ABSTRACT

SOCIAL MOBILITY AND THE DYNAMICS OF CASTE; THE MAHISHYAS OF SOUTH WESTERN BENGAL (1901-1931)

As in the Indian society, caste, along with class, constitutes a major principle of social stratification, social mobility, here, has become deeply influenced by caste dynamics. In such a context, the present study is an endeavour to understand the dynamics of social mobility of the Mahishyas of south-western Bengal between the period 1901 and 1931.

The ChasiKaibarttas started calling themselves as the Mahishyas since the late nineteenth century. The formation of the ChasiKaibarttas or the agriculturist sections of the Kaibarttas in the pre-colonial times, was a significant indicator of mobility of this community.The distribution and movement of population, social organization, civil condition, literacy and occupational diversification of the Mahishyas, during the colonial period have been discussed to analyze social mobility and status incongruence, which explain the origin and various trends of the Mahishya movement.

It has been pointed out that the Mahishya movement in its effort at the construction of the Mahishya identity went through both the processes of fission and fusion. On the one hand, they tried to dissociate themselves from the JaliyaKaibarttas and on the other hand, they strived to bring all agricultural groups of the Kaibarttas, bearing different names, within the Mahishya fold.

Being a caste at the middle level of the caste hierarchy, the Mahishyas did not nurture so much a sense of social discrimination and injustice against the upper castes. Social mobility secured for the Mahishyas a better socio-economic status which effectively supported their aspiration for a better caste status and shortened social distance between the higher castes and them. Therefore, the Mahishya movement and its principal caste association, BangiyaMahishyaSamiti did not go beyond their moderate social demands.

Their numerical strength, socio-economic position in local society enabled the Mahishyas to take an active role in nationalist mass movements in south-western Bengal. The attitude of the Mahishya leaders to the colonial policy of ‘protective discrimination’ revealed their different perception from that of the Namasudra& the Rajbansi leaders.

There existed multiple identities within this large community, which played crucial role in their collective mobility at different historical conjunctures. However, in our period of study, caste identity remained significant in maintaining solidarity and promoting social mobility of the Mahishyas.