CONCLUSION
A study of the organised movements for social mobility in Bengal in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries inevitably suggests that caste was an important factor in the socio-political life of this province. Bengal was no exception to the general rule, although problems of untouchability or social disability were not that acute here. Caste-consciousness was utilised for the political mobilisation of a vast multitude, still largely untouched by a secular culture or a more broad-based national politics. And it was the limited nature of the process of modernisation under colonial rule, that led to a rejuvenation of such caste-sentiments in the cultural and social consciousness of the Bengali Hindus, gradually leading to their articulation in political life. But at the same time, the very forms of expression of such sentiments led to an erosion of the traditional society as well.

Caste as a social institution was not new in Bengal, neither was the phenomenon of corporate social mobility. Indeed, the caste system could exist for such a long time because of this limited flexibility that allowed positional readjustments for ambitious groups coming up from the bottom from time to time. But under colonial rule, the whole phenomenon assumed new dimensions. The political and economic changes of this period led to a disintegration of the old, hierarchical, interdependent relationships between castes. On the one hand, the intrusion of the foreign rule corroded the local power base that maintained
the social discipline and punished the errant. On the other, a market economy delinked caste from the system of distribution of economic opportunities and rewards; for no occupation was now a monopoly of any particular caste. The result was a higher degree of social mobility. But this did not threaten the existence of caste as a social institution. For ritual rank was still an important index of social status. And this was mainly due to the limited nature of change. In spite of some vertical social mobility, it was still the men of the higher castes who, being traditionally in a privileged position, largely monopolised the fruits of the new order. A positive relation between higher ritual rank and material prosperity still held good, despite a relatively greater degree of inter-occupational mobility. The lower caste individuals who were coming up in social plane, by taking advantage of the new opportunities (mainly trade, agriculture and the new professions), could not, therefore, conceive of mobility in a secular context alone or as an individual achievement. On the contrary, they thought of corporate mobility in caste hierarchy, that was reminiscent of the older days. This happened also because there was very little cultural reorientation of the masses. The new western liberal ideas remained confined to the men of the higher castes for a long time, while education itself led to a greater dissemination of knowledge about
classical Indian culture. Prescriptions of caste, still determined the patterns of social interaction and dominated inter-personal group-relations of the Bengali Hindus. Hence these people, though conscious of their new secular status and aware of the existence of a market system, instead of demanding a levelling off of the society, went for Sanskritization and demanded higher ritual ranks, thus consciously endorsing the caste system. But the way they expressed their sentiments also weakened the structure of the traditional society and its behaviour pattern. The largescale appropriation of symbols of higher ritual status signified a protest against the institution of caste, for it used to make those symbols an exclusive monopoly of the higher castes alone. And above all, the very idea of organising movements for caste mobility, and that, too, by a number of castes at a time, threatened the hierarchical structure itself and challenged by implication the ideology of caste, that made caste ranking theoretically immutable in the upward direction. Moreover, the marks of distinction between castes were fading out, because of Sanskritization and other forms of reference group behaviour. The different caste groups, both high and low, were becoming increasingly similar, so far as their social customs and ritual behaviour were concerned - a phenomenon which Risley had discovered in Bengal as early as in the 1890's. But still at the level of popular consciousness, caste identity remained
important in determining social relations of the Bengali Hindus, although now it was important more in a secular context rather than ritual, as it had started influencing the secondary group relations or public life in Bengal. This was mainly due to colonial policy.

Post-1857 British policy towards the indigenous social institutions was one of non-intervention.\footnote{All the aspects of this policy have not been covered in the present study, for they have already received adequate and excellent treatment in T.R. Metcalf, The Aftermath of Revolt: India 1857-1870, (Princeton, 1964).} Caste-autonomy was legally recognised and caste-groups were regarded as valid social entities. But the system, with its intricate complexities, proved an enigma to the foreign rulers. It had already attracted the wrath of the Missionaries and the academic attention of the Orientalists. But now administrative exigencies demanded far deeper analyses. First of all any executive action required a detailed knowledge of the customs and beliefs of the subject society. And then, to control it more effectively, the rulers had to know the inner social divisions of the ruled, so that one group could be played off against the other, if any of them would
challenge the colonial connection. This realisation led to
the sponsoring of a number of ethnographic studies and
initiating the decennial census surveys. These colonial
ethnographers in the late nineteenth century discovered two
central contradictions in the pluralist society of Bengal:
one between the Hindus and the Muslims and the other among
the Hindus themselves, between the more advanced high caste
bhadraloks at the one end and the under-privileged lower
castes, eventually known as the 'depressed classes', at the
other. This stereotype began to influence the colonial
policy when the bhadraloks began to question the legitimacy
of the Raj at the turn of the century. In order to weaken
their movement the British first tried to rally the Muslims
and, then with equal consistency, sought to mobilize the
depressed classes in support of the Raj. This they did by
evolving a policy of 'protective discrimination', that sought
to grant special favour in matters of education, employment
and constitutional rights, first, to the Muslims and, then,
to the depressed classes, later called the 'Scheduled Castes'.
The Bengal Government had some initial hesitation about
extending the policy towards the depressed classes, because
the Muslims were politically more important in this province.
The problem of untouchability was also less acute, and the
depressed classes, by all-India definition, included only
the untouchables. But the Government of India insisted on a
uniform policy throughout the country and the Bengal Government later resolved its dilemma by defining the Scheduled Castes as those who were socially and politically backward to deserve the special protection of the Government. This backwardness was to be determined only through its own subjective judgement. In this way, Bengal, along with the rest of the country, moved towards a corporate pluralist society, where ethnic or caste status of individuals was taken into consideration for distributing official patronage. The policy was partly to redress the existing social imbalances, but partly to draw the attention of the larger section of the Hindu community away from the rising waves of the nationalist movement. Such a policy would further encourage structural pluralism, which could be taken advantage of.

This conscious move towards developing a corporate pluralist society in the colonial set-up did bring forth its expected results. As caste status determined the nature of entitlement to government patronage, caste increasingly became a rallying symbol for political mobilization. A social category was thus transformed into an interest group. True, the modern caste movements for social mobility did not merely result from a clannish desire for power or patronage, although it might have been present in the minds of some of the leaders. A desire for various forms of freedom, as Kathleen Gough would
put it, was a much stronger motive for a majority of the people involved in such movements. Yearning for freedom should be called protest against the absence of it, and in many caste movements, like that of the Namasudras, such a spirit of protest against social and economic injustices led to the growth of an articulate community consciousness that cut across its inner class divisions. Sometimes this consciousness expressed itself through a defiance of authority of the higher castes and sometimes through communal strife with other similar social groups. But in course of time many of these movements assumed a political overtone, as their continued exclusion from the socio-economic privileges and their newly aroused self-respect, filled them with a sense of alienation from the better-privileged higher castes and their political agitations. The colonial policy of protective discrimination only contributed further to this development, for its beneficiaries, particularly the elites among the depressed classes, felt more grateful to the Raj and in the process, more loyal to it. The colonial regime appeared in their consciousness to be their most trusted friend - nay, their 'liberator'. Such a different perception of history, in which the colonial rule seemed to be more

egalitarian than the traditional regimes of the Hindu or Muslim rulers, stood in sharp contrast to the practice of glorifying the pre-colonial past by the nationalists. Many of the caste associations in the early twentieth century made attempts at self-reliant development of their respective communities. But the immense problem of their backwardness and the persisting prejudices of the society stood in the way of their corporate mobility. As a result, many of these movements gradually became more dependent on official patronage. To have a larger share of it, their leaders became grossly involved in constitutional debates and council politics, the masses receding to the background. At this stage, which came in around the 1930's, there was a transformation of these caste movements from social protest to politics of backwardness. Now the elite leaders of the different backward castes made use of the depressed condition of the majority of their caste brothers as a political capital in their bid for power and patronage in institutional politics. But, for that very reason, they could not neglect the masses who, viewed from an institutional angle, formed their constituency. Only those movements, which could mobilize their masses effectively, did succeed in elevating the social status of their castes.
This whole process of the politicization of caste, along with religion, came to its logical culmination in 1937. There was now a distinct third political force in Bengal—the Scheduled Castes—loyal to the Raj and separatist in their political attitude. One might raise doubts about its mass base, but not certainly about its existence. In the early nineteenth century Calcutta, S.N. Mukherjee found two distinct levels of politics—traditional and modern, although quite often the bhadralok leaders used the traditional channels like the dals to mobilize for modern agitational movements. But now the two levels had effectively merged; modern politics was now being spoken of in a traditional language, at least in some quarters, if not universally. The Rudolphs thought that, although these caste associations were not unqualified assets, they made certain positive contributions by bringing about an extension of political education among the masses and by making the modern complex political processes more comprehensible in traditional terms to a population still largely politically illiterate. However, to what extent they could modernise


Bengal politics is open to question, for only a few castes like the Namasudras, Rajbansis or Mahishyas could effectively mobilize the masses. The activities of the other associations remained confined to the western educated upper rung of their respective communities. Those who had improved in wealth and power sought to bridge the gap between their secular status and ritual rank, economic power and social prestige, and above all, between the cultural ideas and the new socio-economic realities. In most of these cases, the masses remained largely ignorant of what their leaders were doing for getting census recognition of higher ritual status of their castes or for entreating the government to grant more concessions that would hardly benefit them. But the exceptions mentioned above are important nonetheless. The Namasudra leaders were successful in involving the masses by using caste and religious linkages and by utilising their legitimate grievances against the higher castes, who were both their social oppressors and economic exploiters. There were two distinct levels of consciousness within the community. The leaders were more involved in institutional politics and more concerned for concessions. The masses were more imbued with a spirit of protest, arising out of a sense of deprivation, a newly acquired self-respect and an intense group-consciousness. The latter had very little idea about the nuances of modern institutional politics and went against the government when
they found it helping their enemies. But most often the government was on their side, helping them against their high caste adversaries. There was, as a result, a symbiosis between the two levels, leading to the emergence of the loyalist separatist Namasudra politics, in which caste became the rallying symbol. The Rajbansis also offered an almost similar picture and together these two communities stood as the two main pillars of Scheduled Caste politics in Bengal. But the Mahishyas were different. They were a middle peasant caste, who filled up all the layers of the agrarian structure in a contiguous region in Midnapur. They controlled more surplus and were subjected to less social oppression. Most of their leaders were, therefore, less concerned for concessions and more responsive to nationalist politics. There were class divisions within the community, but caste served as a cementing force and led to the emergence of a broad front for the Congress movement in eastern Midnapur. But this was the only example of a caste movement subsequently joining nationalist politics in Bengal. The rest either remained inconsequential or pursued a loyalist political line, thus weakening the nationalist movement in a similar way as Muslim separatism.
But that modern politics or nationalism could not reach the poorer millions of our country was also due to the lack of proper initiative on the part of the main protagonists of such politics in Bengal. As *Amritabazar Patrika* put it in 1927, "Swaraj, independence, dominion status have no meaning for the 98 per cent of the population of India, unless expressed in terms of the everyday necessaries." And this the Congress leaders in Bengal failed to accomplish. Except for certain isolated or periodic attempts, no concrete long-term socio-economic programme was ever launched for the cultivating or the working classes. The untouchability removal movement could not even catch up a momentum. The Krishak Praja Party, by offering a positive programme for the tenants, did mobilize a sizeable section of the lower caste peasantry in eastern Bengal. But later on, it too opted for communal politics. But that the Scheduled Caste peasantry were prepared to accept secular politics, was proved when the left forces began to mobilize them in the 1940's, around a class-based economic and political programme. But by then, the loyalist-separatist trends of the Scheduled Caste politics had taken firm roots, to be completely obliterated through such alternative secular politics.
