CHAPTER- 1

SOCIAL MOBILITY IN PRE-COLONIAL BENGAL: FORMATION OF THE CHASI KAIBARTTAS

Most of the scholars agree with the view that castes are not all built on the same model; the system has grown slowly and gradually with different variations, and castes which are of different origin are also of different nature. The formation of any social unit, like caste, as a cultural or a structural reality is a complex phenomenon, which is related to the problems concerning the nature and reality of such unit. Regarding the nature of caste the initial problem is that of definition. J.H. Hutton has written:

The truth is that while a caste is a social unit in a quasi-organic system of society and throughout India is consistent enough to be immediately identifiable, the nature of the unit is variable enough to make a concise definition difficult. ¹

Similarly Bryce Ryan has stated:

That there is no satisfactory definition of caste, or of a caste, is due to the actual variety of social organization systems found within the Hindu milieu. Any precise definition will inevitably fail to conform to some structure and again will imply characteristics which in specific instances are not present. ²

Scholars have agreed that defining caste as one of a number of self-contained and completely segregated units, the mutual relations between which are ritually determined in a graded scale, is far from satisfactory. Lack of precise definition regarding caste indicates that formation of any particular caste cannot be explained by one or two general theories of origin. In the colonial period, for the most part the Indian understanding of caste was derived from, and was based on the scriptures and sacred texts and this influenced the perceptions of the castes at that time of their status mobility. Generally, all castes in analysing their origin looked back to the scriptures and searched for a respectable origin. The leaders Chasi Kaibarttas believed in their

² Bryce Ryan, *Caste in Modern Ceylon*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University, 1953), p. 18.
scriptural origin and justified their adoption of the title, Mahishya on scriptural ground.

It is important to note here that we are not using the term formation, in scriptural sense, where the members of a caste are believed to be descendants of common parents. By this term we are referring to an evolutionary process where some groups of people came to form a caste and to be known by a caste name. So in our discussion we avoid emphasising on any scriptural interpretation on the formation of the Chasi Kaibarttas.

The formation of any social unit, like caste, as a cultural or a structural reality is an important aspect of its mobility. This is a complex phenomenon, which is related to the problems concerning the nature and reality of such unit. Social formations in India have been studied by a large number of scholars belonging to various disciplines, as well as many administrators, particularly those involved in the census operations, during both colonial and post-colonial times. Caste in India, being one of the most important social formations, has attracted major attention of these scholars. It has been pointed out that formations of castes never result in well maintained boundaries and like any other social group the boundaries of castes are often fuzzy, arbitrary, or contextual. The popularly used words, ‘caste’, ‘sub-caste’, do not actually designate fixed entities, though the ideology of caste insists on social relations in terms of well-demarcated groups. Declan Quigley aptly has remarked:

The essential point is that both the boundaries between castes and those within them are contextual. ...in fact very strict separation and endogamy only operate in particular circumstances and for particular groups. ...In any case, caste exclusiveness is always a matter of degree. Castes are always relatively, rather than absolutely, bounded.\(^3\)

While a caste as a social unit in a quasi-organic system of society throughout India is consistent enough to be identifiable, the nature of the unit is variable enough to make a theory of its formation difficult. Most of the scholars have agreed with the view that castes are not all built on the same model; the system has grown slowly and gradually, and castes which are of different origin are also of different nature. The castes and the divisions within the castes originate in a variety of circumstances. As a result of social

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mobility, there is a continuous process of amalgamation and/or segmentation take place among the castes. But there has always been a tendency in society to arrange the castes or sub-castes, thus emerged, in the prevalent scheme of social hierarchy based on the notions of purity and impurity. It may be argued here that to conceptualise caste as one of a number of self-contained and completely segregated units, the mutual relations between which are ritually determined in a graded scale, is far from satisfactory. The position of various ranks in a social hierarchy and the position of different castes and sub castes in these ranks are far from fixed which provides the scope for further social mobility and formation of new castes.

One of the major concerns of the Orientalists and colonial administrators was to identify the origin of the caste system in India. They speculated on the possible explanations of the caste system in Hinduism, as originating from the racial mix-up after the Aryans arrived in the ancient past or simply in the evolutionary process and division of labour. Some Indian scholars also wrote in a similar vein.

It is generally agreed that the evolution of the caste system had taken place in a slow, uneven manner into many regions from variety of social organizations. In each region, the local specificities, ecological features, nature of populations were drawn into the caste structure and the particular mode of production had shaped the caste practices of that region. The multiplicity of caste practices were a consequence of the interaction between the communities and the dialectics of the situation on the ground in each region. In this sense, the ‘flexibility’ of the caste system can be understood in a different way. The broad features of the caste system might be extended to new areas but these features had to be taken into consideration the vitality of the local cultures which refused to be erased by the larger social forces that might come to dominate their region. Caste hierarchy and its elaboration thus came to be influenced by the local arrangements of socio-economic and political power.

To get an idea of development of caste system in Bengal and formation of specific castes, we need to take into account both socio-cultural changes and advancement of productive forces or relations of production in society. Such an attempt calls for a historical analysis and explanation, avoiding overemphasis on textual references found in the scriptures, Brahmnic caste literature, genealogies etc. Dipankar Gupta has suggested:
History ... helps in putting some of the fine contingent points that may have urged Hindu society along to adopt the full-blown caste system. Seen historically the caste system does not appear as pure ideology either. It is apparent that caste mobility and change, conflict and dissension, have characterised Indian history from the earliest of times. All this helps to ‘normalize’ Hindu society and ideology and prevent it from appearing too distant and exotic.⁴

The Chasi Kaibarttas emerged in the medieval period. According to Hitesranjan Sanyal:

At least two new castes, namely, the Chasa Kaibartas and the Chasa Dhobas appear to have emerged between the middle of the sixteenth century and the middle of the eighteenth century, when Bharatchandra composed his Annadamangal: his list mentions these two castes for the first time.⁵

The emergence of the Chasi Kaibarttas as a new caste is an important instance of social mobility in pre-colonial Bengal. However, the formation of the Chasi Kaibarttas is debatable and the basic debate is around two issues – the first, related to their association with the ‘Mahishyas’ and the second, to the nature of their relationship with the Jalia Kaibarttas. It is evident from the name ‘Chasi Kaibartta’ that the caste happened to be the agriculturist section of the Kaibartta community. As, the Chasi Kaibarttas constituted the majority or the main body within the larger Kaibartta community, distributed all over the Bengal Presidency, our discussion on the formation of the Chasi Kaibarttas starts with the formation of the Kaibartta community, itself, which is followed by the analysis on emergence of the former within the latter.

Early reference to this community can be found in the ancient inscriptions and literary sources.

The Kaibarttas have been traced to a very early period, being mentioned as Kevarttas in the Vajasaneyi Samhita, as Kaivarttas in the Epics and the Manu-Samhita, and as Kevatas in a pillar edict of Asoka.⁶

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References to the Kaibarttas are available in many medieval texts also. However, the etymology of the name ‘Kaibartta’ is uncertain. H.H. Risley pointed out considerable difference of opinion on this.

Some derive it from *Ka*, water, and *vartta*, livelihood; but Lassen says that the use of *ka* in this sense is extremely unusual in early Sanskrit, and that the true derivation is *Kivarta*, a corruption of *Kimvarta*, meaning a person following a low or degrading occupation.\(^7\)

Risley supported the view that Kaibartta and Kewat were merely two names for the same tribe.

Kaibartta, the Sanskrit or Prakrit form, has been preserved in Bengali, and still in use as the name of the caste in question, while the shorter form Kewat has become current in Behar. ... In Orissa, on the other hand, the two names are current side by side; but Kaibartta is used by members of the caste, while only outsiders have the bad taste to talk of Kewats.\(^8\)

Nripendra Kumar Dutt held a similar view regarding close association between the Kaibarttas and the Kewats.

The word Kaivarta or Kevarta seems to be the Sanskritized form of the word Kevatta or Kewata which was probably the name of some aboriginal tribe, like the Nisada, Pukkasa, etc., whom the Aryans encountered in the valley of the Ganges. The original form of the word is retained in the early Buddhist literature (e.g., Dighanikaya, Brahmajalasutta) and in Asoka’s Inscriptions, and survives in modern times as the name of a sub-caste of fishermen, the Kewat. ... The orthodox derivation of the word Kevarta from the root Ka, water, does not dispel the suspicion that it was an afterthought to give a Sanskritic look to a non-Aryan word. From a tribal name Kevarta or Kaivarta became a caste name of a functional nature.\(^9\)

The Mahishya leaders were obviously staunch critics of such views of non-Aryan origin of the Kaibarttas, from whom the Chasi Kaibarttas originated. However, they were also far from unanimous about the meaning of the term.

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The colonial administrators generally agreed that the Kaibarttas constituted an ancient community of Eastern India. Risley in his comprehensive ethnographic survey of Bengal noted:

There seem to be good grounds for the belief that the Kaibarttas were among the earliest inhabitants of Bengal and occupied a commanding position.\(^\text{10}\)

According to the ancient Sanskrit texts the Kaibarttas are a ‘mixed’ caste. In the Dharmasutras, the earlier Smritis, and the *Mahabharata*, we find long lists of castes, supposed to evolve out of marriages or unions between men and women of different varnas or castes. These normative texts regarded the *Vedas* as eternal and infallible, and therefore strove hard to bring the actual state of society of their days within the framework of the four varnas, Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. Trying to conceptualise the existing and ever proliferating jatis, communities or tribes within the unchanging four-varna model, the authors of the Dharmasutras and Smritis explained formation of these social units in terms of innumerable matrimonial combinations and permutations within the overarching four-fold varna order. According to Niharranjan Ray, “This endeavour continued from the time of Manu and Yajnavalkya to Raghunandana in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.”\(^\text{11}\)

The *jati*, or more precisely *misrajatis*, according to the latest stratum of the Vedic literature, numbered eight in addition to the four varnas. In the *Manusamhitā* the number had already shot up to 60.\(^\text{12}\)

According to the *Manusamhitā*, many castes or jatis were produced by a series of crosses first between the members of four varnas and then between the descendants of these initial unions. To Manu, the Kaibarttas were one of such castes.

The Kaivarta is referred to in Manu (X. 34) as an alternative name, current in Aryavarta, of Margava or Dasa, who is born of a Nishada father and Ayogava mother.\(^\text{13}\)


According to S.V. Ketkar, the Margava or Dasa was described in Manu as a person, whom the inhabitants of Aryavarta called the Kaivarta. However, the early authorities did not agree among themselves regarding the specific union behind the origin of the Kaibarttas. The confusion is probably due to the fact that as these early texts were not composed in Bengal, no clear picture of social order in ancient Bengal is available in these sources. The book of the Laws of Manu (Manusmriti or Manava-dharma-shastra) represented the conditions in the valley of the Ganges or Magadha during the third century A.D.

None of the ancient Smrti works was composed in Bengal, and no Smrti or similar work reflecting Bengali society and in which a picture of caste patterns of the times could be identified which had been written in Bengal prior to the eleventh century.

We may say that, whatever is evident from the Institutes of Manu or other contemporary texts, did not represent social system, prevalent in Bengal at that time. The caste like divisions of the Bengali people developed later than those of north Indian regions. R.C. Majumdar has observed:

... it was not till a comparatively late period represented by the Epics and the Manu-smriti, that people of Bengal first began to imbibe the social and religious ideas of the Aryans. ... the caste divisions in the early Aryanised society of Bengal were in a state of flux and ... the adoption of Aryan manners and customs by the indigenous tribes of Bengal was a long and tedious process.

Niharranjan Ray similarly has noted:

Bengal, being north India’s easternmost region, the influence of Aryan beliefs and culture made inroads here only after their pervasion of other parts of north India. Bengal was the home of various peoples imbued with the beliefs and culture of an earlier time, and their consciousness of their own cultural tradition was profound and extensive. Thus, it was not without conflict and strife that Aryan Brahmanism imposed itself on this region, and such hostility continued over many centuries. From epigraphical evidence it

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15 Ibid., pp. 8 & 66.


is apparent that prior to the establishment of the Aryan Brahmanical state during the Gupta period, Brahmanical caste patterns, religions, customs and culture were by no means acknowledged in Bengal.\(^{18}\)

So with the development of a history of its own for a long time which marked out the lands of Bengal from the others of North India, there developed in Bengal a system of caste order, which although very much a part of the total Indic civilization, bore certain elements, which may be differentiated as being peculiarly Bengali. The peculiarity of Bengal’s caste development is visible in the post-eleventh century works of Bengali Smrīti and Puranic writers. However, these writers “deliberately started to fit the social structure of Bengal under the umbrella of the fourfold caste division of India according to the framework and rationale of the more ancient Brahmanical Smrti.”\(^{19}\)

In the early medieval Bengal, in addition to the scriptural and legal books (such as the books of Bhavadeva Bhatta and Jimutavahana) there are at least two later puranas, the *Brihaddharmapurana* and the *Brahmavaivarttapurana*, the *Ballalacharita* of Gopalabhatta and Anandabhatta, and the genealogical works of Bengal, all of which have given some glimpses of the caste structure. “However, they cannot be accepted on their own as authentic contemporary testimony.”\(^{20}\)

The *Brihaddharmapurana* and the *Brahmavaivarttapurana* are believed to be thirteenth-fourteenth century texts.\(^{21}\)

It is difficult to determine the time of composition of these two works, but it can be assumed that it was not before the twelfth century nor after the fourteenth. If that is so, then it can be said that in these two Puranas there emerges something of a rough sketch of the last stages of the caste development of ancient Bengal.\(^{22}\)

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\(^{19}\) Ibid., p. 161.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 162.


These two *puranas* made the first attempt of a systematic analysis of the caste system of Bengal, but like all other *puranas*, had mythological and fanciful elements deeply interwoven with the social facts of those times. In these two *puranas* (or *upapuranas*)[^23], “a large number of castes have been described with reference to their origin and occupations and classified according to the ceremonial rank enjoyed by the individual castes in the regional caste hierarchy prevalent in Bengal.”[^24] In neither of these two *puranas* under discussion was there any mention of the Kshatriyas or the Vaishyas in Bengal though in keeping with Manu, and the traditional notions of those days, the various castes cited (including the Kaibarttas), were said to have originated from mixed unions of the members of various *varnas*.

In accounting for the origin of the Kaivartas the compiler of the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* claimed that they emanated from the union of a Ksatriya father and a Vaisya mother, and it is interesting that the same explanation is given in the ancient lawbooks by Gautama and Yajnavalkya in regard to the origin of the Mahisyas.[^25]

However it is to be noted that these above mentioned assumptions, linked with the *varna* model of Hindu law books found in such texts, were constructed *a priori* rather than based on historical evidence. It may be pointed out that the *varna* and other associated models, such as that of *varnasamkara*, explaining origin of castes (*jatis*) in the medieval period were at the most theoretical or ideal ones. But the formation of castes took place in a particular context conditioned by socio-economic and political forces. Romila Thapar has pointed out that the *varna* hierarchy arose in and related to a lineage-based society but was adapted to a state system. *Varna* as a theory, assisted the process of the transition from lineage to monarchical states, where multiple groups with varied economic and political power were ascribed different *varna* status with religious sanctions and appropriate genealogical connections.[^26] Thapar has emphasized on historical evolution of gradation within the *varna* category on the basis of secular considerations.

If varna is not to be defined as a system of economic status then it takes on the characteristics of a theory not entirely divorced from reality but at the same time not mirroring reality. For the purposes of historical analysis each group has to be located both in terms of ritual rank and economic status although the two points need not necessarily have coincided.27

The interpretations of Sanskrit and vernacular sources of pre-colonial period did not explain the historical process of the formation of caste groups, their regional variations, relevant to respective local-level formations. The sharp rise in the number of jatis in the ancient or medieval times is to be analyzed in terms of the spread of sedentary settlements, the crystallization of occupational groups into endogamous jatis, of the gradual absorption of the tribal people into the sedentary agricultural society and so on.

The late nineteenth century & early twentieth century colonial administrators tried to explain the geographical anchorage of the Kaibarttas by their tribal origin. The Kaibarttas were portrayed in the early twentieth century indigenous caste literature (jatimala) either as a mixed caste depicted in the Hindu texts or as the ‘non-Aryan autochthonous people of the land’. The latter theory certainly appears to have been derived from the late nineteenth century racial ethnology of the colonial officials like W. W. Hunter, Herbert Risley, L.S.S. O’Malley, J. H. Hutton. Risley divided the Indian population into two racial types, the Aryan and the Dravidian, and held that a tribe was a development out of race, while a caste was a development out of tribe, in some cases.

Early society, as far back as we can trace it, is made up of a network of tribes, and in India it is easy to observe the process of the conversion of a tribe into a caste. …the transformation in question is confined to those tribes which have been brought into contact with the regular caste system, and have adopted its characteristic usages from religious or social motives.28

The origin of the Kaibarttas was ideally fitted into this explanatory scheme, which was initially developed in the colonial context of the late nineteenth century. In Risley’s typology the Kaibarttas appeared as ‘tribal’, who had gradually embraced

27 Ibid., p. 169.
Hinduism, accepted the Hindu social organization and thus had crystallized into a caste.

The long existence, wide geographical expansion of this community and the anthropological data – all indicate to the fact that this *jana-goshthi* (group of people) was formed by a continuous amalgamation of various ethno-cultural elements, through different stages of its evolution. Before Risley, W. W. Hunter had made similar observation on the tribal origin of the Kaibarttas:

There is little doubt that this caste was one of the aboriginal tribes of this part of the country. They are spoken of in the Mahabharata and in several of the ancient religious books of the Hindus; and the caste is especially numerous in the Districts of Hugli, Midnapur, and the 24 Parganas. The Kaibarttas embraced Hinduism soon after the Aryans pushed themselves forward into Bengal, and succeeded in obtaining for themselves a fair rank in Hindu society.29

Regarding the Kaibarttas of the District of 24 Parganas, he wrote in a similar vein:

It is conjectured that the aboriginal tribes of Western Bengal, on settling in the plains, took upon themselves the name of Kaibartta, and adopted the Hindu religion, manners, and customs. Some of the Kaibarttas still bear the sept name of an aboriginal tribe, the Bhuiyas. … Regarding the origin of the Kaibarttas, it is said that they are the offspring of a Sudra father and a Kshattriya mother, but, as already stated, there seems to be greater reason to class them among the aboriginal population of India.30

As to the Kaibarttas of Midnapore, W. W. Hunter stated:

The Kaibarttas are probably one of the aboriginal tribes of the Chhota Nagpur hills, west of Orissa and Midnapur, and are supposed to be the same as the Bhuiyas, an undoubtedly aboriginal tribe still inhabiting the Chhota Nagpur hills and jungles. They embraced Hinduism at a very early period after the Aryans made their appearance in Bengal, and from their numbers and strength, succeeded in demanding and obtaining admission to the Hindu community on honourable terms.31


However, a very interesting statement comes from Hunter’s *Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol. VIII. In this volume, commenting on the origin of the Kaibarttas of the Bogra District, Hunter acknowledged a drawback in his earlier view stated in Vol.III:

> It is sometimes supposed that they are an aboriginal tribe from Chutia Nagpur, but their wide distribution over Eastern Bengal would seem to negative this view.\(^{32}\)

This observation of Hunter, points to the fact that different tribal or ethnic groups of both Western & Eastern Bengal came to constitute the Kaibarttas of Bengal as the Kaibarttas of Eastern Bengal were not necessarily descendants of their counterparts of Western Bengal. Hunter made another significant comment regarding the origin of the Kaibarttas in the *Statistical Account of Murshidabad*:

> The persons bearing this name are sharply divided into two classes, the jalia Kaibarttas and the Chasa Kaibarttas. The former, who alone in ancient times bore the name of Kaibartta, are fishermen, and usually poor, except in some favourable situations on the banks of the Ganges. The Chasa Kaibarttas form the majority of the Hindu cultivators of the soil. Like all cultivators, they are poor, but they are not despised as the fishermen are. The Deputy-Collector mentions as remarkable, that the Chasa Kaibarttas, although a totally distinct class from the fishing Kaibarttas, are nearly always found in villages by the river side, but are never fishermen.\(^{33}\)

In this statement, it is clear that though Hunter was aware of some of the Sastric interpretations of the origin of the Kaibarttas and contemporary sharp social and occupational differentiation between the Chasi and Jaliya Kaibarttas, he refrained from saying that the former emerged from the latter.

H.H. Risley in his ethnographic glossary observed as to the origin of the Kaibarttas:

> No serious attempt can be made to trace the origin of the Kaibartta. The physical characters of the caste are not marked enough to throw any certain light on their descent, while their exogamous divisions, having been obviously borrowed from the Brahmins, contribute in no way to the solution of the question. All that can be said is that they are one of the characteristic castes of the deltaic districts of Bengal, that the nucleus of the group was probably Dravidian, but that their original cast of feature may have been to


some extent refined by a slight infusion of Aryan blood. The type as it stands at present, is distinctly an intermediate one, equally removed from the extreme types of Aryan and Dravidian races, found in Bengal.\textsuperscript{34}

Despite the limitations of Risley’s view, the multi-ethnic character of the Kaibarttas is evident here.

In the \textit{Bengal District Gazetteer: Midnapore}, L. S. S. O’Malley opined that the Kaibarttas were ‘the great race caste of Midnapore’\textsuperscript{35} and ‘seem to have consisted originally of a conglomeracy of tribes, which coalesced owing to the similarity of their functions’.\textsuperscript{36} He referred to Dr. Grierson’s conjecture that the Kaibarttas entered Midnapore from Orissa. To Grierson:

> The history of their arrival in the district accounts for the very peculiar character of the dialect of Bengali spoken by them. Originally owning some non-Aryan language, they arrived in Midnapore speaking a corrupt patois of Oriya, and on this, as a basis, they have built the dialect of Bengali which they speak in their present home.\textsuperscript{37}

W.H. Thompson, the Census Superintendent of Bengal, 1921 in his Report noted about the origin of the Chasi Kaibarttas:

> Originally they must have been the people of the delta who filled the space between the ancestors of the Bagdis just below the fringes of the rising ground to the west, and ancestors of the Pods and Namasudras nearer the delta face.\textsuperscript{38}

J. H. Hutton in his \textit{Caste in India} spoke of the Kaibarttas of Bengal as “perhaps a tribe originally”.\textsuperscript{39}

In Sanskrit literature also we find indications of tribal origin of the Kaibarttas. It has been pointed out in the \textit{Manusamhita} (X, 34) that there was a relationship in race


\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., p.69.


between the Kaibarttas and the Nisadas, another of the aboriginal tribes of Northern India. The *Mahabharata* (Anusasana, chapters. 50 & 51) has made the two words Kaibartta and Nisada synonymous. 40 Niharranjan Ray has observed:

The *Visnu Purana* describes the Kaivartas as non-Brahmanical; in the *Manusmriti* the offspring of a Nisada father and an Ayogava mother is described as Margava or Dasa, both of which are names for Kaivarta. ... From these two ancient sources it is clear that the Kaivartas were a pre-Aryan ethnic group or community which in time came to be classified among the lower levels of Aryan society. 41

As there is no objective basis to establish that the Kaibarttas had descended from the some mixed castes, described in the post-Vedic Brahmanical literature, it is perhaps logical to conclude that they were being referred to as such because of some reasons. These people, in all probability, belonged to the indigenous tribes or communities of the land who, along with the expansion of agriculture, were gradually being absorbed into the fold of Hindu society. This tendency was quite common among many erstwhile tribal groups in India. This process of tribal absorption or development of tribes into castes, has been variously described by European & Indian Anthropologists and Sociologists. Risley noted:

… a glance at the facts will show that the transformation in question is confined to those tribes which have been brought into contact with the regular caste system, and have adopted its characteristic usages from religious or social motives. ... In short, when tribes are left to themselves, they exhibit no inborn tendency to crystallize into castes. 42

Hardening into a caste is a long complex process and internmixture with other groups is not ruled out in this process. At least, from anthropological measurements and

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computations it can be observed that ‘there was a close relation between the Bengali Kayastha and the Sadgopas and Kaivartas.’

P. C. Mahalanobis on the basis of anthropometric data analysis regarding thirty modern typical castes of Northern India, including seven from Bengal, viz. The Brahmana, the Kayastha, the Sadgop, the Kaibartta, the Rajbanshi, the Pod and the Bagdi, has thrown interesting light on this question. To him, the Kaibarttas, like the Kayasthas and Sadgops, are typical indigenous castes of Bengal and the Kaibarttas show as much internixture within Bengal as Kayasthas and Sadgops, but less affinity with upper castes and greater resemblance with lower castes. There has certainly been no miscegenation between the Kayasthas, Sadgops and Kaibarttas (the latter two being described as Satsudras in the Brahmandaivartapuranā) on the one hand, and the Santals, Garos, Khasiyas or any of the low-born castes (antityaja) mentioned in the Brihaddharmapuranā, on the other. B. S. Guha, anthropologist, Zoological Survey of India, on the basis of anthropometric data, collected by Mr. A. K. Mitra has pointed out that the Mahishyas has a distinct relationship with the Vaidyas and Subarnabaniks.

The Kaibarttas thus, taken horizontally, were not a homogenous or undifferentiated community, rather they represented a combination of different ethnic groups of Eastern India with localized characteristics of their own. This by itself is an example of the non-static character of the Indian society.

From the above discussion it is evident that the formation of the Kaibarttas took place during a period, when the caste system was not in a mature phase in Bengal. The Kaibarttas were referred to since ancient times but the ‘Brahmanical caste order’ was not firmly established at the higher level of the caste society before ‘the Sena-

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Varman period (eleventh and twelfth centuries).

This explains to a large extent the differences in names & caste status of the sections of Kaibarttas inhabiting different parts of Bengal. However, as different ethno-cultural groups came to constitute this large Kaibartta community, in the ancient and medieval times, it was not possible for them to have a single occupation. Evidently this community had different occupational groups within its fold. Different strata of people, from local chieftains to commoners, from zaminders to agricultural labourers or fishermen— all were included in varying number, into this community. In a predominantly agricultural economy in Bengal, majority of the people of this large community seemed to have practiced agriculture—an occupation, which commanded some social prestige also. “As a matter of fact, farming has always been regarded in Brahmanical and Buddhist literatures as a much nobler profession than hunting and fishing.”

Now, with the development of caste system in Bengal, different occupational groups, within this community, came to form separate caste groups. Under the changed socio-economic scenario, especially after the Gupta period, the caste system gradually made its way into different regions of Bengal. In such circumstances, it may be said that caste-like divisions, based on particular occupations or other considerations came to appear within this large Kaibartta community, resulting in the formation of several endogamous sections. Among these, the most important section was that of the Chasi Kaibarttas, as most of the members of this group were agriculturists. However, the caste also included a large number of local chieftains or landed gentry. Their power, wealth and number secured respectable status for the Chasi Kaibarttas. The Chasi Kaibarttas constituted the majority of the Kaivartta community. The smaller sections of the Kaibarttas also formed separate occupational groups or castes, including the Jalia Kaibarttas. The cultivating sections, which constituted the majority and enjoyed higher social prestige came to form the upper strata of the community. The sections,


48 The cultivating sections among the Kaibarttas were variously called in the nineteenth century as Chasi Kaibarttas, Halik/Halwa/Halia/Hele Kaibarttas, Chasi Das, Halia Das, Parasar Das etc. in different parts of Bengal. We refer to them all as Chasi Kaibarttas, as in the Census reports, District Gazeteers and other official documents all these sections were mostly referred to by this name. The Mahishya movement tried to integrate all cultivating sections of the Kaibarttas, by constructing the ‘Mahishya’ identity.

engaged in fishing, which came to form the caste of Jalia Kaibarttas, were given a low social status due to their occupation and cultural traits. It is true that, both the Chasi Kaibarttas and the Jalia Kaibarttas emerged from the Kaibartta community, this ‘common’ origin is of less significance, as the Kaibarttas were not a homogenous tribe or race. So here, the matter of common descent is only subject to one’s subjective analysis.

Needless to say that, in the late nineteenth & early twentieth century, the Chasi Kaibarttas and the Jalia Kaibarttas were endogamous groups, without regular social interaction, as such between themselves. However it is not clear to us that when the Chasi Kaibarttas, exactly transformed themselves into a full-fledged caste group. Nowhere in the ancient Sanskrit literature, legal, mythological or otherwise, do we find any mention of different classes of Kaibarttas. “Manu knows only one class of Kaibarttas … and so also other writers of Dharmasastras like Angiras …and Atri…”

The sources of early medieval Bengal do not throw much light on this issue either. “The first historic reference to the Kaivartas comes from the Pala period.” The contemporary poet, Sandhyakaranandin in his Ramcharita described the successful Kaibartta revolt in Varendri, which included considerable portions of present Bogra, Rajshahi and Dinajpur districts, against the Pala ruler, Mahipala II.

He was a contemporary of Ramapala, but wrote or could finish his poem at least during the first few years of Madanapala’s reign, as the concluding portion of the work shows. Thus, Sandhyakara’s literary activity may roughly be placed between 1077 to 1130 A. D.

The main theme of the work is an account of the successful revolution in north Bengal waged under the leadership of Kaivarta chief Divya which cost the life and throne of the Pala king Mahipala and the restoration of the paternal kingdom by his younger

50 Ibid., p.296.
brother Ramapala which required an elaborate preparation and a fierce battle.\textsuperscript{54}

Though, the poet elaborately dealt with three Kaibartta kings, Divya, Rudoka and Bhima, he did not mention any specific section – Chasi (Halika) or Jalia (Jalika), within the Kaibarttas.

Nripendra Kumar Dutt has argued that these prefixes were not to be found in use in Sanskrit law-books and religious texts and in the standard Dharmasastras, Puranas and old lexicons, the two words, Dhivara and Kaibarta were used as synonymous, indicating that the Kaibarttas had represented the fisherman caste at least for the last two thousand years.\textsuperscript{55}

It is when a section of the Kaivartas advanced in culture, gave up their hunting and fishing life and settled as cultivators of the soil that their status was improved. Hence, probably we find that in more recent writings like the Brahmavaivarta Purana the Kaivartas are derived from respectable parentage though still with a stigma of degradation.\textsuperscript{56}

So, it seems that in N.K. Dutt’s opinion, the Chasi Kaibarttas came to exist before the fourteenth or fifteenth century when \textit{Brahmavaivartapuran}a was composed.\textsuperscript{57}

To N. K. Dutt, the two words Dhivara and Kaibarta are synonymous words. As noted earlier, in Manu, Kaibartta and Dasa are also synonymous words. Interestingly, the \textit{Brihaddharmapurana} (a contemporary text to \textit{Brahmavaivartapuran}a) mentioned both the Dasa & Dhibara as distinct castes with separate occupations (cultivation for the former & fishing for the latter) & social status without mentioning the Kaibartta anywhere. As it is not probable that this ancient large community of Kaibarttas would be ignored in a text which otherwise produced an elaborate list of castes in Bengal, it seems that the author of the text tried to refer to two occupational sections, Dasa & Dhibara, within the Kaibarttas. Thus, here also, it may be argued that the Chasi Kaibarttas emerged before the fourteenth or fifteenth century, when these \textit{puranas} were written.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p. 75.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., p.300.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., p.298.
Reference to two distinct occupational castes, one cultivating & another, fishing, bearing a common name Das has been found in one of the texts of Kavikankan Mukunda’s Chandimangal (Kalketu-pala), which was composed by the end of the sixteenth century. We find one line from this text – “Matsya beche kare chas: Dui jati baise Das,” which means that there were two castes, known as Das, one engaged in selling fish and the other in cultivation. In another text of Chandimangal, Das has been understood as one section of the Kaibartta, – “Matsa beche chase chas: Kaibartta Dhibar Das.” This line means that the Kaibartta Dhibar were engaged in selling fish, while the Kaibartta Das were cultivators. Chandimangal, generally provided a detailed list of castes with their respective occupations and social status in the then Bengal and it clearly indicated the existence of two sections or jatis – Dhibar (fisherman/fishmonger) and Das (cultivator) – among the Kaibarttas in the sixteenth century.

Hitesranjan Sanyal has fixed a later period for the emergence of the Chasi Kaibarttas. According to him, the ‘Chasha Kaibartas’ constituted a new caste which appeared to have emerged between the middle of the sixteenth century and the middle of the eighteenth century, when Bharatchandra Ray composed his Annadamangal (1753). Bharatchandra’s list mentions this caste (along with the Chasa Dhobas) for the first time. He has argued that traditionally the Kaibarttas were fishermen and the ‘Chasha Kaibartas’ abandoned the traditional occupation and had taken to agriculture. It was due to their new occupation that the dissident Kaibarttas had acquired the prefix Chasha i.e. peasant. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century this dissident group was found to have established itself as a full-fledged caste and elevated to the intermediary rank.

However, medieval origin of the Chasi Kaibarttas was evidently supported by the Brihaddharmapurana, the Brahmavaivarttapurana and the Chandimangal, though

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58 Sanat Kumar Naskar (ed.), Kavikankan-Chandi (Kalketu-pala), (Kolkata: Ratnabali, 2009), p. 299.
59 Ibid., p. 299.
61 Ibid., p. 41.
these texts did not specify the period of origin. On the other hand, very early origin of the Chasi Kaibarttas has been referred to by R. C. Majumdar:

According to *Amara-kosha*, the Kaivartas include both Dasa and Dhivara. This, added to the evidence of the *Brahma-vaiyarta* Purana, Manu and Jatakas ... indicates that the Kaibarttas were from ancient times divided into two sections, the cultivator and fishermen.\(^{62}\)

Sailendranath Sengupta has held a similar view:

It appears that Kaivartas very early split into three groups, the agricultural Kaivartas, who have identified themselves with Mahisyas, the Dhivaras or fishermen who are untouchables, and the Ferrymen who correspond to Ghattajivins and Patnis.\(^{63}\)

Thus, we are confronted with two opposite views regarding the period of formation of the Chasi Kaibarttas, though it is clear that they emerged in the pre-colonial period. The colonial ethnological narratives did not address this issue. Hunter, Risley, L. S. S. O’Malley and Hutton discussed in detail the tribal origin of the Kaibarttas and pointed to the presence of two distinct occupational classes within the Kaibarttas in colonial times but remained silent on the period when such occupational diversification took place.

As emergence of sections of Chasi Kaibartta or Jalia Kaibarttas within the Kaibarttas may be generally explained in terms of occupational mobility, we need to identify first, the initial occupation or occupations, the Kaibarttas were associated with. This will also enables us to understand whether the Chasi Kaibarttas constituted a dissident or breakaway group which abandoned their traditional occupation to achieve comparatively higher social position than that of their ‘parent’ caste.

The traditional occupation of the Kaibarttas has been also a debatable issue since the ancient times. To Manu, the Kaivarta (i.e., Margava or Dasa) subsisted by working as a boatman.\(^{64}\) In one of the tales of the Buddhist *Jatakas* fishermen were called

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\(^{64}\) S.V. Ketkar, *History of Caste in India*, (First Published, 1909, Reprint, Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1993), p. 103
Kevattas, i.e., Kaivarttas.

According to the lexicographer, Amara, Kaivarta and Dhivara (i.e., fisherman) were synonymous terms. We learn from the Amarakosha that the Dasa and Dhibara were called the Kaibarta. “In Taittiriya Brahmana, 3.4.12, Dasa, Dhivara and Kaivarta were separately mentioned but how they were distinguished is not known.” The poet Sandhyakaranandin in his Ramacharita had given no indication of the occupation of the Kaibarttas, while discussing the Kaibartta revolt, although it would seem that their occupation was not disreputable. The Brihaddharmapurana referred to the Dasa and Dhibara separately, without mentioning the Kaibartta. It should be mentioned here, according to Manu the Dasa was a boatman, but to the Brihaddharmapurana, which is an important source on castes in Bengal around the thirteenth century AD, Dasa was meant to be a cultivator. The Brahmavaivartapurana mentioned the Kaibartta as Dhivara (i.e., fisherman.) In Chandimangal, the Kaibarttas were both Dasa (cultivator) and Dhivara (fisherman/fishmonger). Thus, according to the ancient and medieval literary sources, the traditional occupation of the Kaibarttas, was either fishing or were both fishing & cultivation.

The British administrators, also, who had made detailed discussion on castes and tribes in Bengal, did not come to a definite conclusion in this regard. In the Memorandum on the Census of British India of 1871-72, the Kaibarttas, (2,700,000 in

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71 Sanat Kumar Naskar (ed.), *Kavikankan-Chandi (Kalketu-pala)*, (Kolkata: Ratnabali, 2009), p. 299.
number in Bengal and Assam), were considered as an agricultural caste and the Chasas of Bihar were included into the group.\textsuperscript{72}

Hunter in his *Statistical Account of Bengal* had emphasised on tribal origin of the Kaibarttas and did not mention any traditional occupation for them. He was aware of the fact that according to some *sastras*, the traditional occupation of the Kaibarttas was fishing but he had doubts about it. In his account on the district of Nadia, Hunter mentioned:

\begin{quote}
According to the *sastras*, the original caste occupation of the Kaibarttas was that of fishermen, but in this part of Bengal very few Kaibarttas are found who follow that employment.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

In fact, he mentioned Kaibartta and Chasa Das, in the district of Nadia as landholders, merchants, cultivators, and servants only. In the *Statistical Account of 24-Parganas*, he mentioned Mala or Jele as fishermen and boatmen, holding a lower position than the cultivating sections of the Kaibarttas.\textsuperscript{74} He said that the Mala appeared to have been originally a mere title for a branch of the Kaibartta caste, which had separated and formed into a separate caste.\textsuperscript{75} Thus, to him the fishermen and boatmen Kaibarttas were a breakaway group of the Kaibarttas. He pointed to another breakaway group. According to him the Modaks or Mayras (Confectioners) of 24-Parganas were also a branch of the Kaibarttas:

\begin{quote}
These are said at one time to have been a branch of the Kaibarttas, but at the present day they have formed themselves into a separate and distinct class, and deny any such connection.\textsuperscript{76}
\end{quote}

This may be noted here that Hunter did not mention the Chasi Kaibartta as a breakaway group, rather they constituted the parent caste from which some other occupational groups had broken away.

\textsuperscript{72} Memorandum on the Census of British India of 1871-72, (London, 1875), p.22.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., p.60.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., p.54.
Risley, like Hunter, was aware of *sastric* view on the traditional occupation of the Kaibarttas. He mentioned in his *The People of India* that in Manu’s opinion, the Kaibarttas, an ancient functional group, similar to the Margavas and Dasas, were fishermen. But, he treated the Kaibarttas as a tribe absorbed into Hinduism:

The Doms, Dosadhs, Gujars, Jats, Kaibarttas, Namasudras (Chandals), Pods, Nayars, Pallis, Paraiyans (Pariahs) and Rajbansi-Koch represent tribes which have been transformed into castes at a comparatively recent date and retain some traces of the tribal stage of development.

However, he did not ignore the role of community of function, which was “ordinarily regarded as the chief factor in the evolution of caste” and agreed that “almost every caste professes to have a traditional occupation.” Here, he opined that the Kaibarttas (and Kewats) were both fishermen and cultivators by tradition.

L. S. O’Malley in *Bengal District Gazetteers: Midnapore*, traced the Kaibarttas to a very early period, being mentioned in the *Samhitas*, in the Epics and in a pillar edict of Asoka. Following Hunter and Risley, he also did not refer to any specific traditional occupation of the Kaibarttas. He suggested that the Kaibarttas “... seem to have consisted originally of a congeries of tribes, which coalesced owing to the similarity of their functions. As land was gradually reclaimed from the waste and came under settled cultivation, they took more and more to agriculture.” Here, he was not very specific about ‘their functions’, before the Kaibarttas ‘took more and more to agriculture’.

W.H. Thompson, the Census Superintendent of Bengal, 1921 in his Report had noted about the Jalia Kaibarttas:

The Jalia Kaibarttas are traditionally an aquatic community engaged in fishing and as boatmen. ...to the student of the question whether they were originally of the same stock as the Chasi Kaibarttas or not, the close parallel between the distribution of the two communities over the several districts of

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the Province will appear significant. Both communities seem to belong to the same localities, but naturally the Jalia Kaibarttas are rather less numerous in the drier districts, where there is not the same scope for the exercise of their traditional occupation than the districts intersected by streams.\textsuperscript{81}

Here Thompson indicated common origin of the two but with separate traditional occupations.

J. H. Hutton characterised the Kaibarttas of Bengal as a single caste, ‘divided occupationally into Jaliya Kaibarttas who practised the calling of fishermen and Haliya (or Chasi) Kaibarttas who lived by agriculture.’\textsuperscript{82} and did not deal with the issue of their traditional occupation.

Athelstane Baines commented that the Kaibarttas were supposed to have abandoned fishing in favour of agriculture.\textsuperscript{83} However, he added at the same time:

\begin{quote}
... the Kaibarttas, accounts its agricultural sections far above those which fish, and has framed its subdivisions accordingly. It is doubtful which occupation is the earlier amongst them, but from their appearance, it is surmised that they are immigrants who spread over the Delta, from the country round Midnapore and took to fishing for a livelihood as their numbers increased.\textsuperscript{84}
\end{quote}

It seems that Baines was little confused about the earlier occupation of the Kaibarttas. If he thought that the Kaibarttas abandoned fishing in favour of agriculture, fishing should have been the earlier occupation of the Kaibarttas. But if he thought that the Kaibarttas ‘took to fishing for a livelihood as their number increased’, fishing was not their earlier occupation.

Thus from the writings of the British scholars/administrators of late nineteenth and early twentieth century mentioned above, we do not get specific information about the traditional occupation of the Kaibarttas. They definitely mentioned agriculture as the principal occupation and fishing as the subsidiary occupation of the Kaibarttas and observed the formation of two castes on the basis of this occupational diversification.

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\textsuperscript{83} Athelstane Baines, Ethnography (Castes and Tribes), (Strassburg: Trubner, 1912), pp. 51-52.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., p. 51.
\end{flushright}
But they were not sure about ‘which occupation is the earlier amongst them’ (Baines). Besides, they were also not keen on pointing out any single traditional occupation for such a large community, consisting of groups of various socio-economic backgrounds, inhabiting all over Bengal and adjoining places.

So it is not clear from their writings, whether the process of the formation of the Chasi Kaibarttas within the Kaibarttas had resulted from any change of occupation, i.e. from non-agricultural occupation to agricultural occupation or a result of segmentation owing to occupational differentiation within the different ethno-cultural groups within the Kaibarttas. This issue needs to be examined as it highlights an important aspect of social mobility of the Chasi Kaibarttas in the pre-colonial period.

As to the formation of the Chasi Kaibarttas, a number of scholars have argued that they were originally fishermen or boatmen, like other members of the Kaibartta and took to agriculture, a relatively respectable profession, to raise their social status. Ultimately they dissociated from the main body of the Kaibartta and formed a new caste with a higher social status. As a matter of fact, this view, that the Kaibarttas were originally fishermen and the Chasi Kaibarttas were merely an offshoot of the Kaibartta caste, the cause of separation being the adoption of an occupation, not followed by the main body of the caste – dominates the Indian scholarship, as far as the formation of the Chasi Kaibarttas is concerned. We can criticize this view empirically, at several points. We may cite some of the leading opinions, representing the above mentioned view point.

It may be mentioned here that there were a lot of instances, both in the pre-colonial and colonial India of attempts by sections of low castes to rise in social esteem in relation to their respective parent caste. Such fission within a caste was often the outcome of change of occupation from an impure to purer one. Since the status of a caste in a purity-pollution scale, as perceived in the sastras, depended, to a large extent, on the nature of its occupation, there was a natural tendency on the part the lower castes to change their occupation in favour of purer ones. Some scholars have tended to analyze the formation of the Chasi Kaibarttas in this context, i.e., in terms of abandoning the traditional occupation of the parent caste.

Hitesranjan Sanyal referring to social mobility in the pre-colonial Bengal, has stated:
At least two new castes, namely, the Chasha Kaibartas and the Chasha Dhobas appear to have emerged between the middle of the sixteenth century and the middle of the eighteenth century, when Bharatchandra composed his *Annadamangal*: his list mentions these two castes for the first time….Chasa Kaibartas and the Chasa Dhobas were breakaway groups of the Kaibartas and Dhobas respectively. Traditionally the Kaibartas are fishermen and the Dhobas are washermen. The dissidents of these castes had abandoned the traditional occupations of their respective castes and had taken to agriculture. It is due to their new occupation that the dissident Kaibartas and Dhobas had acquired the prefix Chasa i.e., peasant….The Chasa Kaibartas had elevated themselves to the intermediary rank. The Chasa Dhobas, however, failed to improve upon their ritual rank.  

Sanyal has referred to the fact that, generally speaking, agriculture was not a profitable occupation during the Mughal period as agriculture itself did not involve prosperity. High rate of rent and various other cesses and exactions were imposed by the landholders. However he has opined:

> Yet, the dissident Gops and the Chashi Kaibartas, who later came to be known as the Sadgops and Mahishyas respectively, appear to have made their change of occupation mainly to agriculture the starting point of rise to eminence. They extended their activities to trade and established control over land in the respective areas of their settlement, where their leaders had succeeded in acquiring political power at the local level. It is the combination of economic control and political power that placed the dissident Gops and the Chashi Kaibartas in a position of advantage vis-a-vis the other castes and ultimately helped them to raise their social position in the local society.

Evidently, this view of Sanyal regarding the formation of the Chasi Kaibarttas, has been influenced by one general theory of social mobility. This theory refers to the type of mobility, resulting “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.”

Such type of mobility, usually, begins with the change in occupation. Sanyal has opined:

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86 Ibid., p. 74-75.
87 Ibid., p. 75.
88 Ibid., p. 42.
The process of caste mobility began with the change of hereditary occupation with which each caste was invariably associated...The examples of caste mobility indicate that agriculture was the main refuge for the dissidents and spillovers from other functional castes. It is perhaps mainly due to the availability of potentially arable land and, even, perhaps a favorable land-man ratio,...that agriculture could accommodate newcomers.\(^9\)

In a caste society, occupation, being the most important factor in determining the position of a group of people in the society, the relative purity and impurity of occupations identified the different castes with one or the other rank in the hierarchy of castes. In such a situation, the mobile caste groups usually abandoned their original less respectable occupations and switched over to the new ones, which in all cases were relatively more lucrative and respectable. Adoption of new occupations helped the dissident groups to dissociate themselves from the parent castes of lower ranks and brought for them economic power and prestige that followed from it. Sometimes, the dissident groups had to remain satisfied with the limited achievements of getting an elevated position in the secular context. In other cases, the groups were able to achieve a higher ritual status, through various status raising efforts.

According to Hitesranjan Sanyal, the process of social mobility, beginning with the change in occupation up to the formation of new castes with higher social ranks, both in the ritual and secular contexts, was completed by only a few groups. He has observed that the castes such as Madhu and Phul Napits, Barendra Sunris and Chasha Dhabas had to remain content with their improved secular status, while the castes such as the Chasi Kaibarttas, Sodgops and Tilis, came to form a new caste with a higher rank in the social order, than that of their parent castes.\(^9\)

The above theory of social mobility is, of course, very important in analyzing the formation and processes of mobility of different castes or sections of different castes. But this theory fails to provide an adequate explanation for the emergence and mobility of the Chasi Kaibarttas or Mahishyas. Though the recent scholars like Hitesranjan Sanyal have applied this theory to the case of the Chasi Kaibarttas or


Mahishyas, on the basis of available information, we can subscribe to a different explanation.

This opinion of Sanyal, as to the formation of the chasi Kaibarttas is however, not new. Nripendra Kumar Dutt made a detailed discussion on this issue in the Appendix – III to Chapter XII, incorporated in the Census Report of Bengal & Sikkim of 1931. 91 He was a professor of the Sanskrit College, Calcutta and in this Appendix, he made discussions on several castes of Bengal, including the Mahishyas. Later, this Appendix was included in his book Origin and Growth of Caste in India. Here, he came to the conclusion that the Kaibarttas belonged to the aboriginal tribes and the Kaibarttas “represented the fisherman caste for the last two thousand years.” 92 Naturally, to N.K. Dutt, the Chasi Kaibarttas were a breakaway group of the large Kaibartta community, who gave up their original occupation, i.e., fishing, and settled as cultivators. Dutt put forward several arguments in support of his view. We may take some of his arguments for discussion.

He argued that though the Chasi Kaivartas at that time called themselves Mahishyas and claimed that they had always been different from the Jalika Kaivartas, with whom they had nothing in common, except the name, facts, however, did not seem to support this claim. He said that the prefixes Halika and Jalika were added only to point the distinction in functions between the two classes, and were not parts of the name and the common name Kaivarta was suggestive of a common origin of the two sections, unless there be any strong evidence to the contrary. 93

We have already noted that probably both belonged to the Kaibartta community. It has been also noted that when the community was referred to in the ancient sastras, the caste system did not develop in Bengal and different ethno-cultural groups inhabiting different parts of eastern India, were, in course of time got incorporated in the long process of the evolution of the community since the ancient times. In such a situation, common origin of the Chasi and Jalia Kaibarttas in terms of common

93 Ibid., 295-296.
ancestry is a matter of subjective opinion. The census reports have provided us with instances, regarding both castes being joined by members of other groups even in the early decades of the twentieth century. It should be noted that origin of castes or communities in ancient or medieval India is highly debatable subject and generally it is conceded that these were conglomeration of diverse groups of people with different socio-economic background and no caste and community is bound by blood relations of any sort or a collection of relatives. In such a situation, the terms, ‘origin’ or ‘common origin’ can be used only in a limited sense. We have also noted racial affinity between the Mahishyas or Kaibarttas and some other caste in Bengal. The issue of racial affinity between the two communities – the Chasi & Jalia Kaibarttas, as raised by N.K. Dutt is questionable because it cannot be proved so far that they had more racial affinity with each other than with any other caste or castes of Bengal.

However, N.K. Dutt put forward some arguments in favour of his opinion that Chasi Kaibarttas were traditionally fishermen, who took to agriculture to raise their socio-economic status. To him Kaibartta, Dasa and Dhivara were synonymous and the Mahishyas were pure and simple Kaibarttas who shifted to agriculture. We do not agree with his opinion.

He tried to prove from the ancient Sanskrit literature that the Kaibartta and the Dhivara were the same caste. He referred to the lexicographer, Amara, to whom Kaibartta and Dhivara were synonymous terms. He also referred to one passage in Brahmandaivartapurana (Brahma, X, 111-112), which he argued, used the two words Kaibartta and Dhivara to denote the same caste. Now, apart from the fact that the ancient or medieval Sanskrit literature could not be treated as an authentic source on the origin of castes, we can say that from some ancient or medieval Sanskrit texts a different opinion could be made. According to Manu, the profession of the Kaibartta was plying of boats. So the Kaibartta was not a fisherman in Manu’s text. In

94 Ibid., p.296
95 Dhivara or dhibara is a fisherman.
Taittiriya Brahmana, 3.4. 12, Dasa, Dhivara and Kaibartta were separately mentioned.\(^98\) Here also the Kaibarttas were not equated with the fishermen (Dhivara). So a clear distinction in the origin of the Kaivartas and the Dhivaras can be found in some Sanskrit texts, which contradict N.K.Dutt’s opinion that in the ancient and medieval Sanskrit literature, the two words Dhivara and Kaibarta were used as synonymous and both “…have represented the fisherman caste at least for the last two thousand years.”\(^99\)

In the discussion, what we are trying to argue is that there is no definite proof behind the conception of the Chasi Kaibarttas or the agriculturist Kaibarttas as being a breakaway group of a large fishing community. Scholars like, Hitesranjan Sanyal, N.K. Dutt have put forward various arguments to prove that fishing was the traditional occupation of the Kaibarttas in general. Interestingly, the great novelist of nineteenth century Bengal, Sri Bankimchandra Chottopadhyay in his essay on the origin of the Bengali people (Bangalir Utpatti)\(^100\) expressed almost the same opinion. According to him:

> In the dictionary of Amara, (Amarakoshabhidhan) the names of the Kaibarttas are Kaibartta, Dasa, Dhibara….Dasa, Dhibara, Kaibartta – all three are the same. If Dasa and Dhibara are non-Aryans, the Kaibarttas are non-Aryans too. Now in Bengal, among the Kaibarttas, some are Chasa Kaibarttas; some are Jele Kaibartta. No doubt, all of them were Dhibaras (i.e., fishermen) before. With their increase in number, some took to agriculture and came to be known as Chasa Kaibarttas. Similarly, some of the Dhopas took to agriculture and formed a separate caste, the Chasa Dhopa. (Translation mine)\(^101\)

However, there are some other opinions, which contradict the above opinions. According to Narendranath Bhattacharyya, a section of the agriculturist Kaibarttas

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\(^{98}\) Ibid., p. 32.


\(^{100}\) This essay was originally published in a series in *Bangadarsan* between 1287 and 1288 B.S.

turned into fishermen, who are known as the Jalik Kaibartta. But their larger section is agriculturist or Halik. Ranabir Chakravorty has observed:

Scholars assumed that the Kaivarttas belonged to the cultivator caste and this has led to Sharma’s hypothesis of a successful peasant rebellion in early medieval Bengal. Scholars like, R.S. Sharma, B.N.S. Yadav have considered the Kaibartta Revolt of eleventh century Bengal, as a peasant revolt. R.S. Sharma has opined that the Kaibartta chiefs and peasants were alienated from the land, they were cultivating and were oppressed with taxes, which led them to revolt. All these opinions have upheld the view that the traditional occupation of the Kaibarttas was agriculture, not fishing. Now, the problem with these views is that it cannot explain the prefix, ‘Chasi’, added to the caste name ‘Kaibartta’. If the sole traditional occupation of the Kaibarttas was agriculture, the prefix ‘Chasi’ was hardly required.

In fact, the issue of traditional or original occupation of the Chasi Kaibarttas is important to us, as it throws light on some important aspects of the social mobility of the community. If it is accepted that the community emerged as a result of a change in occupation (i.e., from fishing to cultivating), that occupational mobility is indicative of one important aspect of the social mobility of the Chasi Kaibarttas or Mahishyas and, if the formation is the result of some other developments, that also serves as an important dimension of social mobility of the community. It has been already pointed out that the view that the Chasi Kaibarttas emerged by changing occupation, suffers from some limitations. Actually, the scholars who have put forward the opinion, have tried to apply a general theory to the specific case of the formation of the Chasi Kaibarttas, without going into the complexity of the situation. They have found an apparent similarity between the Sadgops, Chasa Dhobas, Madhu and Phul Napits etc. on one hand and the Chasi Kaibarttas on the other, as far as the formation of these communities are concerned. All these communities added prefixes to their original

103 Ranabir Chakravarti, Exploring Early India; upto c. AD 1300, (New Delhi: Macmillan Publishers India Ltd, 2010), p. 319
caste names to emphasize their distinction from the rest of their respective communities. But the similarity ends here. It is true that the Sadgops, Chasa Dhobas, Madhu Napits, Phul Napits and the Chasi Kaibarttas were previously sections of the Gops, Dhobas, Napits and Kaibarttas respectively. But it should be emphasized that the first three are occupational castes, unlike the last one. An occupational caste is originally consisted of the persons who follow one specific occupation, which is evident from the very name of the caste. According to S.V. Ketkar:

\[\text{We may define an occupational caste either as a caste, the bulk of the people} \]
\[\text{of which regard a particular occupation as their peculiar one, or as an} \]
\[\text{aggregate of people who have by some means become associated with a} \]
\[\text{certain occupation. With this definition such occupational castes are common} \]
\[\text{in many communities.}^{105}\]

No one has any doubt about the occupation or the traditional occupation of the castes like, the Gops, Dhobas, Napits, because these caste names are derivatives of the names of respective professions. So, when sections of these occupational castes add prefixes to their original caste names, we can be sure of their original or traditional occupation. The scholars like N.K. Dutt or H. Sanyal are of course right when they have opined that the Chasa Dhobas were originally washermen, who took to agriculture. But when they have opined that the Chasi Kaibarttas were originally fishermen, who took to agriculture, they are mistaken because the Kaibarttas were not an occupational caste like the Dhobas.\(^{106}\) The castes like the Karmakar, Kumbhakar, Dhoba, Napit were named after their respective occupation and this occupation served as a common bond among the members of the respective castes, at least at the initial stage of their formation. But the Kaibarttas had experienced a different process of evolution since ancient times. They were not directly associated with any particular occupation. Different groups of people, belonging to different tribes and communities, with various stages of evolution, gradually came to form this large community. Manu (who was supposed to be a Brahmana of Magadha, between the third and the fourth century A.D. by S.V. Ketkar) mentioned the Kaibarttas as a tribe near Magadha, along with other tribes, such as Nishadas, Chandalas, Lichchivis, Paundras, Karanas,


\(^{106}\) Bankim Chandra made the same mistake, in his discussion on the origin of the Chasi Kaibarttas, by comparing their origin with that of the Chasa Dhobas.
Manu (x, 34) pointed out relationship in race between the Kaibarttas and the Nishadas. N.K.Dutt, himself admitted:

The word Kaivarta or Kevarta seems to be the Sanskritized form of the word Kavatta or Kewata, which was probably the name of some aboriginal tribe, like the Nisada, Pukkasa, etc., whom the Aryans encountered in the valley of the Ganges.

So, it is evident that the Kaibarttas were neither named after any specific occupation, nor were they composed of a homogenous group. On the contrary, this vast community of the Kaibarttas represented heterogenous groups of people with different occupations. In such a situation, the argument of some scholars, like N.K. Dutt, Hitesranjan Sanyal, that they were traditionally associated with one particular occupation, i.e., fishing, finds little justification.

Besides, these scholars, in their explanation of the origin of the Chasi Kaibarttas as a dissident group, changing their occupation from fishing to cultivation, have overlooked the existence of the “Jalia” Kaibarttas. If the prefix ‘Chasi’ is taken to be an instance of dissidence of the Chasi Kaibarttas from the larger Kaibartta community, then the ‘Jalia’ Kaibarttas also should be considered as a dissident group. This point needs some elaboration.

According to Hitesranjan Sanyal, Chasa Kaibarttas were the breakaway group of the Kaibarttas, who were traditionally fishermen. The Chasa Kaibarttas had abandoned the traditional occupation of their caste and had taken to agriculture. It was due to their new occupation that the dissident Kaibarttas had acquired the prefix Chasa i.e., peasant. So, according to this line of argument, addition of a prefix by a caste group implies its dissidence and adoption of a new occupation other than the traditional occupation. Now, if we apply this same line of argument to explain the origin of the Jalia Kaibarttas, it would appear that the Jalia Kaibarttas also had

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107 S.V. Ketkar, History of Caste in India, (First Published, 1909, Reprint, Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1993). p. 68.
109 Ibid., p.199.
abandoned their traditional occupation and had taken to fishing as their new occupation, which is evident from their addition of the prefix, ‘Jalia’ and this would imply that the traditional occupation of the Kaibarttas was anything but fishing. Certainly such a conclusion runs contrary to the view that fishing was the traditional occupation of the Kaibarttas and the Chasi Kaibarttas constituted the dissident group, taking to agriculture. In fact, if the traditional occupation of the Kaibarttas was fishing, one section of the Kaibarttas should not be known as Jalia Kaibarttas because under such circumstances, the prefix, Jalia, would have been superfluous.

Here we are not as such against the above line of interpretation regarding formation of several new castes, resulting from adoption of new occupations as such but against its application to the analysis of the origin of the Chasi Kaibarttas. This line of interpretation is good enough to explain the origin of the castes like the Chasa Dhobas, Madhu Napits, Phul Napits etc., because this indicates the emergence of a different occupational section within a larger occupational group. But the Kaibarttas were not an occupational group. They were constituted of several ethno-cultural groups with different occupations. They were known since the ancient times and were distributed over vast areas of Eastern India – particularly, in Bengal, Bihar & Orissa. They were present at different strata of the society – from the kings, local chieftains, important state officials to the common people, including peasants & fishermen. Here it is not possible to identify one or two traditional occupations of different groups of the community and the dissident groups within it. So this line of interpretation could not be justifiably applicable to the interpretation of the formation of the Chasi Kaibarttas.

It seems that the Kaibarttas, went through a process of peasantization in the context of considerable expansion of agriculture in south-western Bengal. The peasantization of tribes became a common feature in the changing relations of production in early medieval Eastern India. Land grants to Brahmins and the extension of agriculture had the attendant consequence of the conversion of the autochthonous tribes into Sudra castes, a process which was carried out simultaneously along with their peasantization. The Kaibarttas must have undergone this process of peasantization, which led to the formation of the Chasi Kaibarttas.
In fact, the view that the Chasi Kaibarttas were originally fishermen in ancient times, finds little support from the economic history of Bengal. A functional caste generally develops in response to the demand for that occupation. The Chasi Kaibarttas constituted the largest agricultural caste and also the largest caste of Colonial Bengal. In a pre-dominantly agrarian economy, it could not be otherwise, except in exceptional cases. In such an economy, generally, the largest community practices agriculture and the largest agrarian community constitutes the largest community of the region. If the Chasi Kaibarttas were the break-away group of a larger fishing community (the so called Kaibarttas), we have to believe that before the emergence of this agricultural group, this fishing community was the largest community of pre-dominantly agrarian Bengal. This was hardly possible and we do not have any strong evidence contrary to this.

Risley in his ethnographic glossary observed that there seemed to be good grounds for the belief that the Kaibarttas were among the earliest inhabitants of Bengal and occupied a commanding position. Many centuries ago five separate prindedoms were said to have been founded by them in the Midnapur district, which must have been one of the earliest seats of the tribe.\footnote{H.H. Risley, *The Tribes & Castes of Bengal*, Vol. 1, (First Published, Calcutta, 1891, Reprint, Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Limited, 1998), p. 376.} Here, we may point out that this early history of the Kaibarttas of Midnapur does not support the opinion that they generally had followed a very humble profession, i.e. fishing, in early times. The same argument can be extended to other Kaibartta dominated areas in South-western Bengal.

We may say here that the Kaibarttas since the earlier times had been following several occupations and the majority of them followed agriculture, at least in the regions where they had numerical dominance and “occupied a commanding position.” The Chasi Kaibarttas, in fact appeared from this agriculturist section within the Kaibartta community, at least in the regions where they had numerical dominance. We are not sure when the formation took place. We have already noted difference of opinions among scholars regarding this issue, though it may be said that socio-economic differentiation between the Chasi and Jalia was quite discernable in the nineteenth century which was evident in the accounts of both Hunter and Risley. It can be said that there was possibility of emergence of an agrarian group from fishing community.
of the Kaibarttas in a particular region, which might have swelled the rank of the Chasi Kaibarttas. It was also possible that some agriculturists of different castes might have gained admission into the Chasi Kaibartta community but these could not be the general trend.

As an issue, however, origin of any caste group is of much debate and conjecture. In many cases, we cannot reach at any definite conclusion and the case of the Mahishyas or the Chasi Kaibarttas is of no exception. But, as stated earlier, we need to probe into this issue because this throws light on some significant aspects of the social mobility of the community at the initial stage. So far, the dominant opinion regarding the origin of the Chasi Kaibarttas, is that this community was a break-away group of the Kaibarttas, who turned themselves into agriculturists, relinquishing the traditional occupation of the Kaibarttas, i.e., fishing. This has been taken as an important aspect of the occupational mobility, leading to the formation of a new caste group – the Chasi Kaibarttas. We have already, discussed above some drawbacks in this line of argument.

We have analysed that the Kaibarttas could not be associated with a single traditional occupation. In fact, unlike the occupational castes, the Kaibarttas, being a conglomeration of different tribal groups with various occupations, did not have any single traditional occupation, but more than one, of which agriculture was followed by most of the members. As stated earlier, the association of a single occupation with a caste group is generally applicable to the occupational or functional castes, which have been formed on the basis of a specific occupation. The scholars, who are trying to identify one traditional occupation of the Kaibarttas, be it fishing or agriculture, have overlooked the difference between the Kaibarttas and the occupational castes, like the Karmakar, Kumbhakar, Dhoba, Napit etc. To Manu, the Kaivarttas were boatmen. This is probably due to the reason that the section of the Kaibarttas, known to him were boatmen, while he was ignorant of other occupations of different groups within the community. This is also true of other texts of ancient and medieval periods, where the Kaibarttas and their occupations were referred. Ignorant of large number, wide distribution and various occupations of the Kaibarttas, each of the authors tried to identify one single occupation of the community and conferred a social status according to that occupation, which was probably true of a section of the community.
only, residing in a particular region. This is probably due to this fact, various opinions (often contradictory) can be found in these texts, regarding the origin, occupation and social status of the Kaibarttas and Chasi Kaibarttas, which have confused the modern scholars.

Besides, we are not sure whether at any point of time, the Kaibarttas developed into a full-fledged caste. No doubt, it was the name of a community since ancient times and was referred to as a *jati* in the Sanskrit literature of ancient and medieval times. But it is sure that the Kaibarttas did not constitute a caste, when it was referred to in the text of Manu (which was written not later than the fourth century A.D.) The caste system started developing in Bengal in the early medieval period. So, the existence of the Kaibarttas, much earlier than the period, indicates that the Kaibarttas were not a caste, just a community, consisted of several tribal groups, at least during the ancient period. In fact, a caste did not exist by itself. It could only be “recognized in contrast to other castes with which its members are closely involved in a network of economic, political and ritual relationship.”

In fact, according to S.V. Ketkar, Manu mentioned the Kaibarttas as a tribe, along with other tribes near Magadha, such as Nishadas, Chandalas, Lichchivis, Paundras, Karanas, Khasas, etc. 113 It was likely that caste like divisions started developing within the community according to occupations of respective groups of people, when the caste system was evolving in Bengal. The formation of the castes like the Chasi Kaibarttas, Jalia Kaibarttas, Tutia Kaibarttas might have been the result of such evolution. These castes were endogamous units, with different social status, though all were generally known as Kaibarttas in the nineteenth century Bengal.

We should trace the formation of any social group in the complex background of historical evolution. The formation of the Chasi Kaibarttas is not an exception. Several agriculturist groups within the Kaibartta community, residing the vast areas of Eastern India, gradually developed into a caste – the Chasi Kaibarttas, through

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centuries of evolution, roughly on the basis of their occupation. This very fact throws important light on dynamism of such a large community of Bengal. Similarly, the Jalia Kaibarttas, as a caste, also emerged out of evolution.

As different caste groups, the Chasi Kaibarttas and Jalia Kaibarttas had different social status and caste status (samajik marjada and jati marjada), though both groups were generally known as the Kaibarttas in the pre-colonial period. In the nineteenth century the Chasi Kaibarttas or the agriculturist Kaibarttas tried on the one hand, to unite all cultivating Kaibartta groups such as Kaibartta- Das, Chasi-Das, Halia-Das, Parasar-Das etc. and on the other hand to dissociate themselves from the fishing Kaibarttas. This attempt could not be termed satisfactorily as ‘dissidence’. Commenting on the social mobility in the early decades of the twentieth century S. Bandyopadhyay has stated:

During these years, the different dissident groups, the ambitious Sahas or Chasi Kaibarttas, Tilis or Sadgops, were moving gradually further up, at least in the matter of education, than the members of their original parent castes.\textsuperscript{114}

Here Bandyopadhyay has indicated that certain groups within some castes of lower status had shown dissidence to achieve higher social status. Now, it should be pointed out so far as the Chasi Kaibarttas are concerned, there was no dissidence or distancing from the parent caste as such. In the Census of 1901, when the Chasi Kaibarttas were enumerated for the first time as a separate caste, they constituted 78.86\% of the total Kaivartta population in Bengal.\textsuperscript{115} Generally such an overwhelming majority within a community could not be termed as a dissident group but as the parent community itself.

In fact, both Hunter and Risley in their accounts on the social status of the Kaibarttas, with some exceptions, actually described the status of the Chasi Kaibarttas. Risley opined, ‘there seem to be good grounds for the belief that the Kaibarttas were among


the earliest inhabitants of Bengal and occupied a commanding position.”

Hunter wrote, “The Kaibarttas embraced Hinduism soon after the Aryans pushed themselves forward into Bengal, and succeeded in obtaining for themselves a fair rank in Hindu society.”  

Needless to say that, what both referred to, as the status of the Kaibarttas in general, was actually the status of the Chasi Kaibarttas. They pointed out the divisions within the Kaibartta community and the low social position of the Jalia Kaibarttas compared to the Chasi Kaibarttas, but took both sections as a whole, in determining the status of the Kaibarttas. Therefore, it seems that both considered the Chasi Kaibarttas to be the main body of the Kaibartta caste and determined the social status of the Kaibarttas accordingly.

The Jalia Kaibarttas also should not be considered as a dissident group because it is hard to analyse the reason for dissidence of the Jalia Kaibarttas as they in no way hoped to get a better status or economic opportunity by taking up fishing. Regarding the ‘Mala or Jele’ section of the Kaibarttas of the 24 Parganas, Hunter remarked, “…they have now formed themselves into a separate caste”.

Considering the fact that the Jalia Kaibarttas were placed at the lowest strata of the Kaibartta community, it is unlikely that they showed dissidence by forming ‘themselves into a separate caste’.  

In the Census of 1901, the Chasi Kaibarttas, Jalia Kaibarttas & unspecified Kaibarttas were enumerated separately. If we consider the Chasi and Jalia Kaibarttas were dissident groups, then the latter group should be considered as the parent caste. According to the Census statistics of 1901, the unspecified Kaibarttas constituted 10.41%, while the Chasi and Jalia Kaibarttas constituted 78.86% and 10.73% respectively, of the total Kaibartta population in Bengal. It appears improbable that the unspecified Kaibarttas with 10.41% members of the Kaibartta community comprised the parent caste, while the Chasi Kaibarttas and Jalia Kaibarttas represented the dissident groups.

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In fact the concept of dissidence from the parent caste does not adequately explain the caste mobility movement of the Chasi Kaibarttas. The formation of both Chasi Kaibarttas and Jalia Kaibarttas can be explained as segmentation of a caste, the Kaibarttas (if they constituted a caste at all), which became the basis for the emergence of both castes. Such processes of segmentation or fission, in the caste system, were going on continuously in the past, which were not necessarily the result of moving up of some ambitious dissident groups by adopting new occupations, within particular castes.

Formation of the Chasi Kaibarttas or Mahishyas was a complex process. The Mahishya leaders tried to forge a community out of a loose agglomerate of endogamous groups of the agricultural Kaibarttas, residing in various parts of Bengal, while distancing them from the other Kaibarta groups, practicing fishing or boating. This was one of the oldest caste groups of Bengal, nucleus of which was situated in the south-western part of that region (especially numerous in the districts of Hugli, Midnapur, and the 24 Parganas). This region, being one of the most fertile tracts of Eastern India, might have ensured agriculture as the profession of the main body of the community from the very beginning. At the same time, presence of so many rivers and proximity to sea also helped some sections of the community to take fishing and boating as profession. Class divisions from local powerful chiefs to common people, within the community might have developed centuries ago, as suggested by the colonial administrators, such as Hunter and Risley. We also should not forget the historical fact of the Kaibarta Revolt where Kaibarta chiefs revolted against the Pala king. However, it is not clear when the formation of a separate identity of the Chasi Kaibarttas came into being. It seemed that the formation took place centuries ago. Possibly both the cultivating and fishing groups were undergoing through the process of consolidation during the previous centuries which could explain the wide social differentiation between the Chasi Kaibarttas and the Jalia Kaibarttas as two separate castes sharing the Kaibartta nomenclature in the nineteenth century. However, it should be kept in mind that neither caste had a well defined boundary and inclusion and exclusion of groups did happen in the process of long evolution of both castes in various regions of Bengal even in the nineteenth century.

…in Central Bengal and Maldah we find the cultivating and fishing groups, variously called Halik and Jalik or Chasa and Jalwah or Jaliya, clearly
differentiated, while in Dacca there is no Chasa or Halwaha division, and the Das Kaibarttas have not yet separated into a distinct caste. … The divisons of the caste in Bakarganj are curious and interesting … There the Kaibarttas are divided into two groups – a cultivating group, known as Halia Das, Parasara Das or Chasi Kaibartta, and a fishing group, known simply as Kaibartta.  

During the census operations we have seen a number of Jalia Kaibarttas and even some non-Kaibarttas returned themselves as Chasi Kaibarttas or Mahishyas. All the cultivating groups of the Kaibarttas did not appear to be known as Chasi Kaibarttas even in the late nineteenth century. There were different names by which the cultivating groups were known, which is evident in the accounts of Hunter and Risley. It seems that initially Chasi Kaibartta was one such name adopted by some sections of the cultivating groups. We have discussed in the next chapter that even in the late nineteenth century all groups of Kaibarttas were treated in the official records as one caste, irrespective of higher position of the cultivating sections and existence of various strata among them, while analyzing socio-economic profile of the Chasi Kaibarttas or Mahishyas, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.