

The Mahishyas : The Wrangle over Caste-identity

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The history of Midnapur 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 Mahishya 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 took business as their profession 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 Midnapur 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 Kaivarta by 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 ignored 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:

Aśvaprsthe 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 Midnapur 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 meetings. The *Sabha* resolved that they will 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 1901 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 title as Mahishya, led to a prolonged wrangle.

In protest the *Bangiya Mahishya Samiti* put forward before the Census authorities lots of 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 Yanjavalkya 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 are 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 termed under one general title "as the use of the term Mahishya is confined to the *chasi* Kaivartas only ...". On the same date O'Malley sent this 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 Midnapur over the taking to of the Mahishya designation and the adoption of the Vaisya status for the *chasi* Kaivartas.¹¹ 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.¹² 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 that 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 uproar and vehemently protested against this design of the low castes. 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 accepted 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.¹³ 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.

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