that owed their origin to the colonial state—such as opening up the professions—who in turn acted in a way that the less privileged among the caste collective that they represented began to have less and less voice as time passed.

On the general question of the role of colonialism in remaking tradition I find Neeladri Bhattacharya's position particularly helpful.²³ Bhattacharya argues for a perspective that seeks to understand the colonial relationship with native traditions as complex, ambiguous and varied—both spatially and temporally. Codification, he suggests, hybridized custom; it appropriated indigenous custom through western categories and mixed heterogeneous traditions. Hybridity, however, suggests an amalgamation of pure essences. In reality, different officials, looking through different lenses, saw different realities and interpreted custom in dissimilar ways. Native tradition was not filtered through any fixed frame of Oriental discourse which had crystallized in the West in a congealed form. The frame was not only fractured, it was continuously reconstituted. So we need to look not only at multiple discourses of tradition and modernity but also the ways in which the elements of difference were incessantly recombined into new forms, new languages of power and domination. This process revealed the inner tensions and ambiguities within colonial ideology. The nature of dialogues with local informants was crucial to the remaking of custom, although not native voices could be easily

Power and Region in South Asia, vol. XLI, no.1 (January-March, 2004) and *Creative Pasts*, New Delhi, 2008.

²³ Neeladri Bhattacharya, 'Remaking Custom: The Discourse and Practice of Colonial Codification' in Champaklakshmi and Gopal (eds.) *Tradition, Dissent and Ideology*, Delhi, 1996

accommodated in the imperial discourse. Moreover, discourses so constituted need not always have the power to reorder practices unhindered. Traditions and customary practices need not be so malleable as to entirely succumb to transforming power of a codifying/ethnographic state. Beneath the regime of codes and discourses lay the reality of uncoded practices, and if I may add, still unordered caste relations. Padmanabh Samarendra has recently explored the career of colonial census with a similar historiographical position.²⁴ In my chapters my agreement with this position would be, I hope, fairly obvious.

IV

There are not many works by historians on the role of caste in modern Bengal. Arguably the first historians to study the role of caste in politics in modern Bengal were the members of the so called Cambridge school of historiography. Their works essentially deal with the politics of the Bengali bhadroloks within an overall framework that privileges legislative politics and dismisses Indian nationalism as mere factional squabbles between various bhadrolok groups jockeying for power and patronage. The bhadrolok, say Broomfield and Johnson, was an Weberian 'open status' group based on educational and professional attainments that nonetheless was predominated by three upper castes of Brahmans, Baidyas and Kayasthas.²⁵ Extremely wary of manual labor, the

²⁴ Padmanabh Samarendra, 'Between Number and Knowledge: Career of Caste in Colonial Census' in Ishita Banerjee Dube, (ed) *Caste in History*, New Delhi, 2008, pp 46-66

²⁵ J.H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society*, Bombay, 1968; Gordon Johnson, 'Partition, Agitation and Congress: Bengal 1904-1908', Jack Gallagher, 'Congress in Decline: Bengal 1930-1939'. Both these essays appeared in Seal, Gallagher and Robinson (eds.), *Locality Province Nation: Essays on Indian Politics 1870-1940*, Cambridge, 1973, pp 213-268 and 269-325 respectively. Broomfield is an American but historiographically his position is no different from the Cambridge school.

Bhadroloks seriously resented the rise of leaders from agricultural castes such as Mahisyas, notwithstanding their educational qualifications or political constituency. In this connection Broomfield and Gallagher have discussed the marginalization of Birendra Nath Sasmal in the Bengal Congress in the late twenties and the early thirties.²⁶

The Cambridge school has been castigated by a couple of generations of nationalist historians, I am afraid, for entirely sentimental reasons. Their language makes for great reading, and their command over the sources they have seen is generally mind boggling. Even a cursory glance at contemporary newspapers would convince the most ardent nationalist that factionalism in early twentieth century Bengal was at least as much a reality as the stirrings of nationalism. However, the methodological challenge that the Cambridge historians smugly, and successfully, avoided is some familiarity with the Bengali language sources. It indeed takes some amount of courage to write the political history of a people without bothering to learn, let alone master, their language, and still hope to be taken seriously.

This willful suspension of linguistic familiarity is a part of the way they look at history of the bhadrolok and their politics. This history, it would appear from their work, is little more than an account of university graduates clamoring for employments and their leaders for legislative positions so as to get hold of public resources and feed their clients. As a natural corollary to this position, it is ordained that all history is political, nay legislative history and therefore vernacular sources are an entirely dispensable

²⁶ *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society*, pp 210-11, 259-60, 268, 279; 'Congress in Decline'

commodity, except for selectively translated versions of vernacular periodicals. It is high time to treat their ignorance and incapacity to work with vernacular sources as precisely that, ignorance and incapacity. For example, Broomfield passes off the parallel government at Midnapore and the temporary disappearance of British authority from the district in 1942 as having happened twelve years earlier.²⁷ Gallagher, on his part, smugly portrays the trio of J.M.Sengupta, S.C.Bose and K.S.Ray as Oxbridge returned upper caste snobs who rallied against Sasmal, a rustic Mahisya agriculturist from Midnapore.²⁸ In his eagerness to set this little, racy, sweeping, rural/urban, bhadrolok/chasha, Oxbridge/the rest dichotomy up as an impressive parenthetical detail, he either deliberately ignored or did not know that Birendra Nath Sasmal hailed from a rather well to do zamindar family of Contai and had entered the Bar from the Middle Temple.²⁹

Notwithstanding their cavalier handling of Sasmal and Midnapore, Broomfield and Gallagher have made a couple of significant points about the role of caste in Bengal politics in early twentieth century. First, they have made a sufficiently valid, if a little overstated, critique of an uncritical nationalist historiography. Second, they have drawn our attention to the role of local and provincial specificities such as caste identity in influencing larger processes such as the formation or retardation of nationalism.

²⁷ *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society*, p. 302. It is not as though vernacular sources alone mention this little detail. I am afraid there would be hundreds of home political files of all hues corroborating the point.

²⁸ 'Congress in Decline' p.277

²⁹ Now it is of course a matter of some amusement that Middle Temple turned out rustic agriculturists.

Hitesranjan Sanyal was the first, and still in many ways one of the profoundest, historians to take up systematic studies of caste mobility in Bengal.³⁰ To start with, his command of vernacular sources was unimpeachable and he undertook extensive fieldwork across the villages of Bengal over long periods of time. He has defined, more or less comprehensively, the caste hierarchy as it was in practice in Bengal, which is quite different from the traditional *varna* hierarchy.³¹ Caste mobility movements, according to him, are not necessarily a modern phenomenon. He shows that movements of corporate mobility of large groups took place in medieval Bengal, without the intervention of modern agencies such as railways and the press. Mobility was possible not only for corporate groups but also for small family units or elite groups. It was possible, he reasoned, because caste system as it operated in Bengal admitted of revisions in the composition of different ranks and recognition of social forces unleashed by historical developments in the form of elevation of lower castes to higher ranks. Such elevation often followed shifts to comparatively lucrative and respectable occupations and consequent dissociation of the dissident groups from the parent castes of lower ranks. Since each caste was traditionally associated with a particular occupation, which in most cases was its monopoly, an attempt to change occupation was virtually an infringement over the monopoly of others, and therefore likely to be resisted. One of the ways this tension could be, and was, resolved was through a shift to agriculture at a time when potentially arable lands were still available. Sanyal classified these mobility movements into four different types, each representing a level, according to the positions desired or actually achieved by different aspirant groups—upward mobility of a group within

³⁰ Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*. Calcutta, 1981.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp 37-38

Individual jatis, greater social respectability for individual jatis without ceremonial rank ascent, dissident groups within individual castes breaking away and achieving higher social position, and emergence of new castes with higher ritual rank.³² Traces of Sanyal's influence would be palpable throughout the dissertation, especially so in the second chapter.

Sanyal's formulation about the caste system in Bengal admitting of revisions in the composition of different ranks has been subsequently elaborated by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay. In his monographs and essays he has been making the point that caste system in Bengal was maintained primarily through cultural hegemony. This theoretical formulation was not so clearly elucidated in his work on the Namasudras in which he had attributed the autonomy or otherwise of lower caste movements in the early twentieth century to their proximity or distance from nationalism.³³ In his latest work, however, various dimensions of this hegemonic process are explored with great empirical rigor and theoretical richness.³⁴ The difference in emphasis between the two works can also be attributed to the difference in the source material used. While for his first two books he relied largely on colonial sources, in *Caste, Culture and Hegemony* he has extensively used material produced by the ideologues of various castes themselves.

Swaraj Basu's monograph on the Rajbasnis of North Bengal follows up on the lines suggested by Bandyopadhyay. His analysis of the eventual breakdown of the movement

³² Ibid, pp 41-45

³³ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity: The Namasudras of Bengal 1872-1937*, Surrey, 1997

³⁴ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal*, New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London, 2004

along class lines and his meticulous grounding of the movement within larger socio-economic backgrounds commands serious attention.³⁵

What Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has recently described as ‘heterogeneity and transience’ of a caste identity is also visible in the recent works of Sumit Sarkar.³⁶ As Sarkar suggests, developing this point even further ‘...while identities like caste are certainly not fixed, given or unchanging, neither can their construction be reduced to the colonial construction alone.’³⁷ One of the things this dissertation seeks to demonstrate is precisely this. Sarkar also argues that there was possibly no polarized distinction between upper caste and lower caste worlds, each influencing the other in complex and multiple ways although this interpenetration was marked neither by absolute consensus nor entirely autonomous protest. As a result, he advocates a more holistic approach, seeking to explore the rise and decline of a ‘language of caste’ in early twentieth century Bengal. P.K.Datta’s recent work on the development of communal common sense in early twentieth century Bengal builds on this perspective, exploring with great persuasiveness how caste linked up and interacted with other identity markers such as gender and community.³⁸ I seek to follow a similar perspective in my third chapter.

³⁵ Swaraj Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement: The Rajbansis of Bengal 1910-1947*. Delhi, 2003

³⁶ Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, New Delhi, 1997 and *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, New Delhi, 2002

³⁷ *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, p 41

³⁸ P.K.Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal*, New Delhi, 1999

V

So far as I know, there is not a single full length work on the Mahisyas. They have occasionally figured in the modern history of Bengal within other historiographical frames, however. I have already discussed their position within the Cambridge historiography. Rajat Kanta Ray has looked at them as part of his larger jotedar thesis, as one of the case studies where these rural magnates gains in strength and sets up a challenge to the urban, professional, educated, nationalist leadership, the 'social conflict' behind the 'political unrest' in Bengal between 1872 and 1927.³⁹ Swapan Dasgupta, Bidyut Chakrabarty and Partha Chatterjee largely conform to this perspective as far as their analysis of the Mahisya movement is concerned.⁴⁰ All of them agree that the rich jotedars of Midnapore used the caste movement in an instrumentalist way to ensure the loyalty of their poorer castemen and this in turn made Midnapore a major nationalist bastion in the late twenties and the early thirties.

Tanika Sarkar's recent essay on the canonization of a Mahisya (then Kaibarta or Chashi Kaibarta) ascetic illuminates the often almost imperceptible ways through which such hegemony actually worked in practice.⁴¹ Her deft analysis provides an insightful exposition of the intricate ways upper caste hegemony could be subjected to complex negotiation and adjustments by emerging lower caste movements. As she says, '[T]imes

³⁹ Rajat Ranta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal 1872-1927*, New Delhi, 1984

⁴⁰ Swapan Dasgupta, *Local Politics in Midnapur-1907-1934*, Unpublished Ph.D thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1980, Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Local Politics and Nationalism: Midnapur 1919-1944*, Partha Chatterjee, 'Caste and Politics in West Bengal' in *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism* New Delhi, 1998. I am grateful to Dr. Dasgupta for letting me read his thesis.

⁴¹ Tanika Sarkar, 'Caste, Sect and Hagiography: The Balakdashis of Early Modern Bengal' in *Rebels, Saints, Wives: Designing Selves and Nations in Colonial Times*, New York, 2009, pp 69-120

had indeed changed rapidly. A local Shudra leader of a minor sect was being cited anxiously by an educated Kayasth to validate the words of Sri Jiva, a leading Brahman theologian of Vrindavan, a founder of the Gaudiya Vaishnavism movement. If the twentieth century hagiographer proved his fidelity to conservative Brahmanism, the irony was that he could not get away, in the same breath, from having to confess the extent of its erosion.⁴²

In this dissertation I seek to interrogate the conventional distinction between the upper and lower castes by highlighting a series of negotiations at various levels. These negotiations, I argue, keep reconfiguring a given caste identity at various moments, in ways that it is not really possible to talk about a stable, fixed or permanent caste identity at any point of time, whether in precolonial or colonial period. At the same time, these negotiations also significantly qualify the other participant categories such as nation, class or gender which in their turn contribute to the making and revising of a caste identity. I choose to do this through a case study of the social mobility movement among the Mahisyas of Bengal between 1886 and 1921. I start at 1886 because it was during that year that Risley took over as the Special Officer of Ethnography in Bengal and launched the first systematic enquiry about the social composition of the province. By 1921, I argue the Mahisyas had more or less developed a distinct caste identity and also a majority of them became part of the mainstream nationalist movement. Lest it appears that the period too closely corresponds to the dates of colonial censuses, let me clarify that my telos, if there is any, is actually to try to show something precisely opposite. I argue that even though colonial sociology had significantly contributed to the

⁴² Ibid, p. 120

reimagination of the category of caste, much of this reimagination took place through negotiations between actors that did not involve the colonial state and its policies.

In the first chapter I take up a detailed discussion of colonial knowledge production, trying to bring in the role of local informants on the one hand and the internal debates between various strands within the 'colonial' discourse roughly between 1886 and 1901. It is through this encounter of multiple layers of discursive complexities that I seek to trace the emergence of a Mahisya identity, linking it up also with larger socio economic processes that clearly predated the colonial state, some of which I have already mentioned above.

In the second chapter I seek to interrogate the polarized upper caste/lower caste dichotomy focusing on some of the challenges that faced the Mahisya movement, roughly between 1901 and 1910. I make the historiographical point that the strongest opposition to an upwardly mobile caste usually came from those castes which were located immediately above or below the caste in question, and not necessarily from the traditional upper castes. I must confess here that all my chapters suffer from a palpable tension between a thematic and a chronological approach, and I do not necessarily consider that a terribly fatal flaw.

The third, and historiographically the most ambitious, chapter seeks to map the development of a distinct Mahisya identity in the second decade of the twentieth century. I take up several aspects of the movement—its politics, its ritual reforms agenda,

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entrepreneurial ethos and gender—in order to suggest that a caste movement can be many things at the same time. It may be, for instance, loyalist and nationalist all at once or it can promote education among its members but do so in a very restricted way. It can, again, inculcate an entrepreneurial ethos among its people but eventually have them specialize in an industrial sector that cannot do without official patronage. I also argue that there may be divisions within a putative caste group along not only class, but also territorial, lines. Between them I seek to link up the history of a caste movement with several other histories—of nationalism, of gender, of education, of public sphere, of entrepreneurship and so on. In this sense this is not merely a history of an intermediate caste, but also one that seeks to mediate between several historical categories in early twentieth century Bengal. I have not, however, attempted to connect it to a history of communalism since it has already been very competently done by P.K Datta and many others.

Nobody knows the limitations of this dissertation more than I do. However, I would be happy if it manages to raise successfully even some of the questions that it seeks to ask.

Chapter One

Intermediate knowledge, uncertain status: Colonial Ethnography, Census and Mahisyas

The Mahisyas of Bengal launched a most spirited agitation on the eve of the 1901 census, claiming a new caste name, Mahisyas, for themselves. The colonial bureaucracy dealt with their plea at two levels. On the ground the census enumerators were instructed to allow the Chashi Kaibartas to return themselves as Mahisyas. In the final compilation though, the Mahisyas were returned as Chashi Kaibartas as in previous censuses. This chapter tries to understand the genealogy of this dual response and in so doing it seeks to map some aspects of colonial knowledge production on the Mahisyas or Kaibartas between 1886 and 1901. One of the objectives of the chapter is to highlight some of the ambivalences and inconsistencies in the colonial ethnographic enterprise and some of the tensions that continued to mark its career during this period. At no stage during this period did the colonial knowledge formation represent an internally consistent enterprise. The ostensible objectives of colonial ethnographers were often defeated by the lack of resources in their hand. This chapter attempts to study this incomplete and intermediate nature of the colonial knowledge formation through its engagement with the category

Mahisyas/Kaibartas. The chapter is divided into five sections, each focusing on a particular moment of colonial knowledge production with direct reference to the Mahisyas and eventually showing up its tentative and uncertain character as a whole.

The first section examines some formative assumptions and objectives of colonial ethnography as they were worked out during a conference in 1885 and some of its implications. I have taken this particular conference as the point of departure for it marks the beginning of an encounter between two schools of opinion on the right method of classifying individual caste groups. This tension between the methods preferred by Denzil Ibbetson and J.C. Nesfield—the so called Punjab school—and H.H. Risley continued to characterize all subsequent attempts at classifying caste groups. The next section illustrates these points more clearly through a close examination of a body of correspondence between H.H. Risley, the then newly appointed Special Officer for Ethnographic Enquiries in Bengal, and his informants. This set of correspondence finally led to Risley's tome, *Tribes and Castes of Bengal*. Interestingly, though much of this correspondence focused on the relative social and ritual ranking of various caste groups in Bengal, Risley ultimately listed the castes in alphabetical order in *Tribes and Castes*. Most of these informants were upper caste colonial officials and they often consulted orthodox Brahmans before forwarding their dispatches to Risley. I shall examine a particular set of correspondence focusing on the responses of these officials to Risley on a draft rank-list of castes in Bengal that he had prepared and circulated among the latter for their opinion. The third section focuses on an examination of the ways of the category Jeliya (fishermen) and how the census report of 1891 listed people belonging to this

category scattered across several caste groups. It seeks to illustrate the mismatch between the assumed occupation-caste correspondence in actual practice in Bengal, and some of the ways this mismatch leads to a revision of colonial knowledge formation on individual caste groups. The fourth section goes on to show some of the ways these shifting concerns of colonial ethnography opens up a space for the Mahisyas to formulate and articulate a distinct caste identity on the eve of the 1901 census. This section also briefly reviews some aspects of the Mahisya movement of 1901, focusing on their representations to the census authorities and the subsequent partial rejection of their appeal. The fifth and final section tries to relate the dual response of the census bureaucracy to some of the ways that the colonial knowledge production system assembled a corpus of knowledge about Kaibartas/Chashi Kaibartas and the resulting uncertainty about their appropriate social rank and status in Bengal. This is done through a juxtaposition of the relevant sections of Hunter's *Statistical Accounts of Bengal* and Risley's *Tribes of and Castes Bengal*.

It has been argued, fairly persuasively, that Indians started to objectify their culture since the late nineteenth century. Germane to this process were situations where their precedents for action were questioned and they were called upon to explain them. Such instances arose in relation to determining rights to property, social relations, rituals as well as caste hierarchy. The Indians responded by turning their culture into a 'thing', as it were, and selecting, reformulating and polishing some aspects of their culture for conscious ends. Thus the culture of Indians—defined as a system of inherited conceptions expressed in forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and

develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life—was unhinged from the matrix of custom, religious or ritual symbols into within which it hitherto lay embedded. It left the realm of the unconscious and walked into the territory of the conscious *via media* such colonial knowledge production processes as the census or ethnographic enquiries.¹

Scholars have interrogated this neat picture of an epistemological break under colonialism. They have shown, for instance, that public hearings and discussions leading to adjustments in caste ranks and arbitration of caste disputes was an important function of social leaders and local social groups in Bengal during eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This is distinct from the traditional role of the monarch arbitrating over and consecrating adjustments in the social status of individual castes relative to other similar collectivities. Leadership of such bodies was understood to confer special prestige to individuals. Interestingly, then, individuals could acquire some amount of social mobility by virtue of their membership of a body that sat in judgement over issues relating to an institution generally understood to defy change or mobility.² The epistemological break set in motion by the colonial state was certainly important, but possibly less fundamental. If there were institutional bodies especially constituted to deliberate and arbitrate on disputes regarding caste in precolonial India, the project of colonial knowledge production on caste was no monolithic enterprise either, being itself fraught with inconsistencies and contradictions. This chapter seeks to illustrate this point, focusing

¹ Bernard Cohn, 'Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia', in *An Anthropologist among the Historians*, New Delhi, 1987, Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, New Delhi 2001, M.S.S. Pandian, *Brahmin and Non Brahmin*, New Delhi, 2007.

² Kumkum Chatterjee, 'Communities, Kings and Chronicles: The Kulagranthas of Bengal', *Studies in History*, 2005:21;173; S.N. Mukherjee, 'Daladali in Calcutta in Nineteenth Century', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1975) pp 59-80. Both Mukherjee and Chatterjee mention an institution called *Ekjai* constituted to arbitrate of caste related disputes.

closely on the shifting concerns characterizing three distinct moments of colonial knowledge production. Each of these moments was marked by a crisis in colonial epistemology arising out of serious incompatibilities between its formative assumptions about the intrinsic characteristics of individual caste groups and received information on their actual practices.

II

Caste, scholars have long agreed, presented the most complex questions for the colonial administrators who often doubled up as ethnographers. G.S.Ghurye has wondered whether it was merely the intellectual curiosity of some of the early colonial officials; M.N.Srinivas observed how the role of Indian rulers in promoting or demoting a particular caste was now transferred to the new rulers and the ranks accorded in the census reports became equivalent of traditional copper plate grants declaring the ranks and privileges of particular castes. Bernard Cohn has studied the influence of the census operations on theoretical perspectives of both administrators and social scientists about Indian social systems.³ Down until 1950s the data and conceptions growing out of the census and related ethnographic investigations mainly shaped the scholars' and scientists' views on the nature, structure and functioning of the Indian caste system.

The official justification for ethnographic enquiries was based on administrative necessity. By 1901, senior officials in the Home Department of the Government of India could easily observe that

³ Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India*, New York, 1932; M N Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, Bombay, 1963, Cohn, *Census and Social Objectification*.

It is unnecessary to dwell at length upon the advantages to many branches of administration in this country of an accurate and well arranged record of the customs and the domestic and social relations of the various castes and tribes. The entire framework of native life in India is made up of groups of this kind and the status and conduct of individuals are largely determined by the rules of the group to which they belong. For the purposes of legislation, for judicial procedure, of famine relief, of sanitation, and dealing with epidemic diseases, and of almost every form of executive and action, an ethnographic survey of India and a record of the customs of the people is as necessary an incident of good governance as a cadastral survey of the land and a record of the rights of its tenants.⁴

By the middle of the nineteenth century, many British officials felt caste and religion were the sociological keys to understanding the Indian people. Information about these two institutions was therefore considered a prerequisite for delivering good governance. At the same time, the army was beginning to be reorganized on 'martial race' assumptions. Public debates raged about the respective strengths of the Hindu and the Muslims in the public services. Apocalyptic theories about certain castes hatching conspiracies to wage rebellions against the British rule were also circulating thick and fast.⁵ As the resolution above shows, ideas about caste—its origins and functions—contributed as much to policy making in the latter half of the nineteenth century as ideas about the village community and the nature of property rights did in the first half.

⁴ Excerpt from the proceedings of the Government of India the Home (Public) Department, dated Simla, 23rd May, 1901; Resolution signed by Home Secretary, Risley Papers. Henceforth RP

⁵ This was reportedly the basis of the now discredited safety valve theory about the foundation of the Indian National Congress. For a fine rebuttal of the theory see Bipan Chandra et al, *India's Struggle for Independence*, New Delhi, 1988.

The first census of 1871-2 witnessed endeavours to gather information on caste, and the attempt to slot the castes within the four *varnas* or in categories of outcastes or aborigines. The exercise met with failure for want of a uniform system of classification. Elaborate lists were prepared in 1881 with information on castes and subcastes to achieve standardization in the recording of information and supervisors (usually a literate government official, patwaris, zamindars, school teachers and such like) were instructed to train actual enumerators on how to classify responses. In regard to Bengal in particular, some methodological innovations were made in 1881. J.A. Bourdillon, Census Commissioner for Bengal proposed the category of intermediate castes to accommodate groups such as Kayasthas and Khandaits, rated very close in status to Brahmins and Rajputs. The lieutenant Governor solicited the help of Rajendralal Mitra, the outstanding Sanskrit scholar who set out a list of castes in order of precedence. These lists and instructions were meant to equip the census enumerators with the wherewithal to work out the rank of an individual caste in the caste hierarchy in perfect harmony with Hindu textual prescriptions.⁶ The involvement of Rajendralal Mitra shows that Indian informants and even more importantly, Indian officials and experts were intimately involved in these colonial enterprises.⁷

Roughly from the first half of 1886, the colonial state had initiated a fresh round of knowledge production on the subject of castes in Bengal following the appointment of H.

⁶ Cohn quotes Rajendralal Mitra actually making this very point. See Cohn, *Social Objectification*.

⁷ Lucy Caroll, 'Colonial Perceptions of Indian Society and the Emergence of Caste(s) Associations', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. XXXVII, no. 2, February, 1978. Caroll, of course, makes the point in regard to the *Kayasths*.

H. Risley as the Officer on Special Duty for Ethnographic Enquiries in the Bengal Presidency. As we saw, by this time certain conventions regarding the methodology of working out individual caste ranks had already evolved. This phase of enquiry was geared towards a comprehensive elaboration of the functional significance of caste as an organizing principle of society in India. To this end it set out to prepare a record of the caste hierarchy as it operated at the ground level. Through a close examination of the actual working of this ethnographic enterprise, it is possible to argue, following recent historiography, that these ethnographic investigations were saddled with several ambivalences and inconsistencies.⁸

This particular round (1886) of investigations was commissioned shortly after the generation of some new insights on how 'to *define more precisely* the nature of the groups to which (are given the) various terms applied to the divisions upon which society in India is based'.⁹ The initiative began at the Conference on Ethnography of Northern India, held at Lahore between 18th and 22nd March, 1885. The proceedings of the conference yielded, among other things, some resolutions regarding 'some doubtful points of ethnographic nomenclature'. These suggestions, evolved in concert by Denzil Ibbetson, John.C.Nesfield and H.H Risley, contained new definitions of *caste* ('the largest group based upon *community of occupation*'), *tribe* ('the largest group based upon real or fictional community of descent, or upon common occupation of territory') *sub-*

⁸ Sumit Sarkar, 'Identities and History: Some Lower Caste Narratives from Early Twentieth Century Bengal', in *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, Bloomington and New Delhi, 2002; Padmanabh Samarendra, 'Between Number and Knowledge: The Career of Caste in Colonial Census', in Ishita Banerjee Dube, (ed.) *Caste in History*, New Delhi, 2008.

⁹ Excerpts from the proceedings of the Conference on Ethnography of Northern India, preserved in Risley Papers (Microfilms), National Archives of India, New Delhi.

caste (smallest endogamous group within a caste) and several other ethnographic categories.¹⁰

This coming together of Ibbetson, Nesfield and Risley is a most appropriate point of departure for they represented competing epistemic positions on the question of classifying castes. Ibbetson and Nesfield advocated an occupation based model while for Risley *varna* more or less stood for race. Nesfield, Ibbetson and Crooke, all prominent Civil servants, favored a functional approach to caste classification though earlier observers had noted a widening distance between occupational categories for caste and actual occupations. Ibbetson's *Punjab Castes* (1883) and Nesfield's *Brief View of the Caste System of NWP and Awadh* (1885) suggested occupational categories like trading castes, priestly castes, landowning agricultural castes, artisan castes and so on.¹¹ Risley, on the other hand, was convinced that racial encounters lay at the core of the caste system. He relied on *varna*, and more generally on Brahmanic measures, and opinions, concerning caste rank. This moment of collaboration between two different schools of opinion on classifying caste groups in a way marks the complex nature of the colonial ethnographic enterprise. I hope to show that throughout this period (1886-1901) these two ways of classifying caste groups continued to wrestle for supremacy within the colonial taxonomical framework.

¹⁰ Ibid. Emphasis mine unless stated otherwise.

¹¹ Denzil Ibbetson, *Punjab Castes* (Reprint of the chapter on 'The Races, Castes and Tribes of the People' in the *Census of the Punjab, 1881*, Lahore, Mubarak Ali, 1974 (first published in 1883); J.C. Nesfield *Brief View of the Caste System in North Western Provinces and Oudh*, Allahabad: NWP and Oudh Government Press, 1885

The administrative rationale for the exercise was couched in terms of order. The colonial state was projected as a successor to the Hindu rulers seeking to remove the 'great deal of uncertainty' that had been caused in the Hindu society since the beginning of the Muhammedan rule in India.¹² This administrative logic to classify and thereby to rule (or police) more effectively appears to be a more significant drive behind these enquiries, as opposed to mere intellectual curiosity of scholarly civil servants.¹³

The 1885 conference, incidentally, was organized only nine months before the Congress sat for its inaugural meeting in Bombay in December, a date loosely assumed to mark the entry of Indians at an all India level into modern, i.e. legislative and associational politics. While sections among the educated middle class Indian professionals were attempting to forge an Indian 'national' political unit through the modern means of associational politics, the colonial bureaucracy was getting ready, to launch yet another round of enquiries based on the assumption that Indian society consists primarily of ascriptive units like caste.

¹² E.A. Gait, *Census of India Report 1901*. p 363

¹³ In 1901, British Association for the Advancement of Science the Government of India requested to carry out ethnographic, anthropometric and photographic investigations along with the census. But Government declined to undertake photography. Earlier in 1891 a similar request to carry out ethnographic enquiries was turned down. Administrative needs, and not absolute fidelity to scientific knowledge formation was the key consideration of the colonial state. See Excerpts from the proceedings of the Government of India (Home Department), dated May 23, 1901. See also Padmanabh Samarendra, *Between Number and Knowledge*.

The conference did its best to work out concrete and standardized definition of a number of key terms involved in classifying individual caste groups.¹⁴ Particularly interesting in this connection were the rejection of the term *Gotra* as a Brahmanic, and therefore external, imposition and the advocacy of the desirability of the term *Got*. The *Gotra* was defined as artificial moniker imposed upon caste groups *in addition to their proper caste or tribal divisions*. The term *Got*, on the other hand, was seen as denoting the *organic* division and subdivision of castes and tribes. The *gotra*, 'in the strict Brahmanical sense'—in that they were chiefly used by the officiating priests at various ceremonies and often remained unknown to the people to whom they ostensibly belonged—was thus declared to be an accretion to the name of a caste or tribe *from outside* as opposed to *Got*, now deemed to be an 'organic' index to caste nomenclature. The following advice was to be given to the actual investigators.

The Brahmanical *gotras* have, in many cases been adopted by or imposed upon, castes and tribes in addition to their *proper caste or tribal divisions*. In such cases the *Gotras* are not what is wanted; what is wanted is the *organic divisions* of and subdivisions of the caste and tribe, not unusually called *got* by the people themselves, as distinguished from *gotras* in the strict Brahmanical sense. Occasionally these organic divisions and Brahmanical *gotras* are identical; but where the latter are distinct from and have been superimposed upon the former, the *gotras* run through the divisions, the same divisions often, though not always including several *gotras* while, on the other hand, the same *gotra* is found among several divisions. The Brahmanical *gotras* are chiefly used by the

¹⁴ It would be more interesting, and perhaps more rewarding, to explore the terms of reference of this conference in greater length but our material does not permit it at this stage.

officiating priests at marriage and the ceremony of *sankalp* and are often unknown to the people themselves without reference to the to their priests.¹⁵

In other words, a clear formula was being prescribed. If the *gotra* of a given caste was not found identical with *got*, then the investigators were to ignore *gotra* altogether. The response of the caste members themselves was deemed more authentic. What a man knew about his own caste was appreciated as what his caste really was, notwithstanding what his priests told him during his marriage. This can be problematic. For instance, the *gotra* name could have been an imposition even in cases where *gotra* and *got* were found identical. Similarly, the *gotra-got* incompatibility need not be treated as a proof of complete autonomy from Brahmanical categories. Even when members of a caste or a tribe attaches a separate *got* to his community, his effort in so doing could represent only a partial escape from the Brahmanical categories. However, as Lucy Carroll has written, the colonial ethnographers often preferred to work with simple formulations rather than engage with deeper methodological issues.¹⁶ More accurate knowledge production, for instance, was thus equated with dispensing with Brahmanical categories and replacing them with what was accepted as colloquial denominational practices. This of course is another evidence of administrative expediency guiding their works much more than academic rigor.

¹⁵ Excerpts from the proceedings of the Conference on Ethnography of Northern India, RP.

¹⁶ Lucy Carroll, *Colonial Perceptions*.

Kenneth Jones alludes to some similarities as well as striking differences between such investigations in India and England. The two censuses were very similar in form while in content they were markedly different. The Indian census was much broader in the scope of material covered. For instance, the English census did not have to explore questions of religion and ethnicity but for its Indian counterpart they were fundamental categories. Caste and religion came together in the Indian census, while the division of castes into religious groups became a standard element in census reports. The Indian census, as Jones showed, demonstrated strongly ethnological character both in its attempt to describe the culture of South Asians and to trace changes in that culture. Elements that appeared more exotic to the western mind such as marriage practices, alternative religious groups such as the order of *Yogis* and *Sanyasis* and so on received closer attention.¹⁷

It is no surprise then that the same proceedings of the 1885 ethnographic conference contained detailed guidelines on how to conduct ethnographic investigations. There were about 27 questions in all to be asked about a particular caste and all details about the caste identity and professional location informant were to be recorded. Interestingly, a majority of these questions related to marriage and other ceremonial and religious practices and only 5 questions directly or indirectly referred to occupations. The questions on marriage practices related to enquiries on exogamous subdivisions, endogamous subdivisions, prohibitions on marriage, marriage of infants, polygamy, polyandry, forms of marriage ceremony, widow remarriage, divorce, practice of prostituting women and so on. Given that marriage was considered to be a most likely

¹⁷ Kenneth.W.Jones, 'Religious Identity and the Census', in N. Gerald Barrier, *Census in British India: New Perspectives*, New Delhi, 1981.

site for Brahmanic impositions such as fake *gotra* names to dilute the *organic* nature of a caste, these extensive enquiries on marriage practices in effect rendered the process of colonial knowledge production much more vulnerable to the opinions and categories promoted by the Brahmans. At the same time, while the logic of this *Gotra-Got* distinction implied a rejection of Brahmanic or upper caste taxonomical practices, the social composition of census enumerators left the state with little choice but to rely on the very upper caste personnel whose ideological prejudices it sought to preempt.

It is perhaps possible, following a close examination of the note, to make an observation or two on some other ethnographical assumptions on which it was based. To start with, it assumed that tribe was a backward form of caste—at some stage men began to specialize in a particular occupation and then tribes resolved into castes. Historically, then, caste was envisaged only as an advanced version of tribe. Not much was, however, said as to how this moment of departure could be mapped. The investigators were to follow ‘the terminology of each so far as the organization depends upon the same basis as the type, and no further’¹⁸ but how exactly an individual investigator was to decide *when and how* an organization based on occupation began and an organization based on descent ended, was clearly left to his own discretion. More importantly, each caste or tribe was to have an origin moment—its history was to begin at some point in the past and the only clue that could trace such a moment of initiation was an occupational shift in case of a caste. Since such shifts were not likely to be found readily recorded in easily accessible documents, not at least for castes without a standard written account, the investigator had

¹⁸ Excerpts from the proceedings of the Conference on Ethnography of Northern India, RP.

only the members of the caste concerned to help him trace such moments of rupture and corroborative evidence was largely unlikely to come by. There was thus ample discursive space being made available for the ‘construction’ or ‘birth’ of castes. Secondly, the divisions and subdivisions of caste were deemed to be universal, that is, such divisions were to be found in the same way across India as a whole. Castes were expected to be readily found divided in sub-castes which in turn would be divided in sections and so on—investigators were only to go and note such neat divisions down on paper. The note defined a sub caste, we may recall here, as the smallest endogamous group within a caste.¹⁹

The implications of these two assumptions were clearly incompatible. If there was no clear moment of separation between a caste and a tribe, then such separations might have been effected at different moments in different regions. Again, it was assumed that there indeed was some kind of ‘organic’ divisions of castes beyond the manipulations of ‘Brahmans’ and it was to record this inherent caste names that investigators were to be cautious to distinguish between *Gotra* and *Got*.²⁰ But such positivistic notions of caste—objective and beyond human agency—went against the admission, made earlier in the note, that some castes and tribes might be coterminous. In other words, this note, even while prescribing very minute guidelines for the investigators who were to record *actual* details of various castes and tribes, in effect left much discretion in the hand of the investigators. It is this discretion, I argue, that in turn often proved crucial in determining the rank of a particular caste.

¹⁹ See page 8 above.

²⁰ For the way the note worked out *gotra-got* distinction see pp 10-11 above.

III

Interestingly, H.H.Risley, one of the three experts who prepared the concept note, assumed charge as the Officer on Special Duty in connection with ethnographic enquiries' for the Government of Bengal, and initiated the series of investigations on which I shall be concentrating now. By doing so, it is possible to show how and to what extent the investigators actually played a very crucial role in determining caste ranks in Bengal in the late 1880s. We have already seen the context within which to frame this round of ethnographic investigations. A subsequent section will elaborate on Risley's formative assumptions on classifying castes and his treatment of the Mahisyas in particular, along with the similarities and differences of his approach from Hunter, Ibbetson and Nesfield. Here I make an attempt to evince the extent to which his attempts at formulating accurate knowledge of caste groups were mediated by substantial inputs by upper caste colonial officials and their Brahman advisors. My argument is that the very structure of colonial knowledge production was erected in such a manner that attempts to get beyond Brahmanic categories were all destined to become implicated in or collusive with that very paradigm of classification.

In mid 1886, Risley circulated a note to the various District Officers in Bengal and asked for their comments and suggestions on the content of the note.²¹ The note contained,

²¹ The replies begin to arrive from the month of August and one of the respondents actually wrote that he was replying after six months in a letter dated 10th January, 1887. It is reasonable, therefore, to conclude

among other things, four lists of castes of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa.²² The Bihar and Orissa castes were recorded in list A and B respectively, while the castes of Bengal proper were to be found in lists C and D, which we shall focus presently on. These lists, reproduced in table 1 and 2 respectively, pertained to the castes of Eastern and Central Bengal. They were prepared, presumably after some preliminary enquiry, on the basis of the principle of relative social precedence. Risley wanted the district officials to comment particularly on this aspect, as is clear from their responses.

Table 1: List of 'Chief castes of Eastern Bengal' arranged on the basis of social precedence. [List C]

Rank Caste Name

| | |
|---|------------------|
| 1 | Brahman |
| 2 | Kayastha, Vaidya |
| 3 | Khsatriya |
| 4 | Vaisya |

that the original note must have been sent some time late in July 1886. Several responses note that the original note was dated 24/07/86 (Circular no. 1) RP.

²² That is, the then Bengal Presidency. The division was not clear-cut at all and several castes of Bengal proper were listed in lists A and B as well. But I have taken up lists C and D for closer examination because castes listed therein belong to Bengal proper much more obviously, not the least because the lists themselves say as much. Even more important for my purpose, the KaibartaKaibartaKaibartas (both *Chasha and Jelia*) do not feature in lists A or B.

| | |
|----|--|
| 5 | Sadgop, Kumar, Kamar, Tanti, Teli, Malakar, Gandhabanik, Maira, Barui |
| 6 | Sudra |
| 7 | Sankhari |
| 8 | Kansari |
| 9 | Napit |
| 10 | Pratikal |
| 11 | Acharji |
| 12 | Barna Brahmin |
| 13 | Subarna Banik |
| 14 | Halia Das |
| 15 | Gorai |
| 16 | Barna Sankar—Sunri (Saha), Jugi, Sutradhar/Chhutar, Dhoba/Rajak, Chandal>Nama-Shudra, Jalia/Jalua, Teor, Jeliya Kaibartta, Kaibartta, Pattor, Mala/Mallah, Halia Kaibartta |
| 17 | Mechhua, Kalu, Beldar, Katura/Chunari/Chunia. |
| 18 | Ghasi, Chashi, Ghattal, Behara, Dulia, Buna, Bhar, Koch, Katuria, Kapali, Sikri |
| 19 | Dai, Dom, Hari, Bhuimali, Bhumij |
| 20 | Nat/ Nar |
| 21 | Rishi, Hrishi/Muchi, Chamar |

| | |
|----|---------------------|
| 22 | Mal, Bedia, Babajia |
| 23 | Peshkar |

Table 2: List of 'Chief castes of Central Bengal' arranged on the basis of social precedence. [List D]

Rank Caste Name

| | |
|----|--|
| 1 | Brahmin |
| 2 | Khsatriya |
| 3 | Vaisya |
| 4 | Baidya |
| 5 | Kayastha |
| 6 | Barui, Tamoli, Teli, Kansari, Napit, Gandhabanik, Sadgop, Karmakar, Malakar, Maira, Kumbhakar, Tanti |
| 7 | Chashi Kaibarta |
| 8 | Goala |
| 9 | Kapali |
| 10 | Subarnabanik |
| 11 | Kalu |

| | |
|----|--------|
| 12 | Dhoba |
| 13 | Sukli |
| 14 | Pod |
| 15 | Bagdi |
| 16 | Dule |
| 17 | Mallah |
| 18 | Jeliya |
| 19 | Teor |
| 20 | Kaora |
| 21 | Hari |

Source - Letters of the district officials in response to Risley's Circular no. 1 of 26/07/1186. List C was prepared by an educated Kayasth of Dacca and List D by a Rarhi Brahmin pandit of Howrah.²³

A cursory glance at this draft list would show how widely 'public opinion' differed in Eastern and Central Bengal and the extent to which castes in Bengal moved away from the traditional four-*varna* of classification. The *Kayasthas* and *Vaidyas* of eastern Bengal, for instance, ranked higher than *Khsatriyas*, and *Subarnabaniks* ranked much higher in eastern Bengal. The *Kaibartas/Chashi Kaibartas* again ranked higher in Central Bengal

²³ Mentioned below the respective lists.

than in the East. However, it was only a draft list, to be revised following the inputs from Risley's correspondents. It is them that we shall now turn to.

The draft list represented a continuation of the colonial project of knowledge production on castes through direct enquiries by the colonial state ostensibly seeking to transcend the 'impositions' by opportunist Brahmans. This phase of the project, however, involved some changes in the social and cultural composition of informants. Elaborating the logic, E.A.Gait, Superintendent of Census Operations for Bengal, was to write in 1901 that 'the test laid down ...for fixing the scale of social precedence is not the rank assigned by the pedantry of pandits but 'Hindu public opinion of the present day'. The Hindus as a body were generally considered unaware about the social situation of castes other than their own, and the lower classes were dismissed as even more ignorant of their caste-position.²⁴

This 'enlightened public opinion' turned out to be largely a bunch of Hindu middle ranking bureaucrats, though some eminent private individuals, including, for instance, Haraprasad Sastri, were consulted. It would be interesting to see to what extent this enlightened public opinion differed from that of the pedantry of Brahman pandits. This will be done by considering the replies from the officials in some detail, taking up their comments on the position of the Chashi Kaibartas alone. In view of the fact that they were to launch the most powerful mobilizing movement only a decade later by virtue of being the single largest caste group in Bengal, a close study of the colonial knowledge

²⁴ Report on 1901 Census by E.A.Gait, pp 366-367

formation about this group is especially significant. This, I hope, would go some way in bringing out the muddled and multiple strands of the official colonial discourse on caste.

To start with, let us dwell briefly on this neat official dichotomy between Brahman pedantry and 'enlightened public opinion' as the unacceptable and acceptable source of legitimate and accurate knowledge about the relative ranking *in practice* of various caste groups respectively. Although official correspondences frequently referred to this objective, the markers of difference between 'pedantic' Brahmins and 'enlightened public opinion' were never clearly worked out. The bureaucrats and other authorities consulted—such as Haraprasad Shastri—were all men with some exposure to formal English education and to the colonial state and its bureaucracy. If they were to be accepted as 'the enlightened public opinion', then the key factor that distinguished them from the Brahmins was their exposure to colonial bureaucracy and institutions of knowledge production. Colonial education and bureaucracy, in other words, were seen as agents capable of completely removing from the minds of these gentlemen all traces of their pre-colonial, 'Brahmanic' rationality as it were. Everyone unable or refusing to subscribe to the automatic 'reforming' influence of the colonial education or bureaucracy could be defined as either a pedantic Brahmin or—as Gait's note described—an ignoramus who did not know his caste.

This neat binary of (*pedantic*, to be read as a synonym to conceited and opportunist) 'Brahmin' and 'enlightened' no doubt fits well with the civilizing mission doctrine but only at the cost of vastly overestimating its reach and equally vastly simplifying the

rationality of Risley's consultants. It is possible to critique such binaries following Partha Chatterjee's 'fragment' model that suggests that even these supposedly 'enlightened' native bureaucrats often divided their worlds between public selves that submitted to the demands of colonial knowledge and professions, and private selves that passionately upheld a conception of traditional and cultural India which valorized by default Brahmanical ideas and rituals framing the caste system. However, it must be noted that Chatterjee's model perhaps overestimates the autonomy of these two worlds of the middle ranking Indian bureaucrats²⁵.

One way to critique such easy binaries (pedantic Brahman/enlightened public opinion) is through mapping the interaction of such men with their own kind in addition to and beyond their transactions with the colonial state. Were they referring to 'Brahmans'—as the colonial ethnographers defined them—while preparing their responses to Risley's queries? Let us not forget that these representatives of 'enlightened' public opinion were to be the authorities of last resort on questions of caste. Any reference to the officially disgraced 'Brahmans' on their part, therefore, would constitute a transgression of the official colonial discourse on caste and expose larger methodological limitations of colonial knowledge production. In doing so, I hope to make the point that even the representatives of the 'enlightened public opinion' functioned within a caste-embedded society and that the colonial ethnographer's attempts to elicit neutral knowledge on caste matters were practically unattainable.

²⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton, 1993.

Risley's enquiry was beset with such epistemological tensions from their very conception. For example, both of the two preliminary lists circulated for consultation were prepared by evidently upper caste experts, one of whom was definitely a pedant Brahman. As we saw above, the compiler of list 'B' was characterized as a Brahman pandit, his being Brahman serving thus as a marker of eligibility and not the other way round.²⁶ In other words, a pedantic Brahman laid the foundation stone for the construction of an edifice designed to accommodate the outcomes of a venture beyond the realms of Brahmanic pedantry.

As Cohn wrote, most of Risley's correspondents cited sacred texts and legends, such as the code of Manu and *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, to support their positions. Respondents often tended to cite sources that placed their own castes way above the hierarchy.²⁷ However, *the most frequent validation for altering Risley's list was reference to learned Pandits and Sanskrit scholars.*

The majority of the responding government officials also belonged to one or the other high castes and some of them actually sent elaborate *puranic* lists based on the *Upapuranas* of Bengal, and not on the colloquial taxonomical practices. Taraprasad Chatterjee, the Deputy Magistrate of Burdwan responded with a list of mixed castes and their origin myths as provided in the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*. The Kaibartas are ranked

²⁶ See note 23 above.

²⁷ Cohn refers to Kayasthas frequently referring to the Ballal Sen legend that places them right below the Brahmans and as we shall see *Subarnabaniks* drawing up a neat list situating themselves way above the *Nabashakhs*. See Cohn, *Social Objectification* and below.

45th in this list, which furnishes a total of 54 such mixed castes. Chatterjee wrote that the Kaibartas' occupation was *shipping* and fishing, and not boating and fishing. It is not prudent to read much into this particular strategy of semantic deployment, but it does perhaps indicate that the Kaibartas were not exactly an insignificant caste group. The *Brahmavaivarta Purana* account was typical of what Sumit Sarkar calls the pre-colonial accounts of caste, that is, it takes caste 'as a matter of course or trace it immediately to an origin in a single happening', without any explanations of hierarchised inequality in any sense of a social or historical process.²⁸ But Chatterjee's account is no mere pre-colonial chronicle because he was not entirely happy with the puranic explanations. According to him, some degradation stories provide eloquent testimonies to the 'priestly tyranny to which it would be difficult to find a parallel.'²⁹

More importantly, Chatterjee also furnished a list of the chief castes of his district as he saw them, possibly to highlight its contrast to the puranic account. In this list the *Kaibartta Das* or Chashi Kaibartas occupied the 8th position from the top, clear 7 steps above the *Jaliya* Kaibartas, who languish at the 15th rank, out of the total 29. The 8th rank was entered as 'Kaibarta (also called Kaibarta *Das* or *Jaliya* Kaibarta)'—as if Chashi Kaibartas were the real Kaibartas or the distinction between the Chashi and *Jalia* was still not clear in his upper caste mind although he was convinced that it existed in practice. In many ways this letter is typical of the confusion prevalent in the mind of the colonial bureaucracy—the tension between an attempt to go beyond the textual

²⁸ Sumit Sarkar, 'Identities and Histories' p. 55

²⁹ Letter of Taraprasad Chatterjee, the Deputy Magistrate of Burdwan to the Special Officer, Ethnographical Enquiries dated Burdwan, 10 January, 1887, RP. For example degradation for 'stealing a Brahmin's gold or for neglecting to supply him with sacrificial equipments' appear particularly offensive to him.

prescriptions yet not quite managing to get out of its secure certainties. In fact, when Gait ultimately rejected the Mahisya's claim to the new name in 1901, one of the key reasons he cited was the Mahisya petitioners' failure to convince him about the authenticity of their origin myth as given in the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*.³⁰ Both the colonial state and its bureaucrats thus appear to display characteristics of both Brahmans and the enlightened at the same time. Chatterjee's two lists clearly demonstrate that the 'book view' and 'field view' of caste were neither totally exclusive nor entirely mixed up. The 'enlightened', in other words, could not do without Brahmanic references.

In Birbhum, the Kaibartas were found tenth on the list of social precedence by the enlightened public opinion as expressed through the letter of a Deputy Magistrate. There was a caste called Halia Kaibarta further down the list, and then for number 16, there was an entry of 'Kaibarta or Keot'.³¹ In Midnapore, Kaibartas were ranked 7th, below the *Nabashakhs* and the *Gopas* or *Goalas*, according to a junior Brahman official but he was confident that Brahmans definitely accepted water from them.³² In other dispatches, the Kaibartas' rank varied between 8th to 10th.

Some enterprising officials often held wider consultations before handing over their comments. Rajendralal Gupta of Tamluk, for example, held meetings with a council of six experts including the headman of the 'Brahmanical village of Halishar', a bastion of

³⁰ *Census Report for Bengal 1901, Section XII (Caste)*. p 80.

³¹ Letter from Bhuvan Mohan Raha, Deputy Magistrate of Birbhum, to the Special Officer, ethnographical enquiries dated Suri, 18 September, 1886. RPNAI, R-1

³² Letter from Bissessar Banerjee, Jr. Superintendent (dept. name unclear), to the Special Officer, ethnographical enquiries dated 'Midnapore, 17th September, 1886'. This contrasts with Gait's 1901 report where he wrote ChashiChashiChashi KaibartaKaibartaKaibartas could not offer water to the Brahmans in Midnapore.

Braminical orthodoxy, who presided over the final preparation of Gupta's list.³³ This council included as many as four Brahmins of impeccable pedigree, and two Kayastha college lecturers. However, three of these four Brahmins straddled the traditional and colonial learning and professions alike—one was a pleader, one a professor of Sanskrit College and the third a CIE title holder.³⁴ Nevertheless, the actual list was prepared by Uma Charan Mukherjee, headman of the orthodox Brahmanic village of Halishahar. Mukherjee was chosen to prepare the list on account of his special authority as the patriarch of one of the most orthodox Brahman villages in Bengal. Interestingly, Gupta provided the educational and professional status of all the members of his advisory council except Mukherjee who was introduced only as the purest of all Brahmans in Bengal. Predictably, the puranic origin myth of the Kaibartas (Khsatriya father and Vaisya mother, as given in *Brahmavaivarta Purana*) is repeated in this list. In his final list the Kaibartas are clearly ranked above the *Goalas*—and immediately after the *Nabashakhs*, a clean Sudra caste cluster entitled to offer water to the Brahmans and have them as priests.³⁵ We must remember Rajendralal Gupta was writing from Tamluk, where according to the President of the Nadia college of Pandits the Chashi Kaibartas formed part of the local aristocracy.³⁶ We must not, however, miss Gupta's consultation with the headmen of the orthodox Brahmanical village Halishahar and his presiding over the preparation of the final list. For the local bureaucrat, the headman of a staunch

³³ This was Uma Charan Mukherjee, 'than whom a better Brahmin (I am informed by the Orthodox Brahmins of good social standing) can hardly be found in all Bengal', says Gupta, See Letter from, Rajendralal Gupta to the Special Officer, ethnographical enquiries dated Tamluk, 1st September, 1887.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ The cluster is said to have been formed of nine (*Naba*) branches (*shakha*) of the clean Sudras but now it includes between fourteen to sixteen castes in various parts of Bengal. In general social estimation the *Nabashakh* castes remain below the *Baidyas* and the *Kayasthas*. See Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1981, p 38.

³⁶ Jogendranath Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, Calcutta, 1896, p. 222.

Brahmanicized village still remained the most authentic source of knowledge of the appropriate caste rankings within his jurisdiction.

Risley received some unsolicited submissions as well, from the Brahmans who his enterprise was intended to discredit. Some of these responses were written in Bengali by modest Brahman pandits settled in villages.³⁷ Yet others came from private individuals.

Two such private voices may be studied in some detail. The letter from Dinanath Pal is particularly interesting. This wealthy *Subarnabanik* merchant got a caste-hierarchy list drawn up entirely on his own, even though he 'was not asked by any government official to submit any caste report' to the Special Officer. Being a wealthy member of his caste group, he sent forth a printed—as opposed to the handwritten reports of the district officials—report-cum-representation, drawing upon 'Manava Dharma Shastras' and the 'local usages of Bengal', and claiming a higher status for the *Subarnabaniks* as the highest *Vaisyas*.³⁸ Pal allotted the 29th rank to Chashi Kaibartas citing *The Digest of Hindu Law* by Syamacharan Sarkar in support of his decision.³⁹ His list was very elaborate, actually containing a total of 70 ranks. Particularly for our purpose, however, is

³⁷ There was, for instance, a submission in Bengali from a Brahmin pandit from Pabna who, incidentally, addresses the Special Officer as *Dharmabatar* or righteousness-incarnate, i.e. the King. We must recall here Dirks' definition of caste as 'cultural construction of power.' The Brahmans were perhaps fully conscious that a process of 'construction' of caste was underway as much as they were aware that they must continue to perform their traditional duty in this regard—provide inputs to the temporal ruler. For the phrase see Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*, Cambridge, 1987, p.5.

³⁸ Representation from, Deno Nath Pal to the Special Officer, ethnographical enquiries dated Peepulpati, Hooghly, 21st January 1888. The 'Manava Dharma Shastras' include a motley collection including Bengali translation of *Manusamhita*, *Srimadbhagabat*, *Vishnumriti* and *Parasharsamhita*. Of particular interest is the Bengali translation of the *Manusamhita*. It is not clear what strategic purpose it served. The section dealing with the position of Subarnabaniks has a collection of seven scriptural quotations from such diverse sources, in support of Pal's elevation of the Subarnabaniks to a higher ritual and social status. In most cases Pal had—perhaps deliberately—collapsed *Banik* (merchant) and Subarnabanik (Goldsmith)

³⁹ It was a textbook for students of Hindu Law. See Cohn, *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays*, Delhi, 1987, p. 247.

the fact that Chashi Kaibartas were immediately succeeded by the Kaibartas, as a caste group placed in a no category's land between 14 superior *Sudras* (ranks 16-29, including *Nabashakh*) and 9 inferior *Sudras* (ranks 31-39). Could this be an indication that at times some caste-groups lower down the hierarchy were not too happy with the fast upward mobility of the Chashi Kaibartas? Here interestingly the profession of the Kaibartas (Ranked 30) is listed as 'boatmen and fishermen'. Is it possible then that the upward mobility of a caste could be resented less by Brahmins than by the castes placed immediately above or below it in social estimation? It is not unlikely given the hegemonic structure of Bengali society—Brahmins, after all, had very little to fear from the Mahisyas for the latter were never going to claim the top position in the caste hierarchy anyway. But *Subarnabaniks* were almost invariably placed lower than the Chashi Kaibartas in all the rank-reports, except in Pal's representation.⁴⁰ Such voices show how caste-ties could also cross-cut class solidarities and add richness and depth to the existing historiography.

Haraprasad Sastri, the eminent Sanskrit scholar and Indologist, was the other significant private voice. In his list, the Kaibartas as a whole are ranked 9th, immediately after the *Goalas*, who followed the *Nabashakhs*. He does not divide the Kaibartas into Chashi and *Jeliyas* though elsewhere in his letter, he writes that there were three sub-castes of the Kaibartas—Chashi, *Jeliya* and *Tunte* (silkworm rearers)—and that the Chashis considered the rest as practically untouchable (*asprishya*) and did not intermarry or conduct any social communication with them. An interesting nugget of information

⁴⁰ *Subarnabaniks* had been projecting a corporate identity since at least the eighteenth century. They had been fairly active in claiming a higher status for themselves ever since. See Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony*, pp. 142-190 and S.N. Mukherjee, *Calcutta: Essays in Urban History*, Calcutta, 1993. Incidentally, the draft list of chief castes in Eastern Bengal prepared for circulation by Risley in 1886 (see list above) placed *Subarnabaniks* above the KaibartaKaibartaKaibartas.

provided by Sastri may help to solve the riddle as to why the *Mahisya-Varna Brahmans* were particularly enterprising in their efforts for upward mobility. There was reportedly a tradition that when Ballal Sen, the legendary organizer of the caste system of Bengal, was hard pressed by the Kaibartas for a Brahman. So he invested a *Hari* with the sacred thread and presented him to them as a Brahman.⁴¹ *Haris* were a scavenger, and therefore an untouchable, caste, always ranked at the very bottom of the caste hierarchy.

Our reading of the series of responses to Risley's circular—makes a few points reasonably clear. First, most of the respondents were well aware that the Chashi Kaibartas had more or less left their *Jeliya* and *Tunte* cousins way behind, yet they were still far from unanimity in unambiguously acknowledging this reality. None of them was ready to treat the Chashi Kaibartas as a separate jati yet, not even in districts where the division was more or less established. This tension—between what the text prescribed (no scriptures provided a readily acceptable origin myth for the Chashi Kaibartas/Mahisyas) and what they actually experienced—persisted throughout our period, in both the official and indigenous discourses. Its prime example is the incongruity between two passages in Gait's census report for 1901, in one of which he clearly underlined the connivance of Brahmins in making adjustments in the local hierarchy in exchange for a price and yet in another rejected the 'so-called' Mahisyas' claim to be tabulated on the basis of the textual inconsistency of their representation.⁴² Second, the constitution of the 'enlightened public opinion' hardly varied from the orthodox Brahmin pandits in terms of the caste composition of the consultants who

⁴¹ Haraprasad Sastri to the Special Officer, Ethnographic Investigations, September 1, 1888, RP.

⁴² *Census of India 1901(Bengal)*, Report by Gait, p 366 and 380 respectively.

responded to Risley's circular. Except for Dinanath Pal, who was an uninvited contributor, it did not include any lower caste representation at all—presumably, in the official opinion enlightenment was a preserve of the average educated middle class and upper caste government official or renowned Sanskritists and Indologists like Haraprasad Sastri. Nonetheless, even within such a limited circle, there still remained a certain polyphony, as reflected in the lack of agreement among various parties about the respective ranks of different caste groups—the Kaibarta confusion invariably points to the obviously local—and fluid—nature of the institution of caste in Bengal.

IV

If the uncertainty about the position of the Chashi Kaibarta between 1886 and 1888 was one instance of the fluidity in the colonial discourse on caste in Bengal, yet another moment of tension in the official correspondence could be traced after the census of 1891. This time the queries and clarifications revolved around the exact connotation of the term *Jelia*—did it represent a distinct caste group or was it the name of an occupation that spans across several castes? It is a particularly important debate for although the Chashi Kaibartas had been scrupulously avoiding marriage or other social relations with the *Jeliya* Kaibartas for quite some time, to the government both still continued to belong to the same parent caste.

A fairly large number of people were returned in the 1891 census against the common appellation *Jeliya*. The census authorities in Bengal had become concerned about the uncertain nature of this category, along with that of a few others, by mid-1900, when

preparations for the 1901 census were underway.⁴³ The situation so demanded that E. A. Gait, the Census Commissioner, sent a circular to various government officials in the district, asking them to clarify the corporate or otherwise exact social status of the persons returned against the common head *Jeliya* in the last census.⁴⁴ He wanted three basic types of information—what was really meant by the name used, to which particular caste or tribe the term actually referred and what percentage of the total population people belonging to the category constituted.

The project to take the study of caste beyond the pedantry of the Brahmin pandits must have some progress by then, because, unlike the last series of official letters that I discussed, where the respondents were typically a middle-ranking caste-Hindu bureaucrats, chosen perhaps on the assumption that as Hindus they knew more about caste than the European officials, this time several of the correspondents were European District Magistrates. For instance, B. Foley, the Magistrate of Burdwan, wrote that the term *Jeliya* was derived from the root-word *Jal* or fishing-net in Bengali and that it was generally applied to 'fishermen who belong[ed] to the Kaibarta caste.' Yet, he was informed by the Chairman of the Burdwan Municipality, who must have been a Bengali Hindu, that some Bagdis had also been returned under the category and that they were also called *Jelias*.⁴⁵

⁴³ Others were *Buna, Malik, Rajbansi, Dulia, Mala, Poddar* etc.

⁴⁴ Circular no 3 dated 31st May, 1900, from the Superintendent of the Census Operations, Bengal to various District Magistrates. RP.

⁴⁵ Letter from B. Foley, the Magistrate of Burdwan to the Superintendent of the Census Operations, Bengal dated Burdwan, 7th December, 1900, RP.

This mismatch between supra-caste occupations and the traditional concept of occupationally distinct castes may be seen to augur another shift in the official colonial policies on caste. Once a certain amount of local information started reaching the government at Calcutta, the awareness had perhaps been dawning that it is the occupation actually practiced by a particular caste group that entitled it to claim a certain caste-identity, and not the other way round. In other words, a caste identity was seen as preceded by occupational identity. I argue that it is this shift—and thereby creation of some discursive space—made available to the castes aspiring for upward mobility some discursive ideas along which to tailor their representations to the census authorities.

The magistrate of Birbhum, for instance, informed Gait that ‘the term *Jeliya* might apply to *all classes* of fishermen....but it is chiefly claimed by the *Keots* who are sometimes called *Jeliya Kaibartas*.’⁴⁶ The *Jeliya* class, he continued, included members from the *Keots*, *Kaibartas* and *Teors*. For this gentleman then, *Jeliya* was clearly a supra-caste occupational category.⁴⁷

The Magistrate of Hooghly, who was advised by his Indian Deputy, who in his turn had received a detailed *Brahmavaivarta Purana* based input from a Kayatha Head-clerk, was rather confident that at least in Hooghly, *Jelias* were a sub-section of the *Kaibartas*. It is to be noted that the Chashi-*Jeliya* distinction was still not comprehensively endorsed by

⁴⁶ Jogendranath Bhattacharya feels the term *Keot* was a derogatory reference to the *Kaibartas*. See his *Hindu Castes and Sects*, p 225.

⁴⁷ Letter from A. Ahmad, the Magistrate of Birbhum to the Superintendent of the Census Operations, Bengal dated Suri, 20th August, 1900. RP.

the 'enlightened public opinion' and the same textual sources still continued to be cited by the more or less the same group of upper caste Hindu informants.⁴⁸

In the 24 Parganas, the Jeliyas themselves claimed that they were not sub-sects of the Kaibartas nor of any other caste and that they constituted a distinct caste.⁴⁹ The Magistrate of Nadia suggested that the 4381 Jeliyas in that district probably belonged to a multiplicity of castes and that it was practically impossible to tabulate them separately.⁵⁰ The magistrate of Jessore was clear that it was a professional title of fishermen and not the name of any exclusive caste or tribe.⁵¹ The magistrates of Dinajpur, Dacca, Tippera and Noakhali seconded his opinion. The Magistrate of Dinajpur actually furnished a list of castes which had some Jeliyas among their ranks, as many as 11.⁵² H.Y.S. Forrest, the Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri, however, made the curious observation that 'the term Jeliya [wa]s appropriated mostly by the Kaibartas of both the fishing and the cultivating classes.' It is proper to conclude the discussion on this moment with this particular observation because it captures very vividly the confusion that still persisted in the minds of the officials about the purported distinction between the Chashi and Jeliya Kaibartas. It is no wonder then that the Census Commissioner rejected the Mahisyas'

⁴⁸ Letter from B.Allen, the Magistrate of Hooghly to the Superintendent of the Census Operations, Bengal dated Chinsurahi, 20th June, 1900, RP.

⁴⁹ Letter from C.G.R. Allen, the Magistrate of 24 Parganas to the Superintendent of the Census Operations, Bengal dated Alipur, 13th October, 1900, RP. The District Superintendent of Police here had reportedly spoken to 'several leading men' of the Jeliya caste who stressed their distinct identity. The singular importance of this particular document lies in the fact that it sought to include the *Jeliya* voice, albeit in reported speech.

⁵⁰ Letter from H. Walinsley, the Magistrate of Nadia to the Superintendent of the Census Operations, Bengal dated Krishnanagar, 20th August, 1900, RP.

⁵¹ Letter from A.G. Hallifax, the Magistrate of Jessore to the Superintendent of the Census Operations, Bengal dated Jessore, 29th September, 1900, RP.

⁵² Letter from J.H.E. Garrett, the Magistrate of Dinajpur to the Superintendent of the Census Operations, Bengal dated 28th September, 1900, RP.

claims to be tabulated as a separate caste shortly afterwards. At the same time, it also remains clear that to a majority of the senior officials Jeliya was by now clearly a supra-caste occupational title. In other words, the Chashi-Jeliya distinction was still far from being officially endorsed but it was becoming increasingly difficult to continue to use the term Jeliya as an exclusively Kaibarta title. By default then, this shift in the official discourse in some ways weakened the discursive position from where the government could counter any proposals from the Chashi Kaibartas (who had begun to call themselves Mahisyas by now) to concede to them a higher social position.

V

It took the colonial bureaucracy another ten years to resolve this caste-occupation mismatch. The resolution is best represented in an excerpt from a note, by E.A. Gait, the Census Superintendent for Bengal, wrote to all the District Magistrates in the Bengal Presidency. He wrote that

It has been said that 'sub-caste' is the *true* caste and that the caste in the *ordinary* sense of the word is merely a generic term, usually referring to traditional occupation, which links together large and heterogeneous groups of sub-castes, the members of which *can not intermarry and do not ordinarily eat together*.⁵³

This letter explicitly reverses the policy that began with Risley's May 1886 circular. Now the Magistrates were to gather information on the various sub-castes of at least six major castes in their respective districts—sub-castes and not castes as such, were clearly

⁵³ Letter from the Census Commissioner to all District Magistrate dated Calcutta, 14th August 1901, RP. Emphasis mine.

recognized as the *true* functional unit of the caste structure. Since the main characteristics of a sub-caste now were intermarriage and commensality, the likelihood of the resolution of the Chashi-Jeliya identification under the broad rubric of Kaibarta was far more than it had been so far. The time to sink the Kaibartas, so to speak, had arrived. In fact, in the very same letter, Gait justified such a shift by calling for a framework of understanding caste that would be able to accommodate an explanation of the process whereby ‘the Chashi Kaibartas now disown[ed] all connections with their fishing congeners.’⁵⁴ The Chashi Kaibarta—Mahisya conversion process was now reportedly complete while many similar processes were still underway.⁵⁵

This is the discursive space that had been forced open by the way I have shown the official colonial discourse as moving from an *ordinary* sense of the caste (caste as a community of occupation) to a *true* sense of the caste (subcaste or an endogamous unit). In other words, the Chashi Kaibarta claim that they did not intermarry with the Jeliya Kaibartas and practiced an altogether different occupation (agriculture and professions) deserving a higher caste status (and a distinct caste name) was now more likely to be accepted. It is within this new discursive space that the first phase of the Mahisya movement (1897-1901) must be located.

A feature of the colonial governmentality that often remains unnoticed in this connection is its consistent failure to elicit the answers that it wanted from its informants. In effect, the answers that eventually came appeared to destabilize its formative assumptions.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Some of these other processes were: *Dom-Patni*, *Napit-Madhunapit* and *Fishing Pods-Cultivating Pods*.

Although ostensibly part of a colonial project to debrahmanize caste markers, for instance, Hindu officials consistently referred to Brahmanical authorities, both textual and personal, while preparing their lists.⁵⁶ One of the reasons why the Chashi-*Jeliya* conundrum remained unsolved could be the lack of Brahmanic prescriptive sources or their inadequacy to explain observed practices. Although there were many scriptural texts in circulation, they seldom provided detailed information about less than upper castes. In other words, colonial knowledge did not bestow its bureaucracy with any tool to successfully resolve the problem, whether with reference to question of social precedence or to a clear distinction between the caste and occupational implications of the term *Jeliya*.

Nonetheless, when it came to passing a verdict on the Chashi Kaibarta claim to the name *Mahisya*, the colonial state acted at not one but two levels, each at variance with the other. On the one hand it refuted the claim on textual, and therefore Brahmanical, grounds and on the other, bureaucratic and administrative level, it resorted to duplicity—allowing the Chashi Kaibartas to return themselves as *Mahisyas* but ultimately refusing to tabulate them as such when it came to the final report.

VI

It is possible to reconstruct some aspects of the early phase of the *Mahisya* movement from the official correspondences that followed the census tabulations for 1901. This may

⁵⁶ We may recall here the reference by Rajendralal Gupta to Umacharan Mukherjee, the headman of the Brahmanic village of Halishahar. See above.

partly explain its limited success and highlight the restricted nature of the discursive space that was actually available to the Mahisyas.

In December 1900, the Magistrate of Jessore wrote to the Census Commissioner, in course of his observations on the index of castes and surnames to be attached as an appendix with the census data for 1901, that it was desirable that 'the Kaibartas who were hitherto called Hali or Chashi Kaibartas would now be called Mahisyas'.⁵⁷ The Magistrate of Midnapore, the district where practically every third person was a Mahisya,⁵⁸ suggested to the Commissioner that the Helia or Chashi Kaibartas should have the privilege of referring to themselves to as Mahisyas and that the term Mahisya would therefore indicate a *true* caste, and *not* a synonym for a sub-caste of the Kaibartas.⁵⁹ These officials were certainly aware that some members of the Chashi Kaibarta caste had launched a powerful movement to claim a higher status for themselves.

In Murshidabad, they filed representations to the District Magistrate, along with some copies of the vernacular newspaper '*Sikha*' (Flame)—which presumably published some pieces supporting their claim—in support of their prayer. Similar petitions were presented to the Census Commissioner at Calcutta by the Central Mahisya Samiti, which was

⁵⁷ It must be kept in mind that he was probably writing *after* the Mahisyas were allowed to return themselves as such to the census enumerators. It must then have come to him as something of a surprise that in the index they were still referred to as KaibartaKaibartaKaibartas. In fact, the term Mahisya was there in the index-but only with reference to Midnapore, 24 Parganas and Murshidabad districts. RP

⁵⁸ In 1921, Mahisyas made up 31.6% of the population of Midnapore. See Bidyut Chakrabarti, *Local Politics and Indian Nationalism: Midnapore 1919-1944*. New Delhi, 1987, p. 66.

⁵⁹ It is very clear that the true caste discourse had been circulating in the official circles much before Gait's letter cited above came up with a cogent formulation. Letter from H.K. Samman, Magistrate of Midnapore to the Census Commissioner, dated Midnapore, 20th December 1900. RP.

founded in Calcutta and patronized by the educated and wealthy members of the Chashi Kaibarta community.⁶⁰ The Officiating Collector of Rajshahi had come to know about this meeting and requested for a copy of the relevant order passed.

The Mahisya movement was officially admitted to be the 'most vigorous of all the agitations that arose in connection with the caste question' during the census enumerations of 1901. Influential committees were formed in various districts, and the lower classes of the community were urged to return themselves as Mahisyas at the census. They urged that they were entirely different from the *Jeliya* Kaibartas and identified themselves as belonging to the ancient caste of the Mahisyas, said to be descended from a *Kshatriya* father and *Vaisya* mother.⁶¹ While the same origin was attributed to the Kaibartas in *Brahmavaivarta Puran*, in *Gautama Samhita* and *Yagyavalka Samhita*, Mahisyas were provided with identical parentage.⁶²

Quoting *slokas* from *Brahmavaivarta Puran* and *Padma Puran*, and having obtained supporting *Vyavasthas* from some Brahmin pandits, they pursued the agitation with great energy. According to a Mahisya account, however, it was the Maharaja of Nadia, on being requested by the Census Commissioner, who secured the decision of the Nadia Pandits endorsing the legitimacy of the Chashi-Jeliya distinction and that of the claim of the former to the name Mahisya.⁶³

⁶⁰ Letter from N. Fischer, Magistrate of Murshidabad to the Census Commissioner, dated Berhampore, 12 and 13th November 1900. See also Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest*, pp 76-80.

⁶¹ The following account of the movement is based largely on *Census of India 1901*, Report By E.A. Gait, pp. 380-384

⁶² Ashutosh Jana, *Mahisya Tatva Baridhi*, Tamluk, 1911, pp 12-39.

⁶³ Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest*, P.77 This version is given in *Mahisya Vivriti: Banger Mahisya Jatir Utpatti, Samajik Abastha O Itihas Prabhruti Tattwer Sarba Pradhan O Mulgrantha*

Earlier, the movement was formally started in 1304 B.S. (1897/98) by a local zamindar of Midnapore who convened a conference at Tajpur. This is where the agricultural Kaibartas were first identified with the ancient Mahisya caste mentioned in the scriptures. From this conference also emerged a permanent body called *Jati Nirdharani Sabha*. The *Sabha* received generous donations from a large number of respectable Chashi Kaivartas, mostly local proprietors of Midnapore. Their counterparts in Nadia followed suit, setting up Nadia district *Mahisya Samiti* in the autumn of 1897.⁶⁴ Shortly afterwards, *Bangiya Mahisya Samiti* was founded in Calcutta and a great many local Mahisya associations sprang up in different parts of Bengal. These organizations were patronized by the educated and wealthy men of the Chashi Kaibarta community—Trailokyanath Biswas of the Janbazar Kaibarta family of Rani Rasmani, Mahendranath Ray, high court advocate, Mahendranath Halder, editor of *Sevika* and several other such men in Calcutta and elsewhere.⁶⁵

The movement had several internal limitations from the very beginning. For instance, the distinction between the Chashi and Jeliya Kaibartas was beyond any dispute only in some parts of Bengal.⁶⁶ Secondly, their claim was confined to central and western Bengal and a large number among the lower classes of their own community was far from clearly

by Basanta Kumar Ray. This was the product of a research commissioned by a substantial Mahisya Zamindar of Dacca to prove higher ritual origins of his *jati*. Hence the account has to be treated with caution. But it is an important point that in the book the Raja of Nadia was still given the final temporal authority to directly consult with the Brahmin experts—in some ways it is a recuperation of the agency of the native Hindu monarch to arbitrate in the matters of caste ranking. See also Tanika Sarkar, 'Caste, Sect and Hagiography'

⁶⁴ Speech by Basanta Kumar Sarkar in 44th Annual General Meeting of the Central *Mahisya Samiti*, April 1954, *Mahisya Samaj, Asadh* 1361 B.S.

⁶⁵ Rajat Ray provides a larger list of names. See Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest*, P.77

⁶⁶ In some places in Orissa, intermarriage was still permitted between them. *Census of India Report*, 1901.

informed about their new identity and status. For instance, some people in Dacca were entered at the census as Chashi Kaibarta by caste, who were fisherman by occupation. Similarly, in Mymensingh, many withdrew their claim to the new title when it was stated⁶⁷ that the new title meant 'pertaining to a Mahish (buffalo)': The Mahisya intellectuals, however, spiritedly claimed the puranas entitled them to the same occupations as the Vaisyas.⁶⁸

If poorer Mahisyas were somewhat apprehensive in Eastern Bengal, in some places in the West, they were a little too adventurous. For some of them at any rate, the movement appeared to promise immediate emancipation from degrading occupations. A considerable number of Chashi Kaibarta men and women were employed as domestic servants in wealthy upper caste households, even though contemporary accounts do not mention it prominently.⁶⁹ In Nadia, a large number of these people 'threw up their work saying it was beneath their dignity'. Faced, however, with the prospect of unemployment, they soon began to return to their former employers, asking forgiveness and requesting to be reinstated in their jobs.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ It is not clear who made such statements or why such a statement was made. It is interesting to note the accounts of confusion among the ranks of the poorer Mahisyas came mainly from Eastern Bengal. Risley's account of the KaibartaKaibartaKaibartas of Eastern Bengal not yet forming themselves into self contained endogamous group is may be recalled here. See below for more on Risley and his description of the KaibartaKaibartaKaibartas.

⁶⁸ Ashutosh Jana, *Mahisya Tatva Baridhi*, Ch 3. He cited the authority of *Skandapurana*, which also reportedly included astrology and voice reading (*Shaakunshastra*) as one of the permitted occupations.

⁶⁹ Jogendranath Bhattacharya does say that KaibartaKaibartaKaibartas were employed as domestic servants in some places, but he is convinced that 'generally speaking' they did not form part of the castes usually employed as domestic servants. It is most unfortunate that even though he himself was the President of the Nadia college of pandits, he does not say much on the extent to which Chashi Kaibartas were employed as domestic servants in Nadia. Jogendranath Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*. p 245.

⁷⁰ *Census of India 1901*, Report by Gait p 380. Tanika Sarkar also mentions this incident as an instance of a class distinction between 'the more fortunate members of the caste' and the poorer ChashiChashiChashi KaibartaKaibartaKaibartas. See Tanika Sarkar, *A Shudra Father*.

The movement received set backs from some other quarters too. It was led mainly by successful men who had seized the new avenues of power opened by commerce, education and profession. But those who held the traditional levers of power in the Kaibarta community—*Samajpatis*—were generally opposed to the movement. The growth of the new sources of influence had left these once substantial landholding families behind the times and their moral grip over the community—the power to outcast—was fast waning as well. Unwilling to undertake reform, they proceeded to form factions against the men who advocated it.⁷¹ The next chapter would focus on a number of such tensions within the Mahisyas themselves and with the opposition to the movement from other castes.

The census authorities certainly took the agitation very seriously. Broadly speaking, the census authorities *rejected* the Mahisyas' claim and granted only a cosmetic concession. The dividing line between them and the *Jeliya* Kaibartas was considered 'still far from clear and universally recognised'. Their Brahmans were found to be more degraded than those of the Goalas. A third objection harped on the fact that many Chashi Kaibarta men and women still served as domestic servants and that their women did not observe *Jatyachar*, or ritual practices common to upper caste women. Another point that went against them was that in many districts, their water was still not received by the higher

⁷¹ Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest*, p.74-78

castes.⁷² Permission to serve water to the Brahmans (*Jal Acharan*) entitled castes to a *Satsudra* or *Jalacharaniya* status.⁷³

Their textual representation was refuted with some force as well. The Chashi Kaibartas were on fairly strong grounds, however. The Puranic caste name that they appropriated, Mahisyas, were born of cross breeding between a Kshatriya father and a Vaisya mother. The father was certainly high-caste, and the mother, too, belonged to a caste somewhat higher than the Kaibartas. The miscegenation lowered the status of the descendants below that of both the parents. Since, however, neither parent was low-caste and since an upper caste father was not ritually barred from liaison with a woman belonging to a somewhat lower caste, according to the principle of *anuloma* marriage the sub-caste should not be considered as unclean Sudra. Accommodating pandits and educated caste members drew supporting evidence from the sacred texts, the *Padma Puran* and the *Brahmavaivarta Puran*, to defend this claim. According to *Smriti* writers like Gautama and Yajnavalka, the union of a *Ksatriya* male and Vaisya female produced the Mahisya while according to texts like *Brahmavaivarta Puran*, the same union produced Kaibartas—the two castes were therefore presented as identical.⁷⁴

However, the census authorities were by now armed with some solid expert commentaries, some of which may have been forwarded to them by the opponents of the

⁷² Interestingly, Midnapore was reported as one of those districts. It appears that their position was ritually highest in 24 Parganas where their promotion to the rank of *Jalacharaniya* or clean Sudra castes was recommended. *Census of India 1901*, Report by Gait pp. 370-375.

⁷³ Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*, Ch-1.

⁷⁴ Nripendra Kumar Dutta, *Origin and Growth of Caste in India*, Vol. III, 1965, pp.132-135, Quoted in Gouripada Chatterjee, *Midnapore: The Frontrunner of India's Freedom Struggle*, Delhi, 1986, p. 157.

movement. Therefore, Gait pointed out that the verse quoted by the Mahisyas from the *Padma Puran* was 'said not to be found in the ordinary edition'. The relevant verse from the *Brahmavaivarta Puran*, on the other hand was found to be incomplete or selectively quoted, because the immediately next verse went on to say that the Puranic Mahisyas (i.e. Kaibartas) were fallen on account of their connection with the *Tivars* in the *Kaliyuga* (*Kali*, the dark, dystopic age in Hindu mythological imaginary) and became fishermen.⁷⁵ This passage, then, while supporting the alleged origin of the Kaibartas as a whole, failed to establish beyond reasonable doubt the Mahisyas' claim to be completely distinct from the *Jeliyas*. Going further, Gait noted also that the 'opponents of the movement' dubbed the entire passage spurious since it was not found in several 'trustworthy' editions, including that brought out by the Sanskrit Library at Benaras. The occupational identity between puranic Mahisya and Chashi Kaibartas was disputed, since the former did not practice agriculture per se but protection of grain. The argument was concluded, incidentally, with the linguistic point, that the word Kaibarta derived from *Ka*, or water and *varta* or engaged, and, therefore the connection with the *Jeliyas* was deemed to be written into in the very expression of the Kaibarta identity.⁷⁶

But the government could not entirely dismiss the Mahisyas' claims. What it chose to do is beautifully conceptualized by J.I. Rankin, the Collector of Dacca in his letter to the Census Commissioner written on 17 November, 1900. The Chashi (or Haliya) Kaibartas of Dacca, wrote Rankin, would most certainly object to being entered in the census

⁷⁵ For an excellent exploration of the implications of this dystopia to the Bengali professionals in the nineteenth century see Sumit Sarkar, 'Kaliyug, Chakri and Bhakti', *Writing Social History*, Delhi, 1997. The category *Tiyar* may be a corruption of the Sanskrit term *Dhibar* (fishermen). However, if it is mentioned in *Brahmavaivarta Puran* (A.D.12-13 Century), it was a fairly old term.

⁷⁶ See below for more on the complex and tensive nature of the category Kaibarta.

schedule as Kaibartas, because they called themselves 'Parashara Das' or Mahisya while only the fishing section of the community was popularly known as Kaibartas. Fearing a possible law and order problem, the hair-brained bureaucrat that he was, Rankin came up with a most smart solution. 'I therefore think they may be entered as Mahisya. *It will neither prejudice any other caste nor will it be difficult to classify them in the tabulation office as 'Halia Kaibarta'*'.⁷⁷ This is exactly what the Census Commissioner came to do.

As we saw above, Gait offered several reasons for rejecting the Mahisya claim for a separate caste name, and one of these reasons included a reference to a mismatch between the occupation of the Puranic Mahisya caste and the Chashi Kaibartas. Nevertheless, his decision was influenced as much, if not more, by the insufficiency of the textual citations by the Mahisyas. In other words, even very sharp and penetrating colonial bureaucrats could not entirely get out of the seduction of a scriptural view of the caste system, often despite open proclamations to the contrary.

Having said that, it is also clear that scriptural sanctions, though pre-eminent at this stage, were insufficient. The question of others higher castes accepting water from Mahisyas still serving as domestic helps and of their women not performing *Jatyachars* were important considerations too. These last three were essentially observed practices, and could thus hypothetically change over time if higher castes could be persuaded to accept water, Mahisyas stopped serving as domestic helps and their women took to observing *Jatyachar*. In other words, all of these called for an internal mobilization. As we shall in

⁷⁷ Letter from J.I. Rankin, Collector of Dacca to the Census Commissioner, dated Dacca, 17 November, 1900, RP. Emphasis added.

next chapters, *Bangiya Mahisya Samiti* and its branches devoted themselves precisely to this activity after 1901.

VII

As we saw above, the colonial bureaucracy's response to the Mahisya representation operated at two related levels. On the one hand, their desire to return themselves as Mahisyas was accepted at the ground level but on the other, they were still tabulated as Chashi Kaibartas in the tabulation reports. At the same time, the Chashi Kaibartas and *Jeliya Kaibartas* were understood to have emerged from the same ethnic origin. The Mahisya claims, in other words, could neither be rejected as entirely baseless nor accepted as totally sustainable.

Such dual responses to the Mahisyas/Chashi Kaibartas could be found in the works of various colonial ethnographers from the 1870s. Nowhere is the uncertain position of colonial knowledge about the Kaibartas more visible than in its treatment of the Kaibarta origin myths. This uncertainty arose from the problem of having to represent Chashi/Halia Kaibartas as originating from a single racial stock. The colonial administrator-ethnographers like Hunter, Risley and O'Malley consistently presented the Chashi Kaibartas and *Jeliya Kaibartas* as part of the same ethnic stock.

Particularly crucial was their steadfast denial of any *Aryan* origin to the Mahisyas. As we shall see in the next chapter, separate origin from the *Jeliya Kaibartas* and a claim to

Aryan origin were two most powerful tropes of self-representation for the Mahisyas themselves. For the colonial ethnographers, the prominence of the Mahisyas/Chashi Kaibartas in some districts of Bengal illustrated a process of upward mobility. In this particular process, some ritually ranked lower castes were seen to acquire local prominence by virtue of their wealth and numbers. This model of social mobility operated with a pan-Indian caste system as the norm and local dominance of castes not found elsewhere as an exception to be rationalized by social mobility theories.

In Hunter's *Statistical Accounts of Bengal* (1876) the Kaibartas were described as one of the aboriginal tribes in the eastern part of the country who embraced Hinduism soon after the Aryans entered into Bengal and managed to secure for themselves a fair rank in Hindu society. Hunter attests to their ancient origin by referring to their reported mention in the Mahabharata and several ancient religious books of the Hindus. He goes on to say that the Kaibartas were divided into two classes, the first the better off agriculturists including substantial landholders and the second poor fishermen. Brahmans were known to receive water from the former while the latter was generally looked down upon as a very low caste. He listed them among pure *Sudra* castes which also included the *Nabashakhs*.⁷⁸

Hunter's narrative explains the high rank of the Mahisyas as an old merger between the aboriginal tribes and incoming Aryans, not a recent phenomenon secured by wealth and numbers which was the version found in Risley and O'Malley to whom we shall shortly

⁷⁸ W.W. Hunter, *Statistical Accounts of Bengal: Hugly District* (1876), reprinted by Govt. of West Bengal, pp. 41-42

turn. Their alleged mention in ancient religious texts was cited as evidence of the ancientness of this merger. However, when read with his subsequent description about the two distinct classes among the Kaibartas, it is clear that he was leaving the poorer fishermen out of this merger. This, along with the fixing of the tribal origin, made the question of the actual status of the Kaibartas a matter of some complication. Their story of their merger with the Aryans so many centuries ago could not be easily reconciled with the low caste status of the Kaibarta fishermen. As long as the two classes of the Kaibartas—whom Hunter did not name as Chashi or *Jeliya*—were spoken of in the same breath, the question of their status would obviously remain a matter of some duality.

Following the appointment of H.H. Risley as the Special Officer for Ethnographic Enquiries in 1886, colonial ethnographic enterprises generated an impressive amount of information on the Kaibartas. Risley's *Castes and Tribes of Bengal* contains several pages of deliberation on this caste group, focusing on debates about their origin myths, internal stratification, religious and occupational practices, and ritual observances and social ranks.

Risley's understanding of caste generally relied on the *varna* framework and Brahmanical measures and opinions on caste rank. The closer an individual caste was with the Aryan race, the higher it ranked in Risley's scheme of things. In other words, proximity to the Aryan racial stock was the most important indicator for Risley to decide on a given caste's social rank. For him the judgment of science on race reportedly confirmed the attitude of the Brahmans. Considering race history and race sentiment very

crucial to understanding caste, he devoted much space to the various origin myths of the Kaibartas and to their internal stratification and marriage practices.⁷⁹

Risley wrote with the assumption that an Aryan origin was superior and a Dravidian one represented inferiority, postulating that in spite of much cultural exchange between various communities, India had not witnessed any major racial intermingling. Kaibartas, however, did not conform to this hypothesis. Risley was careful not to attribute the Kaibartas to either of these 'pure' origin groups. He conceded 'that the nucleus of the group was probably Dravidian, but their original cast of feature may have been to some extent refined by a slight infusion of Aryan blood. The type as it stands at present is distinctly an intermediate one, equally removed from the extreme types of Aryan and Dravidian races in Bengal'. This turn of phrase, conceding a Dravidian origin and yet talking of refinement through intermingling with Aryans, distinctly hinted towards a recent history of upward mobility.

The category of intermediate caste was introduced, it may be recalled, on the eve of 1881 census to accommodate groups such as the *Kayasthas* of Bengal and *Khandaits* of Orissa.⁸⁰ The Mahisyas responded to these two groups in diametrically opposite fashion. They spiritedly contested what they perceived as unfair attempts by the *Kayasthas* to present their origin in unfavorable terms while they claimed kinship with the *Khandaits*. Caste groups slotted in the same category by the colonial ethnographers, and thereby

⁷⁹ Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, New Delhi, 2001, pp. 212-24.

⁸⁰ See section II above.

accorded equality of rank and status, did not necessarily perceive themselves as sharing the same rank-space.⁸¹

Risley also conceded that Kaibartas were among the earliest inhabitants of Bengal and occupied a commanding position. Accepting the legend of the five kingdoms having been founded by the Kaibartas in Midnapore, he declared it as one of the earliest seats of the community.

Interestingly, he refers to these earliest settlers as a *tribe* and the present day Kaibartas as a *caste*. He seems to thus frame his narrative of Kaibarta mobility from tribe to caste. However, such mobility also at another level negated Risley's presumption of minimal racial intermingling in India. If Kaibartas indeed predated the Aryan entry into Bengal and belonged to a Dravidian stock, then their racial 'refine'ment through infusion of Aryan blood obviously pointed to substantial intermingling between the Aryans and Dravidians in Bengal.

Risley's references to the contradictory origin myths of the Kaibartas—some alluded to low origin and some to a respectable ancestry—is particularly interesting in this context. He was by and large convinced that Kaibartas were originally fishermen, and that Kewats and Kaibartas were merely two names of a single tribe or that they originally shared a common occupation. Eventually they had formed endogamous units and the group with a more Sanskritized name claimed a superior status for itself. He did not, however, bother

⁸¹ The same people were described as Khandaits in Orissa and Mahisyas in Bengal. See Ashutosh Jana, *Mahisya Tatva Baridhi*, Tamluk, 1911, pp 76-80

to explain what allowed a particular group comparatively easier access to a Sanskritized name.

Equating the Kewats of Bihar with the Kaibartas of Bengal, Risley proceeded to the legends in circulation relating to their separation. Many of these legends revolved around the allocation of a priest to the Kaibartas. One legend said that Ballal Sen, the legendary king credited with introducing the *varna* system in Bengal, elevated them to the status of pure Sudras on condition that they give up fishing as their occupation. However, the *Kanaujiya* Brahmans refused to serve them and Ballal Sen was forced to appoint *Vyasokta* Brahmans as their priests. The *Vyasokta* Brahmans were said to be descendants of the great Brahman sage Vyasa or initiated by him into priesthood. This version appears to credit the upward mobility of the Kaibartas more or less entirely to the discretion of Ballal Sen and offers little agency to the Kaibartas themselves.

Another legend that admits some agency to the Kaibartas has two versions. One version, reportedly brought to Risley's notice by the Kaibartas themselves claimed that when they proceeded to claim *nabashakha* status in the form of a higher caste Brahman for themselves, Ballal Sen rejected their appeal and allotted to them one of the most degraded priests. An analogous version credits the Kaibartas doing a great service to Ballal Sen and requesting the king, who proposed to bestow them with a reward, to get the pure caste Brahmans to serve them. The king reportedly promised to appoint the first person he saw the next morning as their priest. It so happened that the first person he saw the next morning turned out to be a lower caste sweeper. Ballal Sen promptly invested

him with a holy thread and sent him off to serve the Kaibartas.⁸² The profusion and variety of such origin narratives clearly show that the Kaibartas were making their presence felt to both the upper caste professionals and to the colonial bureaucracy.

From the controversial investiture of the Kaibarta Brahmans Risley moved on to their origin myths. They were presented as children of Bahru, a Brahman sage from South India who composed heterodox *Puranas*, but was cursed by Brahma, to serve the Kaibartas, now depicted as the children of Vidur. Vidur was a foster brother of the Dhritarashtra and Pandu, the fathers of the Kauravas and the Pandavas respectively. But more importantly he too was fathered by the sage Vyasa. In effect, Risley ended up collapsing the parentage of the Kaibartas and their Brahmans.

Risley observed great diversity in the internal divisions of the Kaibartas in various districts. In the districts of East Bengal, the division between the Chashi Kaibartas (cultivating Kaibartas) and *Jeliya* Kaibartas (Fishing Kaibartas) was far from clear as opposed to districts in Central and South Bengal. In Dacca the division was not strongly visible. In Bakarganj, the bifurcation was visible, but the fishing group was called only Kaibartas. Girls of *Halia Das* could be freely given to the Kaibartas while the families of *Halia Das* men marrying Kaibarta girls could be accused of misalliance and descended a step in social estimation. Such marriages, however, were known to take place fairly regularly, with Kaibarta families paying a substantial price to acquire a bridegroom from

⁸² Interestingly this very legend was submitted to Risley by Haraprasad Sastri as well. Kaibartas were unlikely to present this legend to Risley since it portrayed their Brahmans, and by implication themselves, unfavorably. However, they could have used the legend as an illustration of Ballal Sen's unreasonable attitude to the KaibartaKaibartaKaibartas. I feel it likely that Risley chose to accept Haraprasad Sastri's version. See section III above.

the higher class. For Risley, the Bakarganj model provided a ready example of social mobility in process.

In Hugli and Midnapore, the endogamous units were far more crystallized. Of the four Kaibarta subcastes in Hugli, two were territorial (*Uttar Rarhi* and *Dakkhin Rarhi*) and two occupational (*Jeliya* and *Tunte*). The *Jeliya* Kaibartas lived by fishing and the *Tunte* Kaibartas by rearing silkworms. Risley found the four subdivisions of Dakkhin Rarhi Kaibartas found in Midnapore—*Lalchatai*, *Ekside*, *Doside* and *Makunda*—particularly unusual. The members of the *Lalchatai* section used to sit on a special red mat in Kaibarta gatherings as a mark of some distinction. The *Eksides* were customarily prohibited to take food on a bride's house during marriage for a day while the same restriction applied to the *Dosides* for two days. The bride's family used to send them a present (*side*) of food which they would cook and eat in a neighbor's house. Risley contrasted such profusion of sections within individual caste groups in West Bengal with fairly monolithic caste groups in Eastern Bengal and Bihar. The rule of sectional exogamy too was seen more in operation in the West. Risley reasoned proximity with Muslims, who frequently encouraged endogamy, might have prevented the formation of exogamous subdivisions among the Hindu castes of eastern Bengal.

In marriage practices too, the Kaibartas differed from province to province. In Bengal child brides were given in marriage but not sent to the in law's hose till after puberty. Divorce was granted on the ground of adultery although widows and divorcee women were not permitted to remarry. The men often had to pay a steep bride price. In Orissa,

child marriage was common practice although post-pubertal alliances were not frowned upon. There widows were allowed to marry again, but usually the younger brother of her late husband and interestingly divorce was permitted following a public hearing by the elders of the caste. Risley also referred to some widow remarriages among the Kaibartas in the Contai subdivision of Midnapore in the Amlī year 1223, speculating the practice might have survived in Bengal until then.

The ritual mourning practices too were more in harmony with the upper caste norms in Midnapore. The stipulated period of mourning after death was thirty days in the rest of Bengal but fifteen days in Midnapore. In terms of occupation, there was little to distinguish between Kaibartas and other Hindu castes engaged in agriculture. In East Bengal though fishing Kaibartas were a prominent presence (chief curers of fish, wrote Risley), marked by their hard work and tendency to quit fishing at the earliest opportunity.

Risley observed the *Halia* Kaibartas smoked with the same Hookah (Hubble-Bubble) with the *Nabashakh* castes and as such stood first below that group in social and ritual hierarchy. The Brahmans were yet to receive waters from their hands. Risley speculated that in course of time the *Halia* Kaibartas would successfully decouple themselves from the Kaibartas altogether and make their way into the *Nabashakh* cluster.⁸³ We must notice the distinction between Risley and Hunter's account on this issue. While Hunter had earlier mentioned that Brahmans did receive water from the Kaibartas in Hugli, Risley

⁸³ H.H. Risley, *Castes and Tribes of Bengal*, Calcutta 1981 (First published 1891), pp. 375-382. I have taken Risley's account of the Kaibartas entirely from this publication.

found the practice was not common in Bengal as a whole yet. This difference in social rank and status of the Kaibartas in various districts must be kept in mind. They were clearly ranked much higher in districts such as Midnapore and Hugli where they constituted a substantial number. I try to correlate this differentiated ranking with the degree of preference for adopting upper caste practices later in the third chapter. Mahisya ideologues writing from districts where they constituted a minority often advocated immediate adoption of *Kshatriya* rituals and practices such as the sacred thread or the prefix *varna*.⁸⁴

Risley thus found the Kaibartas of Midnapore as closest in ritual practice to the upper castes even as Kaibartas elsewhere were fast catching up with them, with the case study of Bakarganj illustrating the actual process in operation. However, he was still not ready to treat the Kaibartas of Midnapore or Hugli (on whom Hunter had focused quite a bit) as a rule and the rest as exception. This is significant because in terms of numbers the Kaibartas of Hugli (including Howrah) and Midnapore constituted the majority of Kaibartas of Bengal. In his eagerness to map the process of Kaibarta upward mobility he ended up devoting disproportionate attention to the fishermen Kaibartas of Eastern Bengal than to the agricultural Kaibartas of Western and Southern Bengal. However, the agricultural Kaibartas themselves were hardly a homogenous group, including within their ranks substantial landlords as well as humble landless laborers involved in agricultural operations.

⁸⁴ Sudarshan Biswas from Faridpur, for instance, was one of them. He wrote several articles in the caste journal, *Mahisya Samaj*, along these lines between 1910 and 1920.

VIII

In conclusion it must be acknowledged, following Neeladri Bhattacharya, that codification, hybridized custom; it appropriated indigenous custom through western categories and mixed heterogeneous traditions.⁸⁵ Hybridity, however, suggests an amalgamation of pure essences. In reality, different officials, looking through different lenses, saw different realities and interpreted custom in dissimilar ways. Native tradition was not filtered through any fixed frame of Oriental discourse which had crystallized in the West in a congealed form. The frame was not only fractured, it was continuously reconstituted. So we need to look not only at multiple discourses of tradition and modernity but also at the ways in which the elements of difference were incessantly recombined into new forms, new languages of power and domination. This process revealed the inner tensions and ambiguities within colonial ideology. The nature of dialogues with local informants was crucial to the remaking of custom, although not native voices could be easily accommodated in the imperial discourse. Moreover, discourses so constituted need not always have the power to reorder practices unhindered. Traditions and customary practices need not be so malleable as to entirely succumb to transforming power of a codifying/ethnographic state.

This chapter sought to trace some of these moments of tension and contestation within the colonial discourse on caste in India as it evolved in the late nineteenth century. Between them the sections recounted aspects of colonial knowledge formation about the

⁸⁵ Neeladri Bhattacharya, 'Remaking Custom: The Discourse and Practice of Colonial Codification' in Champaklakshmi and Gopal (eds.) *Tradition, Dissent and Ideology*, Delhi, 1996

Kaibartas/Mahisyas between 1886 and 1901, when they approached the census authorities with a most vigorous agitation claiming a new caste name. Section two, for instance, begins with the coming together of two divergent schools of opinion on the right method of classifying caste groups. They met in the Ethnographic conference in Lahore in 1885 to prepare comprehensive guidelines clarifying the scope and implications of some key analytical categories such as caste, tribe, sub-caste and *gotra*. However, the document this alliance produced was riddled with ambiguities of its own, as I have shown while elaborating on the distinction between *gotra* and *got*. Subsequently, H.H. Risley, one of the three architects of the 1885 paper launched his own brand of ethnographic enquiry in Bengal the very next year, relying more or less on upper caste informants and indigenous authorities. Section three shows, through a close examination of the correspondence with middle level Indian bureaucrats how this round of ethnographic enquiries worked in close collaboration with native informants and often reproduced Brahmanic ideas and categories even as the exercise refigured both colonial knowledge and indigenous ways of representing caste. The discovery that the occupational category Jelia (fisherman) was found scattered across several castes, as discussed in the fourth section, led to yet another moment of tension in the colonial knowledge formation and shows up the intermediate character of the project, negotiating and adjusting with various strands within its own ambit. The next section dealt with the way this ambiguity was resolved by the colonial ethnographers in 1901, marking a fundamental shift in the colonial understanding of caste. While in 1885 caste was defined as a community of occupation and sub-caste as an endogamous unit, in 1901 the latter was deemed to be the correct marker of a *true caste*. This shift may be at one level seen

as coinciding with Risley's taking over the census establishment, and privileging his race centric understand of caste. However, Risley's obsession with hierachy and racial purity did not survive his tenure in the census establishment. Even his *Tribes and Castes of Bengal* did not list the castes in order of social precedence. This shift in the colonial understanding of caste did, however, open up some discursive space for the Mahisyas to articulate and claim a separate caste identity in 1901. The section on the initial phase of the Mahisya movement showed how the bureaucracy used both scriptural and material arguments to reject the Mahisya claim. This duality, I suggested in the next section through a detailed discussion of the writings of Hunter and Risley, also characterized the colonial knowledge production as a whole during this period.

It is not as if colonial knowledge formation alone was characterized by these tensions and ambiguities. Indigenous knoweldge about the Mahisyas too interacted with and imprinted itself within the former, as we saw, for instance, in the way Risley more or less accepted Haraprasad Satri's orgin legend about the *Mahisyajaji* Brahmans. The Mahisyas themselves built up a fairly large corpus of literature about their own community, focusing on its origin, history and an agenda for reform. This literature was internally diverse and the next two chapters will take up in greater detail some of its major strands leading to the discursive construction of a Mahisya identity. The next chapter seeks to understand this fractured nature of the indigenous discourse on caste in greater detail, unpacking the tensions and ambiguities within the various indigenous representations and practices of caste. At the same time, it attempts to highlight several other challenges before the movement, some springing from within the community and some from the

upper castes, revealing the multiple ways they constituted and reconstituted the formation and unfolding of the Mahisya identity in the first decade of the twentieth century.

Chapter Two

Confronting Challenges: Internal, External and Discursive

The previous chapter dealt with the fragmented nature of the colonial discourse on caste during the late nineteenth century closely focusing on changing contours of the colonial bureaucracy's understanding of the caste composition of Bengal. The project was driven primarily by administrative imperatives of control while methodologically it followed precedents from anthropological studies on race and eugenic theories earlier conducted in Europe, mainly by French and British professionals and investigators.¹

At a general level, the investigations followed either of the two theoretical positions on the operative principles framing the emergence and functional significance of caste groups in India. In the eighteen seventies and eighties they largely followed the formulation explicated in India by senior bureaucrats such as Denzil Ibbetson or J.C. Nesfield. Caste groups in India, according to this school of opinion, corresponded more or less with occupational units and as such practitioners of a distinct occupation were generally understood to assemble themselves within a caste group ensuring restricted inheritance of specialized professional skills through patrilineal descent. Groups that intermarried among themselves were cast as subcastes within this scheme of things and several such subcastes were understood to be found within an occupation group that is caste. In the mid 1880s, H.H. Risley came up with the contending formulation that intermarriage, not occupational uniformity, was a more characteristic attribute of a caste

¹ See section II of the previous chapter.

group. From this premise would follow a reworking of the definition of an effective caste unit in 1901, anointing endogamous groups, who went by the name of subcastes, as 'true' castes.

In 1885, Risley met Ibbetson and Nesfield at a conference in Lahore and the three worked out, in concert, clarifications on some points of doubtful ethnographic nomenclatures pertaining to Northern India. This possibly marked the first encounter of these two discourses on caste in India. The previous chapter explored the complicated relationship between these two competing discourses within the overall administrative knowledge production by the colonial state between 1885 and 1901. If the census bureaucracy, and by extension the colonial sociology, represented no linear, monolithic pattern in its understanding of the caste question in Bengal in the late nineteenth century, the discursive space available before the Mahisyas looking for upward mobility too was fraught with complexities and tensions of various kinds.²

This chapter seeks to develop on the internal and external challenges facing an upward mobility movement or what I call the problems of *becoming* Mahisyas in late nineteenth and early twentieth century.³ How do other castes react when one among them seeks to move up the social ladder? Is it possible to discern any pattern in their response? Do their responses vary according to their relative distance from the upwardly mobile caste in the overall social hierarchy? The first section takes up for a close examination some such discursive and practical challenges to the Mahisya movement emanating from other

² See chapter one, pp. 40-42

³ Emphasis mine, unless otherwise stated.

castes and the colonial bureaucracy. These could be characterized as external challenges to an upward mobility movement in early twentieth century Bengal.

This is not to suggest that the Mahisyas themselves represented a unified collectivity speaking in a single representative voice. Various permutations and combinations of factors such as class, generation, degree of effective authority in rural society, familiarity with modern educations, professions and residence in urban milieu led to multiple sections claiming to represent the best interests of the aspirant caste. Which sections of the emerging caste were the most vocal? Who, in other words, usurped the right to represent the public self of the movement? What did it take for them to monopolize the right for collective representation? What were the resources to which they lay claim and what were the dimensions of the contests for such rights? The section following the external challenges to the Mahisya movement attempts to study some of these internal tensions, focusing on attempts by the Jalia Kaibartas to the caste name Mahisya and on competing claims by a number of authorities on various aspects relating to the origin and evolution of the caste. These self-styled authorities were all either Mahisyas themselves or their Brahman priests with whom the Mahisyas had formed a solid alliance all along, possibly because these Brahmans were themselves struggling to transcend the low status accorded to them on account of their ministering to a low Sudra caste such as the *Kaibartas*.⁴

⁴ They were generally called Barna Brahmans (degraded Brahmans). Jogendranath Bhattacharya, for instance, deals with such Brahmans in a section titled Degraded Brahmans. These Brahmans reportedly formed a separate caste. The good Brahmans did not accept water from their hands and intermarriage between them was quite out of question. They were usually very poor and utterly without any standing in society. The priests of the Kaibartas were alternatively called *Vyasokta* Brahmans as we saw in the last chapter. See Jogendranath Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, Calcutta, 1968 (first published in 1896), pp. 99-100. The next chapter goes into the question of this alliance in more detail.

Towards the end I bring in a third vantage point from which to examine the challenges interrogating the Mahisya movement, one that partly overlaps with the first, external kind, and one that I choose to broadly refer as discursive challenges. I juxtapose selections from representations of the Kaibartas in some influential texts written by upper caste authorities with works by two Mahisya intellectuals dealing with similar concerns. In particular, the section seeks to highlight some of the strategies that the Mahisyas themselves deployed to respond and contest, discursively, their portrayals by these eminent upper caste authorities.⁵ This juxtaposition must not, however, be read as working out a straightforward dichotomous formulation of difference between the Mahisyas and the upper castes for neither of them could, in practice, be so characterized. Instead, the exercise may more fruitfully be treated as an entry point to some of the changes that came to mark the ways debates about caste status were conducted in early twentieth century. What were the markers of legitimacy to which both sides appealed in support of their claims? Which were the most authentic sources acceptable to both sides? What were the points on which their accounts diverged? Which audiences were these writers addressing given that, barring rare exceptions, most of these works were scripted in the vernacular?⁶ This section explores some possible answers to these questions.

⁵ It may be recalled here, in passing, that the Chashi Kaibartas' claim to the caste name Mahisya was rejected by the census authorities in 1901 partly on textual grounds. It was necessary, therefore, for the Mahisyas to build up a formidable body of incontrovertible scriptural support in favor of their claim. See chapter 1, pp. 42-43.

⁶ The Mahisyas came up with only one tract written in English, namely, *The Mahisyas: Formerly a Dominant Caste of Bengal*, Sylhet, 1911. This, compared to more than thirty or so similar works in Bengali among the Mahisyas alone, certainly constituted a very minor part of this literature.

II

The colonial state, we observed in the last chapter, admitted that the Mahisya representations to the census authorities in 1901 were the most vigorous of such caste mobility movements. If the Mahisya agitation so moved the bureaucracy, it was likely to affect other caste groups in Bengal in significant ways. After all, readjustment of the Mahisyas' position within the caste hierarchy, as and when it came, would perforce lead to a reorganization of the entire edifice, as it were. For the sake of analytical clarity, instances of such opposition may be classified into direct and indirect initiatives. Acts or modes of protest by other castes that left no scope for the Mahisyas to respond directly in kind may be defined as indirect initiatives. On the other hand, measures of protests that engaged the Mahisyas directly in that they could respond to the charges leveled against them in ways acceptable to their opponents or the colonial government could be defined as direct initiatives. This rough typology of other caste protests against the upward mobility of the Mahisyas must also make room for a third kind that shared some features with both the direct and the indirect variants. This third variant played itself out in the burgeoning vernacular public sphere which, as Sumit Sarkar has noted, was suddenly besieged with an 'unprecedented flood of both high and lower caste writings ... on caste themes, claims and disputes between c. 1900 and 1920s.'⁷ Now these publications, both by the Mahisyas themselves and by other castes, appealed to a common literate audience familiar with the norms and conventions governing such public debates. These contests I

⁷ Sarkar's rough calculations based on publications details of the printed tracts in Bengali at the British Library provides a fair indicator of the sudden rise in the publication of such tracts particularly after 1905. My own enquiries into the Bengali tract collection of the National Library, Kolkata confirms the point. Most of these tracts were published roughly between 1908 and 1927. Sumit Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, New Delhi, 2002, p. 40

take up for closer examination later in the chapter while dealing with the discursive challenges outlined above.

The 1901 census report happens to mention some instances of other caste resistance to the upward mobility initiative of the Mahisyas. While elaborating on the census authorities' refutation of the scriptural citations of the Mahisyas in 1901—on which we dwelt in the previous chapter—E.A.Gait, the Census Superintendent of Bengal, disclosed that 'some opponents of the movement' were quick to bring to the notice of the census authorities the textual inconsistencies of the Mahisya claims.⁸ The report supplies no additional information on these opponents nor sheds any light on their individual caste identities or the factors motivating such men. Nonetheless, it is reasonably clear some men well versed in scriptural knowledge were rattled enough by the Mahisya representations to want to readily provide to the census authorities adequate scriptural wherewithal to counter the Mahisya claim. Here then is an example of what I have defined as indirect challenge to the upward mobility claims of the Mahisyas since such assistance to the colonial bureaucracy must have been provided without the knowledge of—or active engagement with—the Mahisyas themselves. In yet another display of such indirect protest, the upper castes in the Nadia district, mainly Brahmans, reportedly arranged not to take water from them as a 'sign of their disapproval of the agitation.'⁹ The Mahisyas were not in a position to refuse some service to them in return. We must remember in this connection that the Chashi Kaibartas were not a *Ajalachal* caste, that is,

⁸ *Census of India (Bengal) 1901*, Report by E.A.Gait, p. 380

⁹ *Ibid.*

the upper castes were not ritually prohibited from accepting water from their hands.¹⁰ In Nadia in particular, according to Jogendranath Bhattacharya, they formed the lower layer of the middle classes and by the turn of the century were said to occupy an even higher position, some of them being big landowners and yet others taking service under zamindars. Still others had been competing for University distinctions and held high offices under the service of the government.¹¹ The upper castes in Nadia were thus sufficiently alarmed at the prospect of the Chashi Kaibartas seeking to convert their material advantages into a higher social status and they proceeded to counter such initiatives through social boycott. These two instances of indirect opposition to the Chashi Kaibarta aspirations to a higher caste status may be understood as a strategic choice available to and exercised by the upper castes in circumstances where a direct physical or verbal confrontation with the Chashi Kaibartas was considered either undesirable or futile.

Let us now turn to some instances of what I have defined as direct confrontations between the Chashi Kaibartas and other castes. I will focus particularly on two episodes of direct engagement between the Mahisyas and other locally dominant caste groups sharing fairly similar social status. There was, first a direct physical confrontation with the *Goalas* (milkmen) and second, a court case pertaining to canvassing the tenets of the newly emerging Mahisya community in Murshidabad that went right up to the Calcutta

¹⁰ They belonged to the *Satsudra* (purer *sudra*) category and were placed immediately after the *Nabashakhs* (nine purer *Sudra* castes) in the traditional caste hierarchy. See chapter 1 and Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1981, pp. 33-38. Sanyal provides an excellent account of the concepts of *Jalacharaniya* and *Ajalacharaniya*. Interestingly, this distinction and the sevenfold structure of caste society in Bengal was first worked out in Gait's 1901 census report, which again drew heavily from literate upper caste informants. I have emphasized this interaction between census bureaucracy and the high caste literati in the previous chapter.

¹¹ *Hindu Castes and Sects*, pp. 223-4.

High Court. I seek to highlight the growing self confidence among the members of the caste enabling them to engage their opponents in frontal confrontations. The choice of the two episodes, one relating to street fight and the other to seeking judicial intervention, is intended to illustrate a certain convergence within the movement of what may loosely be described as elite and subaltern strands, each seamlessly interpenetrating the other. We shall see, however, institutionally the Mahisya leaders would much rather prefer legal interventions than pitched battles.

Some of the militant Chashi Kaibartas in Mirzapur village in the Hooghly district who had adopted the name Mahisya decided to exercise their new privileges understood to follow from the newly acquired status by refusing to smoke from the same Hookah with the *Goalas*, as they had hitherto done.¹² The Goalas of Bengal were a large agricultural caste, their numbers reportedly exceeding four millions according to the 1891 census. Although generally illiterate and poor, some among them possessed valuable tenures and even zamindaris while some others secured university degrees and high government offices. However, Goalas, Sadgops and Godos (a section of the Bengal Goalas considered to be experts in martial activities, petty fights and thefts) were still clubbed by the experts

¹² Smoking from the same Hookah (a humbler version of Hubble Bubble) was akin to interdining and accepting water. In a sense this was a more serious issue than interdining because through sharing the same Hookah two persons were understood not to be averse to physical transmission of purity/pollution. The range of castes with which members of a given caste were allowed to smoke from the same Hookah could be roughly said to belong to similar status level. However, it is not easy to prepare a comprehensive list of castes entitled to this privilege, for such practices, as our example shows, were always inflected with local specificities. New forms of social sanctions could be improvised, as in the case of the *Goala* response to the *Mahisya* challenge, and local factors played no small role in such campaigns.

such as Jogendranath Bhattacharya under the overall rubric of the Bengal *Goalas* in the late nineteenth century.¹³

In other words, in number as well as in influence the *Goalas* nearly matched the Chashi Kaibartas.¹⁴ This, in addition to the frequent *Mahisya* claim that theirs was the parent caste from which the *Goalas* branched out much later, must have caused considerable consternation to the *Goalas*.¹⁵ Viewing the sudden rise in the self-confidence of the newly anointed *Mahisyas* of Hooghly with some alarm, the *Goalas* perceived the refusal to smoke from the same hookah as a highly transgressive act that threatened to unsettle their parity with the *Mahisyas*, in terms of both number and social position, in favor of the latter.

In a gesture seeking to restore the perceived loss of parity, they refused to personally deliver milk products to *Mahisya* households, unless the *Mahisyas* themselves came to

¹³ *Hindu Castes and Sects*, pp. 238-239. In a recent article Sudeshna Banerjee has written about the negative stereotype about the non-Bengali *Goalas* circulating among the middle class Hindu Bengalis of Calcutta during the inter war period as a result of socio economic factors. See Sudeshna Banerjee, 'Non Bengali Icons of Malevolence: Middle Class Representaion of an 'other' in Inter War Calcutta' in Nilanjana Gupta and Shipra Mukherjee (eds.), *The Calcutta Mosaic*, Anthem Press, Forthcoming. I am grateful to Prof. Banerjee for sending me the piece.

¹⁴ The number of government servants among the *Goalas* and *Mahisyas* was roughly the same. In 1931, for instance, *Mahisyas* had 1758 of them in government services while *Goalas* had 1777. In professions such as law, teaching and medicine, however, the *Mahisyas* (6623) far surpassed the *Goalas* (942). *Census of India*, 1931, vol.v, part-II, pp. 156-57, Imperial Tables XI, quoted in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, p 111.

¹⁵ This was a common *Mahisya* claim. See Ashutosh Jana, *Mahisya Tatva Baridhi*, Calcutta, 1912, Prakash Chandra, Sarkar, *Mahisya Prakash*, Calcutta, 1911 and issues of the journal *Mahisya Samaj*. In ancient times, there was reportedly no separate caste of *Goalas* and they too were called *Mahisyas* until they proceeded to launch their own caste. Lord Krishna, according to the logic of this claim, was a *Mahisya* and so were the *Ahirs* of Bihar and northern India. I make no attempt to even try to verify the factual accuracy of such claims which is fairly easy. The point is promoters and subscribers to such status claims believed in these formulations and as such they acquire a significance of their own, no less worthy of our attention than verifiable facts. I am more interested in the ways such claims and counter claims happened to mould the relationship between two contesting castes during our period.

their house for collecting it.¹⁶ Against this background, one villager by the name of Panchu Kaibarta reportedly ordered his neighbor Manmohan Goala to supply him with a large amount of curd, possibly on the occasion of some forthcoming ceremony in his house. Manmohan agreed and took earnest money, but declined to personally carry the consignment to Panchu's premises, ostensibly because the latter was a Kaibarta. This led to heated exchanges between Manmohan and Panchu who refused to collect the curd himself, following which the former is reported to have initiated legal proceedings against the latter to recover the cost of curd not collected from his home. While the case had been going on in the court of Bam Dev Chowdhury, the Deputy Magistrate of Serampore, several Kaibarta youths who had come to know about the incident formed a gang and accosted one Khudiram Goala who had been carrying some amount of curd to deliver to a customer at Singur, overpowering him and running away with his consignment. Khudiram, in his turn, immediately reported the matter to his fellow castemen who assembled a band of 300 Goala youths in no time and rushed to the Kaibarta localities, daring them to return the stolen curd or face dire consequences. The latter's refusal led to a full scale riot between the Mahisyas and the Goalas in which around seven men were wounded and removed to Serampore hospital.¹⁷ When we contrast this incident with the timid retreat of the Mahisya domestic servants in 1901, the boldness in the attitude of the poorer Mahisyas clearly stands out, now that they were no longer averse to a physical fight with a competing caste.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Census of India 1911*, Report by O'Malley, Vol. V, Bengal, p. 498.

¹⁷ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, May 13, 1910.

¹⁸ The case of Mahisya domestic servants of Nadia suddenly throwing up their work in 1901 has been discussed in the previous chapter.

Nonetheless, these Mahisya youths stood a world apart from the petition writers and white collar professionals who had mastered the art of making acceptable upward mobility cases and certainly posed as much of a challenge to the Mahisya Samiti as did the Mahisya domestic servants in 1901. In other words, if the Mahisya caste leaders in 1901 had a docile underclass to mobilize, those in 1910 had to rein in sections of their youth who could turn rather violent on occasions. However, the appropriation of a movement originally started by landed magnates and urban professionals by the militant youths of district towns and villages was also an indicator of its expansion beyond its core group of leaders. The Mahisya movement was beginning to assume dimensions of a mass mobilization, to the extent such claims can be made about movements of this kind.

Not much is known about the response of the Bangiya Mahisya Samiti (formerly Presidency Mahisya Society), the Calcutta based institutional headquarters of the Mahisya movement to the *Mahisya-Goala* confrontation in Hooghly. However, only a year ago in 1909 the Samiti, a preserve of the urban traders and professionals, mounted a spirited defense when some members of its Murshidabad branch were charged with misleading the locals. In fact, the journal *Mahisya Samaj* in its inaugural year (1910) published a series of reports on this episode, with blow by blow accounts of the case as it went from the jurisdiction of the local police station up to the court of Justice Digambar Chatterjee of the Calcutta High Court. Rampada Biswas, a Mahisya lawyer from Calcutta, launched the monthly journal in 1910. He ran it for a year on his own before his

finances dried up, and the Bangiya Mahisya Samiti took charge in 1911, bringing in better production values and appointing a new editor, Sevananda Bharati, a Brahman.¹⁹

In 1909, some residents of from Amdahara village, Murshidabad, lodged a complaint to the Disitric Magistrate against five members of the local branch of Bangiya Mahisya Samity (estd. 1897), branding it a 'politically active' organization.²⁰ The DM referred the matter to local police station. The enquiry by the local *Daroga* (possibly a Sub Inspector) found

'...the above named persons have been misleading and persecuting men belonging to other associations in particular and people in general in their drive to enlist members and augment the funds of the Samiti and inflicting various tortures on those who refuse to comply. They have been organizing public meetings and lectures, provoking the subjects. These activities have the potential to disrupt law and order.'²¹

Subsequently, the Police referred the case to a First Class Magistrate of Lalbag who issued summons under section 114 of the Criminal Procedure Code, charging them on two counts of highhandedness and causing threat to peace. On trial, he found them guilty on both counts and ordered them to execute a bond of Rs. 200 each. An appeal against the decision was made to the Sessions Judge at Berhampore who refused to entertain it. Finally, the Society moved the Calcutta High Court. Justice Digambar Chatterjee

¹⁹. Detailed discussions on various aspects of the journal and its politics follow in the next chapter.

²⁰ *Mahisya Samaj*, vol. 1, no. 2, Jaishtha, 1317 BS (May-June, 1910)

²¹ *Mahisya Samaj*, vol. 1, no 3, Asadh, 1317 BS (June-July, 1910)

eventually quashed the lower court order, ruling that prosecution failed to prove its case beyond reasonable doubt.²²

Here was a case of the political and social motives of the Mahisya movement being interrogated by a coalition of locally dominant groups and the administration alike. The concerns of the police and the anti-Mahisya forces in Murshibad converged in a curious fashion. While the locally dominant groups—usually upper caste men—might have perceived in the increasing popularity of the Samiti a threat to their prominence in the local society, they phrased their charges (highhandedness and causing threat to public order) in terms that questioned the political loyalties of the Mahisya activists, a point that the local administration could hardly ignore during the post-Swadeshi years.²³ In other words, the Mahisya movement was portrayed as a seditious enterprise, inciting the loyal subjects of Murshidabad against His Majesty's Government and blackmailing and boycotting those opposing its agenda.

This tarring of a caste mobility movement with a residual Swadeshi color was certainly a curious phenomenon. Unfortunately, in regard to the Mahisyas it had very little material basis, notwithstanding occasional appearance of advertisements in the caste journal from some petty Mahisya trading establishments flaunting their 'swadeshi' wares.²⁴ Available evidence points to no significant Mahisya participation in the Swadeshi movement as

²² *ibid*, vol. 1, no 3-11, 1317 BS (1910-11). The case ran through the year 1909.

²³ For the most comprehensive account of the Swadeshi movement, see Sumit Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1905-1909*, New Delhi, 1973.

²⁴ As already noted above, the journal was launched in 1910. By then, 'swadeshi' was little more than a catch phrase peddled by canny traders looking to cater to a Bengali clientele still enamored with the ideal of economic self-sufficiency that the term represented. See *ibid*.

such, least of all in this particular instance. In Midnapore, for instance, the Swadeshi movement was officially admitted to be 'remarkably mild' in 1906 and 'dying out' by 1907. The powerful network of secret societies and *akhras* that did come up in the district during these years and slightly later were all exclusively upper caste initiatives that failed to enlist the support of the peasantry.²⁵ Mahisya Samiti emphatically denied nurturing any political agenda in its affidavit before the Lagola magistrate. Its written submission contained the statements that a) the Murshidabad Mahisya Samiti was a branch of the Presidency Mahisya Society; b) that its objectives were educational and social improvement of the Mahisya community; c) that the accused did not persecute anyone and d) the charges leveled against the accused were fabricated with an intention to malign the good offices of the society.²⁶ However, even a cursory glance at the agenda of the Mahisya Samity would show that some constructive aspects of the Swadeshi movement—such as economic self-sufficiency and setting up educational institutions—had seeped into the Mahisya movement.²⁷ By this time (i.e. 1909-10) the swadeshi ideal had become some kind of a common sense in Bengal.²⁸ Even as the Mahisyas maintained their distance from the political radicalism of the Swadeshi movement, they were not averse to incorporating some of its economic and constructive dimensions.

The Lalgola Magistrate summoned a large number of witnesses to testify. They represented a cross section of the local population such as Muslims, *Bostoms* (i.e. followers of Sri Chaitanya latter assimilated within the caste society, even itinerant

²⁵ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, New Delhi, 1973, pp. 372-373

²⁶ Summary of the affidavit filed before the First Class Magistrate of Lalbag on 17/05/1909. *Mahisya Samaj*, vol 1, no 4, Shrabon 1317 BS (July-August, 1910)

²⁷ See below.

²⁸ I owe this point to Prof. Sumit Sarkar. Private conversation, 07/06/09.

preachers), *Napits* (barbers), *Swarnakars* (goldsmiths), *Moiras* (confectioners) and even *Barendra* Brahmans. Almost all sections of the local population were thus familiar with the activities of the district Mahisya Society and that its opponents did not belong to the upper castes alone.

J.C. Joyce, a European missionary, was a key witness. In course of his missionary activities he had visited Amdahara, the site of the dispute and observed that the accused were generally respected by the fellow villagers. The Samiti, he testified, worked for the improvement of its own people and as such it was entirely a social organization and harbored no political aspirations, least of all any seditious plans. He was all praise for a night school they ran in the village, leading to an increased desire among the villagers to educate themselves.²⁹ That the accused were convicted by the Magistrate despite Joyce's testimony points to the strength of the opposition against the Mahisya movement in Murshidabad.

But by then the Mahisya movement, too, had acquired considerable clout. Murshidabad Mahisya Samiti, we may recall, was established in 1303 BS (1897) and subsequently sent a delegation to the District Collector on the eve of the 1901 Census praying for a new caste name.³⁰ Lucy Carroll maintains a distinction between those caste associations that sprang up only during the census operations and those that continued to do good work for its constituency even during ordinary times such as the intervening period between

²⁹ *Mahisya Samaj*, vol 1, no 8, Agrahayan, 1317 BS (November-December, 1910)

³⁰ See previous chapter, pp. 40-41.

censuses.³¹ The Presidency Mahisya Society belonged to the latter group. It attempted to organize a broader mass-based movement and called upon its members to become self-reliant and self-sufficient—both economically and culturally. Several organizations were started for putting together the resources of the community and initiate a process of self-reliant development.³² An integral part of the movement was an effort to achieve self-sufficiency within the caste in questions of economic enterprises and spread of education. Agricultural Association of Bengal and Mahisya Banking and Trading Company were established to make available credit to those *Mahisya* who wished to set up an enterprise and to bail out debt ridden Mahisyas. Mahisya Siksha Bhandar (Mahisya Education Trust Fund) and Mahisya Anath Bhandar (Mahisya Orphanage Trust Fund) were established to spread education among them. These organizations ran with donations from the rich Mahisyas. Time and again, *Mahisya Samaj* would encourage its people to take up education and devote themselves to agricultural and industrial ventures, and not wait for government service. In fact, the journal published several essays on better agricultural and animal husbandry techniques and practices.³³ As an active branch, Murshidabad Mahisya Samiti too would have initiated similar activities, including, of course, setting up night schools. This close institutional affinity is the reason why the Presidency Mahisya Society promptly came to its defense.

When we contrast the Society's spirited defense of the Mahsiya activists of Murshidabad, both in court and through its mouthpiece, with its willful reticence on the Hooghly street

³¹ Lucy Carroll, 'Colonial Perceptions of Indian Society and the Emergence of Caste(s) Associations', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 37, no. 2 (Feb. 1978), pp. 233-250.

³² Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal 1872-1937*, Calcutta, 1990, p.144.

³³ The inaugural issue of *Mahisya Samaj*, (that is BS 1319-20, around 1911-12). This was in fact the inaugural issue *after* the Bangiya Mahisya Samiti took over the journal.

fight episode, we begin to see that the Society preferred peaceful, legal and respectable methods of agitation, choosing to distance itself from direct physical encounters with other castes, when it did not outrightly condemn such activities. However, it would be unfair to reconstruct an account of the Mahisya movement without those militant Mahisya youths of Hooghly. Even though they were not directly working under the Bangiya Mahisya Samiti, they clearly drew inspiration from a sense of pride that the initiatives of the Samiti had created among a large section of the *Chashi Kaibarta/Mahisya* population in Hooghly and elsewhere. As indicated above, this could be described as a moment of convergence between two analytically separable, but in practice related, domains within the Mahisya movement.³⁴ This point cannot be pressed too hard at this stage of our research, since more evidence on this other, militant, strand is not available as yet.

The Murshidabad case was significant for another reason as well. We saw above that a Christian missionary testified to the good character of the accused, the local nature of the Samiti (i.e. it was not part of a pan-Bengal political movement), and its complete and unconditional loyalty to the government. Here it would be interesting to explore a possibility of some common grounds in the missionary perceptions of the Indian society and the proposed remedies (i.e. formal English education) and those of the caste associations. Paradoxically, then, the desire for formal education brought together groups that were seeking abolition of castes (i.e. missionaries) and groups that were seeking to

³⁴ It would be somewhat premature perhaps to call these domains elite and subaltern. See the introduction by Ranajit Guha to the first volume of *Subaltern Studies* for the distinction between elite and subaltern domain of politics. Ranajit Guha, (ed.), *Subaltern Studies*, vol. I, New Delhi, 1982. I do feel, however, that he had overemphasized the mutual autonomy of these two domains. For our purpose, it is sufficient to distinguish these two domains in terms of the degree of militancy they entailed.

mobilize local (caste) identities into larger corporate identities (caste associations). Both, however, shared a skepticism of anti-government political activities. Recent research has drawn our attention to the work of Christian missionaries on behalf of tenants against indigo planters. Missionary activities has been seen as one of the three factors, in addition to liberal reformism and state legislation, that dented the larger complex of confidence characteristic of Hindu upper caste landlords bred out of caste, educational and gender privileges. This nineteenth century history of collusion between missionaries and reformers in opening up education for girls, for controlling sati, and legalizing widow remarriage has been highlighted along with the missionary campaigns for expanding rural primary education among peasants and low castes. It is perhaps against this background of consistent missionary support for formal education among the previously underprivileged sections of society that the testimony of Joyce in applauding the night school run by the local Mahisya activists has to be contextualized. It opens up interesting possibilities for further exploration, qualifying at any rate the rather straightforward polarity between missionary hostility to caste as the most formidable impediment to conversion and an indigenous tendency to cling to one's own caste identity.³⁵

The episodes discussed above were instances of what I have called the external challenges to the Mahisya movement, both direct and indirect. The evidence presented does not permit wide generalizations. Yet the larger points this section seeks to make may be summarized as follows. The first decade of the twentieth century saw the Bangiya

³⁵ Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, New Delhi, 2001, pp. 21-28. I feel Dirks overemphasizes the missionary opposition to caste early on in the book. To be fair to him, later of the book he does show how Bishop Caldwell's grammar eventually contributed to the development of modern Tamil and a new sense of pride among the non-brahmin castes in Tamil Nadu.

Mahisya Samiti launch several constructive activities, including encouragement to education and entrepreneurship, which in turn instilled a sense of pride and self confidence among the Chashi Kaibartas/Mahisyas in various parts of Bengal. Conversely, there arose in the minds of upper caste and other locally dominant castes a sense of alarm and hostility. This hostility was possibly more powerful among the castes that enjoyed similar social status and local prominence as the Mahisyas and the nature of such opposition probably varied from district to district. It represented no clear pattern and was not headed by any organized coalition. Incidents of opposition involved rival publications—on which more below—physical encounters and protracted litigation. Methods employed were both non violent and violent and the colonial state was often an interested party to these disputes, mostly as arbiters. Sometimes, the Mahisya activists were accused of seditious activities and endangering public order. In practice though the Mahisyas themselves were no unified community and the Bangiya Mahisya Samity did not enjoy undisputed leadership of the movement.

III

The category Mahisyas was fraught with several internal tensions and some of these tensions had assumed serious proportions during this period. I choose to highlight three major tensions--between the urban gentry and professionals on the one hand and the traditional, village based leaders of society on the other, between the various factions among the urban Mahisyas themselves and finally between Chashi Kaibartas and Jelia Kaibartas as both laid claim to the caste name Mahisya.

Bangiya Mahisya Samiti was funded by the educated Mahisya gentry while its work was conducted mainly by Mahisya professionals settled in Calcutta. Narendranath Das, a Mahisya zamindar living in the Entally area of Calcutta lent his premises to the Society in these early years and Rampada Biswas, the first editor of the caste journal, was a lawyer by profession. A considerable middle stratum of Mahisya businessmen, manufacturers and professionals had grown up in Calcutta. They had nearly six hundred tax assesses among them, mostly traders.³⁶ The number of white collar workers among the Mahisyas actually doubled between 1901 and 1911.³⁷ In the neighboring industrial suburb of Howrah, they had begun to make their presence felt in small scale engineering industries, a sector till then under the control of upper castes. More importantly, when we look at the typical pattern of the emergence of Mahisya entrepreneurship here—a head *mistri* graduating to becoming the owner after practically learning the ropes of the business for several years as a workman—it is arguable that several such men were by 1910 poised to start more enterprises the moment a promising opportunity presented itself.³⁸ The Mahisya movement was the handiwork of these men who had seized the new avenues of power opened by commerce, education and professions—Trailokyanath Biswas of the Janbazar family of Rani Rasmani, Mahendranath Ray, pleader of the High Court, Praksah Chandra Sarkar, pleader of the High Court, Ananata Ram Das, *mukhtar* of the High Court,

³⁶ Census of India Report, (Bengal) 1911, p 586, quoted in Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal: 1875-1927*, New Delhi, 1984, p. 76.

³⁷ The New Vaisyas, Ashis Nandy et al, Bombay, 1977, pp. 88-89.

³⁸ The first workshop set up by a *Mahisya* in Howrah dates back to 1910. *Ibid.* The largest number of subscribers to the journal *Mahisya Samaj* also belonged to Howrah. *Mahisya Samaj*, vol. 12, no 7, Kartik 1329 BS (October-November, 1922)

Mahendranath Haldar, editor of *Sevika*, Shashi Bhushan Biswas, zamindar and President Elect of Bangiya Mahisya Samiti and so on.³⁹

However, the Samajpatis and conservative high born zamindars opposed the attempt of educated Mahisyas. These Samajpatis acted as social leaders of the *Kaibarta samaj* (local caste society), arbitrating in matters of caste and ritual disputes. For instance, the Bahubalindra family of Killa Moinachoura in Midnapore acted as the social leaders of the local society of Mainachoura. Jagadananda Bahubalindra (d. 1773), the 'raja' of Moinachoura, had reportedly introduced ritual reforms among the *Kaibarta* as early as late eighteenth century.⁴⁰ The Samajpatis were thus the ones who as substantial landholding families had from generation to generation stood as the social leaders of the different local Samajs of the *Kaibarta* community. They were either former territorial magnates or superior estate officials or village heads who administered the villages, exercising civil and criminal jurisdiction, organizing public festivals, enforcing caste customs and repairing roads and embankments. Their special powers were outcasting and the stopping of the services of the barber and washerman. The offices of the Samajpatis had long been monopolized by certain families. The growth of new sources of influence left these families behind the times. On observing the activities of most samajpatis nowadays', remarked a modern Mahisya agitator, 'it appears as if they are so many living

³⁹ Prakash Chandra Sarkar, *Mahisya Prakash*, p. 9.

⁴⁰ Mahisya Prakash, p 329, cited in Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society: 1760-1850*, New Delhi, 1979, p. 147. I do not feel comfortable with the idea of uncritical imitation of or submission to the upper caste ideals and practices associated with the model of Sanskritization. Instead, I tend to agree with Dilip Menon's reading of Homi Bhaba whereby he seeks to understand repetition as difference which happens *within* the space of a dominant discourse. Such a reading looks at repetition as part of the recovery of the Self by the actors themselves and opens up the intertextualized nature of existence to an enquiry concerned with the production of difference rather than sameness. Dilip.K.Menon, *The Blindness of Insight: Essays on Caste in Modern India*, Pondicherry, 2006, pp. XI-XII

embodiments of sin...As a result a full scale social revolution is on the way'.⁴¹ Unwilling to undertake reform, they resisted the new men who advocated it and proceeded to form factions on this issue. The control of the Samajpatis over the local caste society had begun to weaken, except with regard to families of dependent tenants or cultivating families in debt to them. In Sylhet in Eastern Bengal, too, some Haliya Kaibartas reportedly refused to return themselves as Mahisyas and some in Mymensingh returned themselves as Gajendra Das.⁴²

The movement became divided at a conference convened by local zamindars of Midnapore at Subadi, a village under the jurisdiction of Nandigram Police Station today, between those who claimed Vaisya status for the Mahisyas and those who were content with a clean Sudra status. Ashutosh Jana, a Mahisya scientist trained in America, recommended the adoption of the Vaisya rites by the Mahisya community. The local high-born conservative Kaibartas did not attend the meeting, pleading illness. The rich farmers who marketed their produce through servants, however, avidly took to their new Mahisya designation. They attempted to outcast those who sold their home produce in the market themselves. The poorer agriculturists resisted the move, and some openly expressed their preference to retain the older Chashi Kaibarta title if adoption of the Mahisya status meant employing servants to market their produce.⁴³

⁴¹ Prabodhananda Saraswati, *Mahisya Suhrid*, Diamond Harbour, 24 Pargana, 1911, pp. 20-26

⁴² *Mahisya Samaj*, vol. 3, no. 7, Kartik, 1319 (October-November, 1912)

⁴³ Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal*, pp. 77-78. The next chapter revisits this controversy in greater detail in the context of what I call politics of incorporation. I am grateful to Mr. Susnata Jana for the exact location of Subdi.

It may not be entirely unproductive to try to relate this kind of obvious class tensions to problems of local agrarian relations in rural Bengal. Sumit Sarkar has shown, for instance, how at this very moment *Nihar*, a weekly journal of the Mahisyas published from Contai, launched a sustained critique of settlement operations in parts of Midnapore district, entirely from the point of view of relatively privileged rural magnates. A series of articles in *Nihar* between 20th April and 20th July strongly disapproved the distribution of *parchas* (title deeds) to bargadars (i.e. treating them as tenants rather than laborers) and efforts to extend occupancy rights to *korfa* ryots (sub-tenants).⁴⁴ Is it entirely indefensible to wonder if at least some of those poorer cultivators who refused to part with the practice of selling their produce in the market themselves could not be among those *bargadars* and *korfa* ryots who were at the receiving end of the *Nihar* critiques only a few months ago? Curiously, *Mahisya Samaj*, the caste journal, refrained from offering any further detail on the identity of these protesters from Midnapore, a brief report on the subject merely stating that 'some people in Midnapore are discouraging the *Chashi Kaibartas* from assuming the name Mahisya.'⁴⁵ This small piece of information is unfortunately all that is available at the moment on the Mahisya movement facing challenges from below but its significance can hardly be overemphasized.

Yet another old tension that refused to fade out with time was the traditional animosity with the Jalia Kaibartas. While the Mahisya leaders were only too keen to dissociate themselves completely from the Jalia Kaibartas, the latter were equally insistent on catching up with the former in terms of ritual and social status. They laid claim to the

⁴⁴Sumit Sarkar, 'Intimations of Hindutva: Ideologies, Caste and Class in Post Swadeshi Bengal', in *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, New Delhi, 2002, p. 93.

⁴⁵ *Mahisya Samaj*, vol. I, no. 6, Aswin, 1317 BS (September-October, 1910)

name Mahisya with some vehemence, arguing that they possessed equal right to the term. As the census report says, the Jalia Kaibartas were also in a state of transition, for they were trying to be recognized as Chashi Kaibartas. As soon as one of them could afford to do so, he gave up selling fish, took up other occupations and tried to keep himself aloof from other Jalias. He dropped the name Jalia and called himself either a Kaibarta or claimed to be a Chashi Kaibarta. They resented the Chashi Kaibartas repudiating all connections with them, and maintained that, as they shared a common origin, they had just as much right to be called Mahisyas. In fact, on the eve of the 1911 census enumerations the Jelia Kaibartas had set up a caste association of their own, called the Calcutta Mahisya Samiti operating from Chingrihata, then an obscure east Calcutta suburb recorded as a wholesale market for prawns.⁴⁶ The association wrote copious petitions to the census authorities praying that all Kaibartas should, without exception, be returned as Mahisyas in the forthcoming census enumerations. There was a threat therefore that the very name which the Chashi Kaibartas have adopted in order to distinguish themselves from the Jalias would be usurped by the latter. At this census some *Patnis* (another fishing caste) also claimed to be recorded as Mahisyas on the ground that they were cultivators in addition to being boatmen. Four days before the actual enumerations they changed their ground as they had discovered a passage in an

⁴⁶ Census Superintendent of Bengal to Bangiya Mahisya Samiti, no. 4220C, dated Calcutta, February, 1911 and Secretary, Bangiya Mahisya Samiti to Census Superintendent of Bengal, dated Calcutta February 24, 1911. For details on Chingrihata, see Debasis Bose, 'Kolkatar Pollinaam: Taalikaar Sondhane', in Debasis Bose (ed.) *Kolkatar Pura Kotha*, Calcutta, 1990. *Jelia Kaibartas* were one of the three castes that predominated in the area. I owe this reference to Dr. Bose himself. The next chapter also touches on the matter in a slightly different context.

ancient work referring to Kaibartas as boatmen and wanted to be designated Majhi Kaibartas (boatmen Kaibartas, as distinct from fishermen Kaibartas).⁴⁷

Hindus themselves used some names as generic designations, notably for fishing castes. In Bengal the nomenclature was sometimes exceedingly loose. Members of fishing castes, having the same occupations, would call themselves Jeliya, Patni, Tiyar, Kewat or Kaibarta or a combination of these names, such as Jeliya Tiyar, Tiyar Kaibarta or Tiyar Kewat.⁴⁸ It is of course coincidental that the Mahisyas had a fishing past to erase out of popular memory, but this particular coincidence did not make their task any easier. The Mahisyas could either bring most of these castes within their fold over a medium or long term or risk losing their exclusivity altogether.⁴⁹

By the turn of the first decade of the twentieth century the Mahisya movement was, therefore, faced with a number of serious challenges in regard to self definition. If on the one hand it was the Jeliya Kaibartas claiming a right to the name Mahisya, on the other there were the traditional Chashi Kaibarta samajpatis who were resolved to persist with their Chashi Kaibarta identity lest they lose their grip over the local society. A third challenge related to the internal conflicts of opinion and factionalism among the Mahisya

⁴⁷ Census of India Report (1911), vol. V, Bengal, p. 498. This finer distinction pertains to the degree to which one's body is submerged in water while at work. Water being regarded as the chief carrier of pollution, the more distance from water your profession allows you to maintain, the higher your caste was understood to rise in ritual hierarchy. According to this logic boatmen were less required to remain in physical touch with, or under, water than fishermen. Therefore, claimants of boatmen status were presenting themselves as belonging to a higher caste than the fishermen.

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 496.

⁴⁹ It is interesting to note that most of these castes are not very prominently seen around us anymore. While it would be premature to suggest that many were all subsumed within the fold of the *Mahisyas*, we need not lose sight of it entirely either, particularly when we try to make sense of the numerical strength of the caste. See the next chapter for a possible way this could have happened.

publicists themselves. I will briefly refer to one particular instance, only to illustrate the point. Prakash Chandra Sarkar and Harish Chandra Chakrabarty, the authors of *Mahisya Prakash* and *Bhranti Bijoy*, both tracts purportedly detailing 'the most authentic' historical and ethnographical account of the Mahisyas and their Brahmans, fell out on the issue of the right name to be adopted by the *Mahisyajaji* Brahmans.

The *Mahisyajaji* Brahmans were traditionally referred to as *Dravid Brahmans* (Southern Brahmans) or *Gauradya Vaidik Brahmans* (the original Brahmans of Gaur, i.e. Bengal). Sarkar, in his earlier writings, accepted that 'both the names are identically the same'.⁵⁰ However, later, in his *Branti Bijoy* Chakrabarty challenged the authenticity of the *Kuluji* (Genealogy) of Gadadhar Bhatta, a discovery of Sarkar, reportedly dismissing it as *Khichuri* (hotchpotch, i.e. a rush job) and insisted on *Mahisyajaji* Brahmans being called *Gauradya Vaidik*.⁵¹ In response Sarkar launched a spirited campaign to refute his claim, arguing that the name *Gauradya Vaidik* was a recent coinage, calling Chakrabarty a pompous demagogue out to create factions within the movement.⁵² Sarkar had little faith even in *Mahisya Samaj*, the caste journal which he dismissed as lacking in autonomy, a consequence of social and personal weakness of its publishers.⁵³

By 1910-11, therefore, the Mahisya movement was on the verge of a split along several axes. Yet, it was in the census of 1911 that all those who returned themselves as Mahisyas were no longer presented as *Chashi Kaibartas* in the reports. In other words,

⁵⁰ Prakash Chandra Sarkar, *Mahisya Prakash*, p. 22.

⁵¹ Sarkar claimed the genealogy

⁵² Prakash Chandra Sarkar, (ed.) *Brihat Mahisya Karika*, Calcutta, 1931, pp. 185-205.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

the Mahisyas were officially allowed to use their new caste name in 1911. Along with the constructive works carried out by the Caste Association, and the social authority of the rich peasants and educated professionals who led the movement⁵⁴, again a change in census rules came in Handy.

Mindful of the controversies generated by the previous census operations, the census authorities this time appeared to formulate something like a cogent policy on this issue. They were in no mood to concede the claims of those castes that 'desired to be returned as *Khstariya* or *Vaisya*'. To them they presented two counterarguments. To start with, they said that the census was intended to merely record the *present* number of persons belonging to a given caste and note their progress or decay over recent times, changes in their professional profile and so on. The census, it was stressed, was not meant hark back to prehistoric times when the Hindu society was divided into four *varnas* alone.⁵⁵ They also pointed out that most such claims emanated from the tiny educated minority within such castes, often without the knowledge of the illiterate majority in whose name such claims were raised. The same census bureaucrats were however, much less keen to press forth with these objections—even if they did apply—to some other caste claims, including that of the Mahisyas. That is because they had by now worked out rough guidelines on how to assess the claims of the upward mobility seeking castes of Bengal—they made a distinction between those that sought *Khstariya* or *Vaisya* status and those

⁵⁴ Hitesranjan Sanyal, 'The Quit India Movement in Medinipur District', in Gyanendra Pandey (ed.) *The Indian Nation in 1942*, Calcutta, 1988.

⁵⁵ *Census of India* 1911. Report by O'Malley, vol. V, Bengal, p. 443. In passing, it would be interesting to note that there were voices in the census that continuously insisted that such claims couched in terms of a reinscription of the four *varnas* actually amounted to denying Indians their history. My point is that even if Risley and his men undertook actions that eventually collapsed India with caste, it was a discourse that had several internal tensions. In this I partially disagree with Dirks. See Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, Princeton, 2001.

who did not.⁵⁶ The Mahisyas, who had among them a good number of white collar professionals⁵⁷, strategically chose to draft their petitions in such a way that claims to *Khstariya* or *Vaisya* status were kept to a minimum.⁵⁸ Their case, according to the new guidelines worked out by the census bureaucracy, was now to be decided less with reference to provisions of scriptures. Instead, their claim to the caste name Mahisya was to be evaluated on the grounds of whether any other caste was laying claim to it and/or whether the majority of 'Hindu public opinion' was no longer opposing the demand.

With the rules of the game so changed, it would appear that the Mahisyas in 1910 presented an eminently strong case as far as the census authorities were concerned. The Census Report of 1911 says,

The case of those castes which discard the name borne by their ancestors and arrogate a new designation is *different*. In their case the new name is recognised by the census authorities, if it is generally applied to them by the Hindu community at large, and is not used by any other caste. In this way, the Chandals have been allowed to be returned as Namasudras, the term being recognised by the Hindus generally and applying exclusively to them. *Similarly*, the Chashi Kaibartas are allowed to return themselves as Mahisyas, for, though the name has been adopted by the Chashi Kaibartas in recent times, it has won general recognition and is exclusively applied to the Chashi Kaibartas. Ten years

⁵⁶ They did not have much of a choice. After all, the hundreds of petitions from different castes weighed 1.5 mounds! *Census of India 1911*. Report by O'Malley, vol. V, Bengal, p. 440

⁵⁷ The number of white collar workers among the Mahisyas actually doubled between 1901 and 1910. *The New Vaisyas*, pp. 88-89.

⁵⁸ In fact, there was a USA returned scientist among them in 1901—Ashutosh Jana—who had mooted a claim to *Vaisya* status. See Ashutosh Jana, *Mahisya Tatva Baridhi*. Birulia, 1911.

ago the innovation was resented by conservative Hindus in some places...but it is now generally tolerated.⁵⁹

Parallel to the challenges threatening to split the Mahisya movement, there was thus an official recognition of the growing acceptance of their status claim by the 'general' population of Bengal. This recognition had also to do with the name Mahisya being perceived to be applicable exclusively to this caste. This, at best, is a partial account. The 'general' acceptance, for instance, was certainly not general enough for the Mahisya writers to stop writing their tracts. On the contrary, it is *after* the census operations of 1911 were over that the caste association took over the journal *Mahisya Samaj* and most of the tracts that I examine were published. There was, therefore, a very clear sense of an unfinished agenda within the movement as much after 1911 as before it.⁶⁰ For instance, the discursive challenge to the upper caste portrayals of the Mahisyas, was mounted in a much more organized fashion since 1911 with the appearance of these publications. As we shall see, in practical terms, the decrees of the census authorities could not force the other castes to immediately accept the changed status claims of these castes. The tract writers subsequently turned their attention to persuading the leaders of the local societies about their newly acquired status. As a matter of fact, winning the census battle was at best a significant, but modest, victory for the Mahisyas. In the final section of this chapter I take up a brief discussion on the factors behind the emergence of these tracts and the general trends observed in the ways upper caste and lower caste writers talked about caste in Bengal in the early twentieth century. In the end, I attempt an overview of

⁵⁹ *Census of India 1911*. Report by O'Malley, Vol. V, Bengal, p. 443.

⁶⁰ I elaborate this point in the next chapter.

the Mahisya literature, against this wider background and focusing particularly on the repudiations of some upper caste observations against the Mahisyas.

IV

The commonest textual cum mythic justification of *varna* hierarchy is supposed to be based on the *Purusha Sukta*, arguably a late interpolation in the *Rig Veda* which explains the emergence of four *varnas* as a result of the sacrifice of the body of the primal being.⁶¹ This Brahmanical theory accounts for the multitude of the *jatis* in practice with the *varnanasankara* or miscegenation model provided in the *Manusmriti*, with inferior *jatis* said to be arising from illicit (*pratiloma*) sexual relationships. Here a neat interrelation was assumed between the right caste and right gender hierarchy, for caste depended on pure lineage, ensured ideally through male control over female sexuality. Medieval *Sanskrit* texts such as thirteenth-fourteenth century *Brahmavaivartapurana* or *Brihaddharmapurana* try to fit the specific intricacies of the Bengal caste structure into this model. The disjunction in time between these texts and vernacular literary representations of caste in nineteenth century required introductions of some variations in textual citations to explain certain anomalies. For instance, the low ritual status of goldsmiths as opposed to their material prosperity was attributed by *Ballalcharita*, a

⁶¹ The discussion on explicatory models available to upper caste and lower caste tract writers, their variegated response to the colonial stimuli and the factors behind the sudden emergence of caste tracts is based entirely on sections II, III and IV of Sumit Sarkar, 'Identities and Histories: Some Lower Caste Narratives from Early Twentieth Century Bengal', in *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, New Delhi, 2002, pp. 38-80.

medieval text of uncertain provenance and date, to the whims of king Ballala, implicitly admitting caste was quite open to state intervention. Again, the caste structure presented in great detail in the sixteenth century *Chandimangala* linked up caste distinctions to specific occupations, without getting down to explain the hierarchy in terms either of the primal being or miscegenation. Thus, there were at least three explicatory models available before the vernacular writers on caste before the Orientalist scholars entered the scene. Typically though, the pre-colonial accounts of caste present the existence of the numerous *jatis* either as a matter of course or trace their origin to a single happening, without invoking any sense of social historical process.

The colonial scholarship introduced yet another explicatory framework—the insertion of the Aryan myth, so very central to Orientalism. Jogendranath Bhattacharya's *Hindu Castes and Sects*, (1896) for instance, readily took to this model. The Aryan race theory, though dominant, was not the only strand of colonial theorization on caste, there being others stressing Brahman conspiracies and occupational groupings as primary causes and the first chapter tried to bring out this plurality in colonial theorizations on caste in India. Such divergences in colonial theories on caste in turn made for widely different Indian appropriations of these positions. While Jyotiba Phule in Maharashtra took to the Brahmanical conspiracy theory with a vengeance, Jogendranath Bhattacharya, as we saw, preferred an Aryan race model.⁶²

⁶² Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Western India*, Cambridge, 1985 and Jogendranath Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*.

The pattern of upper caste appropriations, of both pre-colonial and Orientalist accounts of caste, changed dramatically from the turn of the century, with the development of lower caste agitations stimulated, at least partly, by colonial policies such as the census bureaucracy's decision to fix social precedence.⁶³ In response to these lower caste associations, a section of upper castes took to a more aggressive assertion of *adhikari bheda* or defense of hierarchized difference between castes while another section tried to develop an alternative self image of upper caste leadership formulated in terms paternalist philanthropy and Sanskritizing reforms⁶⁴ from the top that would 'uplift' or 'purify' lower castes and lead to 'Hindu' or 'national' unity in the face of a perceived threat to the survival of the 'Hindu' race following a colonial proposal to proposing to group lower castes under a separate 'non-Hindu' category.

How were contemporary lower caste tracts different from the upper caste deliberations on caste? Stylistically, they were not noticeably more rustic or colloquial than the average upper caste tract. In terms of content, though, they often inverted the illicit origin ascriptions given in *Manusmriti* for these castes. The Mahisya tracts, in particular, insist strongly on their emergence through a *anulom* (i.e. legitimate) union between two upper castes, although the conflation of the right caste and right gender hierarchy is left unchallenged.⁶⁵ In addition, they often display a knowledgeable appropriation of select Brahmanical texts and claim an Aryan origin for themselves. Most of such tracts have

⁶³ See previous chapter.

⁶⁴ I have earlier mentioned my reservation about the Sanskritization model but here in case of upper caste enunciations I do second usage of the term for in this scheme of things upper caste rites and practices were certainly deemed worthy of emulation.

⁶⁵ Ashutosh Jana, *Mahisya Tattva Baridhi*, Prakash Chandra Sarkar, *Mahisya Prakash* and issues of *Mahisya Samaj*

Mahisya in their titles and, despite evident difference in emphasis and argument, they share a common assumption or project of caste identity. Barring rare exceptions, they were all works of men.⁶⁶

The emergence of lower caste authors and readers was obviously a consequence of a certain spread of formal education. Sumit Sarkar has suggested a link between the need for 'historical' arguments advocated in such tracts and the importance given to history in schools of the 'modern' or colonial kind, as distinct from local *pathshalas* where practical training in language, accounting and some religious and moral education was considered far more useful.⁶⁷ Much more crucial, however, was the large number of schools in Bengali medium which by the nineteenth century had reached a fairly substantial section among the lower castes.⁶⁸ The decisive factor here was perhaps the new and significant developments related to the coming of print and the rise of vernacular prose. By means of making available cheap printed texts in large numbers, the emergence of elements of a literary public sphere potentially open to groups previously barred from scribal culture encouraged new voices to attempt to speak: a growing number of women and not a few lower caste men.

Against this background of the emergence of the caste tracts, their writers and the choice of textual strategies available before them, we may now enter into a brief discussion of

⁶⁶ More on the sole exception, the short lived journal *Mahisya Mahila*, edited by an educated *Mahisya* lady from Nadia, in the next chapter.

⁶⁷ Sumit Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, p 49. See also his 'The Many Worlds of Indian History', in *Writing Social History*, New Delhi, 1997, pp. 1-49.

⁶⁸ Sarkar refers to William Adam's famous *Report on the State of Education in Bengal* (1835. 38) to substantiate this point. *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, p 49-50.

the major concerns raised by the Mahisya writers. The number of Mahisyas who went to these new Bengali medium schools was not inconsiderable. In 1911, L.S.S O'Malley wrote

'at the present day Howrah is the most advanced district in Bengal from an educational point of view. No less than 98,001 (people) or 11.5 per cent of the population were ...literate while 17,903 could write in English. Among males, 21.2 per cent were literate—the highest proportion in the province—and among females 1.2 per cent, a proportion exceeded in only three districts, viz. Hooghly, the 24 Parganas and Darjeeling...As regards knowledge of English, Howrah was *facile princeps*, 38.9 males and 2 females in every thousand being returned as literate in that language.'⁶⁹

Here the Mahisyas, or *Kaibartas* were the single largest caste.⁷⁰ It is 'somewhat surprising' wrote O'Malley, still considering literacy as a preserve of upper castes, 'that outside the municipalities, the highest percentage of those able to read and write is returned for Shyampur thana (Police Station), ...where the principal caste consists of *Kaibartas* who are not known to have any predilection for letters.'⁷¹

Here then were all the ingredients for the vernacular caste tracts to take off. A substantial number of middle class professionals and landed magnates within the Mahisya community were now ready to place their agenda before a considerable body of literate readers and discussants some of whom would come to know about the issues through indirect channels such as village gossip and so on. The general profile of the writers of

⁶⁹ L.S.S O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Howrah*, Calcutta, 1911, p. 140. Emphasis in original.

⁷⁰ *ibid*, p. 40.

⁷¹ *ibid*, p. 140. We must recall in this connection that the largest number of subscribers to the journal *Mahisya Samaj* came from Howrah.. See footnote 38 above.

these tracts was fairly similar. They usually came from middling or rich peasant families with some amount of land, usually with their father in service with the colonial state or familiar with its operations in some capacity. Highly educated themselves, as lawyers, teachers or journalists, they went through the ropes of western education and were generally loyal to the government.⁷² I have studied four Mahisya tracts in some detail but have some information about the authorship of a few others. Prakash Chandra Sarkar, the compiler of *Mahisya Prakash* (1911) and *Brihat Mahisya Karika* (1931) was a *talukdar* of Gaya and Palamou and a lawyer by profession. Ashutosh Jana, who wrote *Mahisya Tattva Baridhi*, (1912) was a specialist in Electrical Physics and taught at an American University, before returning to his native village in Tamruk in order to work for the improvement of his caste brethren.⁷³ Harish Chandra Chakrabarty, the *Mahisyajaji* Brahman who wrote *Bhranti Bijoy* (1912), was a middle level official at Howrah District Court. Typically, these were men who had benefited through their connection with the colonial state and had fairly successful professional career.

As we saw above, several frames of reference were available for these Mahisya publicists as far as discursive strategies were concerned. They usually borrowed from more than one depending on their specific requirements. For instance, in tracts such as *Mahisya Prakash*, one comes across references to *Manu*, some of his commentators such as Kullukbhatta (purportedly between 13-15 century), to the genealogy of the Mahisyas written by Gabardhanbhatta (roughly of same provenance) as well as to the works of

⁷² Prakash Chandra Sarkar, for instance, dedicated his *Mahisya Prakash* (1911) to the 'mahamati' (wise) E.A.Gait, the Census Superintendent, in the height of a nationalist agitation against his circular proposing to categorize the lower castes as non-Hindus. For more on this controversy, and the discursive position of upper caste groups of this question see P.K.Datta, *Carving Blocs*, New Delhi, 1999, ch-1.

⁷³ *Mahisya Tatva Baridhi*, Introduction.

colonial officials and investigators such as Hunter or Risley. In other words, the Mahisya ideologues conveniently shuttled from one frame of reference to another while arguing their cases, with the relative weightage assigned to individual frameworks varying from author to author. These writers, then, followed what today would be called an intertextual approach. Instead of looking to a single text (such as the Primal Being or miscegenation theory or an occupation model) they tended to refer to several of them at once, seeking to construct a composite discourse.

By caste tracts I refer to a kind of encyclopedic compilations the ostensible objective of which was to bring within a single volume all the necessary information about a particular corporate caste group. Ashutosh Jana, the author of *Mahisya Tatva Baridhi*, says in his introduction that although much reason and scriptural evidence had already been advanced in support of the claim that Mahisyas were *vaisyas*, some 'oppositionists' (*Biruddhabadi*) were still persisting in refusing to concede to the Mahisyas their due social position, possibly because no single volume containing all the necessary data about the caste was readily available.⁷⁴ Jana then sets out to write what turns out to be an individual caste encyclopedia. He has a clear chapterization plan, devoting a chapter each to a specific aspect of the caste that he then explores at some length. *Mahisya Prakash*, by Prakash Chandra Sarkar, a bulkier volume, does not follow any clear plan of organization. Broadly, the work is divided in two parts, the first compiling every bit of information about the caste that he has collected and published over time in various platforms, and the next, and the more important, section containing a good number of *vyabasthas* (resolutions/decrees by authoritative Brahman scripturalists) from important

⁷⁴ Ashutosh Jana, *Mahisya Tatva Baridhi*, Birulia (Tamluk, Midnapore), 1319 B.S. (1912)

centres of Sanskrit pedagogy within and outside Bengal, such as Benaras.⁷⁵ Then there is *Brihat Mahisya Karika* by Govardhan, a Sanskrit *kulaji* (genealogy) of the Mahisyas, edited and published by Prakash Chandra Sarkar in 1931.⁷⁶ The editor made three interventions—a brief introduction, Bengali translation of each of the 392 verses (*slokas*), and a three hundred page ‘note’ dealing with various aspects of the caste. There were many more Mahisya tracts such as *Mahisya Bibriti*, *Mahisya Kula Kalpadrum*, *Bhranti Bijoy*, *Mahisya Bibad Bhangarnab*, *Mahisya Sandarbha*, *Mahisya Sandarbha*, *Mahisya Bandhav*, *Mahisya Kaibarta Jati*, *Mahisya Purohit*, *Mahisya Prasanga*, *Mahisya Dipika*, *Mahisya Kanthabharan*, *Mahisya Chandrika*, *Mahisya Bidhiti*, *Mahisya Parichay*, *Mahisya Badhika*, *Mahisya Jati Bigyan* and *Mahisya Siddhanta*. Then there was *Mahisyas: Formerly a Dominant Caste in Bengal*, the only caste tract in English among the Mahisyas. Caste tracts, then, functioned as encyclopedic monographs or compilations. They were one off volumes and correspond more or less to books, while journals were closer in affinity to periodicals.

The book/periodical binary is a good metaphor to clarify the distinctions between tracts and journals. While a tract brings to public domain all the knowledge about its subject up to the date of its publication, a journal presents fresh information and perspective as they are first formulated and worked out, before they generate sufficient internal consensus for them to be included in anthologies like tracts. But in some ways journals are a better

⁷⁵ Prakash Chandra Sarkar, *Mahisya Prakash*, Calcutta, 1318 B.S. (1911). This is the edition I have seen but it is possible that there was some problem in its distribution. Jana, whose work came out the very next year, refers to the unavailability of this work as one of the reasons he chose to write *Mahisya Tarva Baridhi*. The 1911 edition then appears to be a reprint, released after Jana completed his manuscript. Jana, however, added a few of the *vyavasthas* available in the *Prakash*, probably from an earlier edition.

⁷⁶ Prakash Chandra Sarkar, (ed.) *Sri Gobardhan Krita Mahisya Kula Karika*, Calcutta, 1931

material for historians because they afford a peek at the *evolving* character of a caste movement, on the nature of a caste on the move, that is. In the next chapter, I take up for a detailed examination the first ten years' of the journal *Mahisya Samaj*, the monthly run by the Bangiya Mahisyas Samiti in Calcutta.⁷⁷ Mahendranath Halder's *Sebika* and Prabodhananda Saraswati's *Mahisya Suhrid* were two other journals that popularized the Mahisya cause but the former ceased publication in 1910 and the latter had a rather brief spell of publication.⁷⁸

Two absences, however, stand out in these Mahisya tracts, one possibly hinting at some autonomy and the other displaying conformity to standard nationalist invocations of India's past. Wherever they referred to a standard upper caste authority such as Manu, they tended to avoid reference to those commentators who were generally cited by the upper caste experts. More specifically, *Kullukabhata's* commentary on Manu was privileged over standard upper caste commentators.⁷⁹ For instance, Nagendranath Basu, the editor of *Bangla Biswakosh* (encyclopedia in Bengali) and also an upper caste intellectual himself, is reluctant to accept Kullukabhata's commentary as a sufficiently *prachin* (old, and therefore authentic) piece of scriptural canon.⁸⁰ This politics of citation, I suggest, may be a gesture of some autonomy on the part of the Mahisyas even as they operated within a cultural space defined largely in terms worked out by the upper castes. Conformity and contestation may often cohabit in such gestures and the precise degree of

⁷⁷ Eleven years actually. The journal was started by Rampada Biswas, a pleader at Alipur Judge's Court, before it was taken over by the Central Mahisya Society.

⁷⁸ In his editorial to the first edition of *Mahisya Samaj*, Ramapada Biswas cited the disappearance of *Sebika* as one of the reasons to start *Mahisya Samaj*, vol 1, no. 1, Baishakh, 1317 B.S. (April-May, 1910). *Mahisya Suhrid* ran for the two years between 1911 and 1912.

⁷⁹ *Mahisya Tattva Baridhi* (1912), *Mahisya Prakash* (1911).

⁸⁰ Nagendranath Basu, (ed.) *Bangla Biswakosh*, vol. 14, p. 700, New Delhi, 1988 (the series first published between 1886-1911).

autonomy can be arguable. However, the very choice to locate and use commentaries on Manu not usually cited by upper castes did perhaps signify some amount of autonomy.

Secondly, I have found few references to the *Mangalkabyas* in these tracts. In the only instance I found it, a verse from *Chandimangal* (end of sixteenth century) was cited to insist that Chashi Kaibartas and Jalia Kaibartas had been completely separate even in sixteenth century. This particular line—*Bose dui jati das/Motso dhore kore chas*—at best indicates that the *Chashi* and *Jalia Kaibartas* had already evolved separate occupational profiles but it says absolutely nothing about their separate origin; the claim in support which it was actually cited.⁸¹ It is a rather curious absence especially since the *Mangalkabyas* provide a fairly reliable chronological boundary within which the Chashi Kaibartas might be shown to have gradually branched away from the larger body of Kaibartas.⁸² This omission becomes more curious in view of the recent works highlighting the role of *Mangalkabyas* contributing to the popularity of certain local cults among the agricultural castes in south western Bengal during medieval times.⁸³ In some ways such omission of historical accounts of the emergence of the caste through material changes in socio economic spheres—that is, bringing virgin lands into cultivation and consequent prosperity—tend to present a largely scriptural view of caste, with or without its subsequent endorsement by colonial ethnographers. At the same time, in so doing such

⁸¹ Prakash Chandra Sarkar, *Mahisya Prakash*, p. 294.

⁸² Hitesranjan Sanyal has shown that this shift occurred between the late 16th century (*Chandimangal*) and the 18th century (*Manasamangal*). Juxtaposed with Ratnalekha Ray's account of the *Khandait* military entrepreneurs entry into Midnapore at about the same time (i.e. 16th century) from Orissa and their eventual settlement and colonization of agricultural lands in south west Midnapore, it appears to be a reasonably accurate chronological account of the rise of the *Chashi Kaibartas* in medieval Bengal. Let us recall, in this connection, the overwhelming preponderance of the *Chashi Kaibartas* in south west Midnapore. See *Social Mobility in Bengal*, p.41 and *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society*, ch-7.

⁸³ Jawhar Sircar, *The construction of Hindu identity in Medieval Western Bengal and the Role of Popular Cults*, IDSK, Kolkata, 2005.

accounts avoid any consideration of class tensions within a caste, a most convenient device for forging a solidarity that allows little room for such internal tensions.⁸⁴ In the case of the Mahisyas, this was a necessity also because their mobility movement was being led by the comparatively rich men who undertook to weld a very large number of small owners and agricultural laborers into a single caste bloc. Significantly, such models of historical memory that maintain a silence as far as the medieval times are concerned share some affinity with the standard (mainly Hindu) nationalist invocations of India's past. Such invocations inevitably deploy the common trope of a golden age ideal followed by a dark period, and seeking to reinstate the community to its ancient position consequently becomes the objective of the leaders of the movement.⁸⁵ All the Mahisya tracts that I have read share this ideological position in varying degrees.⁸⁶ Let us not forget in this context that they were all being written at a time when several powerful publications such as U.N. Mukherjee's *A Dying Race* were running a campaign to counter the perceived numerical decline of the Hindu 'race' by conjuring up a demonic other in the Muslims, a process that P.K. Datta has defined as the making of the communal common sense.⁸⁷ It was a daunting task indeed for the Mahisya writers to remain completely uninfluenced by these publications, especially as most of their social world and reading lists were likely to be fairly similar to those from similar middle class

⁸⁴ Sumit Sarkar, 'Identities and Histories'

⁸⁵ See B.S. Cohn, 'The Census Social Structure and Objectification', in *An Anthropologist Among The Historians*, New Delhi, 1967. There are several influential critiques of this standard nineteenth century nationalist invocation of the Hindu past. See, for instance, Sudipta Kaviraj, *Unhappy Consciousness*, Delhi, 1995 or Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife Hindu Nation*, New Delhi, 2001.

⁸⁶ '...the Mahisya Caste, though of antique origin, remained quite neglected in the background during the dark ages, under the oppression of their rivals, the Sen and Pal kings of Bengal. They were the original lords of the soil, which was wrested from them by the Sen and Pal kings. It is quite natural that the conquerors lord over the conquered.' *Mahisya Prakash*, p. 15.

⁸⁷ P.K.Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal*, New Delhi, 1999. The next chapter shows an instance how, in spite of formally refusing to join an organization floated by U.N. Mukherjee, ostensibly because he did not maintain the Chashi-Jelia distinction, the Mahisyas could not escape the spell of his formulations.

households. To set the record straight, however, it must be emphasized that these tracts contain neither any overt hostility against Muslims nor any direct call for a 'Hindu' solidarity.

Several types of intertextualities were at operation in these Mahisya tracts then—there was the precolonial account of caste model, there was the Aryan myth (more on that follows) model and of course there was some engagement with the golden age ideal as well. Nonetheless, there remained discernible in all of them a very clear projection of a common identity envisaged as a major cultural resource pressed into action towards the materialization of a common agenda. I now hope to illustrate this point with specific references to the points of tension between Mahisya discursive responses to some recurring images in upper caste (even colonial) portrayals of their community.⁸⁸ First I take up some general images of the Mahisyas in upper caste texts and then move on to a detailed repudiation as elaborated in an influential Mahisya text.

A recurring motif in upper caste representations of Chashi Kaibarta/Mahisya upthrust in the nineteenth century was a constant reference to the dubious means which they were thought to have employed and their alleged collaboration with the colonial state, often at the cost of their own countrymen. Jogendranath Bhattacharya, for instance, wrote about

⁸⁸ We will do well to perhaps maintain a distinction between representations submitted by the *Mahisyas* to the colonial authorities and these vernacular *Mahisya* tracts. Although the former were often included in the latter, the latter were unlikely to be cited in the former. No mention of the Aryan myth, for instance, was to be found in the letters the *Mahisyas* wrote to the census officials. However, these Bengali tracts claim Aryan origin for the caste rather forcefully. It would appear they did not mind being called Dravidians or indigenous by the colonial ethnographers so long as the upper castes did not replicate the move. In this the *Mahisyas* show a marked difference from the south Indian non-Brahmin castes which turned their Dravidian origin myth into a powerful rallying point for anti-Brahmin political mobilization. See M.S.S Pandian, *Brahmin and Non Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present*, New Delhi, 2007.

how they took to serving the rapacious indigo planters and did not hesitate to oppress poor ryots,⁸⁹ making their fortunes in the process. A second upper caste stereotype uncritically equated Chashi Kaibartas with the Kewats, a distinction that even Risley was mindful of. This position was usually substantiated with tracing the etymological similarity between the words Kewat and Kaibarta and concluding that all Chashi Kaibartas were fishermen. Yet another common device was to attribute Aryan origin to the upper castes and Dravidian origin to the Mahisyas.⁹⁰ Without enlarging the list any further, let us now proceed to the Mahisya responses.

Prakash Chandra Sarkar in his *Brihat Mahisya Karika* (1931) takes up several such issues for a comprehensive rebuttal. Sarkar, we have already seen, was a fairly prosperous and highly educated Mahisya taluqdar with substantial holdings in Palamou and Gaya. He was in addition a practising advocate, with a house on Elgin Road, an elite locality in south Calcutta. He had been writing extensively about various aspects of the Mahisya past and present for nearly forty years in various publications.⁹¹ In *Brihat Mahisya Karika* he presented an annotated version of a genealogy by Gadadhar Bhatta, one that he claimed went back to early fifteenth century and purportedly presented a comprehensive account of Mahisya 'history' since earliest times.⁹² His main contribution to the compilation was a 300 page long explanatory note following the

⁸⁹ *Hindu Castes and Sects*, pp. 222-25

⁹⁰ Till well into the twentieth century the upper caste experts continued to refer to *Mahisyas* as *Kaibartas*, notwithstanding the exertions of the Mahisya publicists and the endorsement of the new name by the census authorities.

⁹¹ His first known essay on the subject in Allahabad based *Kayastha Deepika* in 1892.

⁹² The genealogy in the form it appeared in the tract could not have been more than a century old. It contains, among other things, a mention of Sarkar's own residence at Elgin Road, Calcutta! At any rate, it must have undergone several interpolations. For a recent study of genealogies as key to maintaining purity of lineages and castes, see Kumkum Chatterjee, 'Communities, Kings and Chronicles: The *Kulagranthas* of Bengal', *Studies in History*, vol.21, no.2 (2005) pp. 173-213.

genealogy, including selections from his own earlier works and those of other Mahisya writers. Singling out Nagendranath Basu's *Biswakosh* (Encyclopedia) as the most representative example of upper caste prejudices against the Mahisyas, Sarkar got down to a point for point counterargument.⁹³ Citing dictionaries by German Sanskritists such as Father Heinrich Roth's (1620-1668) *Grammatica Linguae Sanskretanae Brahmanum Orientalis*, he claimed that the common equation of *Kaivartas* and fishermen (i.e. practitioners of an impure occupation) violated rules of Sanskrit grammar.⁹⁴ Second, he argued Kaibartas of Bengal were entirely distinct from the Kewats since the latter lived largely in Bihar and United Provinces. Third, he challenged the usual interpretation of *Brahmavaivartapurān*—the verse which the Chashi Kaibartas were accused of quoting selectively in the last census—as grammatically inaccurate. In other words, he argued it was the dhibars (fishermen) cited in the verse who became polluted following intermarriage with Tiyars (another fishing caste) in *Kaliyuga* and they must not be confused with Mahisyas.⁹⁵ Sarkar also countered Basu's doubt about the authenticity of *Brahmavaivartapurān* as such. He quoted from an article published in The Journal of Royal Asiatic Society (1878 issue) that the denizens of the largest kingdom of Java were called Mahisha, claiming that the Mahisyas went over and established colonies in Java in ancient times.⁹⁶

⁹³ I take up this 1931 publication because it presents a comprehensive account of the *Mahisya* position on these issues. The arguments are all otherwise dispersed in various *Mahisya* tracts and journals since early twentieth century. *Brihat Mahisya Karika*, pp. 240-80. For Nagendranath Basu's portrayal of *Kaibartas* and Mahisyas see Nagendranath Basu (ed.) *Bangla Biswakosh* (Encyclopedia in Bengali), vol. 4, pp. 494-99, vol. 14

⁹⁴ *Brihat Mahisya Karika*, p 241. Roth was a Jesuit missionary who first came to Goa via Surat and later learnt Persian and Sanskrit while working at a Jesuit College in Agra. Apart from the dictionary, he wrote two volumes on *Vedantsara*.

⁹⁵ For the controversy around this particular verse, see chapter 1, pp. 40-42

⁹⁶ Royal Asiatic Society Journal, vol. 9 (1877-78). I have not been able to corroborate with the original piece as yet.

Basu had divided the Mahisyas into three groups in descending order of social status. The first was *ucchasrenir* Mahisya (first class Mahisyas) born out of a legitimate *anulom* marriage between a Kshatriya man and a Vaisya woman (according to *Yagyabalka Smriti*), the second was *Madhyamsrenir* Mahisya (intermediate Mahisya) born out of legitimate union between a Goldsmith (Subarnabanik) man and Karan (ironsmith) woman (according to *Asvalayan*) while the third *ati joghonno* Mahisya (despicable Mahisyas) was said to be born out of extramarital dalliances of a wife whose the husband makes a living by prostituting his own wife (according to *Asvalayan*). In other words, according to Basu's account, some Mahisyas were plain illegitimate children born out of wedlock, and therefore deemed despicable. Sarkar dismissed this threefold division of the Mahisyas, arguing that all Mahisyas are equal in status and share a common origin, the one that Basu had attributed only to *ucchasrenir* Mahisya. He attacked with particular vehemence the statement the children of adulteress' could also be called Mahisyas, rubbishing the idea as a figment of Basu's fertile imagination. In all such instances, Sarkar typically came up with linguistic counterarguments claiming Bose's interpretations were all grammatically inadmissible. Finally, Sarkar objected to Bose's explanation of pure Brahmans refusing to minister in Kaibarta ceremonies on account of their impure status. On the contrary, Sarkar suggested that the Mahisyas themselves refused to be served by the so called high class brahmans who had come to Bengal since the period of the mythic king *Adisura* or later because the Mahisyas considered them inferior to their own brahmans who had been around for a much longer time and therefore enjoyed an implied superiority in the eyes of the Mahisyas. This position is compatible with the self

perception of the Mahisyas as well. The Mahisyas, we have seen, considered themselves the original settlers of Bengal and therefore deemed it fit to be ministered by a set of Brahmans who they considered possessed an equally ancient record of residence in Bengal.

The migration narrative brings us to the curious way Sarkar appropriated the Aryan migration myth for the Mahisyas. Typically, upper caste accounts endowed themselves with an Aryan origin, describing their entry into Bengal as following a migration from western India. In this model, these new Aryans gradually displaced the indigenous peoples who in turn receded into the forests and eventually came to constitute the lower castes. Sarkar responded to this migration narrative by changing its chronology in favor of the Mahisyas. Carefully distancing Mahisyas from indigenous—as in those without any history of migration—he spoke of an earlier migration by a section of Aryans who first migrated from western India to the south and then moved up the east coast into *Kalinga* (Orissa) and into south Bengal and elsewhere. The *Mahisyajaji* Brahmans were of course said to accompany their clients in this alternative model of Aryan migration. By reconstructing a two way migration route for the Aryans, Sarkar, in effect, appropriated an Aryan origin for Mahisyas for their Brahmans as well.

Such an alternative Aryan migration narrative may of course be read as essentially submitting to a conceptual space the boundaries of which were already worked out by the upper castes. However, it is also possible to see such publications as part of an expanding public sphere that made it possible for previously silent voices to be heard, as Sumit

Sarkar has recently argued.⁹⁷ Indeed, publications such as these catered to a new genre called *jatitvatva*. This Bengali nominal compound literally translates as theory of caste. Along with *jativigyan* (ethnology) *jatitvatva* formed an extremely significant genre of vernacular publications between 1890s and early 1930s, a large number of Bengali periodicals devoting considerable space to debates on ‘origin’ and ‘history’ of various castes in Bengal. *Jatitvatva* has been loosely defined as the study of those peoples who such posses specific regional, local, linguistic, behavioral and cultural specificities that they have been able to carve out a distinct identity for themselves.⁹⁸ The genre, as we saw, combined, in varying degrees, elements of Hindu scriptural provisions with contemporary European ideas on the origin and dispersal of man across continents, primarily in terms of race theory and eugenics. In brief, several castes came out with their own mouthpieces, each trying to somehow project their own caste as closest to the Aryans who were then deemed as the most civilized and advanced bunch of human beings. Typically, such *jatitvatva* accounts would begin with some scriptural citations tracing the origin of the caste concerned to a legitimate union between two of the three purer *varnas* and then proceed to show how this group of people migrated to Bengal from western India, the most acceptable route of Aryan migration at that point in time. It was not as if *jatitvatva* was a preserve of exclusively caste journals. Journals devoted to miscellaneous issues such as *Nabyabharat*, *Prakriti*, *Samay*, *Education Gazette*, *Probashi*, *Sahitya Parishad Patrika*, *Banganibasi* etc. too published *jatitvatva* accounts in regular intervals. For instance, twelve of the seventeen essays Amaluyacharan Ghosh

⁹⁷ Sumit Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, p. 50. In fact Prakash Chandra Sarkar thought his research ‘will throw a great deal of light upon the hitherto pent up and locked doors of the ancient unwritten pages of history of Bengal.’ Sarkar was in effect laying claim to history of Bengal, no less. *Brihat Mahisya Karika*, pp. 473-474.

⁹⁸ *Amulyacharan Vidyabhushan Rachanabali*, vol. III, Calcutta, 1990, pp. 17-18

Bidyabhushan, a polymath who wrote on literature, public theatre as well as aesthetics and castes, published on *jatibigyan* between 1921 and 1937 appeared in *Bharatbarsha*, a general interest journal while five were distributed across exclusively caste association journals such as *Kayastha Patrika* (one essay), *Kayastha Samaj* (two essays), *Madhabi* (one essay) and *Modak Samhita* (one essay). Then, as mentioned earlier, there were several caste journals which occasionally published contributions from members of other castes.⁹⁹ A fuller examination of this enormous body of literature is beyond the scope of this chapter but it is arguable, on the basis of the information presented here, that this genre of public debates did at least provide an opportunity to a larger number of castes to stake claims to higher caste origins and histories for themselves.¹⁰⁰ That the terms of debate were often already fixed need not detract us from the enterprise displayed by middle and lower caste publicists such as Prakash Chandra Sarkar in presenting fresh interpretations of a rather limited range of resources. Indeed, as far as Mahisyas were concerned, this enterprise did not go in vain. The upper caste experts writing on the Kaibartas/ Mahisyas in 1920s and 1930s continued to deny them Aryan origin but often enough referred to their valor in ancient times.¹⁰¹ This change in the position of upper caste experts may or may not have been due entirely to the efforts of Mahisya publicists¹⁰² although the role they played in the process did make a difference.

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⁹⁹ We have already seen Prakash Chandra Sarkar published in *Kayastha Messenger*, Calcutta, 1990.

¹⁰⁰ Amulyacharan Ghosh *Vidyabhushan Rachanabali*, (Collected Works of Amulyacharan Ghosh Bidyabhushan) vol. 3, p.18. I expand on this theme in the next chapter. I return to this theme in the next chapter with some more details.

¹⁰¹ *ibid*, pp. 189-215.

¹⁰² Growing participation of Mahisyas in nationalist mobilization since the 1920s was obviously another important factor.

Mahisya movement, as we saw above, has had to face several challenges in the early years of the twentieth century. Some of these challenges were physical, some institutional and yet others discursive. The Mahisyas themselves were hardly a monolithic community, divided as they were in several factions based on different kind of internal solidarities and compulsions. Nonetheless, the promise of a new caste identity and the assortment of institutional ventures focusing on constructive works within the community certainly instilled some sense of pride within the adherents of this new imaginary. It is with this newly emerging sense of pride that they took on these challenges to their upward mobility initiative. However, despite occasional evidence of the movement causing some excitement among people beyond the small group of its leaders and their followers, this new sense of pride and self confidence often proved transitory, failing to survive beyond these rare moments of community bonding. The youths of the community entered into street-fights with other castes and their caste association legally contested charges leveled on its activists but as yet there was no coordination between these disparate strands, nor was there any consensus on the social and ritual practices which were to become characteristic of the community subsequently. Moreover, the older leaders of local *Mahisya Samaj* in the districts still looked upon the reforming initiatives of the largely urban educated professionals with some amount of suspicion, principally as a threat to their authority at the local level. In addition the Jelia Kaibartas pressed forth with their claim to the name Mahisya along with a few other fishing castes such as the Patnis and Dhibars. Together, these challenges proved so formidable that the movement seemed to fall apart on the eve of the 1911 census operations. If the census authorities still granted the Mahisyas their name in 1911, it was not as a consequence of the name

being widely accepted by all sections of the Bengali population but as a concession to the relentless petitioneering by the caste association and its intelligent manipulation of some changes in the census guidelines.¹⁰³

In 1911, therefore Mahisyas were a caste with a new name whose full implications were still to be worked out. The coordinates of this corporate name had still to be agreed upon and communicated to a very large number of people across the province of Bengal. The caste association had already taken up this task, introducing branches in the districts and encouraging constructive works such as running night schools and providing agricultural credits. However, the more decisive break in this direction came with the launch of the caste journal, *Mahisya Samaj* in 1911 under the editorship of Sevananda Bharati, a *Mahisyajaji* Brahaman and scholar from Tamluk who has earlier written on the history of Midnapore. Along with *Mahisya Mahila*, a journal edited by an educated Mahisya woman from Nadia targeting the educated Mahisya women like her that had a brief five year run between 1911 and 1915, *Mahisya Samaj* provided a platform to a whole range of voices within the community. Debates were conducted on several issues pertaining to the concretization of a composite Mahisya identity, including its ritual, social, economic, political and cultural implications. It is through such intensive debates and discussions for the next ten years or so that clearer ideas on various aspects of a common Mahisya identity began to crystallize. The next chapter is going to focus on this process of the concretization of the Mahisya identity roughly between the years 1911 and 1921,

¹⁰³ The next chapter presents a more comprehensive treatment of the petitioneering skills of the Bangiya Mahisya Samiti office holders, particularly on the eve of 1911 census and the almost complete official acceptance of their case, whether with reference to directions to district officials or to the validity of *Jelia Kaibarta* or *Patni* claims to the name Mahisya.

highlighting the various debates playing themselves out on the pages of the journal and the full length tracts published around this period. Through a close examination of these debates, it will seek also to map the changing power relations between various factions within the Mahisyas and between the Mahisyas and the upper castes, as the tensions discussed in this chapter gradually smoothed over the next decade. As a matter of fact, by the 1920s upper caste men had taken to writing hagiographies of Mahisya ascetics, placing them, in effect, within a line of holy men to be revered by all Bengalis irrespective of their individual caste identities. In so doing, however, he represented the ascetic as a clean Sudra ¹⁰⁴ The following chapter attempts to present some aspects of this transformation from the perspective of the Mahisyas as they set about consolidating their caste identity, defining themselves systematically to their own people, and to the other castes.

¹⁰⁴ Tanika Sarkar, 'Caste, Sect and Hagiography: The Balakdashis of Early Modern Bengal', in *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designing Selves and Nations in Colonial Times*, New York, 2009, pp. 69-120.

Chapter 3

Defining Caste, Redefining Categories

The previous chapter discussed how several castes expressed their disapproval against the upward mobility of the Mahisyas and how the census authorities finally conceded the Chashi Kaibartas' claim to the caste name Mahisya. This entitlement to a new caste name, however, was only a partial victory. The colonial state giving in to their persistent agitation for a new caste title was indeed a significant gain, especially in view of the recent challenges to the movement from within as well as without. We must remember though that a single piece of legislation alone seldom manages to eliminate long standing social prejudices. Widow remarriage, for instance, is practiced only by a minority of people in Bengal even today, a good century and a half after the state had legalized it.¹ Social forces, in other words, can often erect insurmountable barriers against the smooth implementation of state decrees. In any case, it takes some time for a piece of legislation to be widely circulated among its subjects for them to prepare themselves to adhere to its provisions. More importantly, the ruling by the census authorities allowing the Chashi Kaibartas to officially refer themselves as Mahisyas was in reality not even a piece of legislation but something akin to an executive decree carrying neither any incontrovertible judicial authority nor any penal provisions for its potential violators. As a piece of state order, therefore, it carried little disincentive for those inclined to question its validity in practice.

¹ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Caste, Widow Remarriage and Reform of Popular Culture in Colonial Bengal' in Bharati Ray (ed.) *From the Seams of History*, New Delhi, 1997, pp 8-34

The Mahisyas, then, did not find themselves in a particularly privileged position in relation to other castes immediately after the census ruling. Challenges to their newly acquired status continued to emanate from several quarters. Ashutosh Jana, a senior Mahisya intellectual and the writer of *Mahisya Tatva Baridhi* (1912) refers to these people collectively as *biruddhabadi* (opponents) and *satyer apalaapkari* (those who misrepresent truth, distortionists). These were men, he said, who cared neither for sanctity of scriptural citations nor for reason or logic. If they did, they would no longer be writing and speaking against the just claims of the Mahisyas for a higher caste status, for the Mahisyas had presented 'a massive dose of scriptural citations' and logical arguments in support of their demand for *Vaisya* status.²

Jana was perhaps collapsing two analytically distinct factors. On the one hand, it took considerable time for the official decision permitting Chashi Kaibartas to be returned as Mahisyas to reach the level of local functionaries who actually carried out the enumerations. This delay, aided by the ingrained prejudices against the Mahisyas in the minds of these enumerators who belonged mostly to the upper castes, caused them to decline to enter the Mahisyas in the census rolls under a separate heading. Although O'Malley, the Superintendent of Census Operations for Bengal had communicated in October, 1910 the official position in this regard to the *Bangiya Mahisya Samiti*³, the local enumerators refused to follow suit unless they actually received an official circular

² Ashutosh Jana, *Mahisya Tatva Baridhi*, Birulia village, Tamluk, Midnapore, 1911, introduction. There was no consensus among the Mahisyas as to whether they should press for a *Vaisya* status or a *Kshatriya* status. Jana was an advocate of the former while Sudarshan Biswas from Faridpur, another influential Mahisya intellectual, suggested the latter. The journal *Mahisya Samaj* was to witness a fair amount of debate on the question between 1911 and 1920. The Mahisya representations to the census did not specifically claim either of these identities, arguing merely that Mahisyas could legitimately claim both.

³ Letter from Superintendent of Census Operations, Bengal to the Secretary, *Bangiya Mahisya Samiti*, no. 1542, dated October 31, 1910.

to this effect. 'In almost every district of Bengal', complained Bangiya Mahisya Samiti 'the S.D.Os (Sub Divisional Officer) as well as supervisors and enumerators under their respective jurisdiction (we)re raising various questions to recognize the term Mahisya.'⁴

The second factor was what the Mahisyas suspected as the real motive behind this apparently solid bureaucratic reasoning. For the Samiti, it was the generally high caste status of the local correspondents appointed for ethnographical enquiries and their consequent reluctance to dispense 'impartial justice' reinforced by a desire to 'continue to trample on the rights of the weaker in society for an indefinite length of time'.⁵

This was not an entirely unfounded allegation. There is evidence to believe that local bureaucrats, including those from higher castes, already knew about the distinctly superior material and social status of the Mahisyas and their Brahmans from the *Jalia Kaibartas* and their Brahmans respectively.⁶ At the same time, the upper castes had been running a campaign within the Bengali public sphere that continued to emphasize the inseparability of the Kaibartas (i.e. both Chashi and Jelia as a single caste category) from the Chashi Kaibartas or Mahisyas and focused on their low status in general. For instance, Panchanan Tarkaratna wrote a piece titled 'Kaibarta' to this effect in *Hitabadi* on 16th Chaitra, 1318 BS (March, 1911) which so upset the Mahisyas that Nabagopal Maity, a spirited Mahisya correspondent from Mahishadal, Midnpore, published, in

⁴ Bangiya Mahisya Samiti to Superintendent of Census Operations, Bengal, dated Calcutta, October 19, 1910.

⁵ Letter from Narendranath Das, Secretary, Bangiya Mahisya Samiti to Superintendent of Census Operations, Bengal, dated Calcutta, December 31, 1910.

⁶ Letter from Rakhai Das Chatterjee, Sub Divisional Magistrate, Uluberia to Superintendent of Census Operations, Bengal, no 854, dated August 15, 1910.

retaliation, a tract called '*Mahisya Maryada*' (The Dignity of Mahisyas) seeking to demolish Tarkaratna's arguments.⁷ Earlier, in an immediate response, Mahisya Samaj had dismissed Tarkaratna's piece as *paagoler prolaap* (delirium) and *Panchananer prohelika* (Panchanan's puzzle).⁸ *Basumati* and *Hitabadi*, two of the more orthodox Bengali periodicals of the time, reportedly published several essays disapproving the observation of *pokkhasouch* (fifteen days' ceremonial mourning) by the Mahisyas.⁹ The condescending attitude of the higher castes towards the Mahisyas had persisted even when the former sought to mobilize the latter under common all-Bengal Hindu platforms. The Mahisyas and their Brahmans (i.e. *Mahisyajaji* Brahmans) unanimously turned down the offer to participate in the Bengal Educational Conference, helmed by the redoubtable U.N. Mukherjee. This gesture of protest was reportedly directed against a tract Mukherjee had written to publicize the cause of the conference which did not go into the purported distinction between the Chashi Kaibartas and Jelias Kaibartas. In a rather strongly worded editorial Mahisya Samaj dubbed the Conference a *kuhakjaal* (false screen) woven by a gang of opportunist and humbug Brahmans claiming to represent all Hindus, not in the least because it allowed one Adhar Chandra Das, editor of *Samaajbandhu* and a Jelias Kaibarta by caste, to pass for a representative of all Kaibartas.¹⁰

Careful observation of these intense debates makes one notice a shift in the discursive arena within which they were now located as also in the norms and idioms which came to frame their articulations. These debates were all framed within, and also framed in their

⁷ Mahisya Samaj, vol. 2, no. 2, Jaistha, 1319 BS.

⁸ Ibid, vol. 1, no 12, Chaitra, 1318 BS.

⁹ Ibid. More on the *Pokkhasouch* campaign below.

¹⁰ *Mahisya Samaj*, vol. 1, no. 11, 1318 BS. (February-March, 1912)

turn, the norms and conventions of the fast expanding Bengali public sphere. Between 1911 and 1921, there were no less than twenty eight caste association journals, all published in Bengali and operating out of Calcutta and other district towns of Bengal.¹¹ Some of the reasons for the steady expansion of the vernacular public sphere have already been discussed in the previous chapter. Added to these was of course the immediate stimulus provided by the census enumerations which some of these caste associations perceived as an opportunity to get their upward mobility claims endorsed with official approval.¹²

Such aspirations were a part of a larger drive by these fledgling caste associations to forge larger, provincial caste-communities out of what had till now remained an assortment of local, often district based endogamous units only loosely related to similar groups elsewhere in the province. This objective, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has shown, was facilitated by a climate of increasing democratization in the political sphere. By the early twentieth century, the more blatant forms of untouchability and social disability had declined although emotional attachment to caste persisted, especially among the rich and educated sections of the middle and lower castes.

¹¹ Sekhar bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal 1872-1937*, Calcutta, 1988, pp 207-210. Interestingly, four each out of these twenty eight journals were run by *Tilis* and *Namasudras*, three each by *Mahisya* and *Mahisyas* and *Kayasthas*, two each by *Subarnabaniks*, *Tambulis* and *Karmakars*. These publications generally had very short life spans, especially if they were run by private individuals without any financial support from caste associations. *Mahisya Suhrid*, for instance, ran for two years and *Mahisya Mahila* for five, before paucity of funds forced them to shut shop. *Mahisya Samaj* survived largely because the Bangiya Mahisya Samiti continued to subsidize its publication.

¹² Lucy Caroll, 'Colonial Perception of Indian Society and the Emergence of Caste(s) Associations', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2 (February, 1978), pp 233-250.

This was to be expected in a material context where, in spite of limited inter-occupational mobility following the replacement of customary relationships with contract during colonial times and the introduction of a land market leading to some change in the pattern of distribution of economic resources, the traditional higher castes were still predominant in the field of education and in effect to white collar and industrial employments. The rich and the educated among the lower and middle castes made sure the consciousness about the traditional disparities between the upper and lower castes grew manifold they organized their castes in exclusive caste associations, seeking to move vertically in caste rankings as corporate entities. The attachment to caste now became a focus of mobilization for the pursuit of individual and group interests, since the disabilities of the lower castes were due mainly to educational or economic backwardness. It was especially so after 1905, when separate electorate in favor of the Muslims was introduced as a key element of the British policy in Bengal. Similar hopes were generated in the minds of the leaders of the Hindu lower castes who now spotted within this policy framework an opportunity to enter into the world of institutionalized politics and professions. The Mahisya leaders broadly shared the same perspective and nurtured the same ambitions.¹³

However, it would be erroneous to suggest that Bangiya Mahiaya Samiti leaders looked towards government patronage alone to improve the status of their caste. Of the caste associations that came up in Bengal in the early twentieth century, it was perhaps one that counted the least on government measures, concentrating much more on exhorting its members to become self reliant and self sufficient and launching several initiatives in that

¹³ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, pp 142-44

direction. Some of these initiatives, both material and discursive, have been discussed in the previous chapter and yet others will be taken up below.¹⁴

Prior to 1910 or so, Bangiya Mahisya Samiti served the cause of its members mainly through writing petitions to the census authorities, occasionally fighting litigations and looking after, somewhat indirectly, the affairs of Mahisya Banking and Trading Company and other sister concerns. However, its resources were seriously limited and influence feeble. In 1910, for instance, the outstanding dues for the Samiti amounted to Rs. 466.¹⁵ These limitations, along with the challenges discussed in the previous chapter, finally led to the emergence of terminal threats to the sustainability of a unified Mahisya community on the eve of the 1911 census. These threats were of course neutralized to an extent following the census authorities' positive ruling on the exclusive use of the caste name Mahisya but as yet the name signified precious little to its potential adherents. The Mahisyas seriously lacked precisely what the census authorities believed it had already achieved—acceptance of their new caste name by the majority of the Bengali Hindus.

None was more aware of this mismatch between the official perception of the acceptability of the caste name Mahisya and its actual currency in practice among the Bengali Hindus as a whole than the Mahisya intellectuals themselves. In fact, by 1910 or so, they were fully conscious of the enormity of the threat to the survival of the movement as such and searching for ways and means to revive its 'vigor', as it were. It is

¹⁴ See especially the paragraphs dealing with the activities of Bangiya Mahisya Samiti between 1901 and 1910 in reference to the activities of its Murshidabad branch. This is also because the Mahisyas depended far less on government jobs than others. As we saw in the previous chapter, the number of Mahisyas engaged in independent professions was the largest among the middle and lower castes.

¹⁵ *Mahisya Samaj*, vol. 2, no. 2, Jaistha 1319 BS (May-June, 1911)

no accident, therefore, that at this very juncture Rampada Biswas, an enterprising Mahisya lawyer resolved to bring out, entirely in his private capacity and expense, a monthly journal dedicated exclusively to discussions and debates on issues pertaining to, and by, the *Mahiyas* and their Brahmans.

This is how Biswas envisaged the vacuum that his journal sought to lodge itself into:

'*Sebika* has passed away. Sudarshanbabu's health does not permit him to write as before while copies of Basantababu's book are not available in a sufficiently large number of Mahisya households...the Mahisya movement has lost some sheen over the last fourteen years....brothers, only a decade and a half ago you received the great mantra from the god himself in the form of the word Mahisya....fired by its might you so zealously established numerous local bodies in the towns and villages of Bengal, holding meetings and trumpeting the community's glory...burning the opponent's fierce swords to ashes; where has that all pervading determination gone into hiding today?'¹⁶

This is a compelling imagery in that it envisages the term 'Mahisya' as a divine revelation and the act of popularizing it (as in spreading *the magic word of God*, as it were) through methods of associational politics such as setting up local branches and organizing regular meetings as virtually a proselytizing drive. This unselfconscious coupling of the idioms of communitarian mobilization as a quasi religious duty with methods of associational politics was a rather prominent feature of this genre within the

¹⁶ Introductory editorial, *Mahisya Samaj*. vol. 1, no.1, Baishakh, 1317. (April, 1910) From the next year Bangiya Mahisya Samiti took over the journal and indexing began all over again. I have retained the earlier classification for convenience. Therefore, the first issue of *Mahisya Samaj* of 1318 BS is also referred to as vol. 1, no. 1. The reader is requested to pay closer attention to the year of publication. *Sebika* was a periodical edited by Mahendranath Halder which published, between 1890s and 1907, several pieces dealing with the history and other aspects of the MahisyaMahisyas. Sudarshanbabu was Sudarshan Chandra Biswas, an indefatigable Mahisya writer from the East Bengal district of Faridpur on whom more below while Basantababu was Basanta Kumar Ray, the writer of *Mahisya Bibriti*. Translation from original Bengali and emphasis always mine, unless indicated otherwise.

Bengali public sphere at this time, the analytical separation between the sacred and the secular remaining eminently negotiable.¹⁷ Later in this chapter we hope to touch upon the larger implications of this discursive strategy for the movement.

This chapter seeks to show, through a reasonably detailed exploration of Mahisya tracts and journals published between 1910 and 1921, the way the Mahisya leadership managed, by means of the caste journal, to evolve some kind of a matrix of corporate identity that contained within it traces of a number of internally diverse strands of opinions and interests. It then goes on, simultaneously, to situate this transition within a larger process of what I call the increasing democratization of the Bengali public sphere that allowed previously unheard voices to bring their fragmentary perspectives out into the open, and engage with dominant discourses current at the time in ways that, while not radically challenging dominant social and cultural stereotypes, nonetheless locked them into a dialogic relationship, each significantly contributing to the continuously shifting, and negotiable, boundaries of the other. Thus, in seeking to juxtapose, and thus better understand, two overlapping, though analytically separate, processes, this chapter offers a nuanced understanding of the evolving relationship between the sometimes conflicting and sometimes converging imaginations of two political categories—caste and nation—in early twentieth century Bengal.

II

One of the major tasks *Mahisya Samaj* set itself on this inaugural year was, as a later editorial clarification points out, to clearly establish the distinction between Mahisyas and

¹⁷ P.K.Datta, *Carving Blocs*, Delhi, 1999, Ch.1

Jelia Kaibartas who had launched a campaign on the eve of the 1911 census staking a claim to the caste name Mahisya.¹⁸ Indeed, a large part of virtually every number during this inaugural year was devoted to reproducing petitions presented to the census authorities. The first issue, for instance, recalled how Bangiya Mahisya Samiti had written a letter to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal in 1903 protesting against the retention of the appellation Chashi Kaibarta in the final census report of 1901.¹⁹ The LG duly forwarded the letter to the Government of India which, in response, expressed its inability to intervene now that the report had already been published and wanted the same to be communicated to the petitioners.²⁰ The ninth number deals with the return to the 1903 objection issue, with BMS bringing it to the notice of the Census Commissioner of India.²¹ The Commissioner informed them that the forthcoming census would no longer deal with the issue of social precedence of individual castes and that the census authorities would otherwise have no objection to acceding to the appeals of the Samiti provided the word Mahisya was in 'common daily use and generally understood to refer to the community', subject, of course, to the proviso that they refrained from raking up the precedence question.²² Several other letters published in subsequent volumes requested the census authorities to issue specific directions to the local enumerators to

¹⁸ *Mahisya Samaj*, vol.12, no. 7, Kartik, 1329 BS (October-November, 1923).

¹⁹ Presidency Mahisya Society to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, dated September 14, 1903. In the 1910 census the *Chashi Kaibartas* were allowed to return themselves as MahisyaMahisyas during the actual enumerations but the final Report still referred to them as *Chashi Kaibartas*. See the first chapter for a larger discussion on this question.

²⁰ A. Williams, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, to Secretary, Government of Bengal, dated Simla, October 19, 1903.

²¹ Secretary, Bangiya Mahisya Samiti to Census Commissioner of India, dated April 30, 1910.

²² Census Commissioner of India to Secretary, Bangiya Mahisya Samiti, no. 468, dated Simla, May 5, 1910. The previous chapter deals with the matter in greater length. .

recognize the caste name Mahisya.²³ Following the census authorities' compliance, BMS office holders took to flooding district and sub divisional officials across the province with petitions, requesting them to adhere to these provisions.²⁴ The census authorities were so impressed with the relentless petitioneering of the Bangiya Mahisya Samiti and appeared to accept so completely the crux of their arguments about the essential distinction between the Chashi Kaibartas and Jelia Kaibartas that when the Jeliya Kaibartas or Dhibars set up a rival caste association called the Calcutta Mahisya Samiti on the eve of 1911 census, and wrote to the census authorities praying that all Kaibartas be returned as Mahisyas, the Census Superintendent's office sought clarifications from BMS as to a) whether CMS had any connection with BMS and b) if the CMS had a defensible case.²⁵ BMS, of course, responded negatively on both counts, condemning the CMS venture as a ploy to hoodwink the government.²⁶ Accordingly, the office of the Census Superintendent refused to entertain the CMS appeals as well as similar appeals by the Patnis.²⁷

If one were to reconstruct a history of the Mahisya movement from the perspective of getting their corporate identity approved by the official sources alone, this indeed would be the moment of closure for such an account. Indeed, by March 1911, it would appear as

²³ Secretary, Bangiya Mahisya Samiti to Superintendent of Census Operations, Bengal, dated Calcutta, October, 19, 1910; October 22, 1910.

²⁴ Superintendent of Census Operations, Bengal to Secretary, Bangiya Mahisya Samiti, no. 1524C, dated Calcutta, October 31, 1910, no 3023C, dated December, 1910; Bangiya Mahisya Samiti to District Magistrate of 24 Parganas, dated Calcutta January 16, 1911; Bangiya Mahisya Samiti, Srirampore branch to Sub Divisional Officer, Hooghly, dated Srirampore, January 20, 1911

²⁵ Superintendent of Census Operations, Bengal to Secretary, Bangiya Mahisya Samiti, no. 4220C, dated Calcutta, February 1911.

²⁶ Secretary, Bangiya Mahisya Samiti to Superintendent of Census Operations, Bengal, dated Calcutta, February 24, 1911.

²⁷ Superintendent of Census Operations, Bengal to Secretary to Radha Nath Das, Secretary, Calcutta Mahisya Samiti, no. 4365C, March 1, 1911. For more details, see the previous chapter which also touches upon this issue in a slightly different context.

though the Mahisyas could not take a single step in the wrong direction as far as writing petitions to the census authorities—and getting them to concede their demands—was concerned. The other major issue to which Mahisya Samaj consistently devoted its energies during this year was the Murshidabad court case explored in some detail in the previous chapter.

In hindsight, it appears rather appropriate that *Mahisya Samaj* under the owner-editorship of Rampada Biswas ceased publication that very month, only to reappear next month as the official mouthpiece of the Bangiya Mahisya Samiti. This closure and the reappearance of the journal in a new guise and under a corporate management signified the end of one phase of the Mahisya movement and the beginning of another. Biswas' private journal had discharged its public duties with workmanlike devotion. As we saw above, it competently covered the exploits of the Bangiya Mahisya Samiti on the eve of 1911 census enumerations, whether pertaining to the correspondence with the Superintendent of census operations and local officials or to defending its members in the court of law.²⁸ Indeed, as the faithful chronicler of the Bangiya Mahiaya Samiti's encounters with the both the executive and the judicial wings of the colonial state, at a moment when the movement had been facing serious threats of collapse from within as well as without, this journalistic venture from an enterprising individual from the community certainly contributed handsomely to the cause of bringing into the Bengali public sphere the official Mahisya voice.

²⁸ The case has been discussed in detail in the previous chapter.

Nonetheless, we must remember that the colonial state had been sympathetic to Mahisya agitations from as early as 1901, and had communicated to the Bangiya Mahisya Samiti its willingness to concede the caste name Mahisya less than a month after Biswas' journal made its debut.²⁹ In other words, the journal had little or no role to play in influencing the colonial state's policies in regard to the Mahisyas. The objective it had set itself—to revive the excitement among the Mahisyas that had characterized their 1901 agitations—was, however, achieved to a considerable degree, if one were to go by the activism of the Bangiya Mahisya Samiti during that year.

What the journal clearly was not in a position to do, in view of the limited resources of its founder editor, was to effectively counter the unfavorable treatment the community had been receiving in the Bengali public sphere from the hands of upper caste writers. Notwithstanding occasional exhortations from enthusiastic correspondents to the young and the educated members of the community as to the desired ways and means to mount a suitable counter to such upper caste propaganda through a program of self-sufficiency, the publication lacked both financial and institutional resources to undertake such an agenda on a sustainable basis.³⁰ Mindful of this limitation, Bangiya Mahisya Samiti, drawing inspiration from its success with the census authorities, now decided to carry forward the unfinished task, taking over the running of the journal and entrusting Sebananda Bharati, a Mahisyajaji Brahman from Tamluk, Midnapore with editorial responsibilities.

²⁹ See footnote 21 above.

³⁰ Kshitinath Das, 'Chhotoboro' (Becoming Worthy Men), *Mahisya Samaj*, vol. 1, no. 4, Shrabana, 1317 BS (July-August, 1910); Baburam Kayal, 'Sikkhito Somprodayer Nikot Obhijog' (Complaints Against the Educated Section within the community), *Mahisya Samaj*, vol.1, no. 8, Agrahayan, 1317 BS (December-January, 1910/1911)

At this point I want to bring in a brief discussion about the symbiotic relations between the Mahisyas and the Brahmans who ministered exclusively to them. Generally, lower caste mobility movements are taken to be guided by an uncomplicated opposition to the Brahmans and the upper caste world view as a whole. What often remains unexplored is an examination of the role of the 'inferior' Brahmans who had been catering to their ritual needs from much before these movements begin.³¹ As Tanika Sarkar has recently noted, there could be 'a tight interlocking across the ritual status of Brahmans and the Shudra castes to whom Brahmans provided ritual functions. If the latter could climb to a relatively clean category, that would eliminate the degraded status of the Brahmans who served them.'³² This is not to reject the social and ritual gulf between the Brahman and the Shudras, but only to emphasize that there could still be a joint vested interest in raising the ritual status of a particular Shudra group within the over all Shudra category. This would not only economically benefit the Brahmans who were ready to serve them at ceremonies, but would also remove the ritual degradation of those who already did.

³¹ More often than not these caste movements are seen to accompany a religious critique of Brahmanism as well, as elaborated for instance by Bernard Cohn with reference to the emergence of the Sivnarayani sect or by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's in his work on the Namasudras who were more or less totally under the ideological spell of the Matua sect. See B.S. Cohn, 'The Changing Status of a Depressed Caste', in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, Delhi, 1987 and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Popular Religion and Social Mobility in Colonial Bengal', in Rajat Kanta Ray (ed.), *Mind, Body and Society: Life and Mentality in Colonial Bengal*, Calcutta, 1995 and also Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal 1872-1947*, Surrey, 1997.

³² Tanika Sarkar, 'Caste, Sect and Hagiography: The Balakdashis of Early Modern Bengal', in *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designing Selves and Nations in Colonial Times*, New York, 2009, pp 90-91

In case of the Mahisyas their Brahmans, mostly the *Madhyasreni* Brahmans, were so called because their original home, Midnapore, fell midway between Bengal and Orissa.³³ They claimed that their ancestors were *Rarhi* Brahmans who had settled early in pargana Mayna in Midnapore. While classifying the Brahmans of the rest of Bengal, Ballal Sen, the Sen king reputed to introduce *Kulinism*, sent a *Ghatak* (genealogist) to Moyna to include them in the scheme. They reportedly declined to have anything to do with the institution of *Kulinism* and there are no *Kulins* among them till this day.³⁴ For their resistance to his orders, Ballal Sen disconnected them from the rest of the caste, and all intercourse between them and the rest of the Bengal Brahman was strictly forbidden. The *Rarhi* Brahmans, however, dispute this legend on several counts such as the availability among the *Madhyasreni* Brahmans of three extra *gotras* seen mostly among *Saptasati* Brahmans. Legend has it that the ignorance of correct rituals among the *Saptasati* Brahmans forced Adisura to import the ancestors of *Rarhi* Brahmans from Kanauj. Hence, *Madhyasreni* Brahmans were conjectured to be a composite group including members of the *Rarhi*, *Utkal* and *Saptasati* sub castes, who for some reason broke off from their own classes, settled in the outlying district and in course of time formed a new sub caste. Some versions would suggest that the original *Madhyasreni* were expelled

³³ The details about the ritual position of these Brahmans are taken from Risley. H.H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, vol. 1, Calcutta, 1981 (first published 1891) pp 155-56. On *Rarhi* Brahmans and their rituals see pp 144-52.

³⁴ 'By the middle of the eleventh century, Ballal Sen, the second of the Sen kings of Bengal, instituted ... (an) inquiry into the personal endowments of ... Brahmans... by testing the qualifications of each *Rarhi* family for the priestly office, and classifying them, in the order of their virtue, according to the results of this examination. The following nine qualities were selected to serve as the touchstone of sacerdotal purity: *Achar*, ceremonial purity; *vinaya*, discipline; *vidya*, learning; *pratistha*, reputation for purity; *tirtha darshana*, zeal in pilgrimage; *nistha*, piety; *avritti*, observance of legal marriages; *tapa*, ascetic self-devotion; *dana*, liberality. Tradition is silent concerning the precise method in which Ballal Sen carried out his somewhat inquisitorial measures. It seems, however, to be certain, that some kind of an inquiry into the nine characteristic Brahmanical qualities was held under his orders, and that the *kul* or social or ceremonial standing of each family was determined accordingly.' This is how Risley defines the institution of *Kulinism*. See *ibid*, p. 145

from their own sub castes referring them, somewhat pejoratively, as '*Madyadoshi*' or 'guilty of drunkenness'. Most of the *Madhyasreni* did not depart materially from the practices of other Brahmans in the matter of religion or ceremonial observances except on two occasions. Their widows were permitted to eat uncooked food on the eleventh day of either fortnight of the moon (*ekadoshi*) while widows of other Brahman sub castes were not allowed to touch water on that day. Second, some of them were said to eat uncooked food at religious performed by the members of the *Kaibarta* caste. This brief ritual profile of these Brahmans amply demonstrates their symbiotic relations with the *Kaibartas/ Mahisyas* on territorial (Midnapore), ritual and social fronts.

How do these Brahmans respond to the Mahisya movement? Did they support the Mahisyas against their own, albeit distant and hostile, brethren? In case of the Mahisyas my research shows that in and around Midnapore the *Mahisyajaji* Brahmans, again in a context of the growing material prosperity of their patrons, chose to lend their active support to their mobility movement. Quite a few Mahisya tracts such as *Bhranti Bijoy* by Harish Chandra Chakrabarty or *Siddhanta Samudra* by Dharmananda Mahabharati were in fact composed by *Mahisyajaji* Brahmans. The rationale was that if their Mahisya patrons rose in caste and social hierarchy, the Brahmans who ministered to them also stood to rise on both counts, for both were fighting against a Brahmanic cultural hegemony that consigned them to a lower social and ritual position.

This distinction between a Brahmanic cultural worldview as embodied in the upholding and retention of a *varna/jati* based social order and some classes of Brahmans such as the

Madhyamsreni as individuals and groups making a living out of ministering to lower caste groups needs to be emphasized. They had to, I suggest, on the one hand persist with their basic faith in that world view in order to retain their authenticity as Brahmans per se and on the other hand to make sure that their livelihood as priests to the lower caste groups was not threatened. One way of resolving this problem was to try to claim a higher ritual status for their Mahisya patrons. This way the *Mahisyajaji* Brahmans who were rather ill treated by the Brahmanic worldview in the first place, were still so deeply under the hegemonic spell of its core principles that they were not in a position to formulate a radical critique of this worldview as such and ended up championing movements that ultimately sought an entry into this very world, and the *varna/jati* based social order that it consecrated.

To return to the brief career of Biswas' journal, it represented the fag end of that phase of the Mahisya movement which was concerned mainly with direct interactions with the colonial state, and was unlikely to be revived, if at all, before the next round of census enumerations. The new avatar of the journal, on the other hand, was born to reflect the new needs and realities of the Mahisya movement now that it had to address an entirely different constituency, i.e. the Bengali Hindu society as opposed to the census bureaucracy. If in 1901, the census authorities (i.e. the state) belied the hopes of the Mahisyas, in 1911 it was the Bengali caste Hindu society. The Mahisya leaders had been, generally speaking, laboring under the impression, since the announcement of government policy of recognizing social precedence in the late nineteenth century, that if they could have their caste name listed under the category of the twice born castes, their

social rank would be correspondingly raised and accepted as such by the indigenous society.³⁵ Now, however, they had to work out a fundamentally different discursive and representational strategy to suit the needs of their new objective.

III

In order to map the evolving discursive strategies of the Mahisyas between 1911 and 1921, it is appropriate at this stage to begin with a working idea of the constituency that their tracts and journals had been seeking to address.

Prior to mid nineteenth century, the standard convention of linguistic expression was to resort to earlier authoritative sayings, mainly in the form of proverbs or insertion of unsigned nuggets into texts attributed to eminent names. During the second half of the nineteenth century conventions of printed articulation made way for originality and uniqueness in expression clearing grounds, as it were, for the development of a selfhood different from, rather than a total imitation of or derived from, others. Signed publications followed from a large number of people whose opinions and arguments were never heard before in the public sphere. As part of this expansion of the public sphere, caste associations launched journals, reminiscences and religious tracts of caste based sects. Eventually, however, the emergence of these marginal voices contributed to the

³⁵ 'The most interesting feature of the agitation is perhaps that the low castes still look to the Census Superintendent as having the power of the old Hindu kings to raise their status and (do not understand) that the admission of their claims might result in a state of affairs resembling that called varnasnakara or confusion of castes, which was so denounced by the early Hindu sages.' *Census of India Report, (Bengal)*, 1911, vol. v, p 443; 'The object of the census was merely to ascertain the numbers of each caste but individuals found it difficult to accept this. The ancient idea that the king or government is the last appellate authority on questions of caste distinction still has its influence...' *Census of India Report, (Bengal)*, 1921, vol. v, p 346.

crystallization of rather hard boundaries and identities, more concerned, perhaps, with singular and concrete selves than older authorities which did not have to reckon with the challenge of contested identities. Nonetheless, the cheapness and ubiquity of print left the prospects of stratification and individuation of opinion and, in effect, possibilities of identity formation, open ended.³⁶

Debates via the print medium facilitated the emergence of variegated, polyphonic opinion as well as it ensuring continuous dissemination and circulation of such dialogic exercises. Out of this process flourished a public sphere during the nineteenth century and by the early twentieth it was a thriving institution. Here individuals ascribed themselves a subjectivity that did not appeal to their connection with the colonial state for legitimacy, although many of them were directly or indirectly connected with the colonial state apparatus. Many contributors to the caste journals, for instance, could be related to the colonial state, either through direct service or having indirectly benefited from institutions set up under, or encouraged by, state initiatives. However, they more often than not wrote as members of the caste concerned, and not as government servants or zamindars and so on. They discussed about economic, social, political, religious and even intimate personal matters. The significant point about this burgeoning public sphere is that practically all the opinion circulating here came under scrutiny from others with access to the same arena. As a result, the writers had to constantly furnish rational arguments, developed and deployed through certain already agreed upon norms and

³⁶ Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism*, New Delhi, 2001, pp 3-5.

conventions. In the process, colonial laws as well as religious prescription could no longer rely upon authoritarian command alone.³⁷

Now, let us turn towards the world of caste journals in early twentieth century. In size, their potential readership was not inconsiderable at all. There were at least 10 castes in Bengal in 1911 with overall literacy rates notching up more than 10 percent of their total numbers. The *Baidyas* topped the list with 53.2 percent while the Mahisyas stood at the bottom with 10.9 percent which incidentally showed a decline from the corresponding figure in 1901 (13 percent).³⁸ The actual figure for the Mahisyas was probably larger since, as the census officials suspected 'a large number of Jalia Kaibartas return(ed) themselves as Chashi.'³⁹ Of the eleven percent literate Mahisyas, more than ten were literate only in the vernacular. Correlating this figure with the absolute number of the Mahisyas in 1911 (21, 37, 948) and 1921 (22, 10,684), we have as many as two lakh twenty thousand potential readers among the Mahisyas alone.⁴⁰ Assuming that even ten percent of this potential readership was to take interest in such matters, *Mahisya Samaj* was assured of a readership that was at least twenty thousand strong.

More importantly, this readership was likely to be fairly evenly distributed across a number of districts. The Mahisyas were of course most densely concentrated in the

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ The original figures are all taken from Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, p 109. I have calculated the vernacular literacy figures by subtracting the percentage of literacy in English from the total percentage of literacy figures. This again is a conservative estimate for those who were literate in English were definitely likely to be literate in Bengali as well.

³⁹ *Census of India*, 1911, vol. v, part I, p. 360.

⁴⁰ 'In numbers (22,10,684) the Chashi Kaibartas or Mahisyas are the largest Hindu caste in Bengal, beating the Namasudras by nearly 200000 and Rajbansis by nearly 500000.' *Census of India*, 1921, vol. v, Part I, p. 354. For the 1911 figure see Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Local Politics and Indian Nationalism: Midnapore 1919-1944*, New Delhi, 1997, p. 65.

western districts of Midnapore, followed by Howrah, the 24 Parganas, Hooghly, Nadia and Murshidabad. However, theirs was a conspicuous presence in the eastern districts of Rajshahi, Mymensingh, Dacca, Tippera, Noalkhali and Sylhet, their numerical disadvantage often offset by their material and educational attainments. Incidentally, the only English tract by the Mahisyas (*Mahisyas: Formerly a Dominant Caste of Bengal*, 1911), perhaps also the only one among the humbler castes in Bengal, was written by a lawyer from Sylhet. Again, Kalikumar Choudhury, a Mahisya zamindar from Sunamganj, Sylhet, donated Rs. 1000 towards the construction of a hostel for Mahisya students. We have already met Sudarshan Biswas from Faridpur. Besides, the address of the correspondents writing for *Mahisya Samaj* amply confirms the point about their geographical distribution.⁴¹

Similar figures can be drawn up about several other castes which also published their own journals. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, for instance, has provided a list of about twenty eight such journals between 1911 and 1921, their circulation varying between 450 to 1000, as also the literacy rates for at least twelve among them.⁴² Most of these journals were commercially fairly unviable ventures, however. The publishers of *Mahisya Samaj*, for instance, used to distribute 100 copies of the journal free of cost to various offices and libraries.⁴³ This was a very good way of reaching out to a larger readership that visited these libraries and offices.

⁴¹ Ibid; *Mahisya Samaj*, vol. 1, no. 9, Poush, 1318 BS (December-January, 1911/12).

⁴² Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, Appendix-I, pp 207-210 and p. 109. This list, again, is not comprehensive. Based on Annual Reports on Indian Papers in the Bengal Presidency submitted to the Home Department, Government of Bengal for 1911 and 1921, it does not include smaller or short lived publications not noticed by the government officials such as *Samajbandhu* by the *Jelia Kaibartas*, mentioned earlier in the chapter.

⁴³ *Mahisya Samaj*, vol. 10, no. 1&2, Baishakh-Jaistha, 1327 BS (April-June, 1920)

A second vantage point from which to approach this genre of Bengali public sphere is through an exploration of the channels of distribution and exchange networks of such journals. Editors and office bearers of these journals were all indefatigable correspondents and regularly sent and received copies of each other's journals. *Mahisya Samaj*, for instance, would send copies to *Kashipur Nibasi*, *Prasun*, *Education Gazette*, *Kayastha Patrika*, *Arya Kayastha Pratibha*, *Hindu Sokha*, *Nihar*, *Jonmobhumi*, *Sri Baisnabsebika*, *Dharmapracharak*, *Shishu O Sahitya*, *Mohamaya*, *Islam Rabi*, *Chikitsa Prokash* etc. Each of them in turn would comment on the contents of the journals it received or at least acknowledge receipt.⁴⁴ Even a casual observer would not fail to notice the sheer range of this list—here were journals dealing with subjects as varied from each other as education (*Education Gazette*), caste (*Kayastha Patrika*), Community (*Hindu Sokha*), nationalism (*Jonmobhumi*), local affairs (*Nihar*), religion (*Dharmapracharak*, *SriBaisnabsebika*), children's literature (*Shishu O Sahitya*), Islam (*Islam Rabi*) and even medicine (*Chikitsa Prokash*). Some of these niche journals would often publish pieces on issues relating to questions of caste. For instance, Praksah Chandra Sarkar, the writer of *Mahisya Prakash* and editor of *Brihat Mahisya Karika* published a number of pieces on the Mahisyas in *Prakriti* (see table) from as early as 1891.⁴⁵ The following tables offer a rough estimate of the circulation of some Bengali journals and newspapers in 1911.

⁴⁴ *Mahisya Samaj*, vol.1, no 3, Asadh, 1318 BS (June-July, 1911)

⁴⁵ Prakash Chandra Sarkar, *Mahisya Prakash*, Calcutta, 1911, pp. 25-80.1-25. In fact he was a regular contributor to *Prakriti* in the 1890s, with clear evidence of at least 7 more pieces between 1891 and 1899. He also published a similar piece in the journal *Kaystha Messenger* in 1892. *ibid*, pp 1-25

Table 1**Circulation figures of major Bengali journals in 1911**

| Serial no. | Name of the Journal | Circulation figures (in numbers) |
|-------------------|----------------------------|---|
| 1. | Archana | 1000 |
| 2 | Arghya | 500 |
| 3 | Aryabarta | 600 |
| 4 | Bharati | 1600 |
| 5 | Debalay | 1000 |
| 6 | Manasi | 750 |
| 7 | Mahisya Samaj | 1000 |
| 8 | Mukul | 1000 |
| 9 | Mrinmayi | 200 |
| 10 | Nababharat | 1500 |
| 11 | Prakriti | 1000 |
| 12 | Prabasi | 4000 |
| 13 | Sahitya Samhita | 500 |
| 14 | Shilpa O Sahitya | 500 |
| 15 | Suprabhat | 900 |
| 16 | Bamabodhini Patrika | 750 |
| 17 | Bangadarshan | 800 |
| 18 | Bani | 1200 |
| 19 | Birbhumi | 1000 |
| 20 | Tatvabodhini Patrika | 300 |

Source: Circulation/number of copies printed of major Bengali journals as published in Education Gazette on July 12, 1911, quoted in *Mahisya Samaj*, vol. 1, no 4, Shraban, 1318 BS (July-August, 1911)

Table 2

Circulation Figures of Bengali Newspapers and Journals regularly received by the Government Offices in 1911

| Name | Place | Edition | Editor, Age | Caste | Circulation |
|------------------|--------------|----------------|-------------------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Bangabandhu | Calcutta | Weekly | Barendra Lal Mukherjee, 38 | Brahman | 1000 |
| Bangabasi | do | Do | Behari Lal Sarkar. 53 | Kayastha | 15000 |
| Bankura Darpan | Bankura | Do | Ramnath Mukherjee, 49 | Brahman | 800 |
| Basudeva | Calcutta | Do | Kedar Nath Bharati, 35 | Brahman | 1000 |
| Basumati | do | Do | ... | | |
| Birbhun Hitaishi | Suri | Do | Bhusan Patitandi | Mukhtar # | 300 |
| Birbhun Varta | do | Do | Debendra | Brahmin | 800 |

| | | | | | | |
|--------------------|---------------|-------|---------------|--------------|-----------|--|
| | | | Nath | | | |
| | | | Chakravarti | | | |
| Burdawan Sanjavini | Burdawan | Do | Prabodha | Kayastha | 900 | |
| | | | Nanda Sarkar | | | |
| Chinsura Vartava | Chinsura | Do | Dina Nath | Brahmin | 850 | |
| | | | Mukherjee | | | |
| Daily Hitavadi | Calcutta | Daily | Panchowri | Brahmin | 30,000 | |
| | | | Banerji | | | |
| Dainik Chandrika | do | Do | Hari Das Dutt | Kayastha | 1000 | |
| Jagaran | Bageshta | Do | Behary Lal | ... | 600 | |
| | | | Roy | | | |
| Jasohar | Jessore | Do | Ananda | Kayastha | 500 | |
| | | | Charan | | | |
| | | | Chaudhury | | | |
| Kalgani | Magura | do | Bisweswar | Brahman | 500 | |
| | | | Mukherjee | and | | |
| | | | and Tarak | Kayastha | | |
| | | | Sikdar | respectively | | |
| Khulnavasi | Khulna | Do | ... | ... | ... | |
| Manshum | Purulia | Do | Bagola | Kayastha | About 300 | |
| | | | Chandra | (37) | | |
| | | | Ghose | | | |
| Matribhumi | Chandernagore | Do | Surendra | Hindu (32) | 500 | |

| | | | Nath Sen | | | |
|-----------------------------------|------------|---------|-------------|------|-----------|-------|
| Muhammadi | Calcutta | Do | ... | ... | ... | |
| Murshidabad | Saidabad | Do | Bonwari | Lal | Brahmin | Small |
| Hitashi | | | Goswami | | (45) | |
| Navjivan-o- Swadeshi Christian | Calcutta | Do | Revd. | Lal | Native | 300 |
| | | | Behari Shah | | Christian | |
| | | | | | (24) | |
| Nayak | do | Daily | Priya | Nath | Kayastha | 3000 |
| | | | Guha | | (37) | |
| Nihar | Contai | Weekly | Madhusudan | | 50 | 200 |
| | | | Jana | | | |
| Pallivarta | Bongong | Do | Charu | | Kayastha | 400 |
| | | | Chander roy | | (36) | |
| Pallivasi | Kalna | Do | Sri bhusan | | Brahmin | 600 |
| | | | Banerji | | (44) | |
| Prachar | Calcutta | Monthly | ... | ... | ... | |
| Prasun | Katwa | Weekly | Purna | | Brahmin | 500 |
| | | | Chandra | | | |
| | | | Chatterji | | | |
| Pratkar | Berhampore | Do | Kamakhya | | Brahmin | Poor |
| | | | Prosad | | (61) | |
| | | | Ganguli | | | |
| Purulia Darpan | Purulia | Do | Amulya | | Brahmin | 100 |

| | | | | | | |
|--------------------|------------|--------|--------------|------------|------|--|
| | | | | Ratan | (38) | |
| | | | | Chatterjee | | |
| Ratnakar | Asansol | Do | Rokhal | Brahmin | 500 | |
| | | | Chandra | (27) | | |
| | | | Chakravarti | | | |
| Samaj | Calcutta | Do | Behary Lal | ... | ... | |
| | | | Roy | | | |
| Samay | do | Do | Ganendra | Brahmin | 300 | |
| | | | Nath Das | (56) | | |
| Samvad | do | Daily | Puran | Brahmin | 50 | |
| Purnachandrodaya | | | Chandra | (45) | | |
| | | | Ghatak | | | |
| Sanjivani | do | Weekly | Shivanth | ... | 7000 | |
| | | | Shastri | | | |
| Shri-Shri Vishnu | Calcutta | Do | Mrinal Kanti | Kayastha | 2000 | |
| Priya-O- Anand | | | Ghose | (39) | | |
| Bazaar Patrika | | | | | | |
| Surbarnabanik | do | Do | ... | ... | ... | |
| Twenty Four | Bhawanipur | Do | Hem Chandra | Kayastha | 1000 | |
| Parganas Vartavaha | | | Nag | (27) | | |

Source: Report on Native Newspapers (RNP) in Bengal for the week ending 7th January, 1991. These figures usually did not vary for the year.

We now have at least two different sets of circulation figures for Bengali journals in early twentieth century: one provided by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and the ones reproduced above. Allowing for the obvious disparity between number of printed copies and actual circulation figures and other variables, it is possible nonetheless to at least argue that the size of the Bengali public sphere in the early twentieth century was fairly substantial. As we have seen, much cross fertilization went on between vernacular journals at this period, and it will be more fruitful for future research to explore the intertextualities involved in such traffic of ideas. Caste, or indeed any common ground for mobilization such as nation or community, must not anymore be studied in isolation but in relation to each other. In fact, it would appear that even some educated people—like Bhushan Patitandi—the editor of *Birbhum Hitaishi* (see table 2)—those days did not always wish—or bother—to emphasize the distinction between their caste and their profession.

To return to the question of the reach of the Bengali public sphere, besides the easy traffic of ideas and essay across journals dealing with different core foci that we saw above, even the daily newspapers supposedly had their caste bias. For instance, *Basumati* was known as a Brahman publication while *Hitabadi* and *Bangabasi* were dubbed as *Baidya* and *Kayastha* mouthpieces respectively.⁴⁶ The readers of these dailies too were in effect drawn into this larger Bengali public sphere. A significant minority of this readership consisted of women. As the table above shows, *Bamabodhini Patrika*, a

⁴⁶ Baburam Kayal, *Sikkhito Somprodayer Nikot Obhijog* (Complaints Against the Educated Section of the Community), *Mahisya Samaj*, vol. 1, no. 8, Agraphayan, 1317 BS (November-December 1910). Kayal, a Mahisya from Diamond Harbour in the 24 Parganas in fact recommended that Mahisyas too float a daily of their own. For more on the MahisyaMahisyas of the 24 Parganas, see introduction and chapter 1.

journal devoted exclusively to women, had an impressive circulation of 750. It is of course well known by now that the readership of such niche journals was not limited to its target audience alone and that men were often as, if not more, interested in women's issues.⁴⁷

Circulation figures for *Mahisya Mahila*, a women's journal edited by Krishnabhamini Biswas, an educated Mahisya lady from Nadia are not readily available. However, it is possible to reconstruct the profile of at least one, I suppose not totally atypical, subscriber. Shibani Mandal, a regular subscriber, was the wife of Bipradas Mandal, a Mahisya lawyer settled in Itawah near Agra. Mrs. Mondal would of course count among women with a certain amount of vernacular schooling behind them and married to a husband who wanted her to be able to engage him in meaningful conversations on various issues during leisure hours, especially since they lived away from their immediate family and thus neither was like to be part of a very large social circle.⁴⁸ With her husband away on professional obligations for the larger part of the day, without a large household where other women like her would be around to chat with and her children attending school, Mrs. Mondal would in all likelihood have the afternoons to herself. It is not too difficult to imagine her devoting a few hours every afternoon to reading Bengali publications of various kinds and genres, including, of course, *Mahisya Mahila*. This example also illustrates the pan Indian reach of the Bengali public sphere in the early twentieth century, with even niche journals receiving subscriptions from Bengali families settled beyond the territorial limits of the Bengal presidency. The question of pan Indian

⁴⁷ In fact, this is one point I am going to make below in regard to *Mahisya Mahila*. See also the eponymous essay in Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, New Delhi, 2001

⁴⁸ *Mahisya Mahila*, vol. 2, no. 1&2, 1319 BS (April-June, 1911)

reach of the journal, however, cannot be developed any further at this stage for lack of details on the subscription figures.⁴⁹

I wish to conclude this section with a brief biographical sketch of a Mahisya tract called *Mahisyas: Formerly a Dominant Caste of Bengal*. The tract covered large distances over more than half a century, changing hands several times until it found its way into the rare books collection of the Ramkrishna Mission Institute of Culture library in Kolkata where I was lucky enough to find a 98 year old copy of the above mentioned book. I do this in order to emphasize the essentially open ended nature of the Bengali public sphere; to illustrate, in other words, that the potential readership of a book, once released, could actually include the unlikeliest of characters.⁵⁰ Pyari Mohan Das, a spirited Mahisya lawyer from Sunamganj in Sylhet put together this collection of scriptural citations and ostensibly a political-historical narrative of the origin and evolution of Mahisyas since the reign of Ballal Sen in the 13th century. The manuscript then landed in Calcutta and one Sarveswar Bhattacharya, probably a *Mahisyajaji* Brahman, got it printed from Buckland press at no. 28, Baithakhana Road, a brisk trading locality in central Calcutta. Considering that *Mahisya Samaj*, the caste journal, was printed from a press located at Madan Baral lane, barely a kilometer or so away from Buckland Press and that the headquarters of Bangiya Mahisya Samiti was situated at Police Hospital Road, Entally, all locations within a three kilometer radius from each other in Central Calcutta, it is more than likely that Bangiya Mahisya Samiti had an active role in promoting the tract.

⁴⁹ See below section VI for a detailed discussion on *Mahisya Mahila* and its readership.

⁵⁰ Two of the best works by historians on the issue of books and their unusual readers are , Carlo Ginzburg, *Cheese and the Worms: Cosmos of a sixteenth Century Miller*, 1979 and Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books*, Stanford, 1994

In fact it was one of the several tracts on the Mahisyas that was available at the office of the Samiti for sale.⁵¹ While not much is known about its circulation in West Bengal, copies certainly reached the branches of the Samiti in eastern districts. Dwarakanath Sarkar, the Secretary of Mymensingh Mahisya Samiti, presented it to G.Manson, the then Superintendent of Police of the district, on the eve of the 1911 census, probably as part of larger dossier of similar documents. Since then the career of this particular copy of the book is shrouded in obscurity except that it finally came to the possession of one Barid Baran Mukherjee of College Row, Calcutta who eventually donated it to the RK Mission library.⁵² Incidentally, none of the Bengali Mahisya tracts that I have seen happens to mention this particular publication. It would appear therefore that its circulation was limited to mainly the eastern districts of Bengal.⁵³

From the above survey it is possible perhaps to argue that the caste journals appearing between 1910 and 1921 were assured of a fairly large and diverse readership base. They were likely to be read not only by men alone but a limited but articulate section of women as well. Contemporary general interest publications and even dailies occasionally published contributions on matters relating to caste. The Mahisyas from eastern Bengal, although numerically modest compared to their counterparts in western districts, were a visible presence in the movement by virtue of their material and educational attainments.

⁵¹ For the printing details of the caste journal see *Mahisya Samaj*, vol.1, no. 1, Baishakh 1318 BS (April-May, 1911) and for the list of books available for sale at Samiti headquarters see *Mahisya Samaj*, vol.1, no. 10, Magh, 1318 BS (January-February, 1912) and vol. 2, no. 1, Baishakh, 1319 BS (April-May, 1912).

⁵² I have drawn these conclusions from the details inscribed on the opening pages of the tract and the catalogue of RK Mission library. At the present state of research it is not possible to provide greater details but this is one story well worth a detailed follow up.

⁵³ Another reason was possibly that the interests of Mahisyas of eastern Bengal were substantially different from those in the west, a point that I seek to develop below. At this stage of research, however, I am not pressing the point too hard.

More importantly from a historiographical perspective, a micro historical study of a deceptively smaller event such as the Mahisya movement can often yield important connections with and insights into larger historical problems such as the nature and the democratizing potential of the vernacular public sphere in early twentieth century Bengal. As a historian has recently argued, with changes in circumstances and times, a particular group may choose to commit itself to any one or more out of a large range of potential solidarities—such as caste, gender, religious community, nation etc depending upon what he calls ‘the horizon of their expectation at particular moments’.⁵⁴ The sections below shall try to map the range of such choices available to the Mahisyas and how the Mahisya responded to these options. Their responses eventually equipped them with a distinct, but not necessarily stable, identity for themselves. These responses also offer an entry point to several other historical questions relating to early twentieth century Bengal such as nationalism, domesticity, entrepreneurial ethos and so on.

IV

It is within this diverse and increasingly democratizing vernacular public sphere that the journal *Mahisya Samaj* operated. Starting with a survey of the evolving political position of the Bangiya Mahisya Samiti, I then proceed to discuss specific proposals of ritual reforms and the way they were carried out, side by side with the development of what I call a peasant ethos and an examination of their attitude to formal education, public

⁵⁴ Sumit Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, pp 93-94.

employment, independent professions and trade and commerce. Between them I attempt to show the various ways the Mahisyas straddled several worlds at the same time, and in so doing complicate the understanding of caste as an analytical category, trying to situate it as an window to, much larger historical debates.

The first editorial of the reincarnated *Mahisya Samaj* set out its agenda with remarkable precision. The prime objective of the journal, it said, echoing the most famous verse from the *Geeta*, was to reinstate righteousness.⁵⁵ This righteousness was defined as acquiring merit so as to eventually merge with the great soul hidden *within* the confines of this material world. This material world, when enveloped by this spirit of righteousness, would be transformed into heaven itself. Thus the project to which the journal dedicated itself was to transform this material world into a heaven, turning the traditional Hindu idea of salvation privileging otherworldliness on its head in a discursive twist, notwithstanding the essentially religious rhetoric within which it was couched.⁵⁶ Telescoping several centuries of religious history, it then went on to present a neat narrative of the decline and revival of this righteousness as embodied in the careers of Buddha and Adi Shankaracharya, and again through a dichotomy between the exploits of Sri Chaitanya and Smarta Raghunandan.⁵⁷ The former in both these cases were seen to

⁵⁵ The verse 'Yada Yada Hi Dharmasya Glanirbhabati Bharata/abhyuthanam Adharmasya Tadatmanam Srijammayham/Paritranaya Sadhumnaam Binashayacha Duskritaam/Dharmasanthapanarthaya Sambhabami Yuge Yuge' may be roughly translated as 'Every time this Bharat has been sullied by the rise of unrighteousness/ and decline of righteousness/ I have had to take birth/ in order to protect the good men and exterminate the evil ones/and reinstate righteousness in every age.

⁵⁶ Here once finds an echo of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Aurobindo Ghose and Tilak's reinterpretation of the Gita. This substantiates the point I made in the previous chapter about the spirit of Swadeshi by now becoming a common sense in Bengal, influencing groups that stood apart from its political program.

⁵⁷ For a nuanced treatment of the historical implications of Sri Chaitanya and Raghunandan's efforts on Bengali society in general and Mahisyas in particular, see Tanika Sarkar, 'Caste, Sect and Hagiography:

represent forces that destabilized 'Vaidik Hinduism' (as encoded within the *chaturvarna* system) and the latter the heroic efforts by this Vaidik Hinduism to rehabilitate itself. Interestingly, such open admiration for a staunch defender of absolute Brahmanical supremacy such as Raghunandan is rather remarkable in a middle caste journal. Here, in another discursive sleight of hand, the blame for the erasure of the Kshatriyas or Vaisyas from Bengal and the recent rush among various castes to claim twice born status was laid squarely on the shoulder of the sixteenth century *Smriti* exponent and his well intentioned but complicated formulations, and not on the policies of the colonial state.⁵⁸ The colonial state, on the other hand, was seen to have ushered in an uninterrupted reign of peace, God being profusely thanked for choosing the English as the ruler of the country's destiny (*Bhagya Bidhata*). Against this background of absolute political stability, the Mahisyas were exhorted to undertake measures for '*Samajik Unnati*' (social improvement) through the following activities: a) spread of education, b) pursuit of agriculture, trade and industry, c) devotion to work and to god, d) love and compassion for all forms of life. Curiously, this agenda was silent on the question of the pursuit of ritual reforms.

Consecrated with such loyalist sentiments, the journal devoted extensive coverage to the coronation of Goerge V, including such minute details as the name of the ship in which he traveled and its route and comparing his coronation to that of Judhisthir after the battle of Kurkshetra, the famous Mahabharata analogy for the reinstatement of righteousness, in an unselfconscious discursive collapse of the historical and the mythic. The Mahisyas

The Balakdashis of Early Modern Bengal' in *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designating Selves and Nations in Colonial Times*, New York, 2009, pp 69-120.

⁵⁸ The Mahisyas curiously was not even mentioned in the list of castes that had been looking for an elevated status. This silence actually corroborates my earlier point about the essential distinction between the earlier and later version of the *Mahisya Samaj*. See section II more details.

were directed not to miss the once in a lifetime opportunity to see for themselves the 'Pabitra Murty' (holy visage) of the royal couple and sing their praises when they came to Calcutta in December, 1911.⁵⁹ On this occasion Lakshmi Kanta Choudhury, a Mahisya zamindar from Sunamganj, Sylhet donated Rs. 2500 for the construction of a Krishna temple on condition that the daily *Sankalpa* (special offering in the name of a person or persons to ensure his well being) would always be offered in the name of the royal couple and their successors. The journal hailed it as a *satvik dan* (gift of the purest order).⁶⁰ Later in the year when Viceroy Lord Hardinge narrowly escaped an attack on his life, Bangiya Mahisya Samiti immediately rushed off a telegram to his office expressing its 'horror and abhorrence' at 'the dastardly outrage' and 'joy' at the Viceroy's 'providential escape'.⁶¹

In subsequent years this open loyalism gave way to some ambivalence towards nationalism. Till up to 1918, this is how prominent writers articulated the Mahisya position towards the colonial state:

'...we want British Government (to reign) supreme in all things. Absolute Self Government will do more harm than good...we want reforms in the present system of administration... so that family gathering in government offices (i.e. concentration of higher castes) may be removed... We want facilities in spreading education in our caste...'⁶²

⁵⁹ *Mahisya Samaj*, vol. 1, no. 8, Agrahayan 1318 BS (November-December, 1911)

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, vol. 2, no. 1, Baishakh, 1319 BS (April-May, 1912)

⁶¹ *Ibid*, vol. 2, no. 9, Poush, 1319 BS (December-January, 1912) This attack on the Viceroy's life was carried out under the leadership of Ras Behari Bose and Sachin Sanyal. Known as Delhi-Lahore conspiracy case, the assault took place on December 23, 1912 as a bomb was thrown at Viceroy's *Howdah* near Chandni Chowk. Basanta Kumar Biswas, Abodh Bihari and Aamir Chand were arrested, convicted and later sentenced to death for the crime. See Bipan Chandra et al. *India's Struggle for Independence*, New Delhi, 1989, pp 144-145. It is rather ironical that Basanta Biswas himself could possibly have been a Mahisya although the surname Biswas is shared by *Kayasthas* as well.

⁶² *Mahisya Samaj*, vol. 8, no. 1, Baishakh, 1325 BS (April-May, 1918)

Even at the height of nationalist agitations in the Mahisya stronghold of Midnapore over first the anti-union board agitation and then non-cooperation, the journal maintained a studied silence.⁶³ In fact, an office bearer of the Samiti wrote, while explaining the official position of the Samiti on the non cooperation question,

'Since there has been much talk lately over what should be the position of the Mahisyas on the non cooperation issue, let me clarify that Bangiya Mahisya Samiti has so many areas of activity vying for its immediate attention that the right time has not yet come for us as the representative body of the Mahisyas to say anything either for or against non-cooperation. Individuals are free to air their opinions on the question in their private capacity but it would be an injustice to the Samiti if they were to pass their private opinions for that of the Samiti. This would create divisions within the Samiti which is not at all desirable under the present circumstances.'⁶⁴

This ambivalence—silence on the part of the Samiti as a collective, but allowing individual members to freely air their opinions—certainly points to the existence of enormous pressure on the office holders of the Samiti from below. The complex way they handled such pressure may be understood from the Samiti's relation with Birendranath Sasmal, the most famous nationalist Mahisya politician. This is how a contemporary Mahisya writer narrativizes the issue:

'... the Kayastha Congressmen ...laid the foundation of a divide and rule policy which ensured, successfully, that there was no Namasudra-Mahisya joint front strong enough to take on the advanced classes in Bengal. The final stages of this unholy endeavor were reached when the Kayasthas of Bengal did

⁶³ Nationalist politics in Midnapore during these years has been extensively discussed in Swapan Dasgupta, *Local Politics in Bengal: Midnapur District 1907-1934*, unpublished D.Phil thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, 1980 and Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Local Politics and Indian Nationalism: Midnapur 1919-1944*, Delhi, 1997. I am grateful to Dr. Dasgupta for letting me read his private copy of the thesis.

⁶⁴ *Mahisya Samaj*, vol. 11, no. 3, Asadh 1328 BS (June-July, 1921)

not allow *Deshapran* Birendranath Sasmal to be elected as the Mayor of Calcutta, to be followed by his ouster from the Congress.’⁶⁵

Contrary to this later iconization of Sasmal, and the discursive representation of his ouster from the Congress as a slight to the Mahisya community as a whole, Sasmal was not associated with the activities of the Samiti in these years, except in a token manner. For the record, he was elected President of the Samiti in 1328 BS (1921-22) but never contributed a single essay to it.⁶⁶ His name also featured in the list of members of the General Committee of the Mahisya Education Trust, a trust run by the Samiti to support poor Mahisya students.⁶⁷ His supervision of the relief work following the flood in Contai in 1912 was duly praised by the journal.⁶⁸ However, in the very year he was elected President, he failed to turn up during the executive committee election of the trust.⁶⁹ In reality, the Samiti more or less coopted Sasmal as largely an honorary member, by virtue of his stature as a politician. It would appear from the pattern of his participation in the Samiti activities that he was more interested in an inclusive nationalist sort of an identity than a narrow caste based one. However, the very fact that the Samiti had to offer Sasmal high positions, and that he too did not turn down these offers, however, points to an important strategic choice on the part of the Samiti and significantly complicates our understanding of the relationship of the Mahisyas with nationalism. It is entirely possible that Sasmal himself too would have wanted to use the Samiti as it provided him with a

⁶⁵ Nitya Gopal Mondal, ‘Bharater Sangbidhan O Onogrosor Sreni’, *Mahisya Samaj*, vol. 96, no.12, April, 2007, p. 1302. These days the Bengali months are no longer mentioned in journal cover.

⁶⁶ *Mahisya Samaj*, Vol. 10, no. 9 Poush, 1327 BS (December-January, 1920-21).

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, vol. 3, no. 11&12, Phalgun-Chaitra 1320, (January-April, 1913)

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, vol. 3, no. 6, Aswin 1320, (September-October, 1913)

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, vol. 11, no. 1, Baishakh, 1328 BS (April-May, 1921)

ready opportunity to network with the high and mighty among the Mahisyas.⁷⁰ That apart, he required a ready and large personal constituency to enhance his stature within the Bengal Congress which was fairly upper caste in orientation.⁷¹

On the other hand, if on this one aspect of overt profession of nationalism the Samiti displayed some discordance with the goings on in the Mahisya stronghold of Midnapore, on another significant aspect—rather a defining trait—of Mahisya identity it showed absolute identity: the inculcation of a peasant ethic. An official report on municipal council elections in Midnapore in 1921 recalled that one Ashok Datta, an upper caste candidate, reportedly ridiculed the Mahisyas as a bunch of credulous peasants whom he would easily trick into electing him as their representative. As it turned out, the infuriated Mahisyas, for whom their peasant identity had by now become a badge of honor and also a route to ritual upward mobility, subjected him to a humiliating defeat.⁷² This assertion of a strong peasant identity in a way also tied up with the post Gandhian valorization of the peasant in nationalist politics, one reason why Midnapore was so heavily drawn towards Gandhian nationalism in the twenties and the thirties.⁷³ I propose to argue that *Mahisya Samaj* contributed to the development of this peasant ethos among the Mahisyas in substantial measure.

⁷⁰ The same list of 22 members of MET that features Sasmal as a member shows most of them were either lawyers or zamindars or successful professionals.

⁷¹ For an overview of Sasmal's role in Bengal Politics, see J.H. Broomfield *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal*, Bombay, 1968, pp. 210-11, 259-60, 268, 279 and J.Gallagher, 'Congress in Decline: Bengal 1930-1939' in Seal, Gallagher, Robinson (eds.), *Locality, Province, Nation: Essays on Indian Politics 1870-1940*, Cambridge, 1973, pp. 269-325 and Bimalananda Sasmal, *Swadhinatar Phanki*, Calcutta, 1967. I am grateful to Professor Bhaskar Chakrabarty for drawing my attention to Sasmal's book.

⁷² Government of Bengal, Local Self Government Dept. (Local Board) Branch, A 36-43, July 1922, quoted in Bimalananda Sasmal, *Deshapran Sasmal, Bharater Rajniti O Musalman*, Calcutta, 1994, p. 25.

⁷³ Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885-1947*, New Delhi, 1983, pp 239-242, 274-278; Bipan Chandra et al *India's Struggle for Independence*, 197-209; Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Local Politics and Nationalism: Midnapur 1919-1944*, New Delhi, 1997

As we saw above, development of agriculture was one of the founding objectives of the journal. Even before the launch of the journal, the Samiti had been running the Mahisya Banking and Trading Company for providing easy credit for development of agriculture and trade among the Mahisyas.⁷⁴ Virtually every single issue of the journal during this period published at least one piece each on some aspect of agriculture or the other: fertility of the soil, manure, role of technology in increasing yield, quality of seeds, techniques of seed preservation, importance of higher education on agriculture, animal husbandry, significance on cows, vagaries of weather, cultivation of cash crops, and persistent encouragement to educated Mahisya youths to take to agriculture as an occupation and be proud of it.⁷⁵

That this caste movement had contributed to the development of a peasant ethos among the Mahisyas and that this ethos in turn contributed to their remarkable unity during nationalist mobilizations has been noted by several historians.⁷⁶ The point that I wish to stress, however, is the implications of the systematic way Mahisya Samiti worked towards the development of this peasant ethos for its own politics. This peasant ethos, contributed to a strong sense of self-sufficiency which laid the ground for nationalist solidarities among the Mahisyas. Ironically, the pursuit of one founding objective of the journal (peasant ethos) was thus effectively at cross purposes with another (loyalist

⁷⁴ The matter has been discussed in the previous chapter in a different context.

⁷⁵ This is such a recurrent theme that even a random survey of *Mahiya Samaj* would throw up a large number of pieces on the issue. To take a random sample, a poem by Gajendra Nath Biswas, for instance, described *Chashas* (cultivators) as the true sons of the soil and called upon them not to accept any humiliation from the upper caste babus. *Mahisya Samaj* vol. 5, no. 3, Asadh, 1322 BS (June-July, 1915)

⁷⁶ See Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and political Unrest*, Swapan Dasgupta, *Local Politics in Midnapur*, Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Local Politics and Indian Nationalism*, Partha Chatterjee, *The present History of Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism*, New Delhi, 1998.

politics). This was not a story of a gradual transition to nationalism, however. As I have shown above that even in 1921 the Samiti refused to endorse a policy of non cooperation with the colonial government. The Samiti, indeed the entire Mahisya community of Bengal *as a whole* maintained a more nuanced position on nationalism based on conscious acts of choice. They professed loyalty when loyalty paid and turned nationalist when they perceived their immediate material interests were threatened by the colonial state.⁷⁷ This, of course, had to be placed against the larger background of the growing strength, changing social composition and message of nationalism, especially of the Gandhian variety.⁷⁸ Rajat Ray, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and others are right when they argue the relative advancement of the Mahisyas and their control of more surpluses in Midnapore made it easier for them to turn nationalist, but as I showed above, Mahisyas lived elsewhere in the province as well and not all of them had as yet turned nationalist, notwithstanding their control over substantial amount of resources.

I wish to qualify the conventional understanding that upper castes almost on reflex turn nationalist and the lower castes loyalist, by bringing in what I would call a middle caste under analysis. Accepting the larger point implied in such analysis that material conditions often play a significant role in determining the affinity or otherwise of a putative caste-community with anti-colonial nationalism, I wish, however, to emphasize

⁷⁷ The agitations against the Local Board in 1921 and against the imposition of Chowkidari tax in 1930-31 are two well known instances. See Swapan Dasgupta and Bidyut Chakrabarty and Hitesranjan Sanyal, *The Quit India Movement in Medinipur District*, in Gyanendra Pandey (ed.) *The Indian Nation in 1942*, Calcutta, 1988, for detailed discussions on changing material contexts.

⁷⁸ See Swapan Dasgupta and Bidyut Chakrabarty for more details. I feel, however, that both stressed on the role of the Jotedar as a local social group a little too much. As I have showed in the last chapter, there were much disagreement even among the small peasants. Hitesranjan Sanyal's *Swarajer Pathe* (Calcutta, 1997) and Sushil Dhara's *Probaho* (Mahishadal, 1973) discusses the impact of Gandhian nationalism in greater detail.

the need of looking at different segments within such communities and their respective expectations from the colonial state. In case of the Mahisyas, for instance, the protestations of loyalism would come mostly from those settled either in Calcutta or the eastern districts, either representing a minority in their respective areas or heavily dependent upon the institutions of the colonial state for a living.⁷⁹ The agriculturists, or indeed even the rich peasants of Midnapore, on the other hand, had, since pre-colonial times, maintained a sturdy sense of regional exceptionalism that persisted even during colonial times. As detailed research on the change in Bengal agrarian society since the onset of colonial state has shown that Midnapore, unlike other areas in Bengal, did not witness any fundamental change in the social composition of the controllers of land even after the Permanent Settlement came into force, except for a greater degree of democratization in patterns of land ownership by the same people.⁸⁰ Control over land and resource was therefore nothing very new for the Mahisyas of Midnapore.

Against this background of the emergence of a strong rural gentry in Midnapore, the *jotedars*, it is crucial to make a distinction between the development of nationalist sentiments among the Mahisyas of Midnapore and their ambivalence to it in Calcutta and eastern Districts, even among the prosperous sections among the community. In other words, the caste movement contributed in very different ways to the political position of the caste in places where they were dominant and where they constituted a minority respectively. In other words, the dynamics of the caste movement played out very

⁷⁹ The 1918 piece desiring supremacy of the colonial state, for instance, was written by Pyari Mohan Das, who operated from Sylhet. See above for details.

⁸⁰ Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society: 1760-1850*, New Delhi, 1979, pp 131-173.

differently in areas where the Mahisyas were dominant and where they constituted a minority respectively.

The point becomes clearer when we turn towards the more conventional caste reform initiatives. Swapan Dasgupta, for instance, writes that the Mahisyas living away from Midnapore envisaged the caste movement as a means to promote their separate identity and hence placed great importance on the institutionalization of reformed ritual practices. For instance, when in Dacca district, a *Majhi* claiming to be a Mahisya managed to get his three sons married to Mahisya girls, the girls and their families were declared outcastes.⁸¹ Again, one of the most regular—and perhaps also the single largest—contributors to the *Mahisya Samaj* of articles related to ritual reform practices, such as *Pokkhasouch* Sudarshan Biswas, hailed from Faridpur, an east Bengal district. Biswas spiritedly wrote in favor of observing *Pokkhsouch* (15 days ritual mourning, as opposed to a month). He even suggested it be further reduced to 12 days, as befitting *Kshatriya* status, apart from advocating the assumption of their markers of *Kshatriyahood* such as the title *verma*. Clearly question of ritual reforms was not of primary importance to the Mahisyas of Midnapore where their dominant position made it difficult to look down upon on them. Here, Dasgupta shows, as I did above, the emphasis came to rest much more on the inculcation of a peasant pride.

It is time now to briefly sum up this section before we proceed to a discussion on more obvious caste upliftment initiatives undertaken by the Samiti. I suggest it is necessary to maintain a distinction between various sections of a putative caste group, in terms of especially territorial concentration and also historical and socio-economic context, to

⁸¹ Swapan Dasgupta, *Local Politics in Midnapur*, pp 64-65.

better understand its variegated response to anti-colonial nationalism, across time and space. As distinct from Partha Chatterjee's polarized portrayals of almost complete separation between the mental worlds of the lower castes and upper castes in Bengal, I wish to stress both the continuities and the ruptures between such worlds, especially in case of castes that cannot be easily defined as either upper or lower such as the Mahisyas.⁸² It is problematic even to try to map the trajectory of a caste movement in a linear fashion as moving over time from an initial opposition to upper caste anti colonial nationalism towards an acceptance of its ground rules.⁸³ There is ample evidence already to show that even when Midnapore was completely plunged into anti colonial nationalist movement, it retained enough autonomy from the provincial leadership of the Congress based in Calcutta to chart its own ways.⁸⁴ I carry forward into the next section this distinction between the various segments of the Mahisyas while looking into the various caste reform initiatives undertaken by the Samiti during this period, arguing that it is not possible to understand the full implications of these measures without a simultaneous consideration of the development of a distinct spirit of entrepreneurship that the Samiti patronized through its frequent calls to the Mahisya youths to take to independent professions, trade and commerce.

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⁸² Partha Chatterjee, 'Nation and its Outcastes' in *Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, New Delhi, 1993.

⁸³ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Swaraj Basu appear to work broadly within this framework. See Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, *Caste, Protest and Identity* and *Caste, Culture and Hegemony* and Swaraj Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement*.

⁸⁴ Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Local Politics and Nationalism*, see also Sushil Dhara, *Probaho*, vol. 1, Mahishadal, 2002.

The core issue around which the Mahisyas conducted their campaign of more typical ritual reforms was reducing the duration of ceremonial mourning after bereavement (*asouch*). During this period the sons of the deceased had to perform a series of dietary and other austerity measures fit for the life of an ascetic, and refrain from all the comforts of an ordinary domestic life. The degree of such restrictions gradually declined as one moved away from immediate lineage and so on. According to traditional norms, the duration of this practice, a sort of expiation for the ritual pollution supposed to visit a family following the death of one of its members, inversely related to the position of a caste in the *varna* hierarchy. The Brahmans, being the highest caste, had to observe ten days' *asouch* while for Khsatriyas and Vaisyas the period stretched to twelve and fifteen days respectively. The *Sudras*, on the other hand, had to observe a month long *asouch*. In the early twentieth century, most Mahisyas (i.e. Chashi Kaibartas) found themselves observing *masasauch* (month long *asouch*), as befitting a Sudra. The Mahisya publicists therefore launched a vigorous campaign to bring this period down to a fortnight, by holding numerous meetings and passing resolutions to this effect, in tune with their claim to *Vaisya* status. The effort clearly was to distance themselves from lower Sudra castes. Barring Sudarshan Biswas, who continued to press for a Kshatriya status till as late as 1921, the majority of Mahisyas as well as the Samiti appeared to be content with a *Vaisya* status.⁸⁵ It would appear as though the debate between the claim to a Kshatriya status and a *Vaisya* one, to which we referred in the previous chapter as a source of some internal tension within the community, had been resolved, during this period, in favor of the latter.

⁸⁵ Sudarshan Biswas, 'Mahisyer Asouch Boishamya Nirakaran', (Removing the Disparity in Asouch Observances among the Mahisyas), *Mahisya Samaj*, vol. 12, no. 4, Shrabana, 1329 BS (July-August, 1922)

This campaign had started in the west Bengal districts from as early as late nineteenth century, well before Riskey unveiled his own brand of social engineering in the guise of the social precedence doctrine. As Ashutosh Jana writes, Jagadananda Bahubalindra, the king of Moyna near Tamluk in Midnapore, one of the five ancient Mahisya kingdoms, had the details about the ceremonial impurities of the Mahisyas ascertained at length, holding a conference of Brahman authorities in the eighteenth century, well before the advent of the British. This conference reportedly permitted the Mahisyas to observe only fifteen days' *asouch*, a practice that Mahisyas of Moyna had been following since. Later, Manohar Jana, 'a leaned man from Midnapore district', had convened a scriptural conference in 1277 BS (1860) about the status of Mahisya caste that continued its deliberations for several months. This again was well before the colonial census rolled out its policy of listing castes in accordance with its social precedence. Subsequently, Narhari Jana, a wealthy Mahisya zamindar from Jaipur, Midnapore organized yet another assembly of renowned scripturalists from all over Bengal in Jaishtha, 1297 BS (May-June, 1890) leading to compilation of relevant scriptural citations in favor of the practice. Yet again, in Asadh 1304 BS (June-July, 1897) he hosted a conference with several scriptural experts from all over India in attendance that confirmed the earlier rulings to this effect. Only a month ago in Jaistha, 1304 (May-June, 1897), Indranarayan Jana of Subdi, a village now under the jurisdiction of Nandigram police station, another Mahisya zamindar of some means, had spent heavily on convening a similar gathering which,

following heated arguments in favor and against the practice, finally ruled in its favor.⁸⁶

We see, therefore, that the wealthy zamindars of Midnapore had launched the *Pokkhssouch* campaign much before the Bangiya Mahisya Samiti formally took to championing it in early twentieth century. It is possible that one of the axes of the tension between the traditional *samajpatis* and the new generation of urban educated Mahisya reformers that had come to characterize the Mahisya movement in 1910 revolved around the overall control over this campaign gradually passing over to the hands of the latter.⁸⁷

Bangiya Mahisya Samiti, on taking over the campaign in the early years of the twentieth century, changed the mode of its operation. Instead of inviting a collection of Brahman scriptural experts to pass favorable rulings, the Samiti ran the campaign through modern associational methods such as holding meetings among Mahisyas themselves and passing resolutions and making pledges, committing themselves and their families to observe them in practice. Numerous such meetings were held under the auspices of various local branches of the Samiti at district towns and villages as well as in Calcutta, typically in the houses of influential local Mahisya householders and often attracted fairly large participation. *Mahisyajaji* Brahmans were almost always an inalienable part of these meetings. One such meeting in Kolaghat in Midnapore district, for instance, reportedly had as many as 4000 participants. Its agenda featured, in addition to *Pokkhasouch* resolutions, discussions on subscriptions to *Mahisya Samaj* and shares of Mahisya

⁸⁶ Ashotosh Jana, *Mahisya Tatva Baridhi*, pp 92-101. I owe the details on the location of Subdi and Tajpur to Mr. Susnata Jana, a college lecturer in profession and an authority on the people and politics of Midnapore by choice.

⁸⁷ The previous chapter analyzes this tension at some length.

Banking and Trading Company and the status of *Mahisyajaji* Brahmins.⁸⁸ This is a most interesting mix of measures calculated to enhance the self respect of the community as also its material well being. These meetings also worked out strategies concerning response to the opposition from local Brahmins, as and when they arose, and the input of *Mahisyajaji* Brahmins often proved invaluable on such occasions. A group of Brahmins in Panitras and Samtabere, villages in the border of Midnapore and Howrah and better known as the birthplace of the famous Bengali novelist Saratchandra Chatterjee, advised the local barbers not to serve the Mahisyas who had taken to observing *Pokkhasouch*. The boycott had been in operation for more than a year when a meeting was convened to sort out the issue and resolutions passed mildly condemning these Brahmins for their oppositions and proposing to start negotiations with the barbers.⁸⁹ The important issue here that must be noted was that questions of ritual observances and sanctions were now being decided in public meetings and not in exclusive gatherings of Brahmins. Such meetings were often marked with dissenting voices who, if not heard by the majority, wrote to the journal which usually published their positions. At this stage, indeed throughout this period, various strands within the community were more or less freely allowed to air their views and grievances. For instance, in 1913 Bamacharan Majhi, Secretary of the Howrah Mahisya Samiti⁹⁰ wrote to the *Samaj*⁹¹ that the representatives of his society were not allowed to speak in a meeting called to decide whether the

⁸⁸ Mahisya *Samaj*, vol. 1, no. 6, Aswin 1318 BS (September-October, 1911).

⁸⁹ Mahisya *Samaj*, vol. 2, no 12, Chaitra 1319 BS (March-April, 1913)

⁹⁰ Ashis Nandy is plainly wrong when he says that the caste movement did not take off in Howrah before the 1940s. In fact, in this decade Howrah provided the largest numbers of subscribers to the journal. Nandy seemed to argue that the material success of the Mahisyas led them to establish branches of the caste association in Howrah. I argue below that it was the other way round, the caste movement encouraging them to develop an entrepreneurial spirit that contributed to their setting up these enterprises. See *The New Vaisyas*, Bombay, 1977.

⁹¹ Mahisya *Samaj*, vol. 2, no. 1, Baishakh, 1319 BS (April-May, 1912)

observers of *Masasouch* (month long ceremonial mourning) in Calcutta were to maintain matrimonial relations with the practitioners of *Pokkhasouch* (fortnight long ceremonial mourning). This meeting passed a resolution—inconsistent with scriptural provisions, said Majhi—against *Pokkhasouch* without taking into account the views of the Mahisyas of Howrah who were fully seized of the fact that *Pokkhasouch* was *shastrasangata* or scripturally approved.

The campaign was clearly more successful in the western districts. A disappointed Sudarshan Biswas reported in 1921 that Mahisyas of the districts of Nadia, Jessore, Faridpur, Pabna, Rajshahi, Bogra, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Dacca and Maldah had still been observing *Masasouch*, as opposed to their counterparts in Midnapore, Howrah, Hooghly and Murshidabad who had already taken to observing *Pokkhasouch*.⁹² The relative success of the *Pokkhasouch* campaign in the western districts may be attributed partly to such factors as the relative strength of local organizations but for lack of material on the local branches of the Samiti and their activities the point cannot be pressed too far at this stage. Another reason that I have already mentioned was the numerical preponderance of the Mahisyas in these districts.

A third, and in my opinion very significant, factor that helped in the consolidation of a proud Mahisya identity in these districts is a combination of spirited campaigns by the Samiti with what I call some local, low profile, accommodationist politics of incorporation. In this also lay a clue to the way the rich peasants of Midnapore managed

⁹² Sudarshan Biswas, *Mahisyer Asouch Boishamya Nirakaran*, (Removing the Disparity in Asouch Observances among the Mahisyas), *Mahisya Samaj*, vol. 12, no. 4, Shraban, 1329 BS (July-August, 1922)

to contain the challenge from the humbler agriculturists who had refused to assume the name Mahisya if it involved having to give up their traditional practice of selling their produce in the market on their own. It might offer a clue also to the way the Chashi Kaibarta-Jelia Kaibarta divide actually came to be resolved over the medium to longer term. Let's pay closer attention to this nugget from the Census Report for 1911,

'Although the bulk of them (i.e.the Mahisyas) admit that they belong to the same caste as the *Chashi Kaibartas*, one section of them declines to dine or intermarry with those who personally sale their farm produce in the market. They say that the Mahisya is differentiated from the *Chashi Kaibarta* by the fact that he does not sell his produce except through servants of other castes. Anyone of them found selling his own farm produce in the market is outcasted and called *Chashi Kaibarta*. Should a Mahisya marry into a simple *Kaibarta* family, or one which is locally called *Chashi Kaibarta* (and not Mahisya), his readmission into caste is conditional on his making presents to the Mahisya Mandals of the neighbouring villages at a special caste feast. Severance of the marriage tie is not ordered, but further intercourse between the two families must be stopped, although secret communication or visits will be condoned or connived at.'⁹³

Attention is immediately drawn to this deft handling of what was clearly a very powerful internal tension. This partial or rather public self distancing from the Chashi Kaibartas or Kaibartas, and the readmission of a Mahisya who marries into such families subject to the organization of a caste feast, was, in practice, a very effective technique to slowly but successfully increase the number of the Mahisyas in the long run. Once the marriage tie itself was allowed to be retained, and secret communications and visits between the two families continued, it would be reasonable for the Chashi Kaibarta or Kaibarta family to begin to feel proud about the promotion of their son or daughter to the rank of a Mahisya,

⁹³ *Census of India*, 1911, vol. V, Ch-XI (Bengal) p. 498

since it did not anymore require them to abjure the time worn practice of marketing their own produce themselves. Moreover, as no major stigma anymore attached to such alliances, more and more such intermarriages would actually swell the ranks of the Mahisyas, because the couple and their children were known as Mahisyas in public. In effect, such marriages worked as hypergamy. Thus it may be possible to see outcasting as not merely an instrument with which the leaders of a particular caste seek to strengthen the uniformity of their caste by excommunicating an individual or a group; outcasting was not always the end of the road, at times such as these, it actually turned out to be a mid point in a longer process and a source of upward mobility. As I showed above, a Chashi Kaibarta family did not necessarily become socially ostracized or lose all relations with the Mahisyas following an intermarriage. All that actually happened was an absence of interaction in *public*. Moreover, it is reasonable to suppose that since such communications as were maintained between the two families were known to the Mahisya caste leaders, and they 'condoned or connived at' such interactions, it was likely that such marriages would actually enhance, and not demean, the numbers and prestige of the Mahisyas, as long as the couple continued to refer to them as such. Indeed, one can go further and argue that such marriages were a rather painless way of stealthily converting many *Chashi Kaibarta* families into Mahisyas within a generation or so. It is clear then that the Mahisya-Chashi Kaibarta divide was maintained most skillfully in public but in private the former had been practicing innovative—and least likely to evoke resistance—techniques to absorb the latter within itself in the medium and long term. Although intermarriages with the *Jalia Kaibartas* would still be followed by swift and permanent outcasting, it is not entirely unreasonable to suspect similar incorporationist processes

might have been applied to instances of intermarriage between Mahisya/Chashi Kaibarta and Jelia Kaibarta families.

Interestingly, therefore, Mahisya movement throws up two analytically distinct models of caste upliftment during these years. The first, associational, model was reflected in the activities of the Bangiya Mahisya Samiti such as holding regular meetings and passing resolutions at various localities all over the province of Bengal. The second was a more local and less noticed, familial-kinship practice such as the one elaborated above and on display in Mahisya majority districts such as Midnapore. More importantly, these two models were not contradictory but complimentary to each other. Through the operation of the second model which allowed, to an extent, the hold of the local caste sabhas or samajs over the countryside, it is possible to argue that instead of coming to a head on collision with the old order, the urban professionals running the affairs of Bangiya Mahisya Samiti had carved out distinct spheres of operation for themselves and left certain others to the discretion of the old sources of authority over the countryside. So far as I can see, such neat division of labor did not characterize the Mahisya movement in eastern districts where the Mahisyas were in a minority and the distinction between old and new sources of authority was not so clearly marked out.

This division of labor between the Calcutta headquartered Samiti and landed peasants and tenureholders of Midnapore may be further illustrated in reference to yet another dimension of the Samiti's activities and its implications on the Mahisyas of Howrah. From very early on *Mahisya Samaj* had published a number of pieces on the need of

harnessing science to the service of agriculture and industry, in tune with its founding principles discussed above.⁹⁴ Ashtosh Jana, for instance, wrote a piece titled *Eso Bangali Karmakhtere* (Let's Enter the World of Independent Professions) where he called upon the Mahisyas to focus more on innovations and setting up small workshops on commercially viable basis.⁹⁵ In his own electrical workshop at Birulia village near Tamluk, he had already started a workshop manufacturing brick and tile manufacturing machines, Edge Runner Mills, Pug Mills, Saw Mills and Rice Mills.⁹⁶ Again in 1922, articles discussing the agenda on the community offered pride of place to setting up small scale industrial units.⁹⁷

Such consistent calls for developing a spirit of entrepreneurship had profound implications on at least two levels. On the one hand, it was during this period that the Mahisyas began to establish a string of small scale engineering enterprises at Howrah, a sector that till then had been monopolized by upper caste entrepreneurs although it would take at least a couple of decades more before the Mahisyas monopolized the sector for themselves.⁹⁸ Incidentally, by 1922, as we have already noted, the highest number of subscribers to *Mahisya Samaj* came from Howrah where the nature of this small scale engineering industry was such that it heavily depended upon the Railways for contracts. In other words, they had to depend on government contracts for the survival and growth of their enterprises. This further reconfirms the analytical contrast that I have been trying

⁹⁴ See, for instance, Bangalir Bigyan Sikkha and Krishi Shilpa, *Mahisya Samaj*, vol. 1, no. 8, Agrahayán, 1318 BS (November-December, 1911)

⁹⁵ *Mahisya Samaj*, vol. 2. no. 4, Shrabán, 1319 BS (July-August, 1912)

⁹⁶ *ibid*, vol. 2. no. 12, Chaitra, 1319 BS (March-April, 1913)

⁹⁷ *ibid*, vol. 11, no. 5&6, Bhádra and Aswin, 1328 BS (August-October, 1921)

⁹⁸ Ashis Nandy and Raymond Lee Owens, *The New Vaisyas*, Bombay, 1977.

to highlight between the Mahisyas of Midnapore and their counterparts elsewhere in the province. In an interesting way then, we see here yet another instance of the dynamics of the founding agendas of the journal working out in cross purposes with each other. If the peasant ethos eventually strengthened the nationalist fervor of the sturdy peasants of Midnapore, the small scale Mahisya industrialists of Howrah, on account of the nature of their enterprises, stood to gain more from loyalism. Their relationship with nationalist politics then has to be qualified in view of this bit of micro history as well.⁹⁹

As I have been trying to argue all through this chapter, caste reform initiatives among the Mahisyas must be seen as eventually leading to a whole range of attitudinal change among them, of which only one, peasant pride, has received the attention of scholars. The point may be illustrated further in regard to the Mahisya attitude on education. A piece published in the Baishakh 1319 BS (April-May, 1912) issue explained it with remarkable clarity:

'Government shells out Rs. one crore for education in Bengal, of which the students pay only one lakh or so as fees while the government provides the rest through subsidies...The number of students who avail of higher education is very low and they represent only three upper castes...However, the burden of tax which finances their education is shared by other castes who send very few of their children into institutions for higher studies...in other words the lower castes are subsidizing the students of the higher castes...yet these castes spare no opportunity to berate the lower caste men who have not gone to schools and colleges...The agriculturists of the land count among the highest tax payers and respected authorities agree that Chashi Kaibartas/Mahisyas, Aguris and Sadgops are three predominant agriculturist castes of Bengal. The

⁹⁹ Howrah, however, saw very active participation in the Civil Disobedience movement. I do not as yet have sufficient data on the Mahisya participation in the movement. At any rate, my dissertation does not seek to cover the period beyond 1921.

Mahisyas have a far larger population than the other two. This large and influential community has contributed several crores to the cause of education. The question of higher education for this already heavily taxed community can no longer be set aside. It is imperative to set up schools and colleges endowed with provisions of scholarships and freeships for agriculturists. The government would most certainly pass favorable rulings for facilitating higher studies among these law abiding communities. We must see to it that our just government is crowned with success in this noble venture and the selfish characters who spare no efforts to scuttle such initiatives are stopped on their tracks.¹⁰⁰

This rhetoric, combing loyalism with a sharp anti-upper caste tone was watered down as the years wore on, but the core issue of making the most of higher education was pursued in right earnest. The journal regularly published lists of Mahisya students who secured university degrees, as well as names of new schools that came to be established in various corners of the province, often following generous donations from Mahisya zamindars. From such a list published in 1911, we find Mahisya students in practically every respectable college in Calcutta such as Presidency College, City College, Scottish Church College, Ripon College, Bangabasi College etc.¹⁰¹ Earlier, I have already referred to the establishment of the Mahisya Education Fund Trust, which incidentally functions even today, and to Mahisya zamindars making donations towards building hostels for students of the community.¹⁰² The Samiti approached the government to pay favorable attention to their demand for jobs, schools and scholarships.¹⁰³ The government, too, set up a hostel for Mahisya students at Dacca.¹⁰⁴ The Education Trust was eventually registered in

¹⁰⁰ Mahisya *Samaj*, vol. 2. no. 1, Baishakh, 1319 BS (April-May, 1912)

¹⁰¹ *ibid*, vol.1, no.2, Jaistha, 1318 BS (May-June, 1911)

¹⁰² See above p..the Samal being member of the fund trust and a sylhet zamindar making grant

¹⁰³ Proceedings of the AGM of Bangiya Mahisya Samiti, *Mahisya Samaj*, vol.3 no.9, Poush, 1319 BS (December-January, 1913/1914)

¹⁰⁴ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, p 56

February, 1919 under Rule 21 of 1860 while the Mahisya Banking and Trading Company had been already registered under the Companies' Act of 1882.¹⁰⁵ Several pieces appeared in the journal directing the Mahisya students to keep themselves focused on the pursuit of education alone and not be distracted about the larger factors influencing the conditions of society or nation such as politics or economy.¹⁰⁶

Again we see a fairly consistent policy of ambivalence towards, if not outright rejection of, nationalist politics. However, the establishment of so many schools and following so many Mahisya students passing out Calcutta colleges, it was only a matter of time before nationalist sentiments flooded their minds. This, however, was not to happen before the government refused to enlist the Mahisyas as a 'Depressed Class'.¹⁰⁷

This section then shows up a relationship of ambivalence between the Mahisyas and Nationalism during this period. As the official representative of the caste, the Samiti steadily maintained neutrality on questions of politics. However, some of its campaigns, such as the inculcation of peasant ethos, when in combination with the peculiar socio – economic and historical characteristics of Mahisya majority areas nudged the community towards nationalist politics while some others such as promotion of an entrepreneurial spirit and the way it had resulted into the formation of a new group of Mahisya industrialists at Howrah, worked as a disincentive to nationalism as did the way the Samiti envisaged the pursuit of higher education till at least the end of our period. Thus we can see that the question of caste reform initiatives cannot be understood except in

¹⁰⁵ Mahisya *Samaj*, vol. 10, no. 10, Magh, 1327 BS (January, 1921)

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*, vol. 3, no. 11&12, Phalgun-Chaitra, 1320 BS (February-April, 1913)

¹⁰⁷ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, p. 151.

alliance with the development of a composite spirit among the Mahisyas which also included this entrepreneurial spirit and peasant ethos, and both in their complicated relationship with nationalist politics. The final sections seeks to revisit some of these complexities in relation to the Mahisya initiatives to reconstitute their women and situating it within in relation to the broader debates on domesticity in Bengal in early twentieth century.

VI

In the case of the Mahisyas, caste consciousness persisted among even the tallest of their nationalist leaders, but often not in any ritual or social sense of the term. This is how Sushil Dhara, 'Sarbadhinayak' of the Tampralipta Jatiya Sarkar,¹⁰⁸ the parallel administration set up in Midnapore in 1942, and one of the biggest symbols of mainstream nationalism in Midnapore's history recalls his grandfather's contribution to his family,

'Chodda (i.e. his grandfather) did so much for the family. Spread of education within the household, educating my female cousins, bringing over educated Mahisya girls from respected families as daughters in law, encouraging them to undertake regular training in music and holding informal musical soirees...all goes to his credit.'¹⁰⁹

In this evocation of a happy Mahisya household, Dhara's reference to the role of an elderly patriarch as almost singlehandedly (re)constituting such a family is unmistakable.

¹⁰⁸ See Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Local Politics and Nationalism* and Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Quite India Movement in Medinipur District* for details.

¹⁰⁹ Sushil Kumar Dhara, *Probaho*, Mahishadal, third edition, 2003 (first published in 1973), p. 5. I thank Prof. Gautam Bhadra for drawing my attention to this book.

Also difficult to miss is his listing of the qualities that entitled a Mahisya girl to become an ideal lady or daughter-in-law, the two taken to mean more or less the same thing. Education and cultivation of music, he appears to suggest, makes for an ideal sister or wife and the highest service that a senior patriarch could offer his family was to spot such accomplished ladies and bring them over into the family as daughters in law or prepare the ladies within the family in a similar way for them to eventually grace other Mahisya families. Given that Dhara had been growing up in the twenties and early thirties, it is clear that his grandfather was performing the responsibilities he refers to at about this time, if not slightly earlier. I intend to argue in this section that such a model of ideal Mahisya household was a direct outcome of the caste mobility movement, exploring in detail various contributions to the caste journal on this theme, with special attention to the role of *Mahisya Mahila*, a journal brought out by an educated Mahisya lady and devoted exclusively to the reconstitution of Mahisya women.

Existing literature on the relationship of caste and gender has adequately established the tendency of caste mobility movements to restrict the mobility of women and growing opposition to liberating initiatives such as widow remarriage, and their similarity with upper caste ventures looking to 'improve' the conditions of their women, locating them within the overall ideological hegemony that in effect ensured the subordination of both lower castes and women.¹¹⁰ It is time, therefore, to approach this question from another vantage point, one that seeks to relate the caste reform initiatives among the Mahisyas in

¹¹⁰ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Caste and Widow Remarriage', *Caste, Culture and Hegemony*, ch-4, Swaraj Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement*, Ch-3, Sumit Sarkar, 'Kalki Avatar of Bikrampur: A Village Scandal in Early Twentieth Century Bengal', in Ranajit Guha (ed.) *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History & Society*, Delhi, 1989

regard to reconstituting their women with recent debates on models of domesticity in Bengal in late nineteenth and early twentieth century.¹¹¹

Through their caste movement, Mahisyas proposed to reconstitute their women overwhelmingly as wives and mothers devoted to the cause of the development of the community. From its third issue onwards, *Mahisya Samaj* published long pieces on the need for widows to maintain abstinence and chastity, sometimes with approving notes from the editor himself.¹¹² There were, however, important distinctions between the older and younger men within the community as regards their approach to the question of widow remarriage. There are two points that I wish to make in this context. One, even when widow remarriage was advocated among the Mahisyas, it was not necessarily done as a means to ameliorate the plight of widows. On the contrary, it was often advocated as a strategy to swell the ranks of the community in times when the discourse of the dying Hindu must have caused profound anxieties to the leaders of the community.¹¹³ This probably explains why proposals of widow remarriage were put forth largely by the older—and conservative—men within the community and spiritedly contested by younger—and therefore more exposed to liberal education—men who saw it as a negation of traditional practices. This is my second point with regard to this debate—that

¹¹¹ Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal: 1849-1905*, Princeton, 1984; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Difference Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British India*, *Subaltern Studies VII*, David Arnold, David Hardiman, Delhi, 1994; Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife Hindu Nation*, New Delhi, 2001; Swapna M Banerjee, *Men, Women and Domesticity: Articulating Middle Class Identities in Colonial Bengal*, New Delhi, 2004; Judith E. Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India: What Women Learnt When Men Gave Them Advice*, New Delhi, 2004.

¹¹² *Mahisya Samaj*, vol. 1, no 3, Asadh 1318 BS (June-July 1911)

¹¹³ P.K Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal*, Delhi, 1999, Chapter 1. Mahisyas, however, were not willing to join pan-Bengal Hindu mobilization drives, as we saw above. But they could not resist the hegemonic appeal of such formulations either.

we need not always associate 'progressive' choices with the youth and that we also need to contextualize what makes for 'progressive' choices.

A discussion on the kind of gender relations conceived and prescribed in and by *Mahisya Mahila*, a very singular publication that ran for five years between 1911 and 1915 and dealt with the duties of the ideal Mahisya women, would allow us an entry point into the complicated interactions between caste and gender within the Mahisya community.

Mahisya Mahila started with four basic objectives. It advised the Mahisya women to join forces with their men in popularizing the name Mahisya. But it did so in a very domestic idiom. Recalling an incident where a Mahisya family had been traveling in a train and met an upper caste family that did not know much about its new 'proper' identity, the journal exhorted the Mahisya women to complement their men in spreading the name far and wide.¹¹⁴ This imagination of a Mahisya *family* on the move and meeting an upper caste family in course of a train journey encapsulates several important changes in Bengali domestic life in early twentieth century. First, it was no longer considered unusual for a Mahisya family to undertake regular train journeys. In other word, caste was no longer something that one settled within one's immediate locality but needed to be communicated to strangers one met in course of one's journey into distant places. Second, these distant journeys were no longer undertaken by Mahisya men alone, but their wives accompanied them as well. It is as the traveling companion of men that it therefore befell on women to feel equally responsible to spread their caste name among the strangers. This imagery of traveling and accompanying their husbands as equal

¹¹⁴ 'Nibedan' (Dedication to the Community), *Mahisya Mahila*, vol.1, no. 1, Boishakh 1318 BS (April-May, 1911)

companions therefore imposed new responsibilities on the 'new' Mahisya woman. The imagery is striking also because it implies that Mahisya women were likely to meet their upper caste counterparts, if at all, in the course of public travel. This meeting of women from different castes was still so unusual that, accompanied by their husbands, hardly a regular event in their lives. This also speaks of the kind of Mahisya women the journal envisioned as potential readers—wives of men who had the means to travel by train and/or men required by profession or recreation to travel frequently out of their native land.

These new requirements demanded that Mahisya women cultivate some new skills. This links up to the second objective of the journal—'to work for the physical, spiritual and moral improvement of Mahisya women' so that the entire community benefited from their 'improved' performance of certain roles.¹¹⁵ This concept of a fundamentally changed circumstance required men to be as well equipped. The third objective required 'both the 'soil' (women) and the 'seeds' (men) must excel (*utkarsha*)'.¹¹⁶ This idiom was in consonance, perhaps unconsciously, with the agricultural ethos that *Mahisya Samaj* sought to cultivate among the Mahisyas simultaneously.¹¹⁷ The fourth objective of *Mahisya Mahila* flowed logically from this pursuit of cultivation—'this journal will discuss in the forthcoming issues the various ways of educating the Mahisya women so as to become the chief co-travelers of men (*purusher prodhaan sahachari*).¹¹⁸ This repeated

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ See section IV above.

¹¹⁸ 'Nibedan' (Dedication to the Community), *Mahisya Mahila*, vol.1, no. 1, Boishakh 1318 BS (April-May, 1911)

emphasis on an imagery and idiom of mobility suggests that the journal perceived itself as an important point of departure.

In some ways, it indeed was one. This was the only journal dedicated to the women of an exclusive caste group, and as far as I know in Bengal at least, it had no counterpart. It was edited by an educated Mahisya woman, Krishnabhamini Biswas, and was published from a village in the Nadia district.¹¹⁹ It is very interesting that at a time when *Mahisya Samaj* was debating whether Mahisya women should not use *Debi* or *Dei* as a surname, like upper caste women, instead of *Dasi* befitting only lower caste women, Krishnabhamini Biswas actually used her husband's surname.¹²⁰ Nadia was, unlike Midnapore or Howrah, not a district where the Mahisyas were in a majority or the capital of the province where the cream among the Mahisyas congregated for better educational and professional opportunities.¹²¹ However, as Jogendranath Bhattacharya, the president of the Nadia College of pandits, wrote in the 1890s, the Mahisyas of Nadia were especially advanced in education and many among them possessed substantial holdings and government jobs.¹²²

At the same time, this promise of departure had also to profess its dependence on men, both literally and in principle. The journal was printed and published by Damodar Biswas, the editor's husband. In his statement of intent for the journal, Biswas wrote that

¹¹⁹ Udaypur village within the jurisdiction of Kumari Police Station

¹²⁰ 'Mahisya Mahila Goner Upadhi' (Appropriate Title for Mahisya Women), *Mahisya Samaj*, vol.1, no.4, Shrabon, 1318 BS (July-August, 1911)

¹²¹ And from where the caste association journal *Mahisya Samaj* was published.

¹²² For details on Jogendranath Bhattacharya's opinion on the Mahisyas of Nadia and elsewhere see chapter 1 and 2.

the journal would concentrate on teaching Mahisya women ‘... the duties of women, some education, proper manners, how to be loyal to their husbands (*potibrata dharma*), child rearing, respect towards elders, culinary skills, first aid (*mustijog*)’ and so on.¹²³ It would appear from his list of desired qualifications for the ideal Mahisya women that formal education was useful only if it equipped them to become better housewives and mothers. It was as though the journal took upon itself the responsibility to train Mahisya women the very things that they had till then been learning from their female elders, except for the added emphasis on education.

This emphasis on formal schooling for women was taken very seriously. The first issue of the journal published a list of eleven new schools for Mahisya girls. It appears that Midnapore took a lead in this particular activity for all the eleven of them were established in that district.¹²⁴ Nonetheless, Mahisya women in other districts too received sufficient education. A list of subscribers published in the second issue shows that a good number of women from Calcutta, Howrah and Nadia also subscribed to the journal.¹²⁵ Besides, the journal received a steady flow of contributions by Mahisya women themselves-poems, serialized novels and some remarkably frank letters.¹²⁶

In the early numbers the trend of loyalism was very conspicuous, as much as it was in *Mahisya Samaj*. For instance, one Srimati Saraswati sent in a poem entitled

¹²³ *Mahisya Mahila*, vol.1, no. 1, Boishakh 1318 BS (April-May, 1911)

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ *Mahisya Mahila*, vol.1, no. 2, Jaistha 1318 BS (May-June, 1911)

¹²⁶ More on them below.

Amader Raja Rani (Our King and Queen), glorifying the British royals.¹²⁷ Later, *Mahisya Mahila* published a detailed obituary of Lady Hardinge. The aspect of her life that it chose to highlight in the obituary, interestingly, was her unflinching devotion to her husband. The obituary said,

'She loved her husband very deeply...When the Viceroy was hospitalized in Delhi following an attempt on his life, she displayed the virtues of an ideal woman by nursing him back to health. The viceroy has certainly suffered a most irreparable loss with the passing away of such a wife.'¹²⁸

Among other themes explored were excerpts from Vaisnava religious texts such as *Srimadbhagabatam* extolling complete devotion to husband.¹²⁹ Opinion pieces written on the ideal relationship between husbands and wives were inevitably along the lines laid down by Biswas' statement of intent.¹³⁰ While most of these pieces on ideal domestic arrangements were written by Mahisya women themselves, those holding forth on the right conduct for the widows were often composed by men. For instance, one such piece by Pulin Behari Choudhury exhorted the Mahisya widows to strictly abjure all ornaments and other forms of '*bilasita*' (luxury), eat only *hobishanno* (overboiled rice without draining the water, a kind of rice pulp) and observe *ekadoshi* (total fast on the eleventh day after the full moon every fortnight).¹³¹

¹²⁷ *Mahisya Mahila*, vol.1, no. 5, Bhadra 1318 BS (August-September, 1911)

¹²⁸ *Mahisya Mahila*, vol.4, no. 2&3, Jaistha-Asadh 1321 BS (May-July, 1914) For some detail on the attack on the Viceroy's life and *Mahisya Samaj's* position on the issue see above.

¹²⁹ *Mahisya Mahila*, vol.1, no. 2, Jaistha 1318 BS (May-June, 1911)

¹³⁰ See especially vol. 1

¹³¹ Pulin Behari Chowdhury, 'Bidhobaar Brahmacharya', *Mahisya Mahila*, vol.1, no. 9-12, Poush-Chaitra 1318 BS, (December 1911-April, 1912)

After a year in existence, *Mahisya Mahila* earned fulsome praise from the colonial state as well as senior Indian nationalist leaders. On the one hand B.Scott, private secretary to King George V, wrote back thanking the editor and publisher for bringing their publication to His Majesty's notice and on the other S.N.Banerjee lauded the journal in *Bengalee*.¹³²

The clue to this unusual convergence perhaps lay in the way the journal conceptualized the position of women. In ancient India, said one article, quoting H.H. Wilson, women were at liberty to choose their husbands and *pardah* was nowhere in sight. In those times however, proceeded the writer, a strong morality and religiosity among women kept their sexuality in check and kept them from indulging in *byabhichaar* (infidelity).¹³³ This discursive contrast between an ideal ancient India and a not so desirable and therefore to-be-improved present day was framed by the implied need to control women's sexuality which, was believed to result in extra-marital relationships otherwise. Within this paradigm even an iconic *Mahisya* woman such as Rani Rasmoni of Janbazar was cast as a devoted wife. Her accomplishments and confrontations with the British were narrativized as the a devoted housewife fulfilling her duty to her husband; looking after her husband's business after his death and spending the rest of her life making charitable donations.¹³⁴

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ *Mahisya Mahila*, vol.2, no. 1&2, Boishakh-Jaistha 1319 BS, (April-June, 1912)

¹³⁴ Ibid. She was the patron of the nineteenth century Bengali saint Sri Ramakrishna.

Occasional contributions from Mahisya women could, nonetheless, be remarkably candid critiques of Mahisya patriarchy. For instance, one Bindhabasini wrote a very moving letter to the editor, addressing her as a long lost childhood friend. She identified herself as an unfortunate childhood playmate (*hotobhagini khelar sathi*) of the editor and thanked her profusely for bringing out the journal, ‘... teaching and making Mahisya women understand how important it is for girls to study’.¹³⁵ She lamented her lack of education, informing that her only moment of happiness came from secretly reading the *Mahabharata*. Interestingly, she said her desperate attempts to educate herself in private earned her serious notoriety in her marital home.¹³⁶ It is perhaps possible from this letter to reconstruct, in a somewhat fragmentary way, two very different marital trajectories for Mahisya women who may have grown up together in fairly similar parental homes. At one end of the spectrum would be ‘fortunate’ women like Krishnabhamini Biswas and Shibani Mondal¹³⁷ whose husbands encouraged them to read widely and even to write. On the other end stood ‘unfortunate’ souls like Bindhabasini whose desperate attempts to educate themselves were denounced by their marital families. In other words, the extent to which a Mahisya woman could aspire to education depended crucially on the material position and temperament of her marital family. For lack of adequate data about their respective families, this distinction, however, cannot be developed any further.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ *Mahisya Mahila*, vol.2, no. 3&4, Shrabana-Bhadra 1319 BS, (July-September, 1912)

¹³⁷ See section III above.

Similarly, one could occasionally come across strikingly original contributions that did not always go beyond the secondary role of women but nonetheless hinted at some female agency. For instance, a piece titled '*Ramanir Marmakatha*' (true desire of women) justified women's preference for ornaments not as a decoration but as some kind of asset formation to bail out their men in times of trouble. Arguing that the cost of ornaments their men bought for them would never exceed, in money terms, the cost of keeping a maid servant for the jobs that they performed as 'slaves' of their men, the contributor charged the men with 'educating' their women only to 'show off' their own 'advanced mentality' to other men. The men, she wrote, displayed much more pettiness, especially when they bickered among themselves over the division of paternal property, than women who only occasionally craved for some ornaments and jewelry.¹³⁸ It is clear that some of the Mahisya women had clearly gone beyond the prescriptions of Damodar Biswas. This certainly was some achievement at a time when the rate of literacy among the Mahisya women was no more than a measly one percent.¹³⁹

The Mahisya men certainly followed the journal rather keenly. In a list of subscribers published in 1913, a majority of them were male. They came from Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Mymensingh, Jessore, Howrah, Hooghly, Faridpur, Malda, 24 Parganas, Calcutta, Murshidabad, Sylhet and Nadia. In terms of number Midnapore led the list, while Faridpur came a close second.¹⁴⁰ As I have mentioned earlier,

¹³⁸ *Mahisya Mahila*, vol. 2, no. 5&6, Magh-Falgun 1319 BS (January-March, 1913) For another instance of such originality in the pages of *Mahisya Mahila* see Sumit Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, pp 76-77

¹³⁹ *Mahisya Mahila*, vol. 3, no. 6&7, Aswin-Kartik, 1320 BS (September-November, 1913)

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

men were very eager readers of women's journals. Second, this detail also confirms my earlier point about the numerical disadvantages of the Mahisyas of east Bengal having been at least partly offset by their educational and material attainments. However, the ideal woman the Mahisya men had in mind were the ones who made for 'better wives and mothers'. The women writers, barring notable exceptions such as the ones above, mostly complied. As an article by Hemantakumari Ghosh on women's education said,

'Women can not be appropriate wives to highly educated men, unless highly educated themselves. Only serving the husband, cooking, sewing or writing letters won't do. Nor would a knowledge of Vedas, Vedanta, literature or science. We need that kind of education that enables us to become better wives and mothers.'¹⁴¹

These pieces were often very hesitant and tentative, making some bold suggestions on occasions but immediately proceeding to qualify them in several ways. The same piece cited above, for instance, advocated the participation of Mahisya women in public but immediately proceeded to define this 'public' appearance as following a course charted by such iconic mythological characters as Shaivya, Sita, Savitri and Damayanti. Except for Sita, all three of them stepped into the public only to save their husbands from serious troubles. More importantly, the writer declared that 'All these wise women lived by the provisions of scriptures, following the lead

¹⁴¹ *Mahisya Mahila*, vol. 3, no. 8&9, Agrahayan-Poush, 1320 BS (December-February, 1913/14). Ghosh, incidentally is not a Mahisya surname. At this stage of research, I have not been able to ascertain greater details on this piece, such as how it came to appear in *Mahisya Mahila*. I tentatively take this as an evidence of the journal possibly reaching out to a larger constituency i.e. ladies from other castes as well.

(*onugata*) of their father in childhood, their husband in youth and their son in old age'.¹⁴²

Charushila Dei, an educated Mahisya woman from Doktor Lane, Calcutta, presented a contemporary example of such virtues in a piece titled '*Shanta Sundarir Adrishta* (Shanta's Destiny). Shanta, a Mahisya woman, inherited some property after her father's death. However, her husband suffered huge losses in business and she most willingly sacrificed all her inheritance to bail out her husband and his family from their debts. 'Let all the women of Bengal follow Shanta's example and domestic happiness would follow', Charushila went on to prescribe.

This model of ideal Mahisya domesticity envisaged marriage in an instrumentalist way. In an article titled '*Pitrimatritva*' (Parenthood), reproduced from a journal called *Bigyan* (vol.2, no. 7) the key objective of marriage was identified as producing 'healthy' children 'well endowed with knowledge and character; physical and mental well being'.¹⁴³ The piece went on to defend the traditional Hindu model of arranged marriage where elders of the family chose brides and grooms for their children and defined marriage as an 'union of two lineages', strongly disapproving inter-caste marriages. In fact, it also listed the disabilities that made a man or woman unfit for marriage; insanity, timidity, disease, drunkenness, heavy smoking, deformed or diseased genitalia. Quoting Mahendralal Sarkar, the famous Bengali

¹⁴² Ibid. One may remark in passing that the accounts of how these ladies spent their old age is at best only sketchily available even in the mythological narratives of which they were a part. Clearly the writer was more concerned with a discursive construction of the desirable Mahisya woman than with neat biographies.

¹⁴³ *Mahisya Mahila*, vol. 3, no. 8&9, Agrahayan-Poush, 1320 BS (December-February, 1913/14)

physician, the piece concluded that the 'best monument a man (could) build on his own remains (was) to leave behind a healthy son'.¹⁴⁴ Recent research on communalism has shown how eugenic models of race theories populated the Bengali public sphere around this time.¹⁴⁵

The journal published quite a few interesting contributions on conjugal relationships. The husband was imagined as a teacher, the wife a pupil and the bedroom as a classroom. One such serialized dialogue sessions had Nagendradeb, the Raja of Tamluk¹⁴⁶ narrating a Bengali version of *The Merchant of Venice* to his wife Sarala, implicitly holding up Portia as an ideal woman. Portia, as most of us would know, did a splendid job of rescuing his beloved Antonio's life from the clutches of the greedy moneylender Shylock. The climax of the story shows Portia disguised as a male advocate taking up Antonio's case and eventually clinching it by dint of some ingenuous argumentation.¹⁴⁷ It would appear that the ideal Mahisya woman the journal valorized was permitted to enter public life only under exceptional circumstances. Usually, it was to get their men out of a difficult situation. However, they had to do that as far as possible in the guise of men. In other words, Mahisya women were expected to double up as men when their men were not in a position to do so on account of some unforeseen disaster. As I have shown above, even the exploits of Rani Rasmoni, perhaps the most well known Mahisya woman, were appropriated within this discursive framework.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ P.K.Datta, *Carving Blocs*, New Delhi, 1999

¹⁴⁶ He was probably a fictitious character. I do have any more detail on his identity at this stage.

¹⁴⁷ *Mahisya Mahila*, vol. 4, no. 2&3, Jaistha-Asadh, 1321 BS (May-July, 1914)

Monogamy was exalted as the most desirable model of conjugal relationship. A story spoke of a husband who deserted his first wife on account of her infertility and took a second wife. Subsequently, this second wife refused to come to his aid when he fell into some trouble.¹⁴⁸ It therefore seems unfair to conclude that women were imagined only as producers of children and reproducers of community values alone. However, it is their role as saviors of their men in times of trouble that continued to occupy pride of place.

The issue of heavy dowry was condemned unequivocally but here too opinion was divided as far as fixing responsibility was concerned.¹⁴⁹ There was some animated debate over the death of a poor girl called Snehlata. Her father had sold all his property to pay for her dowry yet the bridegroom's family refused to solemnize the marriage reportedly because he failed to meet their demands completely. Giribala Dei blamed the tendency among girls to acquire more degrees for their plight. The more degrees they acquired, she reasoned, the more dowry the bridegroom's family would want.¹⁵⁰ On the other hand, Rajendranath Deyasi, a school headmaster from Howrah, sent in a poem eulogizing Snehlata's sacrifice and holding the material greed of the society as a whole responsible for her death.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Ibid

¹⁴⁹ Bangiya Mahisya Samiti made its member sign a pledge that they would refrain from claiming or paying dowry. For a copy of the pledge see appendix.

¹⁵⁰ *Mahisya Mahila*, vol. 3, no. 8&9, Agrahayan-Poush, 1320 BS (November-January, 1913-1914)

¹⁵¹ Ibid

It is a pity that the *Mahisya Mahila* had to wind up its operations within five years. Even within the first year of its operation it had been struggling for funds, as obvious from repeated requests by its manager to the subscribers to remit their due subscriptions at once.

As such it was obviously a middle class venture but it did attract considerable subscription, even among women themselves. The reason it could not survive for long is probably its private nature. If it had been taken over by the Central Mahisya Society and subsidized the way *Mahisya Samaj* was, it could have enjoyed a much longer life. At a time when female literacy rates were abysmally low, particularly among the lower castes, running a journal addressed exclusively to females of even an upwardly mobile lower caste was a commercially suicidal proposition, the cheapness of print notwithstanding. During the time it was in existence, *Mahisya Mahila* did, however, provide a platform to the Mahisya men and women to discuss issues about women's lives and responsibilities that had appeared urgent and important to them. In the final analysis, it is easy to see the limitations of the venture. It was middle class, definitely aimed at reproducing patriarchal values and had a very limited reach. However, it did genuinely open up a space for exchange of views about and by women, and was run editorially by a woman and these were no small accomplishments in those times, apart from the occasional bold voices that it enabled us to hear, more as an exception perhaps but significant precisely because of that.

Through this journal, the Mahisya ladies were on the one hand provided with exposure to reading and writing, indubitably a tool of empowerment. On the other hand the journal also prescribed the limits of such empowerment—they could read but the reading material was deeply, and carefully, circumscribed; they could learn about special women but only about those who had contributed to the development of the caste-community in some way or the other. The experiment was to die a premature death but the ideals it had preached were picked up by a majority of Mahisya families such as that that of Sushil Dhara.

I propose now to relate the journal and its ideology within the debates on domesticity characterizing the Bengali public sphere in the early twentieth century. It is well known that from the late nineteenth century, a great number of middle classes and landed elites started moving into Calcutta from the Bengal countryside to take advantage of the opportunities created by the expansion of colonial administration and the opening of new educational institutions—schools and colleges. While racial exclusiveness and dominance of European capital prevented large scale Bengali entry into public and private enterprises respectively, educated Bengalis flocked to professional and administrative sectors as well as into clerical and mercantile services.

However, the growth of the colonial urban sector was not an unqualified boon. The upper layers of the liberal professions were racially reserved and congested. The majority of the middle class were employed as petty clerks in foreign administrative or commercial establishments. By the second half of the nineteenth century, hopes of any

major entrepreneurial breakthrough were also over. This passive and subordinate working life produced a deep sense of emasculation among the Bengalis.¹⁵²

Unable to pin the blame on the colonial state, the Bengali male displaced it on his women. Women became the target of both nationalist appeal and blame. Folk art portrayed modern women as self indulgent, spoilt and lazy creatures. The archetypal evil woman during late nineteenth century was the one who, empowered by education has discarded sacred ritual objects for foreign luxury ones. As we saw earlier, *Mahisya Mahila* had resolved this problem by imagining a femininity that was not averse to education only to the extent that it did not threaten conjugal happiness.

Since the alien modernity characteristic of the colonial professional and administrative structures and interventions of the colonial state was read as a series of deprivations, nineteenth century nationalism located its emancipatory project by discovering and enclosing an autonomous space under the rubric of the 'Hindu way of life.' While the liberal reformers envisaged the domestic practices and customs as a distortion an earlier purity, Hindu nationalists upheld them as an autonomous space over and above colonialism and resisted colonial state's interventions on this space as unwelcome intrusion.

Much of this concern revolved around domestic practice. The Hindu home was seen as a sphere where improvement could be made through personal initiative. The home, then, stood in for the outside world where the patriarch could reign without any alien incursion

¹⁵² This sub section is based on Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, New Delhi, 2001, pp 23-52

whatsoever. One particular aspect of household relations, conjugality, was at the heart of this project. Probably this was because it was based on the apparent absolutism of one partner and the total subordination of the other. It is in this context that we have to study the repeated exhortations to the *Mahisya* women to remain subservient to their fathers, husbands and sons.

As part of this overall logic, 'non consensual' Hindu marriages were exalted as better than western patterns of courtship. A lifetime of togetherness beginning from infancy was seen as ensuring a superior and more certain compatibility between the husband and wife. It is within this discursive position that we have to place the several *Mahisya Mahila* articles emphasizing the sanctity of 'non consensual' marriage and denouncing inter caste unions.

The logic of this discourse also emphasised the absolute and unconditional chastity of the Hindu wife. Indeed, much stress was laid on the maintenance of chastity of widows. *Mahisya Mahila* was no exception to this general rule, as the number of articles dealing with the right conduct for widows would testify. At another level, preservation of woman's chastity was envisaged as a compensation for centuries of political subjection. While the male body was perceived as weakened by the grind of western education, office, routine and forced urbanization, the female body was hailed as still pure and unmarked, loyal to the rule of the shastras. We must recall here the pieces in *Mahisya Mahila* exhorting *Mahisya* widows to observe strict norms of austerity.

This imagery of loving Hindu conjugality was more often an act of valiant imagination than a lived experience. From the 1860s women's writings appear, criticizing marriage and domesticity as a source of unhappiness for the woman. Then there was a slew of reformist campaigns for improvement in women's status within Hindu marriage. As Tanika Sarkar shows, all varieties of woman's writings unanimously identified and condemned two problem spots within the Hindu woman's existence—the pain of patrilocalty and the longing for knowledge.¹⁵³ It is precisely these two issues that come together in Bindhabasini's letter to the editor of *Mahisya Mahila*.

Interestingly then we find that on virtually every issue, *Mahisya Mahila* broadly conformed to the contemporary debates on domesticity and conjugal relationship in late nineteenth century Bengal. Unlike *Mahisaya Samaj* which took upon itself the task of carving out a distinct caste identity, *Mahisya Mahila's* focus was limited. The specific lines on which a separate Mahisya male identity was constructed—such as the peasant ethos and entrepreneurial spirit—were pretty much absent from the pages of *Mahisya Mahila*.

VII

This concluding section takes us back to another round of census enumerations and seeks to make a few general remarks on the challenges that still lay ahead of the Mahisyas. On the basis of the findings presented in the above sections, it is clear that the Mahisyas had devised a multi pronged strategy to hold together their community after the challenges in

¹⁵³ Ibid, p. 47

1910-11 that threatened to tear the movement apart. I have tried to focus more on the social and cultural dimensions of the strategy. The growing influence of nationalist politics in Midnapore was also a crucial issue. This dissertation does not deal with it in any detail since it has already generated a substantial body of literature to which I have duly referred.

During the census of 1921 too, caste entries continued to generate more excitement than any other part of this operation did. The Mahisyas continued to produce acceptable cases once again, but this time too they were plagued by challenges from Jalia Kaibartas and Patnis. Interestingly, their strategy of incorporation also appears to be a little more sophisticated this time. It would appear that they were now more open to incorporating the creamier sections of the other caste groups seeking the Mahisya name and clearly hostile to groups which ranked below their social status. This was no new trend, but became more pronounced by 1921. As the census report observes, there was no sign of general revolt against the caste system. Each individual community was claimant to obtain a step upward on the ladder of society, but it was equally insistent that those who stood below it should not be permitted to do the same thing. This was particularly noticeable in the attitude of the Mahisyas. At the last census, their claim to the use of the term Mahisya had been acceded to, and their energy on this occasion was devoted to ensuring that such castes as the Jalia kaibartas, Patnis or others who claimed to use the same term or a variant of it, should not be permitted to do so. This shift from a rather incorporationist strategy to a more intransigent one had probably been a result of the

steady growth of their caste association.¹⁵⁴ However, this is not to argue that the rigor with which caste distinctions were observed in Bengal had drastically come down. A Brahman enumerator still threatened that he would rather cut down his hands than enter a Jugi woman's with a Debi suffix, which was usually reserved for an upper caste woman.¹⁵⁵

The split between the Chashi Kaibarta and the Jaliya Kaibarta was now complete and the jealousy between them very great. The former now claimed to be of totally different origin. This, so wrote the census report of 1921, was a totally new departure, but what was by now well established was the 'somewhat better social position' of the Chashi Kaibarta turned Mahisyas.¹⁵⁶

In terms of numbers too, the Mahisyas were now the largest Hindu caste in Bengal, with a population of 2210684, beating the Namasudras by nearly 200000 and the Rajbamsis by about 500000.¹⁵⁷ Though they were most densely concentrated in Midnapore, they had a perceptible presence in eastern Bengal as well.

Interestingly, however, the Jaliya Kaibartas recorded a very impressive growth between 1911 and 1921 when they grew by about 17.6%. In fact, between 1901 and 1921, they recorded a growth of 44.8% in their numbers.¹⁵⁸ It is of course necessary to take such

¹⁵⁴ *Census of 1921 Report*, by W.W.Thomson, 1923, Vol. V, Bengal, p. 346.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 354

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 354. The rough calculation of 2.5 million is certainly acceptable as well, because the specific number given above includes only undisputed *Mahisyas*. There were many more in the process of transition. We do not know, for instance, whether the absorption of the Maitis had already begun.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 355

statistics with a pinch of salt, but beyond the margin of error, which may well be huge, too some positive growth may obviously be noted.¹⁵⁹ Even more interestingly, however, the census authorities, who were otherwise not averse to granting Mahisya representations a favorable consideration, were still far from convinced with the finality of the Jaliya Kaibarta-Mahisya separation process. While they did not deny the reality that the Mahisyas had indeed moved a considerable distance away from their Jaliya Kaibarta brethren, they were more or less convinced that the two groups shared a common origin, a point that the Mahisyas were only too keen to actually concede. To the student of the question whether the Mahisyas and Jaliya Kaibartas were originally of the same stock, went the census report, the close parallel between the two communities over the several districts of the province would appear significant. Both communities seemed to belong to the same localities, but the Jaliya Kaibartas were—but obviously—less numerous in the drier districts.¹⁶⁰ The close parallel that the report alluded to was not elaborated beyond the reference to contiguity alone and contiguity by itself is not a sufficient ground to testify to a common origin. Be that as it may, it does seem clear at this point that the tension between the Mahisyas and Jaliya Kaibartas was far from over.

Once again, however, the Mahisya movement survived the challenge successfully. The success may be attributed to a range of factors, as we saw above, and one of these factors has to be the new dimension of politics that revolved around the question of special

¹⁵⁹ For a whole range of critical enquiries on the ways census in British India was conducted, see N.Gerald Barrier (ed.), *The Census in British India: New Perspectives*, New Delhi, 1981. Of particular interest to our purpose are two articles by Kenneth W Jones and Frank F Konlon.

¹⁶⁰ *Census of 1921 Report*, by W.W.Thomson, 1923, Vol. V, Bengal, p. 355.

government provisions for the depressed classes.¹⁶¹ The definition of the term presented considerable problems to the census commissioner. He was quite sure that the term 'has not the same meaning as 'the backward classes', that is backward in education and civilization generally. However, the term was not to be coterminous with the lowest classes in Hindu social scale either. Then there were backward classes among the Muhammadans, Animists, Buddhists, and some hill tribes in Darjeeling hills and the eastern hill tracts, to whom he was to be careful that the term did not apply. He was also clear that education did not go hand in hand with one's social position in this country, and that it would be therefore incorrect to include all castes below a certain point in the hierarchy of castes according to the proportion of literates among them.¹⁶²

Finally, he arrived at a list of 39 depressed classes (i.e. castes) which between them accounted for about 11.5 million people in Bengal. The inclusion of the Mahisyas in list was by no means a foregone conclusion. In fact, Mahisyas per se were not actually included in this list at all. But Chashi Kaibartas, Jalia Kaibartas, Patnis and Tiyars were. The profession of the Chashi Kaibartas was returned as agriculture in this list while that of the other three included some connection with fishing and boating. Thomson in fact was 'in some doubt whether to include Chashi Kaibartas' but he went ahead nonetheless because 'they belong(ed) to the rural areas and occupy much the same position in the

¹⁶¹ For a comprehensive survey of these aspects of caste politics in Bengal, see chapters 2 and 4 of Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, Calcutta, 1990. While Bandyopadhyay provides a thorough analysis of the positions of the government over the years on these questions, what the castes themselves were discussing is left out of the ambit of his analysis. He has examined caste literature extensively in *Caste, Culture and Hegemony* (New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London, 2004).

¹⁶² *Census of 1921 Report*, vol. V, Bengal, p. 365

body politic in the parts where they (we)re numerous as do, for instance, the Namasudras, though they are higher placed in the Hindu social scale.’¹⁶³

This is a point of departure for us. Two very important disincentives for the Mahisya movement may be seen in that quotation above. To start with, once the Chashi Kaibartas and other fishing and boating castes who had earlier laid claim to the title Mahisya were included in the depressed classes list while the Mahisyas as such were not, the former could now look forward to some government sops for their collective welfare. The Mahisya movement, on the other hand had little immediate material benefit to offer to them, and in any case it did not wish to associate them with the movement. In other words, these castes now had very little incentive left to even lay claim to the title Mahisya, something that they had done before, notwithstanding the hostility of the Mahisya themselves.

Secondly, as the quotation shows, the question of the depressed classes did not so much involve ‘the Hindu social scale’ as such but a caste’s position ‘in the body politic’. The question had shifted from a primarily social plane to a predominantly political one, and the number of men belonging to individual castes would henceforth matter more, and not less, in a context where electoral democracy was steadily making its presence felt in Bengal. In this changed context, what mattered—that is, what entitled it to favorable treatment from the government—more was not so much the rank of a particular caste in a social hierarchy according to ‘Hindu public opinion’, but whether it was included in categories like ‘depressed classes.’

¹⁶³ *Census of 1921 Report* by W.W.Thomson, 1923, Vol. V, Bengal, p 366

The question of 'depressed classes' acquired a special importance from 1919 onwards with the Government of India Act of 1919 formally recognizing the 'special needs' of the 'depressed classes' and by calling for representatives from these classes among the nominated non-official members in the Central Legislative Assembly.¹⁶⁴ The quandary into which the Census Commissioner of Bengal found himself was partly a consequence of this drive.

Under the changed circumstances the internal tensions of the Mahisya movement doubled up as external challenges as well. On the one hand, the Mahisya leaders now had to initiate and maintain special educational and financial schemes to ensure the material improvement of their poorer caste fellows—as they had been doing for sometime—but could not any more hope to seek any government assistance. On the other hand, paradoxically, the very same castes which had been seeking the Mahisya identity were now left with much less material inducement for pursuing such a course of action anymore. In some way, then, the new 'depressed class' politics offered the Mahisyas the very same exclusivity that they had been craving for since 1901 or thereabout, now that the Jalia Kaibartas had little material incentive left to lay claim to the Mahisya name. At the same time, however, this politics threw a fresh challenge to the Mahisya caste leaders. To remain politically relevant, they now had to devise a strategy of electoral mobilization that had to appeal to a large mass of poorer Mahisyas and to potential Mahisyas like the Jalia Kaibartas or Patnis and promise them concrete material benefits. How Mahisya leaders dealt with this new challenge is beyond the scope of this dissertation but it may certainly some more clues to the subsequent waning of the Mahisya movement and the

¹⁶⁴ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, p. 61.

absorption of the caste movement within the fold of nationalist politics. Given that politics of caste and nation does not go hand in hand in most of the cases, it is important to investigate what brings them together on the rare occasions they do come together. This dissertation offers no definite answer to that problem. It only calls for a more complex history of the Mahisya movement in terms of some challenges that the movement had to contend with between 1901 and 1921, and argues that various dimensions of the movement needs to be understood with conceptual tools that go beyond simple models of Jotedar predominance or straying into nationalist politics for lack of alternative choice on the part of its leadership and so on. In sum, it argues for a history of caste movements that does not forget to note the moments of collaboration between upper and lower castes, and the internal tensions and heterogeneity within a single caste movement across time and space.

Conclusion

This dissertation has left several things out of discussion. It has not, for instance, devoted much attention to organized politics in early twentieth century Bengal, apart from the question of communalism already mentioned in the introduction. It is partly a tribute to the scholars who have already taken up these issues and partly an act of choice on account of limitations imposed by lack of time and resources. I now propose to briefly defend my omission of yet another crucial element—the Sanskritization debate.

Sanskritization as a concept was first developed by M.N.Srinivas in the sixties. Briefly, it means that the lower castes imitate the ritual practices of the upper castes in course of upward mobility movements as a gesture of submission to the larger upper caste world views.¹ Later, following criticism from various quarters Srinivas came up with a revised version of the theory, the dominant caste thesis.² This conceptual model suggests that the lower castes seeking upward mobility need not necessarily imitate 'upper caste' ritual practices but those of the castes dominant in the area concerned. I am afraid the Mahisya movement in Bengal has been more or less cast within this framework by the academic fraternity. That is perhaps why there is not a single full length study dealing with it, even though in scale this movement far exceeded those of the Namasudra and the Rajbansis. Second, the conventional understanding that a lower caste movement would necessarily seek to distance itself from the nationalist mainstream—incidentally a legacy of Risley—

¹M.N.Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, New Delhi, 1996 (first published in 1966)

²M.N.Srinivas, *The Dominant Caste and Other Essays*, New Delhi, 1987.

applies much more to the Namasudra and Rajbansi movements. According to this logic, if there was to be a history of the Mahisya caste mobility movement, it would be tainted by the slur of a 'nationalist' connection, and nationalism was a preserve of the upper castes anyway. In effect, the Mahisya movement was left out of both nationalist and caste-centric historiography. The former has appropriated the movement within the parameters of mainstream nationalism while the latter has not bothered to touch it precisely because of that. But what else can one do with a caste that was, in Rajat Kanta Ray's inimitable words, 'high enough to join the bandwagon of nationalism and low enough to initiate ritual reforms'?³

An answer to this question may be found in recognizing certain limitations of the Sanskritization model. It is well established that it is virtually impossible for a lower caste group to develop a coherent alternative world view and that they often borrow from the existing range of available ritual symbols which are often mostly upper caste. But I wonder who do the upper castes borrow them from? Do the upper castes not have different groups within themselves that follow very different rituals between themselves? In that case, Sanskritization does not go beyond a very broad generalization that successfully manages to bypass ground level complexities. I see the picking up of upper caste rituals and practices as an act of inversion, as laying claim, successfully, to a set of symbols, norms and conventions that legitimizes a position of superiority in terms of power. This imaginary on the part of the upwardly mobile castes certainly does not envisage a society based entirely on the concept of equality of individuals but then I do not see much merit doing a history of superior principles if it does not make room for

³ Rajat Ranta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal 1872-1927*, New Delhi, 1984, p.76

actual practices on the ground. A caste movement's authenticity or otherwise need not any longer be assessed through its compatibility or otherwise with other identities such as nation. A more valid perspective is perhaps to trace the mutual articulations of these various putative identities. Sometimes they converge, sometimes they don't. The challenge before the historian is to identify their internal ambiguities and pluralities and also map the historical conjectures through which they come into being, flourish, or eventually dissolve into obscurity. This dissertation has at best been able to do the first to a limited extent. In future I look forward to doing the second.

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