

CHAPTER – 2

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The history of Midnapore particularly of its south and south-west regions is in one sense the history of one movement in many respects. It is mostly the history of the movement of the Mahishyas, a caste community, for establishing their caste -position and for cultural assertion and also for political resurgence. The Mahishyas claimed that they were a 'pure caste' from time immemorial. They were all along a land- holding and land occupying cultivating people divided mostly in three classes viz landlords, tenants and agricultural labourers. During the Turko-Afghan and the Mughal rules the socio-economic set-up of the community, in spite of little communal troubles and administrative transformations, was quiet and placid, and it was in no way detrimental to their material and religious interests.

With the establishment of the British rule in Bengal and the introduction of the Permanent Settlement the agrarian economy of the region was changed to a very great extent. It was then there began the rise and growth of new land-holders like zamindars and *jotedars* in the Contai and Tamluk subdivisions. Some of them again securing *pattanis* and *pattas* in

the Sundarbans in the neighbouring 24 Parganas became *latdars* and *chakdars*. Some of the advanced Mahishyas now took to business and started business relations with the East India Company in respect of salt, mulberry and silk trades. Others again took services in the Company's merchant offices.¹ As a result a certain section of the Mahishya community of Midnapore particularly the Calcutta-based lawyers and traders thrived plausibly. It was at this stage the spread of progressive Western- ideas and the highly blowing *Sankritization* waves made the upper section of the community feel that their caste-identity and social position were not commensurate with their economic position.

This was not all. There were other grave factors which prompted the Mahishyas to fix their caste-identity and to establish their respectable position in the upper caste dominated Hindu society. It seemed to them that the label '*chasa Kaivartaby caste*' as it was being written in the property-deeds, was an ignominy. So, there should be put a stop to it. Again it is more grievous that Brahman-Kayastha-Vaisya dominated upper caste Hindu society in almost every case slighted them by calling them '*chasa*' i.e. bucolics. In this connection high caste people often cited ingeniously composed *slokas* to hurt the feelings and social prestige of the Mahishyas,

however honoured, wealthy and aristocrat they were. One of the *slokas* runs thus:

*as'vaprsthe gajaskandhe athavā narāvāhane ca /
tathāpi jātimāhātmyam na chāshā sajjanāyate //*

“A *chāshā* be he on horseback or on an elephant or on the shoulders of palanquin-bearers, can never be taken as a civilised person because of his inherent low caste qualities”.

To ward off these attacks a good number of Mahishya zamindars of Midnapore at the initiative of one Narahari Jana of Tajpur in Nandigram called a conference (1897) of the Mahishyas , particularly of Mahishya landlords in his zamindari estate to fix the caste-identity of the *chasa* Kaivartas and thus to establish their higher position in the upper caste-dominated Hindu society. In the conference it was unanimously resolved that the *chasa* Kaivartas would henceforth identify themselves with the ancient Mahishyas as mentioned in the Puranas and other Sanskrit *Shastras*.² The net result of the conference was the formation of the *Jati Nirdharani Sabha* with the whole-hearted support and collaboration and financial assistance of the local landed proprietors present in the meeting. The *Sabha* resolved to publish ‘*Mahishya Samaj*’, a weekly Paper to give a

wide publicity of the mission of the *Jati Nirdharani Sabha*, and thus to make the people of their community conscious of their high caste in the Hindu society.³ The *Mahishya Samaj* in its First Number wrote that they would persuade the Census Commission to schedule the *chasi kaivartas* as 'Mahishya'. In its following Numbers the *Mahishya Samaj* repeatedly appealed to the people of the community that they should always be loyal to the government and would try to secure the favour of the government abiding by its rules and regulations, and they would not participate in any anti-government agitation.⁴ Besides the *Mahishya Samaj* also wrote, "God has sent the English as the fortune-makers of India in a very auspicious moment. It would be the duty of all subjects to acquire from them all branches of knowledge".⁵ Eulogizing on the Coronation of George V, the '*Mahishya Samaj*' wrote "Has the world ever seen such a big empire? Did the first emperor of the world ever dream of such a big empire? Let our agitated India be blessed with the sympathy and co-operation of the great emperor".⁶ The *Sabha* took the decision that it would carry on research work on the origin of the Mahishyas and on their present status in the Hindu society. Shortly afterwards the identification-move of the Mahishyas as distinct from other castes like *Jalia* (fishing) Kaivartas and *patni* Kaivartas (the boatmen kaivartas) and so on became an organized movement. The *Jati*

Nirdharani Sabha started functioning through a good number of local Mahishya associations which sprang up in different districts like Nadia, Barisal, Faridpur, Pabna, Dacca and so on. In 1901 the *Sabha* founded *Bangiya Mahishya Samiti* in Calcutta. Since then the caste-identity agitation became a vigorous movement, and it drew the attention of the government as well as of other castes in Bengal. In the Census Report of 1911 the Superintendent of Census Operations, Bengal wrote that “ the (caste-identity) Agitation was carried on with great energy by committees formed by influential persons ...” and that the agitation was well-founded ... with evidences from the ancient Hindu *Shastras*, and with the opinions of the Nadia College of *pandits*, and the *pandits* of the Sanskrit College of Calcutta and also of the Benaras Sanskrit College.⁷ In the context of the caste-identity agitation the Census of 1911 decided to categorize the Indian population in terms of caste. This time the Superintendent made it clear to the *Bangiya Mahishya Samiti* that in the next Census the Mahishya caste question was to be given due consideration.⁸

In view of the progress of the Mahishya caste-agitation the *Jalia Kaivartas* forwarded their claim to the Census Superintendent that in the Census they required to be scheduled as Mahishyas as they were originally the Mahishyas of Mahishmatipura of the ancient Haihaya Kingdom of

Central India, and that owing to some political and religious convulsions they left their original habitat and settled on Kimvarta janapada , a Haihaya territory, and in the 6th century B.C. they came to be known as Kaivartas, as 'Kaivarta' is a variant of Kimvarta (kimvarta + an).⁹ Therefore the Kaivartas are the same as the Mahishyas , and there can have no distinction between the Mahishyas and the Kaivartas. The *Calcutta Mahishya Samiti*, a caste-society formed by the *Jalia* Kaivartas, hereby tried to make it clear to the Census Superintendent that Kaivarta is no caste and that the Kaivartas were originally the Kimvarta people. On these grounds the so-called *Jalia* Kaivartas would be scheduled as the Mahishyas in the Census.

The claim of the *Calcutta Mahishya Samiti* that all Kaivartas irrespective of *haliks* and *jaliks* should be scheduled under the general heading as Mahishya, led to a prolonged wrangle.

In protest the *Bangiya Mahishya Samiti* put forward before the Census authorities lots of authorities and opinions of Sanskrit scholars to prove that the *chasi* (*halik*) Kaivartas are a distinct caste, a distinct endogamous group and that they are different from the *Jalia* Kaivartas in origin, caste, and profession and also in social position. In this connection it is forwarded that in the Yajurveda and the Gautam Samhitas it is clearly stated that the *dhivara* (fishermen) kaivartas i.e. *Jalia* Kaivartas are the

offspring of a Vaisya father and a Kshatriya mother, and they are a pratiloma caste while the *chasi* Kaivartas are according to Brahmavaivarta Purana and Padma Purana are the offspring of a Kshatriya father and a Vaisya mother, and they are therefore an anuloma caste. Therefore in respect of origin and character the two castes stand poles apart.¹⁰

The long wrangle over the caste identity question at last came to an end in March 1911. On March '11, O'Malley, Superintendent of the Census Operations, Bengal informed *Babu Radha Nath Das*, Secretary of the *Calcutta Mahishya Samiti* that all Mahishyas could not be returned under one general heading "as the use of the term Mahishya is confined to the *chasi* Kaivartas only ...".¹¹ On the same date O'Malley sent this his information to the Secretary of the *Bangiya Mahishya Samiti*. This was indeed a great success of the Mahishya movement in the crucial test for caste-identity fought for more than a decade.

Henceforth the Mahishya movement went on advancing with a great enthusiasm as it held before the *chasi* Kaivartas the hope that they would attain a separate caste status, and that they would thus obtain a step upward on the ladder of society, and that '*chasa na sajjanayate*' would be warded off. But soon a cloud came over the movement. A split became open in the Subdi conference of the zamindars of Contai and Tamluk subdivisions of

Midnapore over the taking to the Mahishya designation and the adoption of the Vaisya status for the *chasi* Kaivartas.¹² The traditional levers of power in the community like the high-born conservative Kaivartas expressed openly that they felt no interest in taking to the Vaisya status as they were content with their clean Sudra status.¹³ While the poorer section of the *chasi* Kaivartas preferred their *chasi* Kaivarta designation to Mahishya. On the other hand the progressive and educated zamindars and lawyers and journalists claimed Vaisya status for the Mahishya community. As a result 'a sort of social revolution was on the way in the Mahishya community'. But owing to the pervading influence of the zamindars and *jotedars* over the community the split did not stand. And the Mahishya movement was crowned with success.

The Mahishya movement faced a new problem after the publication of the Census Report of 1921. Now it was so thought that the Census provided an opportunity to the low-castes like the *Jalia* Kaivartas and the *Patnis* and others, and as a result they might put forward claims to use the term Mahishya or a variant of it for attaining a higher status. Hence the low castes started a new agitation for achieving their desired goal with great enthusiasm. It was at this stage the *Mahishya Samaj*, the mouthpiece of the *Bangiya Mahishya Samaj*, raised an uproar and vehemently protested against

this design of the low castes.¹⁴ In this connection the *Mahishya Samaj* warned that if the mercenary *pandits* would justify the totally unjustified claim of the *Jalia* Kaivartas and others on the basis of farfetched and concocted *slokas* from the Sanskrit texts they would not be spared, and they would not be taken to act as honoured *purohits* in their rituals and social festivities. The *purohit* section of the priests was alarmed as this would pave the way for a social revolution.¹⁵ Hence the contending low castes lost their stand to fight for rising steps up in their social ladder. As a result the agitation of the low castes for attaining higher status in the society did not proceed further. It was thus the caste-identity of the Mahishyas was firmly confirmed and socially established.

The leaders of the movement realized unhesitatingly that only with the spread of education they could westernize themselves, and they could come to the touch of the government, and thus they would themselves do the official works without the via media of Brahman- Vaishyas - Vaidyas. That is why the big zamindars and even the second grade landlords set up in their estates free Primary Schools, Middle English Schools and even High English Schools.¹⁶ Besides they made arrangements in a number of ways for the accommodation and education of Mahishya students desirous of having higher education in Calcutta. For an easy spread of education the *Mahishya*

Samiti set up *Mahishya Sikshya Bistar Bhandar* ; and for offering educational help to poor students it set up *Mahishya Anath Bhandar*.¹⁷ Moreover the *Samiti* encouraged Mahishya students to set sail for foreign countries to study Law, Engineering and Medicine. This encouragement of the *Samaj* proved highly successful. The veteran lawyers like Birendra Nath Sasmol and the ingenious engineers like Asutosh Jana, two distinguished Mahishyas led in due course the Mahishya movement in all its different stages successfully, and helped the Mahishyas to form a well-knit community and to assert its political resurgence through successive movements.

One noteworthy feature of the Mahishya awakening of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the attempts of the *Samiti* for the spread of western education in the Mahishya community. The *Bangiya Mahishya Samiti* and its mouthpiece the *Mahishya Samaj* gave much importance to women's uplift and to the spread of female education. According to the *Samiti* the three grave social ills of the *Mahishya Samaj* were women illiteracy, child- marriage and dowry system.¹⁸ The *Mahishya Samaj* wrote: "The progress of a caste is impossible without the progress of women".¹⁹ And the *Mahishya Mahila* (*Jaistha- Ashadh* 1319 B.S.) wrote: "... without female education no caste or community or nation could never



make any progress".²⁰ But it is peculiar that the Mahishya leaders along with the spread of female education did not think of westernizing Mahishya women. They only thought of idealizing their womanhood with the honoured ideal lives of Sita , Sabitri, Damayanti of the epics.²¹ It is thus the Mahishya leaders tried to build the basic foundation of the Mahishya community. In this connection it is to be noted that the Mahishya leaders so thought that Mahishya women with this ideal education would surely teach their children , relatives and so on that the name of their caste was Mahishya and not *chasi* Kaivarta. Obviously the awakening of the Mahishya community was thus being done on a solid social, educational and religious base.

The leaders of the *Mahishya Samiti* were aware of the fact that the Mahishyas could in no way be a well-knit community till its economic backwardness was at least bearably minimised. That is why the *Samiti* in almost all its meetings and conferences discussed and devised measures for the economic development of the community.²² The zamindars were asked to help their *prajas* and *chasis* in respect of cultivation particularly in the plantation period and in dire times.²³ In addition to this there was established with the initiative of the Mahishya leaders the Agricultural Association of Bengal for agricultural improvement. Besides the *Samiti* took initiative in

setting up the Mahishya Banking and Trading Company to assist the Mahishyas with business loans and advice.²⁴ But it is a pity that both these agencies could not properly help the agriculturists and traders. Be that as it may these two agencies of the nascent *Mahishya Samaj* paved a new way for them to a newer life. Herein lay the credit of the Mahishya movement.

The solution of the caste identity question and the establishment of the caste solidarity and the gradual socio-economic changes transformed the horizontally differentiated Mahishyas into a homogeneous community. The community was always well aware of its newly achieved caste status and *chasi-profession*. The British rule and western education and western ideas of the representative form of government gradually made the community politically agile. Now the difference between the rulers and ruled and their difference of interests came to picture. The *Mahishya Samaj* appealed to the Viceroy for a share of the people in the governance of the country. In this connection they argued that “every land-owning proprietor without limitation or restriction, every tenure holder, every occupancy *ryot*, actual cultivator of the soil, each of whom has a stake in land, may possess a right to vote in the election of the council”.²⁵

During the Boycott and Swadeshi Movement the once loyal Mahishyas vehemently protested against the government design of

partitioning Mother Bengal, and they enthusiastically participated in protest meetings, processions and pickettings against the use of foreign goods with the sole demand for annulling the Partition.²⁶ It is peculiar that the Mahishya movement against the foreign rule did not abate with the collapse of the Anti-Partition movement and it went on in various forms in the following decade. The post-war crisis aggravated their distrust in and anger for the foreign rule. So in the Gandhi-led Non-Cooperation Movement the Mahishyas of Midnapore, particularly of Contai and Tamluk played a leading role, and they were sure that they would win in this their moral war against the foreign demon.

The Mahishya movement assumed a new dimension during the non-violent Non-Cooperation Movement. It was at this time the Anti-Union Board Agitation (1920- 21) of Midnapore was merged to a great extent with the national movement. As a result No-Union Board Movement got a sustaining impetus and strength, and became a forceful movement. The Union Board system was introduced in the district of Midnapore in 1920 with the avowed intention of the government to municipalize i.e to modernize the village life. In the initial stage this government drive was welcomed. It was hoped that a greater number of educated people would henceforth participate in public life. Birendra Nath Sasmol the veteran

Mahishya leader, soon made it clear to the people that the primary objective of the Bengal Village Self-Government Act of 1919 was only to strengthen administration at the grassroots.²⁷ That is why there started the Anti-Union Board Agitation to resist the introduction of the Act. The Agitation became so powerful and effective that the authority thought it wise to repeal the Act.²⁸ To the renascent Mahishya Samaj it was their great victory over the colonial demon. This their victory gave them strength and confidence for their protests against the foreign rule in the coming days.

This awakening of the people of Midnapore provided them with moral courage and mental strength to fight against all odds and ills both in the home and national fronts. During the Civil Disobedience Movement under the leadership of Sasmol they participated in the movement with great vigour and expectations. True, the expectations were not fulfilled. Yet it is to be noted that the Gandhi- Irwin Pact could not damp their spirit for ever long. On the contrary they took the oath that they would remain prepared to respond to any and every call of the nation when it would reach them. This their vow was not merely hollow words. This was true to every word that the Mahishya dominated Contai subdivision established independent provisional parallel Governments in (i) Patashpur (October, 1942 – December, 1942), (ii) Khejuri (October, 1942 – December, 1942) and (iii) Contai (July, 1943 –

December, 1943) during the Quit India Movement caring little what worse might come to them.

The Mahishya movement of the early twentieth century is a sort of social revolution. The net result of the movement was the renaissance of Mahishya, the re-awakening of the Mahishya community. The movement made the Mahishyas a well-knit community. It assured their caste identity. In other words it crystallized their caste-peasant identity. It made the community socially coherent, economically secure and culturally advanced. As a result the Mahishyas felt proud of their caste and social status. It is noteworthy that one Ananga Mohan Chakrabarti, a candidate for the Tamuk- Contai seat in the election to the Legislative Council of 1921, lost his credibility because of his one outré and derogatory remark that Midnapore had no future as long as it remained a land of chasas.²⁹ The Amrita Bazar Patrika noted that Mr. Chakrabati's remark so hurt the people of Mahishya Midnaporee that he was hounded of in a meeting held in Midnapore. The 'crystallization of peasant-pride' i.e Mahishya caste-pride made a serious impact on the future political mobilization in Midnapore so vigorously and so effectively that the British government had to take afterwards stern measures in respect of implementing its administrative policies which were detrimental to the interests of the people.

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