POLITICAL MOBILIZATION IN SOUTH-WESTERN BENGAL AND THE MAHISHYAS

The relation between caste and politics during the British rule has been widely conceived in terms of the dichotomy of tradition versus modernity. This dichotomy sharply and artificially separates society from polity and associates the former with ‘tradition’ and the latter with ‘modernity’ and ‘development’. The system of caste, with its basis in religion and culture, functioning in local self-sufficient economy has been regarded as traditional, which became functionally irrelevant under the pressure of colonial economy and relegated to ‘cultural’ domain only. The optimistic people came to believe that colonial ‘modernization’ would gradually lead to an erosion of the traditional structure of caste. But this did not happen in colonial period. It is to be noted here is that caste was never a purely cultural category or apolitical phenomenon, dissociated from politics, in the pre-colonial period and caste was not entirely an innovation of colonialism. Ranajit Guha has pointed out that it is fallacious to sever casteism (and communalism) from the ideological formations of pre-colonial India and display them as products of, what the Cambridge scholars believe to have been, entirely an innovation of the raj, namely ‘politics’, or what is the same thing according to them – the native collaborator’s pursuit of resources and opportunities within the institutional framework of the British rule.¹ Caste antagonisms existed in pre-colonial India as conflicts between entities related as dominant and the subordinate and such conflicts, under those conditions, were necessarily political. So the colonial policies did not initiate the process of ‘ politicization of caste’, though the substantial effects, directly and indirectly related to colonialism, on caste, added some new dimensions on its political aspects, which sometimes resulted in significant shift from one kind of politics to another. Instead of caste councils in pre-colonial period, caste associations got importance in this period. Various activities of caste

associations, like other pressure groups, instilled consciousness among the members of their unity, strengthening their unity and protecting their interests. They made representations to the colonial government, demanding economic and educational facilities, government jobs, positions in representative bodies. Some caste associations, bargained with other political parties in the interest of respective caste or groups of castes.

However, a caste mobility movement in this period did not necessarily mean pursuit of resources and opportunities, provided by the government within the institutional framework of colonial rule and a caste association did not always have a political agenda to bargain with the government and other political parties. The political dimension of social mobility of the Mahishyas has been discussed in this perspective. The social mobility of the Mahishyas had important political implications in the age of mass politics in early twentieth century Bengal. This chapter deals with participation of the Mahishyas in organized politics with special reference to their attitude towards ‘depressed classes’ politics and mainstream nationalism. Political mobilization of the Mahishyas in south-western Bengal did not happen along the lines of ‘depressed classes’ politics. With their steady integration into mainstream nationalism, the Mahishyas participated and organised some prominent nationalist movements. Their numerical strength, socio-economic position in local society enabled the Mahishyas to take an active role in nationalist mass mobilization in south-western Bengal in the first half of the twentieth century.

The Mahishyas of south-western Bengal were present in the political arena even before the emergence of anti-colonial mass movements. After the passing of the Local Self-Government Act in 1885, many wealthy members of the mobile castes tried to get elected into the Local and District Boards and Municipalities which ‘became a new source of power for this emerging group of aspirant social leaders who were in search for wider recognition and larger following.’² In many cases, caste based personal following of the candidates became important for electoral success and the elected members often used the institutions in the interest of their own communities.

It is evident that in south-western Bengal where the Mahishyas were numerically

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dominant, many prosperous members of the caste achieved electoral success. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has shown that in the first Local Board elections held in 1886 in different districts of Bengal, the locally dominant communities were successful in electing their members in large number:

The picture was far more clear in Midnapur. In Contai and Tamluk thanas, where the Mahishyas had a stronghold, about 50 per cent of the elected members in the former thana and a little more than 66 per cent in the latter belonged to the same caste, while in Midnapur district as a whole, out of a total of 62 elected members, so far as their caste can be determined from their surnames, 23 were undoubtedly Mahishyas. 3

Though the Mahishyas were active in institutional politics in the late nineteenth century, political developments in the early decades of the twentieth century opened wider scope for their participation in the political world. The Mahishya movement, being primarily a status mobility movement, did not have political agenda as such and Bangiya Mahishya Samiti, throughout our period of discussion mainly remained as a social and cultural organization, concentrating on strategies in constructing a distinct Mahishya identity, for the largest agrarian community of colonial Bengal. The leaders, mainly drawn from landed and professional middle class, also, remained silent on potential internal fissures, within the community especially on class lines. The Mahishyas filled up all the strata of the agrarian structure in south-western Bengal. The leaders were not unaware of class conflict within the community. But such issues were not included within the purview of the movement. The Secretary of the Samiti, Dhanapati Nath Das, made a detailed discussion in Mahishya Samaj, (Sraban,1326,B.S.) on the aims and objectives, properties and sources of income, organizational structure of the Samiti, etc. Here he specifically mentioned that the aim of the Samiti was to be the representative association of the Mahishyas of the provinces of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Assam and the Samiti had been founded to achieve unity and ‘social good will’ among different sections of the community, through promotion of education, social reforms and other means. 4 The Editor of Mahishya Samaj, Sebananda Bharati, similarly noted that only the articles related to


social progress of the community (jatiya unnati) and conforming to the objectives of the Samiti would be accepted for publication in the journal. The leaders of the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti preferred to remain silent on political issues to avoid divisions within their social movement, though sometimes a few references were made to political situations. The Secretary of the Samiti, and the publisher of Mahishya Samaj, Narendranath Das wrote a few words about electing Mahishya representatives to local bodies. Dhanapati Nath Das, a pleader of the High Court and important member of the Samiti, in an essay in Mahishya Samaj (Ashadh, 1328 B. S.) on the duties of the Mahishyas, discussed the social and political dimensions of non-cooperation in the context of the Non-cooperation movement, that was going on at that time. He doubted that if the Samiti had any right to say anything on the political issue of non-cooperation and said that the issue should be looked into from an all Indian perspective (nikhil Bharatiya drishti). He said that the members might have their personal opinions but the Samiti had nothing to say on this political issue and it had some more important tasks (abasyakiya karya) to do. He clearly stated that it was not at all desirable to create conflict of opinions on this political issue, in the present state of the Mahishya movement. Some of the members were associated with the Congress and other political organizations but they did not use the Samiti as platform for any political agitation.

Apparently, the leaders were loyal to the government at the initial stage of the Mahishya movement. They urgently sought favourable government decisions for their status claims, which were opposed by some influential sections of the society. In the Census of 1901, Gait noted in his Report that he was told that in Nadia the higher castes arranged not to take water from the Mahishyas as a sign of their disapproval of the agitation. They also needed government assistance in restraining some members of other castes to return themselves as Mahishyas. In the Census of 1911, O’Malley refused to consider the Patnis’ claim to be Mahishyas. Praising this decision Rampada Biswas wrote that the ‘just government’ had protected the status of the Mahishya

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5 Ibid., back of the front cover.
community, which prayed to God for peaceful reign of the British Raj.\(^8\) Again in 1920 on the similar issue of holding back the Jalia Kaibarttas and Patnis, the Samiti sent a memorial to Lord Ronaldshay, the Governor of Bengal, which started by saying that the Mahishyas as a class had worked and were working for the welfare of the community in deep loyalty to the government for which they have become an eyesore to many interested people.\(^9\) Similar attitude can be found among the priests of the Mahishyas, who also started agitation to be known as Gauradya Vaidika Brahmans. We have already seen that status mobility movements of the Mahishyas and their Brahmans were closely associated with each other. Harish Chandra Chakrabarti, one of the leaders of the Gauradya Vaidika Brahmans, in *Bhranti-Bijaya or A Short Social History of the Brahmins of Bengal*, edited by him stated in the Preface that a peaceful administration had been set up by the British Raj, after a long time and the people were living in uninterrupted peace (*ashim shantisukh*) under its just rule.\(^10\) He was critical of other Brahmans who were denying them the status of pure Brahmans. However, the leaders of both castes did not hesitate to protest the official decisions during the census operations which were detrimental to their social status. In fact, in all four census operations, during the period, 1901-31, they mounted pressure on the census authority to make it accept their claims, which has been discussed in the previous chapter.

**THE MAHISHYAS AND ‘DEPRESSED CLASSES’ POLITICS**

The leaders of the movement however, vehemently opposed to the inclusion of the Mahishyas in the list of the ‘depressed classes’ in the Census Report of Bengal, 1921. The attitude of the Mahishya leaders towards the colonial policy of ‘protective discrimination’ revealed the difference in perceptions of the intermediate castes and the lower castes at that time. The government adopted the policy of ‘protective discrimination’ apparently for socio-economic uplift of the ‘depressed classes’ which included the so called untouchable and near untouchable castes, by granting them special favour in matters of education, employment and constitutional rights. But the

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political intension behind such a policy was clear to the nationalists as it was
developed at a time when they were mounting political pressure on the government
regarding several economic and political issues. In the context of intensifying anti-
colonial agitation, the government needed to extend their support base among the
wider sections of population. It initially tried to placate the Muslims and then turned
to the Hindu ‘depressed classes’ through its education and employment policies. The
Bengal government, according to Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, was at the beginning
reluctant to adopt the policy of ‘protective discrimination’ in favour of the ‘depressed
classes’, primarily due to its preoccupation with the politically more important
Muslim community. But the Government of India, in its attempt at uniformity of
policies, persuaded it to adopt such a policy:

Thus 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, and partly to draw the attention of the
larger Hindu community away from the growing nationalist movement. For
such a policy would further encourage structural pluralism, which could then
be taken advantage of to popularize India’s colonial connection. 11

However, the ‘depressed classes’ were not identified clearly by the Bengal
government in the early decades of the twentieth century. After the Partition of
Bengal (1905), the Muslims and the lower caste Hindus, such as the Namasudras, who
were backward in comparison with the upper castes, supported the Partition of Bengal
and appealed to the government of the new province for special facilities in matters of
education and employment. The new administration of Eastern Bengal and Assam
also tried to placate these communities through a policy of protective discrimination.
The Mahishya leaders of this new province, particularly of Dacca Division also
sought similar facilities. These attempts were criticised by the Calcutta-centric leaders
of the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti. Gopalchandra Sarkar, who belonged to the latter
group, gave a detailed discussion on this issue in his book. He wrote that this political
division created chaos in the social movement of the Mahishyas. The Dacca leaders,
like the lower caste Hindus in that region, supported the Partition and appealed to the

Company, 1990), pp. 52-53.
new government for special facilities. Sarkar observed that by supporting the Partition against which the entire educated community rose in protest, the Dacca leaders made themselves ridiculous. To him such a measure served self-interest of a few leaders, who wanted to secure high posts in the government for themselves. Besides the Dacca leaders appealed that separate hostels were needed for the Mahishya students, as they did not find accommodation in general hostels. Accordingly, the Education Department published a circular for providing separate hostels for them like the other backward classes such as the Namasudras and some Mahishya hostels and messes came up in the Dacca and Chittagong Divisions. In fact, particularly in eastern Bengal during the second decade of the twentieth century, a number of hostels were opened in districts of eastern Bengal for the Namasudras, some for the Jogis, Rajbansis, Mahishyas and so on. Such hostels were fully or partly subsidised by the government and boarding charges were also either nominal or free. So from economic point of view, the Mahishya leaders of Dacca did nothing wrong and we have already noted that the Mahishyas of Dacca and Chittagong Divisions lagged behind their counterparts of Burdwan and Presidency Divisions or south-western Bengal, both numerically and socio-economically. But their activities were detrimental to any claim of high status as they were considered socially backward who did not get access to general hostels. Obviously, the Mahishya leaders of south-western Bengal like Gopalchandra Sarkar sharply denounced the steps of Dacca leaders. Sarkar, being an Inspector of schools in Rajshahi and Dacca Divisions, requested the Education Department against the decision for such hostels for Mahishya students and due to his protest no such hostels were opened in the Rajshahi Division. The Dacca leaders on the other hand wrote to the Department against the attempts of Sarkar, branding him as an enemy of the community. This issue throws light on difference in perceptions among the Mahishya leaders where regional differences in terms of socio-economic status played a role.

By this time the first direct official attempt at identifying the certain castes and tribes, returned as Hindus, who did not conform to certain standards or were subject to

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13 BLCP, Vol. 46, 1 September 1914, pp. 840-841; GB, General (Education), File No. 11C-9-1, April 1913, Prog. No. 67; GB, General (Education), File No. 1E-8, January 1917, Progs. Nos. 14-17, K.W., p.9.
certain disabilities was made on the occasion of census operations of 1911. The Census Commissioner for India, E.A. Gait directed the provincial superintendents to enumerate these sections separately from other Hindus.\textsuperscript{14} Due to nationalist protest such attempt was abandoned and the government distanced itself from this attempt by declaring that the attempt reflected the personal opinion of the Commissioner.\textsuperscript{15} At that time, different government departments or government sponsored institutions in their own ways tried to enlist some backward classes for their own purposes. But up to 1916 in Bengal, at least the expression ‘depressed classes’ was unknown:

In 1916, however the Bengal Government was invited to prepare a list of the depressed classes and submitted a list including certain criminal tribes and aboriginals and amounting in all to 31 groups. The list was used by the Commissioner of Education in writing his quinquennial report on the progress of education in India for the years, 1912-1917. The term thus introduced remained and both the Calcutta University Commission, (1917-1919) and the census report of 1921 contained lists of the depressed classes. In neither of these last instances however, was any clear criterion set forth to show on what grounds the groups were included.\textsuperscript{16}

In the list of the Bengal Government (1916) the Mahishyas were not included. The Calcutta University Commission, 1917-1919, reproduced ‘a list of depressed classes of the Presidency’ from the Fifth Quinquennial Review of the Progress of Education in Bengal, 1912-13 to 1916-17 by W.W. Hornell (Calcutta, 1918). In this list, the Namasudra, the Pod, the Bagdi, the Tiyar etc. were included but the castes like, the Mahishyas, the Jaliya Kaibarttas, the Rajbansi etc. were not mentioned.\textsuperscript{17} In the census operations of 1921, the Census Superintendent of Bengal, W.H. Thompson made a fresh attempt to classify the depressed classes, though he was aware of the complexities of defining these classes:


\textsuperscript{15} J.G. Cumming, Secy., GB, General to the Secy., GI, Education, 18 March 1911, GB, General (Miscellaneous), File No-C/30-2, March 1911, Progs. Nos. 29-31.


The term has never been defined and it is not easy to define it. It has not quite the same meaning as the ‘backward classes’, the classes backward in education and in civilization generally, and yet is not quite conterminous with the lowest class in the Hindu social scale.\textsuperscript{18}

So, Thompson did not give much emphasis on educational backwardness and lowest position in the caste hierarchy in determining a depressed class. In his long list of depressed classes, Thompson included several castes, such as the Mahishyas, the Jaliya Kaibarttas, the Rajbansi etc. which were not so classified previously and he particularly mentioned the reason for inclusion of the Mahishyas, who had a literacy rate above the state average and a better social status than that of the castes like the Namasudras:

I was in some doubt whether to include the Chasi Kaibarttas, but they belong to the rural areas and occupy much the same position in the body politic in the parts where they were numerous, as do, for instance, the Namasudras though they are higher placed in the Hindu social scale.\textsuperscript{19}

Obviously, this inclusion was protested by the Mahishya leaders, who wrote to the government against this. They were replied that the inclusion reflected the personal opinion of the Census Superintendent of Bengal and the government did not identify itself with this step.\textsuperscript{20}

In fact the list of Thompson was tentative with about 11,250,000 persons and Thompson admitted that a few smaller castes should come under the same category, taking the number of depressed classes in Bengal at about 11.5 millions.\textsuperscript{21} Census Commissioner of India, J.T. Marten modified the list and reduced the number belonging to the depressed classes in Bengal approximately to 9 millions.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 366.
\textsuperscript{20} Gopalchandra Sarkar, \textit{Mahishya-Namoddharer Itibritta}, (First published in 1928, Reprint, Calcutta: Bangiya Mahishya Samiti, 1405 B.S.), pp. 64-65.
By this time, the issue of political representation came to be associated with the depressed classes. The Government of India Act of 1919 formally acknowledged the needs of the depressed classes by nominating one representative from them in the fourteen nominated non-official members in the Central Legislative Assembly. The provincial legislature in Bengal, also had one nominated representative from these classes. The Government of India was not satisfied with the provision of just one member for the large population enlisted as the depressed classes and wanted further representation for the depressed classes in Bengal. But the Bengal Government did not favour such an extension, mainly because there was no final list of the depressed classes in Bengal.

In fact the criteria for determining the depressed classes were still unclear. The Indian Statutory (Simon) Commission, which emphasised on separate representation for the depressed classes through reservation of seats, noted, referring to them:

> They are not only the lowest in the Hindu social and religious system, but with few individual exceptions are also at the bottom of the economic scale and are normally segregated in a separate quarter and not unfrequently eat food which would not be touched by any person of the Hindu community.

The Census authority in 1931 attempted to prepare fresh lists for the depressed classes and this issue was discussed at a meeting of the Superintendents of Census Operations in January, 1931. As a result of the discussion the Census Commissioner, J.H. Hutton, announced:

> ...for the purpose of the census of India I propose at present to retain the term depressed classes to indicate untouchables, whether of the milder or of the more severe degree of untouchability.

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24 GB, Appointment (Appointment), File No. 6R-42, July 1925, Progs. Nos. 3-4.


26 Ibid., p. 497.
However in preparation of the list in Bengal, other factors such as lack of educational and material progress, were also taken into consideration.

The Mahishya leaders were well aware of the fact being a depressed class, apart from some educational and material advantages, they would be entitled to special franchise concession. Given their numerical strength in the districts of south-western Bengal, they were sure to win some seats in the general constituencies. A depressed class status would give them some more seats, strengthening their political interest. But they were not attracted to such a prospect. We have already discussed the perception of the leaders of the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti regarding issue of getting government financial assistance for some Mahishya hostels in eastern Bengal on the ground of their social backwardness and their inclusion in the list of the depressed classes in the census of 1921. Similarly, they refused to be included in any other such lists afterwards. Though the criteria of defining a depressed class were never fixed, the term was generally associated with the so called untouchables or very low castes with little educational and material progress for whom special political representation was necessary. It was not possible for the Mahishya leaders to brand themselves with the stigma of untouchability or depressed character. We have already discussed that according to the accounts of Hunter, Risley, and the census reports in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, the Mahishyas belonged to the intermediate position in the regional caste hierarchy. The Mahishya movement aspired for a better status than that. The Mahishya leaders did not want to jeopardise their status mobility movement and their existing status itself, by getting included in the list of the depressed classes. Both the Census Commissioner of India, J.H. Hutton and the Census Superintendent of Bengal, A.E. Porter noted in their reports, the agitation of the Mahishyas, for non-inclusion. 27

Porter particularly mentioned that the Mahishyas were opposing such inclusion for quite some time:

In 1921 Mr. Thompson included them amongst the depressed classes but they have strenuously protested against that inclusion not only to the Indian Statutory Commission but also subsequently. In this agitation, Birendra Nath Sasmal, the most important nationalist leader belonging to this community at that time, took a leading role. He particularly requested the Governor of Bengal, Sir John Anderson for non-inclusion. Ultimately, the government decided not to include the Mahishyas for they were considered to be ‘able to look after themselves’.

Thus due to long protest of the Mahishya leaders, the community was not included in the list of the depressed classes in the census of 1931. Prior to the census of 1931, there were three lists of the depressed classes – list of Bengal Government (1916), list in the Calcutta University Report (1917-1919), list in the Census Report of 1921 and the Mahishyas were enlisted only in the last one. No further attempt was made for their inclusion later in any list the depressed classes, who came to be known as ‘Scheduled Castes’ and in the final list of the Scheduled Castes of Bengal, incorporated in the Government of India Order of 1936, the Mahishyas were not mentioned.

THE MAHISHYAS AND THE NATIONALIST MOVEMENT

The Mahishyas were also a politically articulate community. They expressed their economic grievances and socio-political aspirations through political mobilisation against the colonial government in our period of study. And here also the Mahishyas of south-western Bengal played a leading role than their caste brethren of other parts of Bengal.

Being mainly an agrarian caste, their political mobilisation was associated with agrarian grievances. The Mahishyas had a tradition of resistance against oppression.

30 GB, Appointment (Appointment), File No. IR-54, April 1932, Progs. Nos. 34-36.
An important instance of this, in the second half of the nineteenth century, can be found in their participation in the Indigo Revolt (1860). In the Nadia district, where they constituted the most numerous agrarian community, the Mahishyas took a prominent role in the Indigo Revolt. Sisirkumar Ghose in his writings (1860) in Hindu Patriot stated that Bishnucharan Biswas and Digambar Biswas of Nadia were leaders of the Indigo agitation in the region. 33 Both of them were small zamindars of the locality and belonged to the Mahishya community. They were affected by the activities of the European planters in their localities and being sympathetic to the plight of the ryots, most of whom belonged to the Mahishya community, protested against inhuman sufferings of the indigo cultivators at the hands of the European planters, such as William White, the manager of Bashberia Nilkuthi. They led the peasants in resisting the planters, resulting in a series of clashes between them. The planters brought suits against the peasants, many of whom were arrested. Both the leaders provided financial assistance to the peasants and trained them to resist physical attacks from the planters and also sought intervention of the colonial government. 34

The activities of Bishnucharan Biswas and Digambar Biswas in 1860 provided an example of brief bursts of peasant agitation against outside threats, led by the leaders of a peasant community, which also looked forward to the colonial state for redress of their grievance. But the situation was different in the early decades of the twentieth century which saw changes in agrarian relations and in the nature of political mobilization in south-western Bengal. John Gallagher observed that during this period the Congress, the spokesman of predominantly Hindu rentier interests, was on the defensive. On the other hand, in eastern Bengal, the expansion of agriculture raised the aspirations of the more substantial peasants, mostly belonged to the Muslims and the lower caste Namasudra, while in south-western Bengal, especially in Midnapur and in Arambag in Hoogly, the richer peasantry exploited local grievances against the

34 Ibid., pp. 71-72.
government and it was their domination which gave the resistance the flavour of a mass movement in those areas.  

Partha Chatterjee has discussed also two different developments in the context of the relation between the colonial state and peasant resistance in Bengal in the first half of the twentieth century. The fundamental class antagonism in the agrarian struggles in eastern Bengal in the 1920s was between landlordism of the zamindari type and the mass of the peasantry, consisted predominantly of small owner-cultivators, differentiated to a much lower degree than elsewhere in the province. The colonial state intervened in the conflict posing as a neutral party and tried to derive advantage from the ambiguity of its position to prevent a broad political combination against its authority. But in south-western Bengal political mobilization of the peasants took place against the colonial state itself.  

Here it may be noted that the anti-British mobilization of the peasants, who were mostly Mahishyas in this region, was resultant of a combination of socio-economic and political factors and in this process of mobilization their caste identity played a significant role.  

Pointing to economic strain on the Mahishya peasants in the Contai and Tamluk subdivisions, Sugata Bose has observed:

> By the second decade of the twentieth century, however, the tightness of the man-land ratio began to be felt. It was discovered in the settlement of 1911-17 that the size of an average raiyati holding was only 1.16 acres in Tamluk and 1.09 acres in Contai. As each family of five held on average three khatiyans (settlement documents), the average size of a family's holding was just a little over three acres. By about 1920, the Mahishyas' new frontier of opportunity appeared to be receding.  

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The situation was aggravated by the economic and political dislocation, caused by the First World War and its aftermath, affecting the great mass of poor Mahishya peasants. In this time of particular economic difficulty, the government decision to introduce institutions of local self-government only made the matter worse. The government wanted to draw in a wider set of collaborators and to offset its own financial problems by extending local taxation. The introduction of the Village Self-Government Act of 1919 in Midnapur and the setting up of union boards that followed, led to huge increase in the existing chaukidari tax. This adversely affected the poor peasants as they had not had good crops for years and could hardly pay for their food and clothing.  

Pointing to the general discontent J.H. Broomfield has observed:

In January, 1921, the first elections were held in the district for Union Boards, new local bodies provided by the Bengal Village Self-Government Act of 1919. The electors were uncertain as to what they were voting for, but they had a vague idea that they were electing representatives to arbitrate village disputes and thus save lawyers’ and court fees. They were dismayed when they discovered that they had in fact assisted in the formation of new bodies empowered to levy taxes.

In Midnapur, 228 union boards were established, among which the first one was founded in the Contai town. The local Mahishya Congress leaders tried to utilise the discontent over the union boards to spread the Non-Cooperation Movement in this region. The homogeneity of the Mahishya population in Tamluk and Contai and the caste identity of its social leadership with the rest of the people led to a quite effective combination against the attempts to increase taxes by the union boards to pay for the activities of local government. Besides in Midnapur there was also increase in land revenue on large parts of the coastal areas, which were outside the Permanent Settlement. The nationalist leadership in Midnapur tried to mobilize a broad-based anti-colonial movement, including different strata of peasants on the issue of

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increased taxes. This combination was successfully led by the Congress leader, Birendra Nath Sasmal, who belonged to a big Mahishya zamindar family of Contai and was one of the three top lieutenants of C.R. Das. It should be noted here that according to Birendra Nath Sasmal the anti-union board agitation was planned and led by him and Provincial Congress was not directly associated with it, though the local Congress leaders and workers actively participated in it. 41

Birendra Nath Sasmal was one of the most prominent representatives of new Congress leadership, who worked for broad based anti-colonial movement. He came from a well established, affluent and enlightened family of Midnapur. His great-grandfather Karunakar Sasmal established a zamindari in Chandibheti in Contai in 1770 and founded salt manufacturing factories in Samudrapur. His successors acquired zamindaris in neighbouring localities and some joined legal profession. Birendra Nath himself was a successful barrister. Some family members of the family of Birendra Nath were associated with the Brahmo movement in Midnapur. 42 The Sasmal family is a significant example of social mobility of the Mahishyas during the colonial period.

Birendra Nath was associated with the Congress since 1901 and participated in the anti-Partition agitation (1905). He supported Gandhi’s resolution on non-cooperation (1920). In ‘Sroter Trino’ Birendra Nath wrote that at that time preparations were being made for his election to the Bengal Legislative Council. But to join the Non-Cooperation movement, he stopped such preparation, by publicly announcing in the newspapers and left his legal practice. 43 He launched the anti-Union Board movement in Midnapur at this juncture. He organised meetings all over the region with the help of local volunteers, mostly of the Mahishya community, such as Satish Chandra Jana and warned the people that the Bengal Village Self-Government Act of 1919 opened the way for crushing taxation and other oppressions by the Government.


Regarding the support of the local educated classes for the movement, J.H. Broomfield has opined, a factional rivalry between two groups of bhadraloks helped Birendra Nath. Broomfield has noted that many Mahishyas, who ‘were an agricultural caste of good status and were most numerous in Midnapore District’ had entered the professions, without any ‘difficulty in gaining acceptance as bhadralok, for in proportion to its total Hindu population Midnapore had fewer high-caste Hindus than any other Bengal district’. 44 The Mahishya bhadraloks dominated the local educated society and were not in a good humour with their counterparts, who came from outside. Broomfield has explained:

In the Contai subdivision, to which he belonged, the bhadralok were divided into two groups: the locals and people from outside districts who had established themselves in practice in the Contai courts or in other professions. The Legislative Council and Union Board elections had been fought out between candidates from these two groups and the ‘immigrants’ had triumphed. Sasmal, who was a member of the dominant Mahishya caste, now took the leadership of the locals and carried them with him in his attack on the Union Boards.45

Rajat Kanta Ray has also referred to split between these two factions on the issue of the coming election to the Legislative Council in December 1921. The election was contested from Contai by a Kayastha named Asoke Dutt, who was considered an outsider by the local Mahishya gentlemen:

A rumour spread that he had made offensive remarks against the Mahishya community, and he was promptly denounced by the respectable Mahishyas of Contai.46

The local newspapers were got embroiled in this conflict. The Nihar, a Contai newspaper edited by a local Mahishya, Madhusudan Jana, was the organ of the local party and opposed the candidature of Asoke Dutt. The latter was supported by the pro-government Contai newspaper, Hijli Hitaishi, published in May 1921 by

45 Ibid., p.211.
Nagendra Chandra Bakshi a local Kayastha gentleman and the Chairman of the Contai Local Board. The \textit{Nihar} supported Birendra Nath in his campaign.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 290-291.}

Birendra Nath organized the anti-union board agitation with the help of educated Mahishya volunteers so effectively that under social pressure union board members and chaukidars in many unions resigned. In Birendra Nath’s \textit{Sroter Trino} we get detailed information of mass mobilization and support in favour of this agitation. Thousands of people assembled in the meetings organised by him in Contai despite threats from some influential people.\footnote{Bimal Kumar Shit, (ed.), \textit{Birendranath Shasmal: Sroter Trino}, (Kolkata: Arpita Prakashani, 2010), pp. 27-28.} The Government tried to acquire movable property of about four thousand tax payers of union Boards in Contai, who refused to pay taxes. But such attempt failed as no purchaser for such commodities was available in Midnapur.\footnote{Ibid., p.28.}

Birendra Nath extended the agitation to other regions of Midnapur, with similar consequences:

\begin{quote}
Having brought the operation of the Act to a standstill in Contai, Sasmal turned his attention to other parts of the Midnapore District, with similar success. By November the Government was forced to admit that it would be better to withdraw the Act than to fight Congress on such shaky ground.\footnote{J. H. Broomfield, \textit{Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal}, (California: University of California Press, 1968), p. 212.}
\end{quote}

The union boards were abolished by the Government by withdrawing the Village Self-Government Act (17 December 1921) from Midnapur,\footnote{Notification No. 5025 L.6-G dated 17 Dec. 1921, GB Local Self-Govt Dept, Progs.July 1922 Nos. 36-49, File L.2-U-5 SI Nos. 1-7 (WBSA)} and Birendra Nath and his followers emerged victorious. According to Rajat Kanta Ray, the victory was due to the combination of what was effectively made out of the whole population of an
extensive rural tract, who had implicit faith in Birendra Nath Sasmal, their kinsman who was sympathetic to their cause.\textsuperscript{52}

Regarding the character of the organised thrust of the peasant movement against the colonial state in south-western Bengal, Partha Chatterjee has noted that in terms of social forces, although the Congress movement received extensive support from virtually all sections of the peasantry in the areas in which its organization was the strongest, such as in Contai and Tamluk in Midnapore, the leading force was clearly the jotdar-rich peasant section. He has referred to the study on the Congress movement in this region by Hitesranjan Sanyal, who has argued that with the decline of zamindars and patnidars, the new leadership emerging from out of the jotdar, moneylender and trading classes was willing to utilize the opportunities created by the introduction of the union boards to secure state patronage and increase their political power. But once the mass agitation against the union boards started gaining ground, this new leadership thought it prudent to join the movement and emerged as local political leaders of the mass mobilisation. Sanyal has shown that by this time with advanced state of differentiation within the peasantry, a proliferation of kulak-type activities among the richer peasantry, and a strong cultural movement of Mahishya caste advancement encompassing the bulk of the peasantry in Contai and Tamluk under rich-peasant leadership, the latter already dominated the local rural society. These sections resisted the introduction of union boards which was seen as an encroachment by the colonial state into the affairs of the village society. Thus, Chatterjee has argued:

\begin{displayquote}
The entire campaign against Union Boards was, therefore, fought on two issues: refusal to pay increased taxes, and resistance to the attempts by the government to extend its bureaucratic arm into the countryside and further erode what was left of the autonomy of the peasant community. It is not surprising that the ideology and programmes of the Gandhian Congress proved so effective in the context.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{displayquote}

\begin{footnotesize}

\end{footnotesize}
Sugata Bose also has agreed with the opinion of Hitesranjan Sanyal regarding the choice of methods, that the landlords and richer peasants were faced with, in order to translate their social and economic dominance into local political leadership.

They could collaborate and work the institutions of local self-government as the reforms intended. Or they could mobilise the mass discontent in a society which had at least partially acquired a vertically segmented character in the wake of recent powerful caste movements. Many opted for the latter course and threw their weight behind the anti-union-board movement.

Under the leadership of Birendra Nath Sasmal, a Contai lawyer, the whole countryside was pitched against the agents of the state.54

However, the above observations of the scholars have clearly delineated the significant role of the Mahishya identity and the Mahishya movement in the socio-political roots of nationalism and the anti-colonial political mobilisation in south-western Bengal during the Non-Cooperation movement.

John Broomfield, in *Mostly About Bengal: Essays in Modern South Asian History* has added in Appendix B, the comments of Mr. Frank Bell, I.C.S., on the chapter of the book, ‘Peasant Mobilization in Twentieth-Century Bengal’. Bell, who happened to be the Collector of Midnapore during 1943-44, made some observations on the anti-union board agitation by Birendra Nath Sasmal:

..I do know that he effectively stopped the introduction of Union Boards into the Mahisyam dominated areas of the district. ...In much of Bengal, the Union Boards became a real part of the administration. My belief is that the Union Boards brought an element into the countryside that had been lacking in Permanently Settled Bengal – a closer link between Collector, Sub-Divisional Officer and the rural population. Sasmal, being in an ‘anti’ frame of mind, chose to oppose the introduction of institutions that would improve the link, and perhaps undermine the Mahisyam way of doing things. There were still no Union Boards in much of the district in my day – certainly not in the Mahisyam

dominated areas. We still relied upon the Government appointed ‘Panchayets’ to collect the chaukidari tax.\textsuperscript{55}

Bell’s observations amply pointed to the importance of the Mahishya identity of the agitators who had been persistently opposing for decades, the bureaucratic intervention into the countryside through the union Boards.

In fact in the southern (Contai) and eastern (Tamluk) parts of Midnapur, the prosperous tenure holders, educated middle class people, different strata of the peasantry, united by common caste ties took staunch stance in the periods of mass nationalism, opened up by the Gandhian movements. The tradition of the successful agitation of 1921 was to become a great source of confidence for them in subsequent movements. The defiance of the Salt Laws in 1930-31 was made by them with the same significance as the Union Board agitation. They resisted what was considered the unjust state interference in the right of the common people to manufacture an essential item of daily use from easily available natural resources in this coastal district. In the Civil Disobedience movement, according to Sugata Bose, ‘Midnapur, as usual, showed greater political dynamism than other parts of West Bengal.’\textsuperscript{56}

However, class divisions within the Mahishya community surfaced from time to time during the same time. Immediately after the Union Board agitation, by March 1922, demands were made by the sharecroppers of Contai for a reduction in the various \textit{ad hoc} impositions which the landlords made over and above the conventional half-share of produce. But the former, with a little bargaining power to force the issue, could achieve only slight concessions from the latter.\textsuperscript{57} At the time of the passing of the Tenancy Act Amendment in 1928, the legislators from Midnapur voted in favour of the privileges of the landlords and against attempts to strengthen the rights of tenants. Partha Chatterjee has stated that faced with strong criticism from their constituents, the legislators defended their actions with one telling argument:

\begin{footnotesize}


\end{footnotesize}
...the proposed amendments in favour of raiyats would have given legal rights of tenancy to sharecroppers and, as the Contai legislator put it, ‘one shudders to think what a calamity this would have been for the people of Contai.’

The Civil Disobedience movement saw a revival of solidarity against the colonial state but in the early 1930s the economic demands of the small peasants' and sharecroppers' agitation also gained ground, which sharpened class antagonism in rural Midnapur. In 1931, the sharecroppers of Contai and Tamluk demanded better terms from the landlords. The Congress leaders, anxious to preserve the united front against the government attempted to bring about a compromise between the sharecroppers and their landlords and achieved some success in keeping a united front against the Government.

In the aftermath of the Civil Disobedience movement the sharecroppers’ agitation became more intense. But again resurgence of solidarity took place in 1942 in response to repressive state policy and the Quit India movement. Partha Chatterjee has observed:

What is significant, however, is that in spite of this clear articulation of demands against jotdar domination, the resurgence of peasant solidarity in the revolt against the authority of the colonial state in Contai and Tamluk in 1942 seemed to be as organic and widespread as ever.

And, here the Mahishya identity was still effective, which was acknowledged in official sources:

.. .The cultivators who form the backbone of the Congress movement mostly belong to one single community, namely, the Mahishya community. It is a well-knit community... Any order which goes out to the villages from the town leaders is obeyed without question. If, for example, the order be given


that no food-stuff is to be exported from a village, everybody follows that
rule, some through conviction and others through fear of social boycott.\textsuperscript{61}

Commenting on the participation of the Mahishyas in the anti-colonial movement in
Midnapur, Rajat Kanta Ray has observed:

A peasant community had been mobilized on the issue of social status, and
once a respectable identity had been established the imposition of unpopular
measures by the government drove this already mobile community to new
and unforeseen courses of action during the non-co-operation and civil
disobedience movements leading to virtual breakdown of British
administration in the Mahishya inhabited areas of Tamluk and Contai.\textsuperscript{62}

Sugata Basu has compared the Mahishyas with other upwardly mobile peasant groups
in the Indian subcontinent, who had built up a tradition of unified resistance to the
colonial state:

The Mahishya peasantry of Midnapur had their counterparts in pockets of
other parts of India, notably in the Patidar peasantry of some Gujarat districts
and the Kamma peasantry of the Andhra delta.\textsuperscript{63}

It may be noted here that in our period of study the prominent political leaders
belonging to the Mahishya community did not work with an objective to serve the
political interest of their people only. With a nationalist bent of mind, the Mahishya
leaders tried to launch a broad based anti-colonial struggle in their localities. They
were conscious of their caste identity and achieved success generally in the Mahishya
dominated areas but they tried to rise above their caste identity to serve the nation.
Birendra Nath Sasmal took a leading part in non-inclusion of the Mahishyas in the list
of depressed classes. However, he was not actively associated with the Mahishya
movement and the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti, though he made some financial


contribution to it. He participated the Non-Cooperation movement as a nationalist, not as a Mahishya leader and soon became a prominent member of the Bengal Congress (BPCC). He was elected President of the Bengal Provincial Conference at Krishnagar in 1926. Jealous of his popularity in the Congress, some Calcutta Congress leaders once branded him as a ‘Keot of Midnapur’ wishing to rule in Calcutta. His political goals and programme of mass mobilization were not favoured by some Calcutta-centric leaders, who represented big metropolitan professional and landed interests. Though his success was limited to specific localities, it is clear that he did not confine himself to narrow social base. Another important political personality, belonging to the Mahishya community is Hemchandra Kanungo. Born in Midnapur, he was ‘probably the most remarkable figure among this first revolutionary generation’ of early twentieth century Bengal. He was associated with the Anushilan Samiti and went abroad to get military and some political training. In the Alipore Bomb Case (1908-9) he was sent to jail and ultimately was released in 1921. Later he was attracted to Marxism. Hemchandra in his book *Banglai Biplab Prachesta* criticised the caste system and popular Hinduism. He also denounced the status mobility movements of non-Brahmin castes in Bengal and their claim to twice-born or Aryan status. Obviously, he was not interested in the Mahishya movement. His attitude to popular Hinduism and caste system was rare among the contemporary Bengali intelligentsia. However, generally the Mahishya political leaders in south-western Bengal maintained their nationalist stance which also had significant impact on the status mobility of their community.

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68 Ibid., p. 158.