INTRODUCTION

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There is considerable literature on caste, its changing forms and functions in the context of the interrelated concepts of social stratification and mobility, which has been accumulated through efforts of the scholars, belonging to various disciplines, such as sociology, social anthropology, history. On this interrelation Yogendra Singh has commented:

> For sociology of social stratification in India, the treatment of caste becomes unavoidable as a standard to measure changes with reference to other principles of stratification such as wealth (class) and power (elite). These new principles only sometimes operate autonomously; more often these operate contingently together with caste principle of social stratification.¹

It is opined that one of the fundamental characteristics of the systems of social stratification is the degree of openness or closure that they prescribe, prefer, or permit. How much opportunity is there, to move from one position to another, in society, is the basic issue involved in any system of social stratification. A probe in this aspect implies an understanding of the social mobility phenomenon. Social stratification and change constitute the fundamental processes of any society. Despite the apparent contradistinction between social stratification, which refers to the principal mechanism of social order in society or system of ranking of social positions and change, which reflects its inner contradictions and motions, the two processes converge theoretically as well as substantively. An objective analysis of social stratification is not possible without reference to the processes of social mobility, the cleavages and contradictions that the system brings about, as the scheme of social differentiation or hierarchy leads to the tensions of status crystallization on the one hand and status dissonance on the other. So the treatment of social stratification encompasses the perspectives on social change.

The interrelation between social stratification and change is manifested in the concept of social mobility. Social mobility is directly linked with the system of social stratification. It is a process that directly reflects the direction, which the structural changes in society, may be taking. Hindu social order in India is highly caste-structured. Caste is popularly viewed both as a cultural phenomenon, particular to India and a structural form of social stratification. Scholars dealing with social mobility, past and present, have given considerable attention to this phenomenon, but the term caste have been used by them to convey several different types of structural units. Some have viewed caste as a somewhat special type of social stratification; others have treated it as an ethnographic category; still others have considered it a typical structural phenomenon relevant only to India. As in the Indian society, caste, along with class and power, constitutes a major principle of social stratification, social mobility, here, has become deeply influenced by the dynamics of the caste system. In fact, caste is still manifestly correlated with every form of social stratification, whether based on wealth, occupation, income, education, or some other criteria. Some of the most outstanding works on social stratification in modern India have dealt with the caste system, which have contributed to our understanding of mobility in this peculiarly Indian system of stratification. As caste is an important system of social stratification in India, much of the social mobility studies here, have concentrated on social mobility in the caste system.

In the studies on social stratification and its relation with social mobility or change in India, the institution of caste draws major attention, which has been examined from various approaches to understand the basic features of the development of modern Indian society. In the analysis of Indian social order, caste may be comprehended both a structural unit of social stratification as well as a system. Studies on caste mobility have referred to the structural dimension of caste stratification. Theoretically, in structural terms, the caste system manifests both segmental and organic tendencies. While the units within the system, such as castes or sub-castes manifest social inequality and mutual repulsion, as an organic system, the units are mutually interlinked, through the jajmani system. The structural differentiation in caste results from urges for social order and mobility. According to the traditional model of social stratification in India – the model which characterized status summation, limited mobility, and cumulative inequalities – caste is pervasive, all embracing system of
institutionalized inequality and is known for defining all social, economic and political relationships for the individual. This concept of status summation has been considered by Frederick Barth as the essence of the caste system and it is on this concept he has applied the caste model to examine the non-Hindu society of the Swat Pathans.

The principle of status summation seems to be the structural feature which most clearly characterizes caste as a system of social stratification. In this sociologically more fundamental sense the concept of caste may be useful in the analysis of non-Indian societies.²

From this perspective, a caste having a low status in the ritual hierarchy also has low status in other hierarchies of the society such as economic and political. Caste is generally held as the basic institution conceptualizing social inequality in India and no study of Indian society can be complete without getting into the ramifications of the caste system. In its extreme form, the traditional idea of caste stratification subsumes all other stratification systems to an extent that the relevance of other dimensions of stratification in such a society could be questioned. However, the traditional idea of caste envisages existence of vertical differentiation between different castes in terms of ritual, socio-economic and political positions on one hand and absence of internal differentiation between the individuals belonging to the same caste, on the other. Such a model, emphasizing on ascriptive rather than achievable caste position even considers caste stratification as non-competitive or non-antagonistic. Scholars have questioned this status summation model which envisages congruence among various positions. Pauline M. Kolenda, in Caste in Contemporary India: Beyond Organic Solidarity, (California: Benjamin Cummings 1978), has questioned the existence of organic solidarity in a congruent fashion between caste, class and power, at any time in the caste system. Anil Bhatt has opined:

To be sure, such a neat pattern of status summation could hardly be found even in traditional India. Such an image of Indian society has been criticized

because it tends to ignore the latent, deviant, and minority aspects that may not fit the model.³

Inadequacies of this model have been pointed out by the social anthropologists in their empirical studies, which cite examples and incidents of social mobility, indicating that all social dimensions are not practically determined by the caste. Besides, the caste system has never been uniformly rigid in different parts of India, and therefore, it has affected differently the other ‘orders’ of social life. Such interpretations have changed the classical view of caste, according to which caste is the part of Indian or Hindu tradition, which is a static given, which remained virtually unchanged for centuries.

The famous social anthropologist M.N. Srinivas, has commented in this respect:

> When I was doing my B.A. Honours Course in social philosophy at Mysore (1933-6), certain views about Indian – and Hindu – society were not only very popular but regarded as indubitable truths: it was extraordinarily rigid, and the caste wise specialization of occupation prevented any kind of occupational mobility, joint families killed enterprise, and were on the decline ... It was only with the experience of intensive fieldwork in Rampura, that I began to seriously question the above views which, I know, were largely the perceptions of Christian missionaries and British administrators in India and uncritically accepted by educated Indians.⁴

However, social scientific research on the subject and the popular social movements around caste, have frequently questioned the validity of the concept of unchanging Hindu social order under the influence of caste. Many scholars have questioned the theoretical justification of the classical argument that in Indian society, ‘status’ was derived from religious ideology, and that it worked independently of the economic and political realities or the structures of power and domination in the Indian society.

> Early empirical work on the subject was predisposed, in a large measure, to view the system in the ideal framework provided by the sacred texts and tended to ignore certain aspects of it that were crucially significant for its proper sociological analysis, but which found no mention in the ancient works. Recent empirical work has provided, in some measure, a corrective to this one sided approach, but to date the gaps in information regarding the


functional aspects of caste in the different regions of India are far too many and far too wide to permit any meaningful generalizations about the system as a whole.\(^5\)

Thanks to the researches of scholars like M.N. Srinivas, the interpretation of caste as the fundamental institution structuring social inequalities in India which was responsible for stagnation of Indian society, has been long discarded and its role in social formation and change in India gets emphasis instead. From analysis of the Hindu sacerdotal texts and large-scale ethnographic accounts to surveys of attitudes and perceptions and caste-based mobilisations at the regional or local levels, sociologists and social anthropologists have explored different dimensions of the institution.

The early Orientalists and the Indologists with their conceptual focus mostly on some religious texts have drawn the theoretical picture of unchanging caste system, whereas social anthropologists like M.N. Srinivas, have visualised jatis capable of moving up and down. It has been pointed out that in the pre-colonial times, over long stretches of time the caste system was never absolutely closed and mobility was possible through many channels such as change of occupation, change of customs, migration to distant regions, accumulation of wealth and power etc. Indian society, with varied pace of changes was never static and the caste could not defy this momentum.

The social historical studies reveal that contrary to the scriptural view of caste a closed and stable system in which the ranking on varna scale coincided with that of caste or subcaste status, there existed wide divergences in the status ranking of families within the same caste on the basis of subcaste division, occupational sub-specialization and accumulation of wealth. Moreover, the position of caste in the system of ranking was itself subject to changes due to the external and internal forces operating in the social system.\(^6\)

Caste has been empirically interpreted as a dynamic system full of adaptations, accretions, contradictions and transformations in altered contexts, hence resilience and change. Dipankar Gupta has aptly remarked:


\(^6\) Yogendra Singh, Social Stratification and Change in India, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1997), p.36.
Just because caste identity is still present, and quite strong, it does not mean that it operates in the old-fashioned way. It is a mistake to see every manifestation of caste as a proof of its unchanging character and steadfast grip on Indian society.\(^7\)

The caste system, as an important basis of social stratification, has played its role in developing distinctive hierarchical relationship and enabled special types of mobility and differentiation which has later proved instrumental in facilitating political identities and associational urges. Studies on the complex relationship between caste and the patterns of social mobility among individual communities and sections of population, both in the past and in the present, have now occupied an important place in the domain of social science research. The ideas and actions of several castes with different social status, their ideology for self-assertion and their response to the changing socio-economic and political scenario are important in the analysis of dynamics of social change, especially during the colonial and post-colonial India. Studies on social mobility and its relations with the caste system in India (and Bengal), have occupied an important place in the domain of social science research. Though, caste has become a part of life of millions of Indians, as something obvious and self-evident, scholars are not unanimous on the essential attributes of the institution and the nature of change it has undergoing over the years.

Modern-day conceptualizations of caste started with Western and colonial writings on the Indian society. In the colonial period, the British administrators, Indian and non-Indian scholars gave central importance to caste in their analysis of social formation and stratification in India. Colonial constructions of caste were varied and linked to colonial governance. This period saw, as Debjani Ganguly has observed, ‘… the emergence of caste as a cultural/theoretical peg on which most hegemonic accounts of India were constructed.’\(^8\) The influence of colonialism and its forms of knowledge, is quite significant in the way socio-political endeavours, and academic disciplines have developed in colonial India.

As Cohn (1987), Pant (1987), Dirks (1989, 2001), Ludden (1993) and Appadurai (1993) have argued, the administrative empiricism of the British


was responsible for conceptualizing caste categories in ‘new’ ways, ways that continue to be hegemonic in much academic practice, and in the domain of popular politics in India.\footnote{Ibid., p.35.}

Even in the early decades of the post-colonial times, the trend has not changed significantly.

…the notion of ‘caste’ that circulates in post-independence India, both in the academic domain and in the domain of popular politics, draws on the British administrative and epistemological refiguration of this category between the mid-nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.\footnote{Ibid., p.42.}

Scholars generally, during this period, have taken the view that Indian society can be best studied from a ‘caste model’ or ‘caste perspective’, where every aspect of the society is reduced to the core features of caste system, namely, hereditary occupation, hierarchy and mutual repulsion. According to Edmund R. Leach the caste system is an organic system with each particular caste and sub-caste filling a distinctive functional role. It is a system of labour division from which the element of competition among workers has been largely excluded. Leach has asserted that when caste associations assume political and economic functions for respective castes, they violate the traditional norms of caste interdependence or reciprocity and enter the arenas of competition or conflict which is opposed to the idiom of caste.\footnote{E.R. Leach, in Introduction, in Edmund R Leach (ed.), Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North-West Pakistan, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), pp. 1-10.}

F. Barth has contended that, “Caste, as a pattern of social stratification, is characterized by simplicity of its basis schema, and its comprehensiveness. ...Thus, in a Hindu caste system, there is a diversity of economic statuses and ritual statuses, but all these are interconnected so that all priests are sacred and all leatherworkers are untouchable.”\footnote{F. Barth, “The System of Social Stratification in Swat, North Pakistan”, in Edmund R Leach (ed.), Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North-West Pakistan, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), pp. 113.}

Since caste has been assumed essentially a Hindu institution, this in turn has made Indian culture synonymous with Hindu religion.

Louis Dumont, in his book, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* has claimed that caste with it’s the all-pervasive principle of hierarchy, is
the essence Hindu tradition. It has originated in a transcendental realm of religious ideas and has subsumed under it the economic and political power. The hierarchical social structure is free from the ideologies of individualism, competition and equality. As the core principle of caste hierarchy, Dumont has put forward the opposition of pure (represented by Brahmans) and impure (represented by untouchables) within which evolves the notion of ‘status’.

Superiority and superior purity are identical: it is in this sense that, ideologically, distinction of purity is the foundation of status.13

To him, caste system is a hierarchical disjunction between status and power, where ‘purity’ (spiritual authority of the priestly caste) encompasses ‘power’ (temporal authority of rulers or politically dominant castes). According to Dumont (1966), hierarchy is the only operative principle of caste. This involves open and ritualized recognition of inequality among people of different castes in day-to-day social behaviour as well as in the conceptualization of society itself. For him, castes are not merely ranked hierarchically in a vertical order, but they are also mutually related through a system of opposition between ‘purity’ and ‘impurity’.

Dumont is a pioneer of the structuralist perspective in regard to the study of caste system, providing a pure model applicable to entire India and Homo Hierarchicus is the most well-known exposition of the perspective that focuses on the underlying structure of ideas which constitutes the logic of a given system and may not be apparent in its everyday practice. Ideology, for him, is an autonomous sphere and could not be reduced to a residual category or treated as a part of superstructure, secondary to politico-economic factor. The basic tenet in the ideology of the caste system, as conceptualised by him is “hierarchy”, which is not merely another term for inequality or an extreme form of social stratification. Hierarchy encompasses all aspects of life including binary tensions and dialectics of the opposition between “pure” and “impure”.

Dumont has been criticized on various grounds. Dumont’s view in terms of binary opposition (encompassing and encompassed) is inconsistent both theoretically and

substantively, since “pure” in actual practice is often found fused in the “impure” and vice-versa in many rituals. Declan Quigley has observed:

Dumont’s mistake is to believe that because there is automatic connection between ritual status and economic and political strength, there is no connection at all. For him, caste ideology is somehow self-generating without regard to the vagaries of the real world. His claim is that the opposition of pure … and impure … is the expression of a pure form of hierarchy which comes about because of the disjunction of ideology (status) from power. But, as we have seen, Brahmans and Untouchables are often not seen as belonging to opposite ends of the spectrum, ‘poles apart’. On the contrary, they are often assimilated.¹⁴

Dumont, in fact, has put forth his model independent of the body of social anthropological and other empirical studies. As his sources are mostly textual, Dumont’s construction of a theory of caste lacks empirical value. Though he has used ethnographic material, his main sources are Indological. Dumont’s structuralist view has theorised the underlying structure of the system but has neglected the conception of history and analysis of politico-economic dimensions of India’s social reality. To think of structuralism independent of empirical reality has been Dumont’s main concern. But, it may be pointed out caste does not exist or function except empirically in the lives of people at the micro level, where caste plays a role in relations of power and inequalities in material life.

Berreman implicitly has stated that Dumont’s principle of hierarchy is merely an extension of the Brahmanical model of caste:

Dumont relies heavily on some classical Sanskrit texts while ignoring others…. The result is that he conveys a view of caste, which is artificial, stiff, stereotypical and idealized…. It conforms well to the theory of caste purveyed in learned Brahmanical tracts…. The picture is not wholly false, but neither is it true; it is biased.¹⁵

Berreman has criticized Dumont’s notion that power and politico-economic factors are distinct from and epiphenomenal to caste, and that ritual hierarchy is the central fact of caste, which is independent of power. He has said that, since caste does not exist, except empirically, these factors can scarcely be dismissed as epiphenomenal.


The power-status opposition is a false dichotomy in the context of caste. Special circumstances can lead to apparent anomalies (e.g. relatively weak but respected Brahmans; relatively powerful Sudras), but usually status and power go together. To Berreman, it is better to “avoid the compulsive desire to find a single or transcendent basis for caste ranking, and to understand it instead, in its full complexity with power and ritual factors combining, perhaps with others, to define caste and caste ranking.” While the religious texts provide a pan-Indian model of caste system, the actual working of caste is always determined by regional/local conditions and this is more important in any analysis of caste as an empirical reality.

Actually, even the two ends of the caste system are not as firm as they are made out to be. Some Brahmim groups are regarded as so low that even Harijans will not accept cooked food from them.

Dipankar Gupta, emphasizing that different castes have different evaluations of the caste hierarchy, has opined:

In our opinion, such unanimity over the Brahminic hierarchy does not really exist; and the reason for this lack of consensus is remarkably simple. As castes are different and separate, it is but a logical corollary that they should also hierarchize differently and separately.

Nicholas B. Dirks has argued that Dumont’s theory can only gain credibility on the basis of two hundred years of colonial and Orientalist assumptions and in fact, caste neither exhausted the range of social forms, functions, and identities, nor provided underlying unity. Andre Beteille has criticized Dumont for overemphasizing the difference between India and the West. The Indian society is characterized by holism and hierarchy, while the Western society by individualism and equality in Dumont’s work. Beteille has argued that a comparative empirical account of West and India would not be as contrasting as Dumont tends to present. Beteille however, has not minimized the theoretical bases of caste.

---

16 Ibid., pp. 86-87.
17 Ibid., p. 87.
Nothing could be more mistaken than to believe that caste was something that for two thousand years Indians merely lived by, without giving thought to its meaning or its rightness, that it existed merely as practice and not as theory. We must not lose sight of the intellectual tradition of India in which theoretical reflection and dialectical skill were used for describing, explaining and justifying the distinctions of caste by generations of intellectuals. Dumont (1966: 56) was right in drawing attention to the systematic thinking on which caste observances were based; but he was plainly wrong in suggesting that ‘Hindus of today and of past times’ think about caste in the same systematic way.21

The sociologists and social anthropologists, who have focused on caste as the most significant institution of social ranking, have used the caste system as the basic frame of reference, coterminous with the entire gamut of social relations. What is known as ‘caste model of Indian society’ is their theoretical perspective. The ideas related to pollution-purity and religion, are treated as the basis of caste ranking. Some of them have analyzed caste rank as the basis of social status, others have found it either as an obstacle in the economic development, or as an interest group or as a basis of social solidarity and security. Class division within the society has not been given proper attention. K.L. Sharma has pointed out:

In the wake of colonialism, economic and political domains were affected due to changes in the land tenure systems, emergence of professional classes, migration, education, law and bureaucratic organizations, but the notion of class which has been akin to Indian society remained in the background. Western notion of class was propagated as a secular and democratic concept of social relations. Class mobility was viewed as the opposite of mobility in the caste system. Simple facts such as class-like distinction within a caste, class considerations in hypergamy and coexistence of caste and class remained peripheral issues, whereas corporateness, pollution-purity and sanskritization were over-emphasized. So much so that caste mobility at the level of individual, family and jati (group) has not been adequately analysed as corporateness of caste has overshadowed all other dimensions.22

No doubt, the “caste model” has brought into focus some of the quite meaningful features of the traditional Indian society and has added a new dimension, but it has failed to take into account certain other crucial features of Indian socio-economic and political life. It has been pointed out that caste in fact, is more than a “ritualistic”


mechanism and it could face a variety of forces and constraints due to its all-inclusive character. If it were simply a ritualistic arrangement, it would have crumbled down long ago due to its very cumbersome nature. The social formation of Indian society comprises class, ethnicity, power, religion and economy along with caste. All these aspects of the social formation are incorporated into each other. They provide an understanding of the historicity of Indian society including that of caste and class. Caste is like all other systems of stratification in some ways, while it is quite unique in some other respects. Caste has evolved simultaneously in several directions and adjusted with ideologically antagonistic systems. Uma Chakravarti has pointed out:

The multiplicity of caste practices are a consequence of the interaction between communities and the dialectics of the situation on the ground in each region. In this sense the celebrated flexibility of ‘Indian’ society and the caste system can be understood in a different way: as the vitality of the local cultures which refuse to be erased by the larger social forces that may come to dominate their region.23

The structure of social relations that shapes the dominant or hegemonic model of caste hierarchy has not been accepted by everyone and the subordinate castes do not consider their position as permanently fixed. Dalit militancy and lower-caste assertion in the colonial and postcolonial India have largely served to discredit any assumption (such as of Dumont) that lower castes have obeyed the ritual dominance of Brahmans and upper castes without question. The former’s unequal access to material resources and power has been an inherent feature of the caste system in empirical terms, which the pure-impure dichotomy has obscured. Berreman aptly has described the caste system as ‘institutionalised inequality’, which ‘guaranteed differential access to the valued things of life’.24 The so called tranquility of caste relations ordered by status hierarchy dictated from the top had been severely challenged by assertive caste mobility movements.

For a long time, it has been assumed that with the process of modernisation and development the caste-based closed order of social inequality will transform into a class-based open system of stratification. In contrast to economically determined

classes which are motivated by a feeling of competition rather than cooperation, castes have been described as status groups, which form a community of social relationship, determined by specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honour and are bounded by functional inter-linkages, cooperating at ritual, economic and occupational levels. It has been assumed that caste, instead of class, would be more significant in comprehending social mobility in Indian situation. The caste principle of stratification has been considered as ‘closed organic stratification’, while class principle of stratification as ‘segmentary stratification.’ However, the concept of caste system representing ‘closed organic stratification’ is relevant only as a theoretical device as historically it is not possible to maintain that conflicts or competition between castes was absent in any period. Yogendra Singh has observed:

It is true that the castewise division of labour facilitates the interdependence of castes and this is strikingly seen in the jajmani system. But interdependence is not the whole story. Castes do compete between each other for acquiring political and economic power and high ritual position. Historically there have been rulers from merchant and peasant castes and even from tribes. This might sound contradictory if we define caste as closed organic strata characterised by cooperation. This definition, however, holds true only at a static and abstract level and not when we look at castes as dynamic and concrete entities.  

While some have emphasised reciprocity and interdependence between castes, others have referred to the coercive nature of power in caste society, characterised by various forms of inequalities. Subsequently, class, power and ethnicity also have come to receive due attention in the later decades of the twentieth century in the studies on the interrelated concepts of social stratification and social mobility.

Caste, class, power and ethnicity are seen both as convergent and incongruent aspects of social stratification. Patterns of social mobility in these sectors in relation to different social groups, such as castes, classes and tribes have brought about definitional changes in the notions of caste, class, ethnicity, and power and their interrelationships.  

Multidimensionality of social stratification has been emphasized in the in the studies conducted by the scholars, such as M.N. Srinivas, A. Beteille, Anil Bhatt, P.C.

---


Aggarwal, Dipankar Gupta, K.L. Sharma, Yogendra Singh, which do not consider caste as an all-inclusive basis of social stratification but emphasize several dimensions of social stratification. Economic position, style of life, education, occupation and personality attributes are evaluated for assessing a person’s rank in his community or caste.

In *Caste, Class and Power*, (Bombay, 1966) Beteille has made a distinction between caste, class and power following the pattern of class, status and party as suggested by Max Weber.

Beteille argues a case for the study of material interests along with the study of ideas and values in terms of the dialectical relations between the two. But Beteille does not offer a 'class analysis’ of Indian society as an alternative to the caste model. In fact, Beteille suggests a sort of modification of the caste model by putting an emphasis on the study of economic and political conflict with a certain degree of autonomy for the economic and political activities of inter-caste relations.  

Anil Bhatt has observed that social stratification in India has deviated considerably from the traditional caste model. His study has showed that social stratification in modern India cannot be characterized as homogenous, combinative and non-competitive.

...the profile of social stratification in modern India is one of increasing status incongruence, relative openness, mobility between and competition among strata and relative equality. The socio-economic and political dimensions of social stratification are becoming increasingly differentiated from the ascriptive caste dimension, suggesting that one cannot describe or understand social stratification in India within the framework of the classical caste model of stratification.  

However the interrelation between the forms of social stratification remains important. Dipankar Gupta has observed:

The important point to bear in mind is that the various forms of social stratification are analytically separate and separable. Empirically we often find one form of stratification overlaid by another. … The co-variation between two or more forms of stratification asks for a higher order of

---


explanation, and not the abandonment of one for another, e.g. caste for class, or class for caste.\(^\text{29}\)

Importance of caste has been hardly ignored, in the analysis social stratification and change in modern India:

For sociology of social stratification, the treatment of caste becomes unavoidable as a standard to measure changes with reference to other principles of stratification such as of wealth (class) and power (elite). These new principles only sometimes operate autonomously; more often these operate contingently together with the caste principle of social stratification.\(^\text{30}\)

The scholars, such as Ramkrishna Mukherjee, Joan P. Mencher, D.D. Kosambi, Gail Omvedt, however, have looked at caste from a class point of view. To Omvedt, caste is a material reality with a material base. It provides both the form and the concrete material content. It has historically shaped the very basis of Indian society and continues to have crucial economic and political implications even today:

The ‘exploited’ as a whole included a very wide range of castes, the broad ‘toiling caste’ majority. Clearly it was a system which had built-in contradictions among the exploited. ...These divisions and contradictions to some extent justify the characterization of caste as having a *retarding* effect on ‘class struggle’ in that it institutionalized divisions among the exploited.\(^\text{31}\)

Here, it may be said that neither ‘caste’ nor ‘class’ can serve as a model for analyzing the emerging social reality, because caste is not the precise equivalent of class and class is not synonymous with caste. There is no clear fit between ritual status and economic and political power but this does not mean that there is no connection at all. Caste cannot be understood in total separation from class and it is wrong to collapse the one into the other. Traditional segments of caste and kinship undergo adaptive transformation without completely being “diffracted” into classes or corporate groups. Thus, class segments operate within the frame of caste categories with a new sense of identity and they also violate caste norms, hence contradictions. Caste has been a


dynamic system full of adaptations, accretions, contradictions and transformations, hence resilience and change.

So caste alone is not the totality of social stratification and caste is not being replaced by class, as the two are not necessarily antithetical to each other. Caste as a structural phenomenon is considered as a part of the general theory of social stratification. Sometimes, caste has been taken as synonymous with the social formation of Indian society and therefore class has been treated as an alternate system to caste. However, the fact is that neither does caste, refers to the totality of social formations nor is class the polar opposite of caste. The social formation in India has absorbed caste, class, race, ethnicity, religion, etc. To think of Indian society simply in terms of ‘caste’ as the social formation implying harmony, hegemony, reciprocity, hierarchy, division of labour and stability of the society and vice versa from a class point of view would create confusions and misconceptions.

Caste and class are viewed as the most significant dimensions of social stratification. They are considered as closely interrelated, almost inseparable, basic processes of social life. Caste and class have always been interrelated dimensions of the same social reality. Since all the members of a caste do not enjoy a similar economic position, caste and class cannot be equated. There are economic differentiations, though not always necessarily antagonistic, within each caste. In order to seek the support of the caste members in political sphere, the elite appeal to caste sentiments and invoke caste consciousness so that harmony among the members is maintained despite economic differentiations.

Thus, economic differentiations tend to develop classes within caste, and caste ideology, that is, a sense of the same social status of the members, attempts to blur the differentiations and to invoke a sense of oneness among the members. At the same time, the political elite of the upper economic class ally, whenever necessary, with the members of the same class outside their caste to attain and maintain politico-economic dominance. This fact of economic differentiation, though recognized in a number of studies, has not so far been properly related to the dynamics of their social awakening and political movements.
The status of a person in Indian society is determined on the basis of his birth in a particular caste or community and his socio-economic position and social interaction with others. Such a status is regarded as his social status (consisting of status both in the caste system and the class structure), and can be explained in terms of a composite evaluation by him and others. More precisely, a comprehensive evaluation of social status is made through the subjective, composite (based on objective criteria like education, job, income, etc.) and group (caste) criteria. Such criteria of status-evaluation obviously pertain to the social status of a person in a multiple status-hierarchy of caste system and class structure. In fact, in an empirical situation, change in one’s status in the caste system is possible on the basis of one’s material conditions and his/her interaction with others, though such change may not completely alter the status based on birth in a particular caste or community, as caste works through the idiom of kinship. Here, the notions purity and impurity play an important role in explaining social divisions, though not in Dumont’s sense.

AN OVERVIEW OF STUDIES ON SOCIAL MOBILITY IN THE CASTE CONTEXT OR THE CASTE MOBILITY MOVEMENTS

Like social stratification in Indian society, the scholarship on social mobility is also complex and varied. A number of studies have analyzed social mobility through both single and multiple approaches. Studies based on a single approach have argued that occupation is the sole criterion for determining one’s social status. But the adherents to a multiple approach have found the single approach inadequate for analyzing social mobility. A multiple approach includes more than one criterion for determining social status. The adherents to this theory of social mobility based on a multiple approach, have accepted that in a society, there is a possibility of having a higher rate (and degree also) of mobility in one dimension and a lower in others. So, one has to consider together all the possible dimensions of status-achievement – the dimensions of education, occupation, income, expenditure pattern, and social power.

From theoretical point of view, social mobility takes place within the systemic framework of status, acquired by certain reference groups or individuals. In other words, people get socially mobile by adopting the style of life, behaviour pattern and value system of certain groups and individuals though their improved socio-economic status and material condition play a significant role in it. Thus, social mobility refers
to a shift either in the ascribed ritual status hierarchy, or in the achieved or achievable secular status hierarchy or in the both hierarchy. Social mobility is possible both in class structure and the caste system. There could be upward mobility for some and also downward mobility for some other, resulting from socio-economic and political changes. There are both losers and gainers due to occupational mobility, urbanization, migration, monetization of rural economy, entrenchment of caste into polity and economy, etc.

Indian society has imbibed both the caste system and other primordial social categories and class structure. Without going into their complementary and contradictory nature, we may agree with the view that with its all pervasive emphasis on a hierarchical gradation of different segments (castes and sub-castes) and other characteristics like endogamy, purity-pollution, the separation of and repulsion to other segments, interdependence, and socio-religious disabilities of certain castes, – the inter-caste relations have undergone a series of changes in recent times. Although its overall ethos is not completely altered, members of various castes and sub-castes have succeeded in improving their lot by claiming and getting their claims for a higher caste status accepted. In other cases, they have not cared much for their caste status and have tried to improve their overall position through other channels like education, modern jobs, political power, etc., which, in turn, has certainly influenced their caste status. Class structure has provided numerous opportunities to the people of different castes and communities to improve their lot. This has helped them not only to improve their socio-economic position and thereby a rise in their class status, but also to claim and in many cases to get their claims legitimized and socially accepted for a higher status and rank in the caste hierarchy. Caste mobilization is one aspect of the changing dimensions of class formation and the relationship between caste and class, which may result in upward or downward social mobility.

As caste and class have always been interrelated dimensions of the same social reality, emphasis has to be given on economic and political dimensions of a caste side by side with that of status in analysing caste mobility.

For purposes of historical analyses each group has to be located both in terms of ritual rank and economic status although the two points need not necessarily have coincided. However, correspondence was frequent among some groups of high ritual status and virtually predictable among those of the
lowest strata. Middle-level groups remained ambiguous and were probably the most mobile in terms of actual status; a movement which nevertheless would have had some restrictions emanating from ritual ranking.\(^{32}\)

With access to various sources of mobility, adoption of a number of different modes of action and discourse, social mobility of each caste, in spite of having some common characteristics, has its own dynamics. This comes to be conditioned by both the specific developments within that caste and the nature of ongoing changes in the socio-cultural ethos and politico-economic power equation, to which the caste is responding.

Some viewpoints about mobility in caste structure have come up in the past decades.

Firstly, in Indian sociological literature, the various mobility courses that castes, lower in the hierarchy, have adopted for improving their status, are characterized as Sanskritization. The leading Indian social anthropologist, M.N. Srinivas, who was by training an Oxford social anthropologist and by background a South Indian Brahmin, first introduced the notion of Sanskritization in 1952, as an underlying process of Indian social change.\(^{33}\) To M.N. Srinivas:

> Sanskritization is the process by which a ‘low’ Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, ‘twice-born’ caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community.\(^{34}\)

Srinivas has emphasized the need for Sanskritization and Westernization as conceptual tools for understanding mobility in caste system. He has held that “corporate mobility” still remains basic at the caste or jati level, as familial mobility does not obtain public recognition. In corporate ranking, status is attributed to the entire group and even if individuals or families in that group are able to acquire status-enhancing attributes, the status of the group as a whole is not changed. The status is collectively defined on cultural criteria. The process of status mobility

---


through Sanskritization, in a way manifests the corporateness in the ranking system. This explains the tendency to mobilise caste, tribe or ethnic groups as a whole for advancement of social status.

Secondly, on the other hand, Burton Stein has pointed out that the mobility of families and small groups was pronounced in medieval India and corporate movements for mobility are possible only in the modern period.

While it is possible to identify social mobility as a significant, dynamic element in ancient and medieval Indian society, this mobility cannot be generally characterized as corporate mobility. It is usually difficult to identify specific and effective ethnic aggregates – for example jatis (endogamous units in Indian caste organization) – in the materials with which the medieval historian must work... neither the facilities nor for the need for corporate mobility of the contemporary sort existed during the medieval period.

Thirdly, McKim Marriott has referred to ‘multiple reference’ in the caste system, emphasising, “...the need for a number of new analytic notions in order to understand what any given effort at caste mobility is about.” He has argued that in order to gain fuller understanding of the stratification system and caste mobility in India, its process should be observed at various levels, such as those of the village, region and civilisation. Marriott has stated that caste could be comprehended within the frames of multiple references, such as the rural versus metropolitan and traditional varna versus modern national frames of reference for ranking. Rural ranking system, according to Marriot, is closed rather than open, comprising fixed sets of castes, groups and individuals, whose ranks are measured through interaction, manifesting ritual standing in terms of a purity-pollution scale. The metropolitan ranking system is open and expansible system, with individuals or small groups as its typical units, whose comparative ranks are evaluated by attribution against a general urban scale of values. In the villages, on the other hand, the ranking depends more on the traditional evaluation of caste status. Mere acquisition of higher secular status attributes may not be sufficient here for elevation of caste status. Moreover, in the metropolitan settings

---


the principle of ‘corporate ranking’ does not operate as it does in the rural system of stratification. Marriot has observed:

We need further to distinguish the ranking and movement of castes as corporations concerned with ritual dominance and pollution from the ranking and movement of individuals or groups concerned with wealth, power and prestige, for a given act may relate to either or both kinds of units in mutually affirming of mutually denying ways.\(^{37}\)

Forthly, Owen M. Lynch and Y. B. Damle have used the concept of ‘reference group’ to analyze the structural process in caste mobility and to broaden the theoretical level of analysis.

The locus of reference group behavior is the non-membership group or other caste and sub caste whom a caste individual or the caste group as a whole, seeks to imitate or identify with, if its status is positively evaluated or towards which such individuals or groups develop a negative attitude of hostility and disapproval, if its status is negatively evaluated. In both cases the mechanism that motivates individuals or groups to refer to or compare their existing membership position with the membership in other caste groups depends upon a) the extent of closure or openness of the membership of groups to which reference is being made, and b) the nature of deprivations and gratifications that individuals or groups derive from their existing membership group. From this distinction, two major types of reference groups are delineated: the positive reference groups, membership to which is aspired for, and the negative reference groups, membership to which is disliked.\(^{38}\)

Y. B. Damle has provided a theoretical and methodological approach to some mechanisms of social mobility, conspicuous in the urban situation. Damle has described reference group behaviour as positive orientation towards other groups, taken as behavioural models – Brahmanic, Kingly or Kshatriya, Vaishya and Western – involving changes in the behavioural attributes of caste members, to achieve higher social rank.\(^{39}\)

These approaches to caste mobility are significant in comprehending some important aspects of mobility taking place today in caste system. The above approaches to caste

\(^{37}\) Ibid., p.114.


mobility are not however, singularly adequate enough to explain the entire gamut of mobility in the caste system and the complexities, tensions and contradictions arising from it. Sumit Sarkar has criticized the approach in social anthropology that “all kinds of caste mobility, including radical protest, have been grouped together under one label, ‘Sanskritization’, indicative primarily of the most assimilative kind of change.”

Sanskritization covers only socio-cultural aspects of change and confines to “group mobility” of a caste. But group mobility does not encompass totality of mobility in caste structure. It does not take a note of individual frontiers of mobility and the motives and factors that underlie such mobility. Sanskritization does not necessarily reduce ‘economic inequalities’ nor does it challenge caste hierarchy. However, it symbolizes an increased sense of awareness among the unprivileged sections.

However, caste mobility movement is too complex a phenomenon to be interpreted by such a general concept. To some extent, Srinivas was himself aware of it, which is evident from his later writings—from the concepts like, ‘Westernization’, ‘dominant caste’, etc. He has pointed out that Sanskritization is generally accompanied by, and often results in, upward mobility for the caste in question but mobility may also occur without Sanskritization and vice versa.

… whether Sanskritized or not, the dominant peasant castes provide local models for imitation; and as Pocock and Singer have observed, Kshatriya (and other) models are often mediated through them.

He has opined that Sanskritization solely could not result in status uplift:

Sanskritization came to be seen by the lower castes as an adjunct to other and more important things, such as education, prestigious employment, and political power. They also saw that by itself it was of extremely limited value in raising the position of a caste. This is illustrated clearly in the Backward Classes Movement.

---

42 Ibid., p. 10.
43 Ibid., p. 94.
In fact, normative and cultural aspects of castes have received more attention through analysis of Sanskritization and Westernization. That Sanskritization can also cause tensions and contradictions manifestly or latently has been overlooked by Srinivas. Hierarchy based on pollution-purity has remained intrinsic to Srinivas’s thinking in regard to all aspects of human life, even if it is not actually so pronounced. To him, Sanskritization is the only way to remove impurity or to minimize it.

The process of Sanskritization, though apparently cultural, reflects many complex motivational urges for social mobility. An important element in this process, is the manifest rejection of the norms of institutionalized inequality fostered by the traditional caste stratification system. It leads, however, to a paradox: Sanskritization reinforces the normative system, which is represented by caste stratification, but it also, at least in principle, violates its basic tenet – the acceptance of the principle of hierarchy. For this very reason, many sociologists have seen in the process of Sanskritization a latent form of class conflict which results because of the peculiar structural constraints of Indian society (Gould 1961; Leach 1960; etc.). Srinivas points to this process indirectly through his concept of ‘dominant caste’. 44

Srinivas has opined that while the sources of mobility lie in the political and economic systems, Sanskritization provides a traditional idiom for the expression of such mobility. This is not to say, however, that all cases of Sanskritization in traditional India were always preceded by the possession of political or economic power, or even that Sanskritization always had a mobility aspect.

Sanskritization is not a smooth process of status emulation. Adoption of lifestyles by the lower castes that are not traditionally theirs is often interpreted as if these lower castes are ashamed of their identity. Scholars have highlighted that the lower castes often claimed elevated caste status independent of Sanskritization.

Sanskritization is a reassertion in an extraverted form of what was till then an introverted expression of the caste’s overall rejection of the position, given to it by hierarchical rules as governed by the twin principles of economics and politics. But only in rare cases, if ever at all, do these castes want to give up their identity. They are successful when they have access to the axes of economics and politics, ...

Rajni Kothari has pointed to the complex psychological aspects, involved in emulation of upper caste culture:

By itself the ‘sanskritisation’ urge produces some very basic psychological strains in the group that is trying to acquire a new identity in its search for status, as in the process its status becomes subjectively ambivalent and thus insecure; … Also, so long as they do not succeed in raising the status of the group – and that is always a long period – their infirm status necessarily creates an insecure and unsettled position in society – leading either to compensatory devices for social recognition or real withdrawal into something else. ...It is a tribute to the subtle dynamics of Hindu society that in spite of this psychological cost, the adjustments of sanskritisation go on all the time; and one of the many reasons is that the structural distance that is sought to be jumped can often be related to the achievement of other indices of power and position in the modernist segments of society (as perceived both by the striving group as well as by a majority of other groups), thus facilitating the transition to a consensus on the new status of the striving group. Important in this respect is the crucial role that the distribution of secular power has always played in status ranking in Hindu society; and the consequent capacity of the system to keep adjusting to its changing hierarchical balance.46

Social mobility of different communities in colonial India has brought out the importance of the manner in which traditional status urges such as ‘Sanskritisation’ got intertwined in complex ways, with modern urges like ‘Westernization’ and ‘secularization’. A caste or an advanced guard of it, which started initially ‘Sanskritization’ sometimes could repudiate such effort in favour of ‘secularization’ under the impact of universalized aspirations, such as rationality urge, economic wellbeing, and political integration or pursue all simultaneously in varying degrees. This indicates the dynamic nature of our society, which provides the background for receiving changes without either great disruption or great withdrawal or hostility.

Burton Stein’s analysis of mobility in medieval India is no doubt important to the understanding of different levels of the caste system, but it has undermined the

strength of group solidarity based on caste allegiance in medieval period. Hitesranjan Sanyal has pointed out:

...apart from mobility possible for small family units or for elite groups, it was also possible before the modern period for the movements of corporate mobility of large groups which included ordinary people, to develop.47

Marriott’s approach is important in understanding the complexity of social stratification in the context of caste mobility but its application in three zones, i.e., the village, region and civilization remains doubtful in the study of particular caste movements.

Regarding the observations of Lynch and Damle, K.L. Sharma has observed:

The analyses of Lynch and Damle are undoubtedly an addition to the analysis of caste mobility, but how to transform a “culture bound”, ad hoc concept of sanskritization into a structural one and how to explain structural changes and their implicit and explicit repercussions on caste mobility through the reference group theory, remain unclear.48

Commenting on Damle’s paper in his edited volume, Silverberg has opined:

While Damle says that secular rank – attained through enhanced economic and/or political power – may profoundly influence ritual rank, his paper does not focus on the inactions that express rank position or that change it. It is not his objective to link reference group theory conceptually with interaction processes. Furthermore, changes in rank through imitation of a reference group’s attributes would not seem to challenge the system of stratification itself, although Damle’s instances of marriage outside caste by Westernised urban individuals are clearly contrary to the norm of endogamy for the major structural units of the system.49

In mobility of a caste, the moving units that structure it and the extent of their movement need to be identified. According to K. L. Sharma, mobility in caste structure could be comprehended better if we analyze it at different levels namely, group, family and individual. This helps in understanding the extent of mobility and also the quality and quantum of mobility. These three levels of mobility give an idea of the entire of mobility process of respective castes.

Mobility in caste structure at these levels takes place simultaneously. Mobility at one level is not in contrast with the same process at other levels. The same family may bear mobility at all the three levels. This is also true for other two levels. Thus, mobility in caste structure is both interrelated and discrete.\textsuperscript{50}

In the context of socio-economic and political changes, the concepts of ‘Sanskritization’, ‘Westernization’ and other concepts such as reference group theory help in the analysis of mobility at different levels of the caste system.

James Silverberg, Milton Singer and Bernard Cohn, C. J. Fuller have brought out several studies on the related topics of caste and social mobility in their edited volumes in the context of emerging synthesis of new approaches to the study of caste drawing upon the materials of several disciplines and upon both theoretical constructs and empirical case studies. Structure & Change in Indian Society, edited by Milton Singer and Bernard Cohn, is a volume of papers on social structure and change in India highlighting several caste related topics, such as caste and social structure, changes in the caste system, caste in politics, economics and law etc. In this volume, Bernard S. Cohn has discussed the growth of an empirical knowledge of the structure and functioning of Indian society in colonial times, particularly the development of the ‘official’ view of caste.

The ‘official’ view of caste was very much related to how the British collected information about the caste system. In the first instance a caste was a ‘thing’, an entity which was concrete and measurable; above all it had definable characteristics – endogamy, commensality rules, fixed occupation, common ritual practices. ...India was seen as collection of castes; the particular picture was different in given time and place, but India was a sum of its parts and the parts were castes.\textsuperscript{51}

In the ‘Introduction’ of his edited volume, Social Mobility in the Caste System in India, James Silverberg has written that the contributors to the volume intend to differ from much of the early and some of the prevailing preoccupations with Indian caste which take it to be a rigid, static system of rank stratification, supported by unchallenged ideologies that stress passive accommodation and aim to further an

\textsuperscript{50} K.L. Sharma, Social Stratification and Mobility, (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1994), p. 198.

understanding of the nature, extent and significance of social mobility in a caste system and to uncover the mechanisms and determinants involved. Bernard Barber in his article ‘Social Mobility in Hindu India’ in this volume has commented:

As a result of a considerable amount of recent detailed empirical research by historians and anthropologists, research in the documentary materials and in “the field”, a new picture of social mobility in the traditional Hindu caste system is emerging. ...The newer view of the Hindu caste system and of its processes of social mobility involves the explicit statement of a whole series of inter-related points which are at variance with the older description. Perhaps the key point in this series is this one, that the individual and his associated kin group in Indian society are ranked not along one but along different social and cultural dimensions.

William L. Rowe’s illuminating study, in this volume has highlighted the trends of mobility of an elite within the North Indian Sudra caste of Noniyas, which permitted them to reduce the discrepancy between their contrasting positions in the ritual and the socio-economic hierarchies and to claim a higher Kshatriya varna rank. Within a period of half a century, they came be recognised as ‘Cauhan Rajput’.

C. J. Fuller’s edited volume *Caste Today* (Oxford, 1996), contains papers which has highlighted the issues such as political uses of caste, changing meaning and legitimacy of caste to varied sections people in contemporary India, etc., In one of the chapters, collected in this volume – ‘Caste in Contemporary India’ – Andre Beteille has remarked:

If among the intelligentsia, individuals differ in their perception of caste or in the significance they gave to it, it may well be that these differences have some relationship to the differences in their positions in the hierarchy of caste. Where some individual mobility is possible, the burden of caste may weigh more heavily on the lower than on the upper caste person. In certain contexts, caste might matter more for Harijan than for Brahman intellectuals.

---


as race seems to do more for black than for white intellectuals in the United States.  

During the last few decades scholars have directed their attention towards various aspects of social mobility of particular castes/communities, inhabiting different regions of India, both in the colonial and postcolonial period. These scholars have highlighted that the local specificities, nature of populations drawn into the caste structure and the particular mode of production have shaped the mobility pattern of that region.

Hardgrave’s study of the Nadars of Tamilnadu has explained how they have moved from the lower strata of hierarchy to a position of status and power. His analysis has illuminated that the process of ‘Sanskritization’ was initially attempted and could not be successful. This led to them to turn to secular strategies through the formulation of the Nadar Mahajana Sangam for community integration and mobilization.

Here, we can mention some other important works, such as, Karen I Leonard’s Social History of an Indian Caste: The Kayasthas of Hyderabad, (Delhi, 1978) Jan Bremen’s ‘Mobilization of Landless Labourers: The Halipatis of South Gujarat’, in Arvind Das and V. Nilkant (ed.), Agrarian Relations in India, (Delhi, 1979), Kalpana Ram’s Mukkuvar Women: Gender, Hegemony and Capitalist Transformation in a South Indian Fishing Community, (New Delhi, 1992), Eleanor Zelliot’s ‘Learning the use of Political Means: The Mahars of Maharashtra’ in Rajni Kothari ed., Caste in Indian Politics, (Hyderabad, 1995), Dennis Templeman’s The Northern Nadars of Tamil Nadu: An Indian Caste in the Process of Change, (New York, 1996), Lalita Chandrashekhar’s ‘Social Mobility among the Madiga of Karnataka’ and Sunanda Patwardhan’s ‘Social Mobility and Conversion of the Mahars’ in Surinder S. Jodhka (ed.), Changing Caste: Ideology, Identity and Mobility, (New Delhi, 2012). The above mentioned scholars have examined different aspects of social mobility in the context of a particular caste or community and most of them have dealt with the depressed communities/scheduled castes. Recently, Raj Sekhar Basu in his book

Nandanar’s Children: The Paraiyans’ Tryst with Destiny, Tamil Nadu, 1850-1956, (New Delhi, 2011) has analysed the historical experiences and transformation of the Paraiyan community of Tamil Nadu from a socially despised community to one that came to acquire political prominence in the early twentieth century. All these studies have extended the understanding of the nature, extent, significance, mechanism and determinants of social mobility in Indian society, where caste provides the structural or analytical basis.

As far as social mobility in Bengal is concerned, we may mention some important works, which have contributed to explore some important dimensions of ideas and activities of different social groups in different periods in the history of Bengal. Jyotirmoyee Sarma, Hiteshranjan Sanyal are among the first scholars in recent times to discuss in some details the social mobility in colonial Bengal in the context of caste. Before them, Nirmal Kumar Bose and Pradip Sinha have discussed briefly the development of caste based social mobility movements.

Nirmal Kumar Bose, in The Structure of Hindu Society has traced occupational mobility and social movements among some castes and tribal communities in colonial and post-colonial Bengal.\(^57\) In the chapter ‘Social Movements among Various Castes’ of this book, he has discussed the efforts of the Jogis and the Namasudras to advance economically and socially in colonial times. He has concluded this chapter with the observation:

...we see efforts at reform within Hindu society for liberation from the hereditary division of occupations on the basis of which India had at one time prospered in manufacture and trade and which survived in the rural areas despite being partially affected in the cities after the inception of Muslim rule, but which broke down under the impact of British capitalism. ...Everyone is seeking to achieve freedom by breaking down hereditary occupational rights, everyone is seeking to strike at the root of the unequal ranking of traditional occupations and to attain for himself the status enjoyed by the highest caste.\(^58\)

\(^{57}\) The original Bengali work by N.K. Bose, entitled Hindu Samajer Garan, has been first published in 1949 (1356 B.S.). Andre Beteille has translated the book in English in 1975.

Pradip Sinha in *Nineteenth Century Bengal: Aspects of Social History*, (Calcutta, 1965), also, has drawn our attention to the development of caste based social mobility movements.

Referring to social mobility of tribal groups, the anthropologist Surajit Sinha, in his article ‘The Bhumij Kshatriya Social Movement in South Manbhum,’ has discussed acculturation of the Hinduized Bhumij (a southern offshoot of the Munda tribe), of Bengal and Bihar in the context of social class formation and ethnic integration. Sinha has found that in their mobility efforts the Bhumij became integrated with the regional Hindu caste system. Sinha has observed that the Bhumij landholders (*tarafdars*) in South Manbhum, backed by their economic and political power, found it convenient to leave the bulk of the Bhumij population behind and to aspire for recognition of their own lineages as Kshatriya.  

Jyotirmoyee Sarma has described different means of caste mobility in Bengal in general and has presented case studies of five castes which attained higher status and became identified with new names, which ‘show that there is no unanimous agreement between the members of a rising caste on the exact status it aims to attain. Similar to all social movements, there are more disagreements and confusions at the beginning of the movement for a new caste status than when the goal is almost reached. A persistent and unanimous claim is found only among the castes that have been long in their demands for a high status’.

In *Social Mobility in Bengal*, Hitesranjan Sanyal has given a few instances of social mobility between the thirteenth-fourteenth and the nineteenth-twentieth century Bengal and has classified the mobility movements into “four different types, each representing a level.”

“*The first type of mobility occurred within the individual jatis, i.e., castes. ... The second type of mobility movements were confined to the acquisition of greater respectability by individual castes without a corresponding change in*

---


the existing ceremonial rank of the castes. ... The third type of mobility consisted in the formation of a dissident group and adoption by the aspiring group of a new name which is indicative of comparatively higher social position. ... The most important of the mobility movements resulted in the emergence of new castes with higher ritual ranks.\textsuperscript{62}

He has provided two case studies of caste mobility in Bengal, accounting for the emergence of the Sadgop and Tili castes ‘in the traditional social situation’.

...apart from mobility possible for small family units or for elite groups, it was also possible before the modern period for the movements of corporate mobility of large groups which included ordinary people, to develop. ...The Sadgops and the Tilis climbed up to the respectable \textit{Nabasakh} rank in the caste hierarchy.\textsuperscript{63}

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, in \textit{Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal 1872-1937}, has examined some organised lower caste movements during the colonial period, in the context of the changes in the opportunity structure, leading to limited vertical social mobility among the members of these lower castes. Such mobility, he has argued:

... changed their social behaviour by generating on the one hand further ambitions and creating on the other a spirit of defiance to the social authority of the higher castes. This led to the organization of caste associations that worked for the social upliftment of their respective communities. Through these bodies sometimes, the aspirations of the lower caste ‘elites’ converged with the grievances of their ‘masses’ and this conjunction rested on a skilful manipulation of the common caste identity. Wherever such a convergence occurred, a powerful caste movement was born. But, as the study would show, this did not happen always.\textsuperscript{64}

He has pointed to two types of caste mobility by analysing the claims put forth before the census authorities:

The first was the attempt to raise the social status of an entire caste like that of Baidya, Kayastha, Aguri, Barui, Gandhabanik, Tambulibanik, Kamar, Napit, Mayra, Jogi, Subarnabanik, Pod and Namasudra. The rest can be classified as attempt by a section of a caste to rise in social esteem in relation to the parent caste. Such fission within a caste was often the outcome of change of occupation from an impure to a purer one. ... Such change of occupation and fission were visible in Bengal from the thirteenth to the

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., pp. 42-44.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., p.83.

eighteenth centuries. But with the coming of the British, it became easier and frequent at the same time.\textsuperscript{65}

In this study, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has further explored why the ambitions and grievances of some lower castes could not be accommodated within the framework of the upper caste dominated nationalist movement, leading to the development a separate lower caste politics. He has elaborated the character of lower caste politics in the context of the Namasudra movement, in \textit{Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947}. In this richly documented historical study, he has argued:

\begin{quote}
The caste movements ... originated neither solely from prosperity, nor from deprivation alone, and they were not the exclusive expressions of either ambition or protest. Nor was caste identity just a 'symbolic capital' to be invested or manipulated by some crafty politicians for their own political aggrandisement. ... in a single caste movement we may find a convergence of various trends reflecting the plurality of a group that had been united in common action through some shared goals or experiences.\textsuperscript{66}
\end{quote}

Exploring different aspects of the Namasudra movement, he has opined that caste or community identity is a historical phenomenon, and of transient nature, not a given or natural thing. He has situated the protest of the Namasudras in a continuum of hidden resistance, open revolt and accommodative behaviour.\textsuperscript{67} He has pointed to the moments of divergence and convergence and ultimate integration of majority of the Namasudra leaders, along with their other Scheduled Caste colleagues, into the dominant political structure of the country, during the 1940s, “...though until 1937-38 they had laboured consistently to emphasize the distinctiveness of their social and political identity and had maintained their distance from the Congress”.\textsuperscript{68}

Swaraj Basu has elaborately dealt with the attempts of the Rajbanshi community to establish themselves as Kshatriyas in the first half of the twentieth century in Bengal. Situating the Rajbanshi caste movement, in the context of contemporary socio-political events, Swaraj Basu, in \textit{Dynamics of a Caste Movement: The Rajbansis of}\n
\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., p. 102.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., pp 7-8.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., p. 208.
\end{footnotesize}
North Bengal, 1910-1947 has examined the complexities, inherent in the movement. The study has sought to explain that there can be multiple identities within a social group and which of them would be articulated at a specific historical juncture depends on the nature of issues and circumstances. As caste identity often cuts across class lines, territorial identities also can lead to a fragmentation of a caste. This study also has tried to explore “how the Rajbansi caste movement responded to the broader political dynamics of the period; the conflict between the colonial interests and the nationalist aspirations.”

Partha Chatterjee in the essay, ‘Caste And Subaltern Consciousness’ in Ranajit Guha, ed., Subaltern Studies VI, has provided a critique of Dumont and Marxist writings on caste and has contended that the religious beliefs and practices of subordinate antaja caste groups of Bengal, such as the Hadi or Dom are often based on principles contradictory to those of Brahmanism. He also has pointed to the impact of caste in developments of post-colonial India:

What has resulted is not the actualization of bourgeois equality at all, but rather the conflicting claims of caste groups ..., not on the religious basis of dharma, but on the purely secular demands of claims upon the state. ... On the one hand, we have the establishment of capitalist relations in agricultural production in which the new forms of wage labour fit snugly into the old grid of the caste divisions. On the other hand, we have the supremely paradoxical phenomenon of low-caste groups asserting their very backwardness in the caste hierarchy to claim discriminatory privileges from the state, and upper caste groups proclaiming the sanctity of bourgeois equality and freedom ... in order to beat back the threat to their existing privileges.”

Sumit Sarkar in his Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History has emphasized some important aspects of social mobility of some castes by analysing caste narratives from early twentieth-century Bengal when ‘unprecedented flood of both high and lower-caste writings in Bengali on caste themes, claims, and disputes’ took place. He has explored the interrelationships

---


71 Sumit Sarkar, Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007), p. 40
between identity formations and imaginings of history through a close reading of seven Namasudra texts, juxtaposed with available data about changing agrarian relationships of bhadrolok gentry and Namasudra peasants and sharecroppers in the Bakargunj-Faridpur region of East Bengal. He has observed that in the high and lower-caste writings in the early decades of the twentieth century, importance was given to reconstruct historical accounts in the formation of caste identities.

‘History’ entered most of these tracts in ways that were highly diverse, but always crucial for the identities and arguments being projected. An exploration of the specificities of lower-caste handling, appropriations and inventions of history has some intrinsic interest: it can also help to raise a number of important methodological queries. While identities like caste are certainly not fixed, given or unchanging, neither can their construction be reduced to colonial discourses alone. Namasudra identity formation was not just a function of Census operations: it also had wider socio-economic and cultural dimensions.

The above mentioned scholars have emphasized that caste system in India is not only a structure of cultural values but it also represents a pattern of inequitable distribution of power and wealth along the lines of hierarchy.

The Indian social structure itself is based on graded hierarchy of status where religious, economic, educational, political and judicial powers increase in the ascending order thus directly limiting the status of lower castes.

Pervasive pre-suppositions of the caste and caste-identities as tacit structures of belief and practice have been questioned. Caste is not natural and given social order – caste identity should be seen in evolutionary terms. The castes, situated below the upper strata of the society often tried to re-define their given identities in their quest for higher status. Formation of new identities among castes belonging to different strata of society was a common phenomenon in pre-colonial and colonial India. Caste mobilization has demonstrated various trends – two major trends being, emulation of upper caste culture, i.e., ‘Sanskritization’, and the rejection of the caste system. In a specific caste movement, often overlapping of two or more trends are visible. In Tamil Nadu, after initial attempts at Sanskritization, the Nadars had moved towards

---

72 Ibid., p. 6.
73 Ibid., p. 41.
de-Sanskritization and had started the ‘self-respect’ movement in protest against the Brahminical authority.

A caste is not a homogenous group, economically – not even socially. Class-based distinctions within the caste are found in a pronounced form and the members of a caste do not enjoy equal social status. Therefore, a caste mobility movement hardly depicts a uniform trend. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, in his study on the Namasudra movement, has emphasized on multiple and interacting trends in the movement and plurality of voices within the caste. Gail Omvedt has observed that the non-Brahman movement itself contained ‘elites’ as well as ‘masses’, elements of accommodation as well as opposition to the prevailing system, and patron-client, factional politics as well as elements of revolt and mass mobilization.

All these suggest complexities inherent in caste movements, which could be understood better if we analyse the movements in a particular historical context and in terms of specific issues like ideology, status, and power – different modes of action and discourse are visible in a movement. W.R. Pinch has suggested that there is a significant reason to rethink caste as historically specific, ideologically manipulable, and ultimately a function of individual opinion.  

75 Rajni Kothari has suggested:

…a caste may sometimes reinterpret its traditional status in society to buttress its contemporary aspirations and develop a mythology about the same. Examples are to be found in the case of Patidars of Gujarat, Mahisyas of Bengal and Jats of Rajasthan.  

76 However, each caste movement, despite sharing certain commonalities, has its own dynamics. Peculiarities of local culture, status ideology or identity formations as well as changes in power equation, both political and economic – influence a caste movement. At the same time, the salient features a caste movement should not be analysed in isolation with those of other caste movements. Sumit Sarkar has written:

In anthropological and historical research alike, the prevalent tendency has been to research on castes and caste movements singly, or at most upon their interactions at the level of the village or locality selected for fieldwork. This


is of course quite understandable in terms of the logic of intensive study of a manageable amount of new empirical material. I have come to feel, however, that at times an alternative, more interactive and intertextual approach might be helpful, juxtaposing high- and lower-caste movements and texts.\(^{77}\)

He has argued that the relative importance of caste as an issue in early twentieth century Bengal should be analysed in the context of interrelationship between various caste movements.

More significantly, perhaps, an emphasis upon interrelationships could have two other advantages. It might help us test more rigourously the opposed stereotypes – of harmonious integration and clear-cut disjunction of levels – about which I have already raised some doubts. And it could reduce the temptation to conceptualise an ‘identity’ – in this case, caste – in virtual isolation. … The pressures and stimuli of late-colonial times, after all, constituted conditions of possibility for a more-or less simultaneous consolidation of not one but a multiplicity of often cross-cutting identities, of anti-colonial ‘national’, religious or ‘communal’, regional, ethnic, gender, caste, or class. Identities were therefore not only hardened, they could also simultaneously become more fragile: and herein lay the roots of many of the problems and tensions of twentieth-century South Asia. … Identities may not have continuous and ascendant histories, but can also decline and disintegrate (as seems to have largely happened with the Namasudras after the 1940s).\(^{78}\)

In this background the recent researches, we attempt at understanding social mobility among the Mahishyas in the context of caste dynamics, without minimizing dynamism or relevance of other social-economic & political forces and identity formations, in the early decades of the twentieth century. In the present study, we intend to understand these broad patterns of the social mobility among the Mahishyas, its various trends and the determining factors influencing their response to changing socio-economic and political milieu of the period of our study.

The social mobility of the Mahishyas, because of their importance in the history of Bengal and particularly in south-western Bengal has attracted attention of the scholars. Their active participation in the major anti-colonial nationalist movements has been studied from different points of views. However, no detailed systemic analysis of the various facets of their socio-economic life, modes of mobilization, the

---


\(^{78}\) Ibid., pp. 43-44.
necessity of redefinition their caste identity (which resulted in the Mahishya caste movement) and the relations of these developments to their political aspirations has been done so far.

Social mobility of two large scheduled castes in colonial Bengal, the Namasudras and the Rajbansis has been studied extensively. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay in his *Caste, Protest and Identity: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947*, (New Delhi, 2011) and Swaraj Basu in his *Dynamics of a Caste Movement: The Rajbansis of North Bengal, 1910 – 1947*, (New Delhi, 2003), have delineated critical moments in political mobilization of the Namasudras, the second largest and the Rajbansis, the third largest caste in colonial Bengal respectively.

The largest caste in undivided Bengal was the Mahishyas, who at the middle range of social hierarchical system, made ceaseless efforts for mobility to secure higher ritual and secular status through solidarity. They were not classified as a scheduled caste of Bengal in the Government of India (Scheduled Caste) Order, 1936. Being a prominent caste in middle castes’ category, the Mahishyas had better ritual and socio-economic status than the Namasudras and Rajbansis, which obviously made their mobility movement different in some significant ways from those of the latter. But no detailed research work has been done so far on the social mobility of this caste. In his *Caste, Politics and the Raj; Bengal 1872 – 1937*, (Calcutta, 1990) and *Caste, Culture and Hegemony; Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal*, (New Delhi, 2004) Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has made brief references to the mobility efforts of the Mahishyas. Jyotirmoyee Sarma and Hitesranjan Sanyal have traced various trends of mobility, referring to the Mahishyas along with other castes but have not examined significance of the mobility of these castes and the identity formations resulting from it, in political mobilization in colonial India, which have been emphasized by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Swaraj Basu. However, both of them have tried to comprehend the differential impact of colonial rule, leading to further estrangement between the higher and the lower strata in the caste hierarchy and different perceptions about the nature of colonial rule at least in the early decades of the twentieth century. The Mahishyas, belonging to the intermediate strata, did not draw their much attention.

Sumit Sarkar also has explained social mobility of the castes in colonial Bengal, from a wider perspective of invention and/or consolidation of a large number of putative,
inevitably crosscutting, identities which is open to possibility of many histories and trajectories. He has referred to the importance of the caste movement of the Mahishyas in this respect. In the essay ‘The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Co-operation, c. 1905-22’ Sumit Sarkar has opined:

If Islam provided the key vehicle for Muslim peasants in the expression of their socio-economic grievances, one could expect caste movements to perform somewhat similar functions for rural Hindu society. The first two decades of the twentieth century in fact witnessed a large number of ‘Sanskritizing’ caste movements and association in Bengal. The most significant among these were the movements among the Mahishyas of Midnapur, Howrah, Hooghly and 24 Parganas, the Rajbansis of Jalpaiguri, Rangpur and Dinajpur and the Namasudras of Jessore, Khulna and Faridpur – the three major castes below the level of the bhadrolok in a province, otherwise marked by unusually great fragmentation among intermediate and low castes. 79

Similarly, in Beyond Nationalist Frames he has written:

The Swadeshi – and particularly the immediate post-Swadeshi – years in Bengal were marked by numerous lower-caste affirmations, notably among Namasudras, Mahishyas and Rajbansis. Caste had been relatively marginal in nineteenth-century social-reformist endeavours in Bengal in which the ‘women’s question’ had been pre-eminent, and one gets an impression of a decline in importance again from around the mid-1920s. In between, however, it enjoyed a discursive and political centrality. 80

However, in both of the essays, he has discussed the caste mobility movements of the Mahishyas very briefly. In our study, we aim to make a detailed empirical analysis of various aspects of the social mobility of the Mahishyas in south-western Bengal, situating it in the socio-economic, political and ideological context of colonial Bengal, to make up the gap in the historiography of social mobility of castes in modern Bengal. The study shows the similarities between the mobility movement of the Mahishyas on the one hand and those of the Namasudras and the Rajbansis on the other. It also highlights some important differences, manifested in the mobility trends


80 Sumit Sarkar, Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007), pp. 81-82.
of the former. All these three communities, being considered in census reports\textsuperscript{81} as indigenous race castes of Bengal were predominantly agricultural in the pre-British period. However they were placed at different strata of the caste hierarchy in medieval Bengal. In colonial Bengal, with widening of some more avenues for occupational mobility, they made perceptible attempts for social mobility and the Mahishyas, particularly of south-western Bengal where they exercised clear numerical dominance in the rural areas, showed a more positive orientation towards occupational, educational and social opportunities and by the end of the nineteenth century, secured for them much better ritual and secular status than those of the Namasudras and the Rajbanshis. This has made the trends of caste mobility of the Mahishyas of south-western Bengal somewhat different from the Namasudras of East Bengal and Rajbanshis of East Bengal, in our period of study. The Mahishya movement has more similarities with those of other intermediate castes, such as the Aguris, Sadgops, Tilis, etc. The study has highlighted all these aspects, with the help of caste literature, government records, contemporary writings and recent researches. While emphasizing on the Mahishyas of south-western Bengal, in our analysis, references are made to the Mahishyas of other regions of Bengal Proper and outside of it, whenever necessary, for a better understanding of interconnecting and divergent trends of mobility of this caste.

THE MAIN ARGUMENT

It is generally said that compared to other parts of India, caste rigidity was less visible in colonial Bengal. It is only partly true.

In Bengal, as in other parts of India, caste system in a significant way determined the patterns of social relationship among the Hindus, as the modes of interaction between two individuals depended on their respective caste status.\textsuperscript{82}

Caste is a multi-layered and multi-dimensional institution. Lack of rigidity is not experienced at all levels. The social distance in colonial Bengal between a Brahmin and a Kayastha was less rigid than between a Brahmin and a Namasudra, though


according to the sastras both the Kayasthas and the Namasudras belonged to the Sudra varna. Obviously, for the Namasudras, caste was a rigid institution and different sections of this community, inhabiting in different places of Bengal nurtured ‘a common sense of discrimination and injustice’, against the upper castes, resulting in the Namasudra movement. Though not necessarily a protest against discrimination, the emergence of several caste movements with proliferation of caste associations and caste literature in the early twentieth century Bengal spoke of strong caste consciousness among the Bengali Hindus. In fact, the first three largest castes in colonial Bengal – the Mahishyas, the Namasudras and the Rajbansis– ‘developed three major caste-movements of early twentieth-century Bengal’. Caste, being one of the dominant identities in Bengali cultural ethos and a matter of subjective interpretation to different social groups depending on their various linkages deeply conditioned the processes of social mobility in colonial Bengal. The determining position of caste both in policy decisions of the colonial government and in different domains of the indigenous society made it essential to conceptualise social mobility in the light of caste dynamics. In our study on the Mahishyas of south-western Bengal between the period 1901 and 1931, we intend to explore ideas and actions of a socially mobile group or a caste which was not marginalised or subordinate group in the contemporary status hierarchy. The Mahishyas occupied an intermediate level in the socio-economic structure of Bengal, which might have resulted in a mindset which was somewhat different from that of the Namasudras or Rajbansis. This was reflected in their caste movement and political aspirations.

Caste system in pre-colonial India was not only a structure of cultural values but it also represented a pattern of inequitable distribution of power and wealth along the lines of its hierarchy. It is debatable whether, during this period, ritual status preceded the secular status of a particular caste or vice versa. However it is reasonable to say that there was a close inter-relation between these two, both influencing each other. The stability of this equilibrium between the ritual and secular status of different castes ensured longevity of a particular caste structure in a specific region. As the ritually high castes were also dominant in secular terms, they turned into the

custodians of that particular structure to secure their position in it. In the name of tradition, they came to utilise various religious texts and oral traditions in their favour and use secular power to thwart any opposition to their position. Any deep disruption in the equilibrium could cause both upward and downward mobility of several castes or groups within a caste.

The evolution of colonial policies, during its various phases, had a complex impact on indigenous society, sometimes disrupting and sometimes maintaining the equilibrium inherent in the caste structure. The caste system received varying degrees of importance throughout the colonial rule and in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it came to influence the government administrative policies, adding new dimensions to the ideology and functioning of the caste system. This, in turn, affected social mobility of the period. Nicholas Dirks has observed:

Under colonialism caste became a specifically Indian form of civil society, the most critical site for the textualization of social identity, but also for the specification of public and private domains, the rights and responsibilities of the colonial state, the legitimating conceits of social freedom and societal control, and the development of the documentation and certification regimes of the bureaucratic state.\(^\text{85}\)

Thus caste remained as a dynamic institution both in the pre-colonial and colonial period. However, this aspect was hardly emphasised by a large section colonial intelligentsia in their analysis of social change during that time. Instead it was viewed as a more or less static institution hampering desired social changes. What is ignored in this understanding of caste as natural and given social order is that the character of this long-lasting institution was not conceptualised in evolutionary terms. The famous social anthropologist M.N. Srinivas in his *Social Change in Modern India* has examined briefly the manner in which the influential concept of *varna* successfully obscured the dynamic features of caste during the traditional or pre-British period.

The fact that the concept continues to be relevant for understanding some aspects of caste has only helped to perpetuate the misconceptions and distortions implicit in it.\(^\text{86}\)

---

Time and again there was accommodation of new groups into the caste order and positional shifts of caste groups within the structure which vary region to region, as “caste mainly exists and functions as a regional system.” There were constant efforts on the part of castes or sub-castes or any other caste segments towards reinterpretation of their social boundaries and social status in a given context. And such efforts at re-imagination or re-definition of identities were not limited to the lower castes alone as social status, be it higher or lower can never be permanent or remain unchallenged for long. So, caste groups with privileged position had to remain cautious to prevent downward mobility. Studies on social mobility and change in colonial Bengal provide ample testimony to this. So a caste movement did not necessarily emanate from the lower strata of the caste order. However, caste dynamics has been more prominent in the social mobility of the sections of population considered to be of middle and lower social strata and expressions of caste mobility are more discernable at these levels.

In colonial India, though different castes in their mobility efforts, took some identical steps, the sources and expressions/processes of caste mobility varied from one caste to another caste, one region to another region and one period to another. Though grievances of castes against their ascribed status were not ventilated in a uniform way all over India, they all started with their own interpretation caste hierarchy. The studies on the formation of new identities among castes in colonial India, have suggested that caste hierarchies as historically specific and subject to ideological manipulation by various social groups.

A close study of various caste movements shows divergence in aspirations and methods of achieving the goals, which kept changing from time to time. Analysing various instances of mobility M.N. Srinivas has shown how the nature of caste mobility has changed over the years, the actual shift in emphasis being from acquiring the symbols of high status to the real sources of high status, i.e. political power, economic power, and education. In their attitudes towards caste groups superior to them, the castes were guided by their own positions in regional status hierarchy and the structural difference between them and the higher castes in that hierarchy. In some cases, where lower caste mobilization against upper caste hegemony took place, an

---

87 Ibid., p.3.
intensified sense of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ had gripped the minds of lower castes. But there were some cases, where the concerned castes enjoyed some kind of status, i.e. intermediate or middle caste status, which kept them closer to the higher castes than to the lower ones – no such polarization took place. It appears that the caste mobility movements like the Namasudra movement or the Rajbanshi movement fall under the first category, while the Mahishya movement falls under the second.

The caste movements in colonial India generally expressed two major trends. In some cases, castes attempted a positional readjustment claiming honourable status within the regional caste hierarchy, while in some other cases; castes vehemently opposed to the caste system itself. One important aspect of both types of caste movements is intra-caste divisions based on socio-economic criteria. Scholars have emphasised on interaction of various trends in a caste movement and plurality of voices within a caste. In South and West India, where a number of non-Brahmin castes rose in unison against Brahmanic hegemony, we also observe social and economic differences. Commenting on the nature of non-Brahmin movements Gail Omvedt has observed that the non-Brahmin movement itself contained ‘elites’ as well as ‘masses’, elements of accommodation as well as opposition to the prevailing system, and patron-client, factional political forms as well as elements of revolt and mass mobilization.  

88

In fact, caste mobility movements in colonial India were product of inter-play of complex socio-cultural and politico-economic changes of the period and proved instrumental in facilitating political identities and associational urges in the early decades of the twentieth century, which came to influence later developments of Indian history. We need to explain the complexity of these movements in the background of historical evolution, contemporary colonial policies and distinctive hierarchical relationship, inequitable socio-economic power distribution. A general study on the caste mobility movements either at a specific regional level or at the level of the Indian subcontinent as a whole yields important perspectives to form an idea of relative flexibility and internal dynamism but such macro-studies ‘are apt to miss the nuances, refinements, and subtleties which can be reached only by detailed

micro-studies'. A study on a caste movement of a specific locality provides insights into detailed operations of such dynamism. Each caste movement, despite sharing some uniform modes of action with other caste movements, had its own dynamics conditioned by several factors, such as social position in local society, internal socio-economic differentiation within the caste etc.

Peculiarities of local culture and status ideology as well as ongoing changes in power equation, both political and economic, have a determining influence in caste equation. In this study of the social mobility of the Mahishyas, we examine the caste dynamics in the specific context of socio-cultural and politico-economic changes of south-western Bengal, and try to relate this to the wider perspective of social mobility in colonial India. The Mahishyas constituted the most predominant section of the population in the south-western districts of Bengal and were also present in good numbers in neighbouring areas, particularly in Assam. The historical origin of the caste is a matter of intense debate. The Chasi Kaibarttas, the major and most influential section of the Kaibarttas, began to claim to be the Mahishyas, a mythical caste of ancient India in the second half of the nineteenth century. They sought to dissociate themselves from the Kaibarttas in general and the Jalia Kaibarttas in particular. However, the Kaibarttas were the early settlers of eastern India and references to them can be found as early as the Maurya period. In that sense the Chasi Kaibarttas or the Mahishyas were the part and parcel of the indigenous society in Bengal. The Chasi Kaibarttas made their presence felt at every level of agrarian society of Bengal, resulting socio-economic differentiations and a number of endogamous groups among themselves. Their cultural practices were also complex, varying from Brahminical orthodoxy to Vaishnavite liberalism. Their socio-religious system was indicative of the existence among them of a culture and social organization which was not markedly different from the upper and intermediate castes of Bengal. Educationally they were above the average literacy rate of the state. Economically, agriculture was their basic occupation and their representation in other professions was not insignificant, which enabled a sizable section of them to occupy

an important position in the economic ladder. Emergence of Calcutta and Howrah as strong urban centres under the British rule provided economic opportunities to the enterprising members of the caste, who migrated in large numbers into the areas from nearby Mahishya dominated localities. Urban life and culture deeply influenced their social mobility and status aspirations as there were clearly possibilities of alternative solidarities and fissures.

Being the most numerous caste, the Mahishyas were present in every district of Bengal. However, they numerically constituted the most predominant section of the local Hindu population in the south-western districts of Bengal, – Midnapore, 24 Parganas, Howrah, Hoogly, Nadia, Murshidabad, – in the Burdwan and Presidency Divisions. As in the case of other castes, the history of the emergence of the Mahishyas is highly controversial and the basic debate is around the issue of their association with the Kaibarttas, who were the early settlers of Bengal. In medieval Bengal, we see presence of the Chasi Kaibarttas and the Jelia Kaibarttas. The relation between these two sections is a debatable subject. The Chasi Kaibarttas in the later half of the nineteenth century started a movement for status uplift and took the nomenclature ‘Mahishya’. The Chasi Kaibarttas or Mahishyas were not a homogenous community – within the community, there were several sections with different socio-economic status, situated all over Bengal. Their religious and cultural practices varied from place to place and their social organization was also far from simple. So the Mahishyas, as a community, did not have a distinct character. Educationally, they were backward compared to the upper castes of the society. Economically, agriculture was their basic occupation and their representation in other professions was not insignificant. In several places of south-western Bengal a sizeable section of the Mahishyas were zamindars, landowners which enabled them to hold a dominant position in the rural society. However, the Mahishyas basically constituted a peasant caste, substantially present in different strata of the peasant society and changes in Bengal agrarian society determined various aspects of social mobility of this community.

Another important point of our study is the presence of ambiguities in the socio-economic status of the Mahishyas. Whatever be the theoretical interpretation, at the empirical level a caste is not a homogenous group but an internally differentiated one
in terms of class and power of its members. Social mobility of individuals and groups within a caste largely influences the nature and extent of internal differentiation. Caste is both a normative system and a system of actual social-structural relations.

In certain arenas caste adheres to its normative sanctions whereas in some others, caste groups and their members have taken up activities which have no traditional sanctions of the caste system. This results in differentiation, which can be visualized in terms of class divisions, economic and political interests, social ideas and outlook which vary according to context. Here, dynamics of other identities side by side with that of caste identity should be explored in an analysis of social mobility of a community, groups or members in which, come to articulate different identities other than the caste, at a specific historical juncture. One can find diversity at empirical level in economic, social and political distinctions among the people. The fluidity and open-endedness of the processes of multiple identity formation should be emphasized in a given time period. In the colonial period, apart from caste, there remained alternative possibilities for other kinds of solidarity – of nationality, religion, class, language and culture – and redefined goals. Character of caste solidarity among the Mahishyas has been analysed in this context.

Undoubtedly socio-economic and cultural differentiation was more discernible between the Mahishyas or the Chasi Kaibarttas and the Jalia Kaibarttas which led the former to disown any connection with the latter. However the intra-caste differentiation was also a matter of concern for the leaders of the Mahishyas who strived for status elevation of the entire caste. In the traditional social hierarchy of nineteenth century Bengal, caste status the Chasi Kaibarttas or the Mahishyas, inhabiting vast areas of eastern India, was not uniform. They were generally placed at the intermediate level in the hierarchical ladder. However, the social rank depended on the socio-economic positions they were enjoying in their locality. It is a well known fact that caste status at the highest and the lowest strata of a social order is less ambiguous than at the middle level (where the Mahishyas belonged). Yet in the case of the Mahishyas, some factors increased the ambiguities. To mention their caste, the non-Mahishyas and the Mahishyas themselves, used the terms, ‘Kaibarttas’, ‘Chasi

---

Kaibarttas’, and ‘Mahishyas’ interchangeably. The social status of the ‘Kaibarttas’ was lower than the ‘Chasi Kaibarttas’, while the status of the ‘Mahishyas’ was not certain to many as it was a new name adopted by some sections of the Chasi Kaibarttas in the later decades of the nineteenth century and got larger acceptance only in the early decades of the twentieth century. Though the Mahishyas were present in large numbers in all districts of Bengal, they achieved a better status where they were dominant in the socio-economic structure. This status variation affected their social mobility in a number of ways.

The caste movement of the Mahishyas started initially with an effort to relinquish their Kaibartta background. The Kaibarttas were quite well known in Bengal, with two main divisions – Halik or Chasi Kaibarttas or Jalik or Jele Kaibarttas. The Chasi Kaibarttas had superior social status than the Jele Kaibarttas. The former enjoyed an intermediate status in the traditional social hierarchy of Bengal, while the former were placed at a fairly low rank, along with the Namasudras, Rajbansis and others. The Chasi Kaibarttas, though the majority of the Kaibartta community, believed in a different origin for themselves than that of the Jalia Kaibarttas, to justify their superiority and ultimately claimed to be the Mahishyas, an ancient respectable twice-born caste of mythical origin. A similar case can be detected in the Rajbansi movement, where one of the main thrusts was to distance the Rajbansis from the Kochs and to establish superior social rank for the former. The Census classification of castes according to social precedence further motivated the Chasi Kaibarttas to stick to their Mahishya identity claiming for themselves the status of the twice-born caste. They gradually developed a strong movement to influence the Census authority to accept their new name in census enumeration and the public opinion in general. The caste movement involved the creation of myths in support of their twice-born lineage, appeals to the pundits for favourable rulings in support the claim, reform or change of existing cultural practices in order to adopt the twice-born culture, formation of caste associations and publication of journals, tracts and treatises, attempts at educational and economic development of the caste members.

---

The political participation of different sections of the community is an important field of our study. Generally, depressed class politics was shaped by negotiations with the colonial state and Indian nationalism, and worked through institutional forms such as the caste association. Growing politicization of the Namasudras and the Rajbansis, the second and third largest caste of colonial Bengal followed this trend. The Mahishyas, the largest caste, showed a different trend of political consciousness. The Mahishyas were very much active in various political representative bodies or institutions and political movements. They were very keen on protecting their economic and political interests and here their caste identity played no less part. But their caste identity played a different role from that of the Rajbansis and the Namasudras. In the case of both the Rajbansis and the Namasudras, the caste leaders in their effort to fight off backwardness, chose to use their demographic position in political bargain with both the government and the nationalist leaders. The Mahishyas in this sense were not involved in the ‘politics of backwardness’, despite their numerical superiority in south-western Bengal. Here, caste dynamics played a different role in their social mobility.

In the pre-colonial Bengal, several castes or groups within the castes, utilised different sources of mobility to enhance their socio-economic status. According to the Sastric view on caste, upward mobility within the caste structure was not admissible, empirical studies have pointed out that it was not at all restricted in pre-colonial period. Hitesranjan Sanyal's study of social mobility has shown that in pre-colonial Bengal various social groups like the Sadgops, the Bhumijs or the Tilis, by acquiring landed property, political power and by improving economic positions through trade, had established themselves as socially superior groups. However, during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the trends in the caste mobility movements came to show new dimensions, resulted from availability of more sources of mobility directly or indirectly related to the colonial rule. The impact of the colonial rule, urbanization, infiltration of western values, development of educated middle class, emergence of printing press – all had contributed in a very complex way to the widening the avenues for and scope of social mobility in general. Besides as recent researches have shown, colonial constructions of caste in new ways largely influenced indigenous knowledge formations and the process of social mobility movements along caste lines. Being a western nation, the British saw no point in protecting the
institution of caste and being an imperial power striving to perpetuate their rule over a divided people, they did not feel the necessity to destroy it either. The changes unleashed by the state, directly and indirectly had both positive and negative impact on the institution. The limited economic development and spread of modern education in a way consolidated the socio-economic position of the upper castes and to some extent that of intermediary castes. This was clearly evident in the formation of the colonial educated middle class or the ‘bhadrolok’, which was almost synonymous with the upper castes, at least in its initial stage of formation. The ‘bhadrolok’ – the most advanced section of the indigenous society – never, with a few exceptions, shook off their traditional allegiance to caste status.

“...under the surface of the liberal ethos of public life, caste consciousness very much prevailed in interpersonal relationships of most of the members of the ‘bhadrolok’ category. The liberalizing influences of the nineteenth-century Bengali reformers had limited impact on the society, which was largely dominated by traditional values. Among the upper caste elites there was a strong conservative force which firmly believed in the utility of the caste system. When this was the situation in urban life, in rural areas where the people were under the spell of traditional beliefs, caste had a more decisive influence in daily life.\(^{93}\)

Because of strong presence of caste consciousness and pride, status aspirations or mobility efforts of individuals or groups came to be determined by caste ethos. Naturally, social mobility in the colonial period was mostly evident in the caste structure. As the aspirant castes were keen on upward mobility within the structure itself, they did not try to uproot the caste structure or demand a structural change in the caste system but wanted positional readjustment of respective castes on the basis of economic and political achievement. It was evident among the intermediate castes and even among the lower castes in Bengal. The mobilization of lower castes and consolidation of lower caste identity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal greatly conveyed the discontent among the lower castes against upper caste domination. It is also interesting that castes which were aggrieved about their lower social position and were striving to attain higher status were not in favour of treating other lower castes at par with them. This is particularly evident in the Mahishya movement, where the Chasi Kaibarttas were insistent in not allowing the

\(^{93}\) Ibid., p.19.
Jalia Kaibarttas to take the new title, Mahishya, which they had recently adopted. Thus in spite of the fact that the caste movements by claiming higher caste status had put up an indirect challenge to the traditional authority of the upper castes, in real terms they were not against the caste system itself. We may say here that such an attitude is quite consistent if a particular caste is opting for higher social status in caste hierarchy, as it is illogical both to treat other castes with more or less similar status at par with them and to go against the caste system itself. However, the existence of prevalent caste structures depends on the relative stability of the positions of the constituent castes. Substantial positional changes, conceded to greater number of castes, would have diminished the structure itself in the long run. In view of limited economic and political development during the colonial period, the lower castes did not achieve much economic or political strength necessary for such upward positional changes. Consequently, the existing caste structures remained almost intact by allowing small readjustments mostly to the intermediary castes and the grievances of the lower castes were seldom addressed to by their caste superiors.

Assertion of higher social status through caste mobility movements in colonial Bengal was evident at all levels – upper, intermediate and lower levels of the regional caste hierarchy. The Mahishyas belonged to the intermediate strata while the Namasudras and the Rajbanshis belonged to the lower strata. Interestingly, their movements were preceded by caste movements of the Baidyas and Kayasthas, who were considered as upper castes, along with the Brahmins. Apart from the Baidyas and the Kayasthas, who enjoyed high social status within the non-Brahmin or Shudra category, a number of castes placed as intermediary or lower in the traditional social hierarchy were trying to establish themselves as one of the three twice born varnas. A survey of the census reports for Bengal very clearly highlights the trend. Without challenging directly the existing caste hierarchy, these upwardly mobile castes took recourse to religious texts and the ruling of the pundits in support of their claims. The Mahishya caste movement did share some basic characteristics of several other mobility movements during the period under study. The Kaibarttas, the major section of which claimed to be the Mahishyas, were known since ancient times. Their distribution on a large part over eastern India with different occupations with different socio-economic status in the pre-colonial period clearly indicates mobility efforts or dynamism of the community. The continuation of such effort with some new dimensions is manifest in
the social mobility movement of the Mahishyas in the early decades of the twentieth century.

THE PERIOD OF THE STUDY

As social mobility of any large community is a long-term process, it is difficult to limit this study to specific dates. However for the sake of convenience two cut-off dates have been selected to emphasize some turning points in social mobility of the Mahishyas. The period of this study is between 1901 and 1931, which represented the most significant phase in the formation of a distinct identity of the Mahishyas and their socio-economic mobility. Generally, these early decades of the twentieth century Bengal were specifically important for numerous social mobility movements with different perspectives, involving castes belonging to intermediate and lower strata of social hierarchy. Even some socio-economically superior groups tried to reconstitute their self-image in terms of caste idioms, in a changing society. This period witnessed four consecutive censuses – of 1901, 1911, 1921 and 1931, when caste became one of the most significant criteria for enumeration. It may be noted here that mobility efforts of the Mahishyas and their identity formation were not just a result of census operations and it had wider socio-economic and cultural dimensions. Yet, these census operations are important for us due to certain reasons. As this study on social mobility requires comparative data on distribution and movement of population, civil condition, occupation literacy etc., we have to depend mainly on census reports and statistics. Prior to the Census of 1901, no specific data on the Mahishyas or the Chasi Kaibarttas are available as at that time, data by caste, were given on the Kaibarttas as a whole. In the Census of 1901 as a result of the Mahishya movement by the Chasi Kaibarttas and some other reasons, they were enumerated separately and we are able to get detailed data on their numerical strength, distribution of population, civil condition, occupation, literacy etc. from census reports and tables during the period between 1901 and 1931, which are essential in the study of their social mobility. Such data are also available for other castes also, which help in the comparative analysis. After the 1931 Census, such data by caste, are available, only for the scheduled castes, in the census returns. So we have to limit the time period of the study between 1901 and 1931.
Both the dates are important for the other reasons also. In 1901, the Chasi Kaibarttas or the Mahishyas for the first time achieved official recognition, at least in the census return, as a caste, distinct from the Jalia Kaibarttas and other Kaibartta groups. The Census Superintendent of Bengal in 1901, E. A. Gait pointing to a distinction between the Chasi and Jaliya Kaibarttas in terms of social precedence, placed them separately at two different strata in the scale of social precedence. This very recognition of separate caste identity (though still was not universally recognised) and separate enumeration of the Mahishyas in the census return of 1901, were significant at the initial phase of the Mahishya movement. By 1931, the name ‘Mahishya’ succeeded in achieving wider recognition in the indigenous society and in the perception of the government. Referring to this, in the Census Report of 1931, the Census Superintendent of Bengal commented:

It is sufficient to state that they have succeeded in establishing themselves as a different caste from the Jalia Kaibarttas and that they have secured the official recognition by Government of the caste name by which they appear in the present reports.

Thus 1931 is a significant year in the caste mobility of this community and our study ends here.

Bengal during these three decades of our study, witnessed the development of various socio-economic and political forces and different sections of the Mahishya community responded differently to them which reveal dynamism of the community and throw light on important features of social mobility of the community. As the caste system continued to prevail as a ubiquitous feature in the colonial society, for a long period this community had been striving for the retention of caste identity, elevation of caste status in regional hierarchy. They maintained the traditional caste anchorage, consolidated their caste norms and values and developed simultaneously adoptive mechanism for the attainment of redefined goal, according to contemporary needs. We confine our study generally to the Burdwan and Presidency Divisions of south-western Bengal, where the Mahishyas constituted the majority of the Hindu

95 Ibid., p.371.
population. In this region, during our period of study, social mobility of different sections of the community was very prominent. However, keeping in mind the presence of the Mahishyas all over Bengal, developments and trends of such mobility in the adjacent areas are referred to, as and when required.

THE PLANNING OF THE STUDY

In the first chapter, the highly debatable issues of the emergence of the Chasi Kaibarttas as a major community among the Kaibarttas, their traditional occupation, their relationship with the Jalia Kaibarttas have been dealt with. The Chasi Kaibarttas emerged in the medieval period, which was a significant instance of social mobility in pre-colonial Bengal. This chapter shows that contrary to the dominant opinion that Chasi Kaibarttas were breakaway group of the fishing Kaibarttas, the former emerged as a functional group out of the majority of the Kaibarttas, whose traditional occupation was cultivation, not fishing.

In the second chapter, an elaborate analysis of the socio-cultural and economic profile of the community has been made, which enables us to explore the diverse trends of mobility of the community in the context of social stratification and change in colonial Bengal. Here emphasis is given on the distribution and movement of population, social organization and practices, civil condition, literacy and occupational diversification of the Mahishyas with special reference to the impact of such developments as determinants of social mobility on the different strata of the community.

The third chapter discusses growing importance of caste in the discourses of both the British administrators and the Indian intelligentsia which influenced the perceptions of castes belonging to different strata of caste hierarchy. It focuses on the evolution of colonial discourse on caste and its varied impact on colonial administration and the Indian intelligentsia. The colonial ethnographic accounts, caste related policies and caste consciousness among the educated middle classes contributed to the emergence of caste as a substantive category of social identity, which in turn influenced the ideology and activities of castes, such as the Mahishyas, in their mobility efforts.

The fourth chapter deals with the genesis of the Mahishya movement in the wider context of other caste mobility movements in colonial Bengal emphasizing both
similarities and dissimilarities within them. Here we try to explore the reasons for assertion of Mahishya identity at a particular point of time. Here the question which is dealt with, is why during our period of study, the leaders of the Mahishya movement in their growing status aspirations became so concerned to get rid of the “Kaibarta” nomenclature and eager to fortify their caste identity with a ‘twice-born’ _varna_ status. The chapter also aims at a detailed study on different aspects, regional variations, character of the Mahishya movement with special reference to the attitudes towards ‘sanskritizing’ processes and the women’s question.

In the fifth chapter, the attitudes of the Mahishyas towards the colonial government, the nature of participation of the Mahishyas in organised politics with special reference to their integration into mainstream nationalism, have been examined. Here, we like to probe into the complexities of their attitudes to colonial rule vis-a-vis nationalism. In a period when the legitimacy of the Raj, was being gradually challenged by the nationalist politics, a new social category, called the “depressed classes” was constructed by the colonial sociological discourse and was subsequently politicized by the policy of protective discrimination. We have critically examined the response of the Mahishyas to these crucial political developments. 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 & Rajbansi leaders. Here emphasis is given on the fact that the trends of gradual politicization of the Namasudra and the Rajbansi caste movements are not visible in the Mahishya caste movement. Unlike the Namasudra and Rajbansi caste associations, the Mahishya caste associations generally refrained from developing any specific political agenda for the benefit of the community and remained generally confined to addressing social issues, related to status uplift and promotion of socio-economic welfare of their community.

Thus, the present study makes an attempt at understanding the social solidarity and social mobility among the Mahishyas, in the context of the interacting processes concerning demographic issues, socio–economic transformations, political upheavals, ideological changes. The importance of caste in the Bengali society at that time justifies our attempt at such a study on social mobility of a particular caste – the
Mahishyas, which happened to be the largest caste of colonial Bengal. In the pre-colonial period, several castes or groups utilized different sources of mobility to enhance their socio-economic status. However, the patterns of the caste mobility movements acquired new dimensions as more sources of mobility were available during the colonial period. Besides as recent researches have shown, colonial constructions of caste in new ways largely influenced indigenous knowledge formations and the process of social mobility movements along caste lines. We attempt to make our study in this context.