INTRODUCTION
Social mobility was not a rare phenomenon in British or pre-British India. But so far as the Hindus were concerned, and they constituted the majority of the population, it took place within the structural framework defined by the caste system. For any historical analysis of Indian social evolution, it is difficult to ignore the pervasive influence of caste ethics on social milieu. Dissidences did occur from time to time. But these dissident groups were gradually accommodated and assimilated within the same social structure. This caste system codified the norms of social behaviour for the Hindus and also provided them with a social organisation. Although urban influence or education sometimes led to the slackening of the bonds of caste, the peasantry or the less educated urban folk were more firmly in its grips. The organisational framework provided by caste, therefore, had a profound impact on any social or political movement involving the masses. There is scope for debate on whether this impact was negative or positive. But it is hardly possible to deny its

existence or importance. And it assumed new significance when our struggle for freedom was being organised in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.

On the history of the nationalist movement in Bengal, we have by now a rich literature. By way of relating the political movements to the social structure, all these works point out that the nationalist politics was almost an exclusive preserve of the high caste Hindus and that the lower castes, like the Muslims, preferred to stay away from it. The situation began to change in the Gandhian period, but not to any great extent. From these works we have come to know why or how the lower castes were left behind. But we do not as yet fully know why they themselves did not come forward on their own and join our struggle for freedom, what is more important, why some of them opposed it on a number of occasions?

There is certainly no reason to believe that they stood just as passive onlookers to what was happening in society, economy or politics during colonial period. On the contrary, as some recent studies have shown for the other parts of the country, they were active participants in this historical process. But their response differed from that of the nationalists, many of whom belonged to the higher castes, and this was due to a difference in the perception of the reality that generated such responses. It is, therefore, necessary to look at the problem from below. We cannot have a composite picture of this political process in Bengal, unless we explore the consciousness of these lower caste people in their own terms or analyse their grievances, aspirations and ideas that shaped their attitude to the colonial rule vis-a-vis the nationalist movement.

Some obvious questions that remain unanswered by the existing historical literature on the nationalist movement in Bengal are, therefore, related to the consciousness of these 'lower caste' people; why they were thinking differently or feeling estranged from the so-called 'higher castes' and how such feelings were affecting the social and political life of this province? Such questions, which the present study attempts to answer, on inevitably lead us to a discussion/the structure of the society, as this estrangement seems to have originated, to a large extent, from the caste-based stratification system of the traditional society and the changes that occurred in that social structure during the colonial period. But social history of modern Bengal is still a relatively neglected area of historical research and the existing works in this field do not help us to understand this complex socio-political process. We have, of course, some important works on reform movements or on the activities of individual social reformers. But these writings contain little information on caste system, which was never the central focus of any reforming endeavour in the province. 4 The earlier works on caste

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system in Bengal are mainly descriptive and hence more useful as sources of information rather than authentic analyses of caste society. Apart from a few modern writings on the subject which provide valuable insights into the dynamics of change in the caste-oriented society in Bengal under British rule, we also have three monographs, by Ramkrishna Mukherjee, Jyotirmoyee Sarma and Amitava Mukhopadhyay, whose central focus is on the same problem. But while Mukherjee concentrates primarily on the economic aspect of caste, Sarma attempts to analyse social structure by neglecting the consciousness of the people and its ramifications in the organised social or political life.


Mukhopadhyay's study confines itself to nineteenth century alone and gives us only a descriptive account of social customs as they existed during this particular time-span. None of these existing works, however, helps us to comprehend how differently colonial rule affected the various segments of the stratified Hindu society of Bengal and thus led to further estrangement between the 'higher' and the 'lower' strata in the caste hierarchy; nor they show how such dissimilar impacts created different perceptions about the nature of colonial rule and accordingly evoked different responses to it. More precisely, these studies do not adequately explain why certain lower sections of the Bengali Hindu society developed a distinct social and political identity of their own and consequently moved away from the nationalist political mainstream, and above all, how this socio-political alienation was related to the built-in contradictions of the social structure and the differential impact of colonial rule.  

It is to fill in these gaps in our historical knowledge about society and politics in Bengal, that the present study proposes to examine some lower caste movements.

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8. A recent study, following this method of analysis, has shown how almost in an identical way, political separatism was developing among the Bengali Muslims during roughly the same period, cf., Rafiuuddin Ahmed, The Bengal Muslims, 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity, (Delhi, 1981).
during this crucial period of our history. It seeks to show how, in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, changes in the opportunity structure led to limited vertical social mobility among the members of these lower castes and how this phenomenon changed their social behaviour by generating further ambitions and a spirit of defiance to the social authority of the higher castes and led to the organisation of caste associations that worked for the social upliftment of their respective communities. Finally, it explores why their ambitions and grievances could not be accommodated within the framework of the nationalist movement which had come to be associated with the higher castes and how these were further fanned and taken advantage of by the colonial government, in order to encourage the development of a separate loyalist lower caste politics which would both weaken the nationalist struggle and provide legitimacy to the Raj in Bengal, in the same way as Muslim separatism. The study is primarily based on archival materials many of which had escaped the notice of the earlier historians. It also uses caste literature which reveal the mental world of these organised lower castes that were both protesting against the disabilities of caste system and trying to come out of the backwaters of institutional politics to take advantage of the new world.
In order to understand this complex process of social transformation during the colonial period, one should, however, have a brief look into the pre-colonial traditional society. In Bengal, as it appears from some medieval Bengali texts and the modern writings on the subject, caste in a significant way determined the patterns of social relationship among the Hindus. The norms of interaction between two individuals depended on their respective caste status, as each by birth was the member of a particular caste, and each caste was attributed a particular rank with a set of prerogatives and disabilities, in a hierarchy that encompassed the entire Hindu society. But the structure of the society did not represent a loose aggregate of castes, for all these constituent elements were interdependent and, therefore, related.

to the whole. It was based on a social division of labour, which meant a hereditary occupation and regulated distribution of the surplus for each caste. No one was permitted, under religious sanctions, to change the hereditary occupation and adopt that of others. The system in this way eliminated competition with a guarantee of minimum subsistence for all, if they pursued their own calling.

But caste system was not purely and simply a professional system; caste and profession were linked through the intermediary of religion. Notions of purity and pollution led to the division of occupations into pure and impure, and different castes, in terms of their occupations, varied accordingly in social esteem. In medieval Bengal, a caste usually meant an occupational jati, composed of various endogamous sub-castes known by different names, such as sreni, samaj, ashram or thak. But apart from birth and occupation, the other essential factors that defined a caste were territorial location and degree of access to the Vedas or Vedic religious rites. Each caste inherited a 'code for conduct' or jati-dharma which had to be realised in real life through actual conduct or acharas, the non-observance of which led to the fall from the ascribed rank and being regarded as patit or fallen. This rank in the hierarchy of castes was determined, in the ultimate analysis, by a purity-pollution
scale. All those factors mentioned above, like birth, occupations, territorial location, differential access to Vedic religion and the nature of the jati-dharma, as well as its observance or non-observance, determined the amount of purity the members of a caste embodied and pollution they were likely to transmit, primarily through water. Accordingly, the various occupational jatis were ordered into an elaborate hierarchy containing six classified groups, their rank depending upon the degree of pollution transmitted through water touched by them as well as by the behaviour of the Brahmans, so far as their service in Vedic religious rites were required.

In Bengal, historically, only two classical varnas could be found, the Brahmans and the Sudras. Among them, the Brahmans, or more precisely the sat or unpolluted or clean Brahmans, who were regarded as constituting both a varna and a jati, occupied the highest stratum in the regional caste hierarchy of Bengal. Below them, the Sudras were divided into a number of occupational jatis, which were also regarded as varna-sankara jatis, i.e., resulting from miscegenation among men and women of the different varnas. In terms of their purity, they were broadly classified into two groups, Satsudra or pure or clean Sudras and Asatsudra or polluted or unclean Sudras.
Among the Satsudra jatis, the Baidyas and the Kayasthas were represented in the thirteenth century texts as the Uttamasamkara, i.e., the best or the highest stratum of the samkara jatis or the mixed castes. They were considered as jalacharaniya, because water (jal) served by them was acceptable (acharaniya) to the Brahmans and they were also entitled to the services of the pure Brahmans in their religious ceremonies. They were not, however, permitted to offer cooked food to either the deities or the Brahmans. In popular estimation, however, the Baidyas and the Kayasthas were often lumped together with the Brahmans, in spite of the difference in ritual rank, to form the 'higher caste-group', known as the Uchchajati of Bengal. In terms of ritual rank, the group of castes known as the Nabasakh (or nine branches) enjoyed the same status as the Baidyas and the Kayasthas. They were also considered as Satsudra and jalacharaniya and were entitled to the services of the good Brahmans. But in social position, arising possibly out of secular status, they stood one step behind the Baidyas and the Kayasthas and thereby occupied the third stratum in the local caste hierarchy of Bengal. This group, initially consisting of nine (naba) castes, eventually came to include fourteen, viz., Gandhabanik, Sankhabanik, Kansabanik, Tambulibanik, Gop (or Sadgop), Tantubay, Modak, Napit, Tili, Malakar, Karmakar, Kumbhakar, Barui, and Madhunapit.
Below the Nabasakh castes and above the other Asatsudra jatis, stood an intermediary group of castes, which were considered as jalacharaniya, but were not served by clean Brahmans. Historically, the most important caste in this group was the Kaibartta, the agricultural section of which later on claimed to be Mahishyas. The Asatsudra jatis were divided into two groups. The first group was called ajalchal, i.e., water touched by them was not acceptable and therefore, jalavyavahariya, or whose water could not be used either by the Brahmans or the Satsudras. A Brahman would pollute himself and would lose his caste by offering his services to them in their religious ceremonies. Such fallen Brahmans were called Varna Brahmans or Byasokta Brahmans and the pure or Sat Brahmans refused to have any social relations with them. The village barber would shave the members of the ajalchal castes, but their toe nails he would not ordinarily pair and in their marriage ceremonies he would not perform his ritual duties. To this group belonged a number of castes, most important of them being the Sahas, the Subarnabaniiks and the Jugis. The other group of the Asatsudra jatis, which constituted the bottommost layer in the reginal caste hierarchy of Bengal, consisted of Antyaja or low-born castes. They were the untouchables, that is to say, they transmitted pollution not merely through water, but even through their touch. They were only served by the
Varna Brahmans. They usually received the service of the village washerman, but were rarely shaved by the barber. This sixth or the lowest stratum of the local caste hierarchy also incorporated numerous castes, such as Chandals, Pods, Dhobas, Bhuimalis etc.

However, more often in reality material prosperity, political power and higher ritual rank went together. The caste system prevented the lower castes from tilling the soil on their own. They constituted, in pre-British India, a large rural proletariat, who, besides following their prescribed menial professions, were only supposed to work on the fields of the zamindars and the land-holding peasants, belonging to the higher or middle orders of the caste-hierarchy.

It will not be, therefore, an exaggeration to say that caste provided a doctrine to legitimate a system of surplus absorption, with fixed roles for everybody and, of course, a minimum social security for all.

This leads us to the political aspect of caste which was a component element of the medieval Hindu power structure in Bengal. With minimum interference from the central authority, the territorial chiefs or the Rajas, and below them the zamindars, controlled the samajas or the hierarchy of castes living within the territory. Each caste had its own council which settled disputes relating to caste and
family affairs. The Raja was the headman of his own caste council as well as the head of all the councils in his chiefdom. The Raja provided protection for his subjects, settled caste and other disputes, and maintained law and order. He and his followers arranged for the colonisation of new lands and patronised the goods and services of the artisan and service castes. In return, he received revenue and loyal support. Thus, all these caste groups in a medieval Bengali Hindu chiefdom were linked together in a complex economic system involving exchange of goods and services between client and patron. There existed different levels of leadership. But all these levels were tied to each other in fixed vertical relationships and at the apex stood the Raja, the most powerful patron in the whole chiefdom.

However, so far as the reality is concerned, the society was not that rigidly immobile as the study of the idealised texts suggests; for the ideal situation did not always exist. In 1798 Colebrook remarked: "Daily observation shows even Brahmins exercising the menial profession of a Sudra .... Every profession with few exceptions, is open to every description of person."¹⁰ Medieval Hindu society, in spite of its caste orientation with fixed status for everyone.

did permit occupational mobility in keeping with the changes in the opportunity structure. The breaking of vast waste lands, the rise of different warrior groups, technological achievement and commercial success often led to vertical social mobility. The up and pushing dominant groups were accommodated from time to time at higher levels within the hierarchy of castes, the structure itself thus being virtually left in-tact. It was this relative flexibility and internal dynamism that sustained the caste system through ages by successfully absorbing and neutralising tensions from below.

III

A process of change is supposed to have set in with the coming of the British. Colonial rule released certain forces that tended to threaten the very fundamentals on which stood the traditional society. Bengal, being the earliest seat of English colonialism, felt its first impact. The political regime of the traditional type was substituted by a modern type of government and the village was inserted into a larger political and economic framework. The penetration of the British administration into the interior, introduction of British law and the establishment of courts corroded the power base that provided sustenance to the
caste-oriented stratification system of the traditional Hindu society. A new system of surplus absorption replaced the old, with apparently a new set of people appropriating it. "The system of production and exchange that arose in Hindu society on the basis of family occupations" and which "lasted because of the bonds of co-operation it provided," was now seemingly swept away before the onslaught of the market economy that gradually came into existence under the aegis of the colonial government. Customary production relationship, it is often emphasized, was replaced by contract and as a result, caste was detached from the economic system. Land became a marketable commodity and career was thrown open to talent. Frequent transfer of landed rights as well as new opportunities in trade led to greater diffusion of wealth across caste lines. The element of competition was thus introduced in a society which was previously non-competitive. The spread of education, the impact of western liberal ideas and a growing urban-industrial culture so seriously threatened the traditional social milieu, that many individuals and associations in the nineteenth century Bengal had started believing that caste system would wither away automatically.  

But this expected collapse did never take place. Even in the third decade of the twentieth century more than ninety-nine per cent of the Bengali Hindus mentioned their caste status when the census enumerators knocked at their doors. This was mainly because the so-called levelling influences of the colonial rule, in stead of pulling out the individuals from the primordial social aggregates, did in fact led to a rejuvenation of such social ties. It has been argued recently that caste was not the primary unit in the social relations of the Hindus. Instead, Karen Leonard found families, kin-groups and marriage-networks as the "characteristic social units" among the Hyderabadi Kayasthas, attempts to construct or impose broader sub-caste or caste units assuming only "limited importance at sometimes of stress and conflict." But the Kayasthas were traditionally a higher and prosperous caste who had at their disposal a greater amount of patronage and resources that had to be kept within the control of closed social groups. But this was pointless for the members of a less prosperous lower caste, for whom almost the entire life cycle had been full of stress and conflict. Moreover, greater occupational mobility and spread of education during the colonial period had whipped up their status aspirations and made them more conscious of the social deprivation they had been subjected to in the past. Handicapped as they were in so

many ways, they now needed greater horizontal solidarity to wage their battle for more power and patronage in this new competitive world. Hence, in spite of various inner divisions, as marked by the existence of different endogamous and exogamous units within an occupational jati, its members could and did work out a broader group-solidarity or forge a greater community-consciousness when they had to face the outer world. But that they thought of being organised in terms of caste rather than class was partly because, in their mental world, caste was still the most valid and perhaps the only real broad social category which they could easily refer to for social mobilization. This was also due to the colonial policies that reinforced this structural pluralism in Indian society by distributing patronage on the basis of the caste status of individuals, who were thus compelled to stay within that group for personal relationships, institutional life as well as for social and political identity.

But these lower caste movements were not always mere responses to colonial inducements. In some cases they were, in a real sense, articulate expressions of a spirit of protest against material deprivation and social humiliation, or as Kathleen Gough has put it, of a desire for "ethnic freedom." But although some of these movements had such

a radical potential of bringing about some fundamental structural change in society, as Gail Omvedt found it in Western India, this initial possibility often got lost in the whirlpool of institutional politics operating within the competition - collaboration syndrome. The movements thus lost their mass appeal and their elite leadership became more concerned with concessions and patronage that could be earned through a loyalist political strategy. However, contrary to the supposition of Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph the caste associations did not always bring about a modernisation of politics by communicating to the masses the complexities of modern, i.e. institutional, politics in their own familiar traditional language.

This was simply because the membership of these associations was in many cases limited only to the educated members of the caste and they joined these associations partly because they knew quite clearly the advantages of participating in institutional politics. The illiterate and ignorant masses, on the other hand, not only remained outside these organisations, but, as in some areas of Bengal, recently explored by Sudhir Chakraborti, lived in an autonomous mental

16. See, Gail Omvedt, op.cit., passim.  
world, which even repudiated caste system under the levelling influence of certain radically liberal local religious sects. 18 These autonomous realms of consciousness remained untouched by these caste organisations or even perhaps unknown to their elite leaders. Thus a caste association did not always represent the ideas and aspirations of an entire community. David Arnold, Robin Jeffrey and James Monor have argued that a caste association, even if it had only a dozen members, expressed "the embryonic ideas and aspirations of a far larger social group." It is perhaps pointless to stretch it that far. For, although these articulate members were responding to "complex economic and political forces invading the entire community", 19 their ideas often died at this embryonic stage itself, without making any broader impact on society or polity and sometimes not even on their own community.

However, the fact that some of these caste associations suffered from such limitations of ideology or participation need not detract our attention from the other more effective movements, that succeeded in mobilizing the entire community or at least a greater portion of it by generating an articulate community consciousness based on a

18. Sudhir Chakraborti, 'Maner Manusher Gavir Nirjan Pathe', Ekshan, Saradiya, 1399 B.S.
sense of caste identity. True, their leaders could not 
ultimately utilise the protest mentality of the masses to 
effect any radical social change, and themselves got 
embroiled in council politics or faction-fighting. But 
in the process, caste was made into a political category, or 
indeed, an interest group in the organised institutional 
politics of India, which prevented, to some extent, a 
cross-caste political mobilization for our battle against 
colonial rule. This is, in fact, the central argument of the 
present study, which is primarily concerned with some such 
organised movements of the lower castes of Bengal.

For the sake of convenience this work has been 
divided into two parts. The first part deals with some 
general trends and the second part presents a particular 
case-study. Chapter I deals with the colonial perception 
of caste and shows how colonial ethnographers looked at the 
caste system and discovered in it a central dichotomy, with 
the privileged higher castes at the one end and the deprived 
lower castes and the untouchables at the other end of the 
spectrum. Chapter II delineates the process how on the basis of 
this assumption the colonial policy of 'protective 
discrimination' was evolved to provide concessions and 
special privileges for these deprived sections of the Hindu 
community, along with the Muslims. These new recipients of 
special government favour were first described in official 
documents as the "depressed classes" and were then classified
Chapter III deals with the responses of some of the organised lower castes of Bengal to the economic and social changes around them. It shows how a sense of protest was germinating in the mental world of some of these lower castes against social disabilities imposed upon them by the caste system. Gradually this sense of protest was further reinforced by the fact of social mobility arising out of the new economic opportunities created by the colonial rule and led to the organisation of caste movements that proceeded through the usual channels of "Sanskritisation", "Westernisation" and census agitations. Chapter IV shows how the growing status aspirations of some of these lower castes, who eventually came to be known as the 'depressed classes' in official parlance, made them more and more dependent on state patronage. As the nationalists failed to meet their grievances and accommodate their ambitions within the general framework of the anti-imperialist struggle, the colonial policies lured them into the path of political loyalism. When the colonial state began to distribute its rewards and concessions on the basis of the caste status of individuals, the lower castes also began to mobilize along caste lines and drift away from the mainstream of the nationalist movement. This ultimately led to the emergence of a third force in Bengal politics - the Scheduled Castes - separatist in their
political attitude and loyalist in their relations to the British Raj. This weakened the nationalist movement in the same way as the Muslim break-away politics. This politicisation of caste, along with religion, was virtually completed by 1937, when, for the first time in the constitutional history of India, the representatives of these castes were elected to the Bengal legislature by their own voters in 30 seats exclusively reserved for them.

Among the major communities that sustained this Scheduled Caste movement in Bengal, the Namasudras were definitely at the forefront. Hence the Namasudra movement has been studied in greater details in the second part of this work. Such an in-depth analysis of this particular movement appears to be all the more necessary in view of the fact, that it was one of those few caste movements in Bengal which had a commendable mass base and a radical potential at the beginning, but which ended up in concession - mongering institutional politics that only served the interests of its tiny leadership. But despite all the digressions made by the leaders, this large community remained consistently loyal to the Raj and opposed to the nationalist leaders. An effective symbiosis between the educated leadership at the top and the peasantry at the bottom, effected first through a Vaishnava religious sect, Matua, and, then, through different associations, successfully kept this large peasant caste away from the
nationalist struggle, thus weakening it to a considerable extent. The study of this Namasudra movement is divided into four chapters. Chapter V deals with the beginning of their social protest and the initial organisation of their movement in the late nineteenth century. Chapter VI sketches the story of this movement during the Swadeshi period (1905-1911). Chapter VII picks up the story from 1911 and traces it through the days of the Home Rule, Non-co-operation and Khilafat movements, up to the year 1925. Chapter VIII deals with the penultimate phase in the development of their movement, i.e., from 1925 through the days of the Civil Disobedience Movement, up to the election and cabinet-formation in 1937. Hereafter, the Namasudra movement became an integral part of the all-India Scheduled Caste politics led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

So far as the periodisation is concerned, the opening point of this study is the year 1872, which witnessed both the first census and the first organised 'protest' of a "depressed" caste, the Namasudras, against their social disabilities. The closing point is the election of 1937, which formally recognised the separate political status of the Scheduled Castes and constituted the final milestone in the evolution of their separatist politics.