CHAPTER – 3

STATE, INDIGENOUS SOCIETY AND CASTE CONSCIOUSNESS IN COLONIAL BENGAL

This chapter discusses growing importance of caste in the discourses of both the British administrators and indigenous intelligentsia which influenced the perceptions of castes belonging to different strata of caste hierarchy. Caste was never less significant in the social formation and mobility in pre-colonial India. Scholars have delineated several aspects of caste mobility in Indian traditional society. We have already discussed in the previous chapters that formation of the Chasi Kaibarttas had taken place in pre-colonial times. However in the colonial period, caste came to achieve some new dimensions in the perceptions of the colonial state and the Indian intelligentsia, which in turn had some significant impact on social mobility of the castes like the Chasi Kaibarttas or Mahishyas.

CASTE AND THE COLONIAL STATE

After the establishment of the Indian Empire, the British authority felt a growing need to justify their rule over India. However, for a people steeped in the ideas of nationalism, liberalism and practising democracy at home, the attempt to justify imperial control over this vast Asian subcontinent was neither free from complexities nor contradictions. The energies and skills of nineteenth-century British scholarship were harnessed to the project of reinforcing the colonial state’s apparatus of ideological control. Ranajit Guha has opined:

It investigated, recorded and wrote up the Indian past in a vast corpus which, worked by many hands during the seventy years between Mill’s History of British India (1812) and Hunter’s Indian Empire (1881), came to constitute an entirely new kind of knowledge. ...Indian history, assimilated thereby to the history of Great Britain, would henceforth be used as a comprehensive measure of difference between the peoples of these two countries. Politically that difference was spelt out as one between rulers and the ruled; ...culturally between higher and lower levels of civilization, between the superior religion
of Christianity and indigenous belief systems made up of superstition and barbarism – all adding up an irreconcilable difference between colonizer and colonized.¹

Thomas R. Metcalf has argued that, though the British constructed few explicit ideologies of empire, it is evident from the underlying assumptions, revealed in the activities of the Raj, that two divergent strategies were devised to justify their imperial authority – one, defined essential characteristics, which the Indians shared with the British themselves, while the other, emphasized the presumed qualities of enduring ‘difference’. However, the scholar has observed that, throughout the Raj, and especially during the years of uncontested British supremacy from 1858 to 1918, the ideas that most powerfully informed British conceptions of India and its people, were those of India’s ‘difference’.² Despite their inherent contradictions, the various British notions of Indian ‘difference’ were made to fit together; and all alike, helped to define the British as a ‘superior’ race, possessing an incontestable right to rule over India’s people. And here, we can argue, ‘caste’ played a very important role, making the British notions of India’s ‘difference’ readily visible. The discourse on this social institution, became a significant constituent in ever growing colonial knowledge and a major issue of British Government’s ‘scientific’ understanding of categories meant to denote India’s ‘difference’, which resulted in foregrounding of caste as a function of its procedures of government.

The colonial government also needed detailed systematic information on socio-economic and political life of the subject people, which was not readily available to it. Colonial knowledge of Indian society started developing from 1760 onward, through direct official surveys, the acquisition of knowledge of classical and vernacular languages by some British officials, the activities of the Christian missionaries in India, etc. Bernard S. Cohn has pointed out:

Three major traditions of approach to Indian society can be seen by the end of the eighteenth century: the orientalist, the administrative and the


missionary. Each had a characteristic view, tied to the kinds of roles which foreign observers played in India and the assumptions which underlay their views of India.³

During this period, it was common for many British administrators, Western and Indian scholars to refer to Indian/Hindu society as a caste society, despite regional diversity and to consider some ‘basic attributes’ of the caste system to have an all-pervading existence in Indian/Hindu life. Religion was considered to have something to do with caste, as Europeans were careful not to deploy ‘caste’ in their descriptions of Muslim social categories in India. Sometimes it was argued that caste as a ‘system’ was the immutable core of Indian civilization since ancient times. Sometimes the presence and strength of caste as a system was correlated with the presence of ‘Brahmanical Hinduism’.

Differences among administrators appeared because the social and political conditions in which caste emerged varied across regions, and often within regions. Textual and administrative representations of caste continually changed in response to the widely varying political agenda of highly fragmented British and local populations seeking to maximize their control of property.⁴

According to Nicholas B. Dirks, it was under the British that “caste” became a single term, capable of expressing, organizing, and above all “systematizing” India’s diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization. To him, colonialism made caste, what it is today. In this sense, caste is a modern phenomenon, specifically, the product of a historical encounter between India and Western colonial rule. Colonialism produced the conditions that made caste the ‘central symbol of Indian society’.⁵

This was achieved through an identifiable (if contested) ideological canon as the result of a concrete encounter with colonial modernity during two

hundred years of British domination. In short, colonialism made caste what it is today.  

In many ways, British colonialism was responsible for both the identification and the reconstruction of Indian “tradition”. Bernard Cohn, referring to the process, has pointed out:

In the conceptual scheme, which the British created to understand and to act in India, they constantly followed the same logic; they reduced vastly complex codes and their associated meanings into a few metonyms…India was redefined by the British to be a place of rules and orders; once the British had defined to their own satisfaction what they construed as Indian rules and customs, then the Indians had to conform to these constructions. 

He has observed that though the orientalists and the missionaries differed in their assessment of Indian culture and society, they agreed on some central principles and institutions of this society. On the basis of textual study and discussions with learned Brahmans, they came to accept the Brahmanical theory of four varnas and saw the origin of castes in the intermixture through marriage of the members of the four varnas.

During the colonial rule, the people of India were defined by some basic racial and cultural identities. According to Dirks, the most important of these, by far, was caste, which was considered as the single and systematic category, constituting the Indian social order. In pre-British India, the units of social identity had been multiple, and their respective importance was subject to various constantly changing socio-economic and political forces. Caste, constituted one important category among many others, organizing and representing social identity. But under the British rule, caste became more pervasive and more uniform. The colonial organization of Indian social difference, solely in terms of caste, indicated disregard for ethnographic specificity, as well as a systematic denial of the political mechanisms that selected different kinds of

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6 Ibid., p. 5.
social units as most significant, and as most highly valorized, at different times. Brahmanic texts, both Vedic origin stories for caste and much later dharma texts of Manu, provided trans-regional and meta-historical modes of understanding of Indian society that clearly appealed to British colonial interests and attitudes.⁹

The idea that *varna* – the classification of all castes into four hierarchical orders with the Brahmans on top – could conceivably organize the social identities and relations of all Indians across the civilizational expanse of the subcontinent, was only developed under the peculiar circumstances of British colonial rule. Hierarchy, in the sense of rank or ordered difference, might have been a pervasive feature of Indian history, but hierarchy in the sense used by Dumont and others became a systematic value only under the sign of the colonial modern.¹⁰

However, Susan Bayly has not agreed that caste was essentially a colonial imaginary. She has observed that though the British played an important role in the making of a more caste-conscious social order, caste was not in any simplistic sense a creation of colonial scholar-officials, or a misperception on the part of fantasizing Western commentators. She has pointed out:

> Often, though not invariably, so-called orientalists saw Hindus as the prisoners of an inflexibly hierarchical and Brahman-centred value system. Their insistence on this point played a significant part in the making of a more caste-conscious social order. Yet this could happen only in the context of broader political and social changes which were in progress well before the onset of colonial rule… Furthermore, the continuing movement towards the caste-like ways of life… could not have occurred in so many areas without the active participation of Indians.¹¹

The British had for quite some time depended on traditional literati and religious specialists – mostly high-caste and predominantly Brahman – for information on matters of revenue, justice and the early accumulation of ‘Orientalist’ knowledge.

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These groups were considered as learned informants and commentators of the sastric texts which the Company's officers were coming to treat as authoritative sources on ‘native’ law and custom.

Such people’s concern to retain the preferment they had achieved under previous regimes gave many of them an incentive to tell the colonial state that India was a land of age-old Brahmanical values, and that its inhabitants could be most effectively controlled by feeding their supposed reverence for hierarchical jati and varna principles. ... In some cases it clearly suited both the British authorities and their informants to disseminate a picture of Indian life which disregarded its instances of comparative openness and intellectual dynamism, and emphasised instead those conventions of caste and ‘community’ which made it appear static and rigidly Brahman-centred.\(^{12}\)

However, the British strategies to comprehend India, were never simply some general way to justify colonial authority. The colonial endeavour to classify Indian society, was not driven wholly by political objectives. It was also part of the larger Enlightenment endeavour, to understand the world outside Europe, by observation and study. A relentless need to count and classify everything the British encountered, defined much Victorian intellectual activity. In the making of ‘colonial knowledge’ in general, an important dimension of genuine curiosity went along with the logic of colonial power. Andre Beteille has commented that since many of the I.C.S. ethnographers had antiquarian interests, their accounts of caste, apart from the general stress on ritual, purity, pollution, taboos, interdictions and so on, carried a certain archaic flavour.\(^{13}\)

The series of Indian district Gazetteers, the decennial all-India Census, the provincial statistical reports, the encyclopaedic Tribes and Caste surveys – all endeavours became the hallmarks of the Victorian Raj. Still, the British scholarship in India could not be separated from its role in the successful working of colonial rule. India was represented in ways that would sustain a system of colonial authority. Metcalf has observed that as the colonial sociology of India was tied to a system of power, the


British necessarily eschewed at once those categories which would announce India’s similarity to Britain and those which might threaten the colonial order.

To be sure, classificatory schemes familiar to the British at home were not entirely absent. Occupation, for instance, played an important role in the British ordering of Indian society. Nevertheless, categories meant to denote India’s difference, above all those of caste, community, and tribe, were placed at the heart of the country’s social system. Class, by contrast, which Victorian Englishmen regarded as the great divide in their own society, was nowhere to be found in British accounts of India’s peoples.14

Despite the academic value of colonial statistical and analytical documentation or ethnographic enterprise, its subordination to the needs of colonial rule cannot be denied. Sumit Sarkar has said that the British, as utterly alien rulers, needed to know something about the traditions and ‘prejudices’ of their subjects.

The power-knowledge theme is very self-consciously present in much official writing: Risley’s Tribes and Castes of Bengal (1891), for instance, claimed that an ethnographic recording of the customs of people was ‘as necessary an incident of good administration as a cadastral survey of the land and a record of rights of its tenants.15

Since the early decades of the eighteenth century, caste attracted academic interest of a greater number of European scholars, Christian missionaries and the Orientalists, resulting in varied and complex colonial constructions of caste. For the scholars of the generation of Macaulay and Trevelyan, it was an emblem of India’s degradation. The missionaries, too, in their proselytizing effort, were critical of the system. Charles Grant, who was one of the early evangelicals and served as a commercial official in Bengal from 1774 to 1790, felt that the caste system, the legal system, government and above all the despotic role of the Brahmins who controlled the society were the cause of the degraded state of the Hindus.16 The caste system being considered by them as the social base of Hinduism, the missionaries urgently needed the destruction

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of the caste system, without which “...there was little hope of diffusion of Christianity through normal channels of communication.”

Orientalist scholarly constructions of Hinduism grounded essentially in ancient sacred texts like the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*. These scholars adopted as their own the Brahmanical view of India, as a land, inhabited by peoples, whose positions were forever fixed by the four great *varna* categories. Gradually the Brahmanic caste system gained force from the textual studies of the earlier generations of Orientalists. However, the Orientalists in their interpretation of the nature and impact of caste on the Indian society, differed among themselves. The early Orientalists such as, Alexander Dow, Nathaniel Halhed, Sir William Jones, H.T. Colebrooke took the Hindu scriptures as guides to the culture and society of the Hindus and were convinced of the view, which came from these texts themselves, that the Brahman as the centre of the social order of *varnas*. They respected Sanskrit and Persian learning and in their role as judges at the courts of the East India Company, Halhed, Jones and Colebrooke tried to apply Hindu law to govern the Indians under their own law. Sacredness or exalted status of the Brahman was however, criticised by many later orientalists.

Many nineteenth-century orientalists saw both priestly and secular Brahmins as an important but also pernicious force in the society, and were far from credulous about the reliability of the pundits and other literate specialists who informed them.  

However, the importance of caste was hardly minimised in Western scholarship.

Barring the early romantic idealization of India by Orientalists such as William Jones and Max Mueller, in all other modes of re-figuration undergone by the scholarly field of Orientalism in India, from Hegel and Marx’s assignation of India to a ‘lower’ scheme of things, to James Mill’s cold Utilitarian gaze in his ‘*The History of British India* (1858), ... the

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category of caste featured as an essence in which was grounded the fundamental reasons for India’s ‘backward’, ‘static’ state.¹⁹

Marx and Engels also were influenced by the view that the Indians were so completely governed by the normative order of caste that they had no agency of their own. Marx regarded India as caste dominated fragmented society. Though he interpreted such divisions in terms of material rather than religious or ideological factors, the influence of conventional orientalist views is clear in his representation of British conquest, colonial intervention and consequent Westernization as initiating the only social revolution in India, by breaking the equilibrium that had kept the Indian village community static for centuries.

The institution of caste, however, did not possess initially any central position in the colonial understanding of the Indian society, in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, though the image of a static Oriental society, composed of various categories of caste and community, of race and sect, was being carefully built up during this period. In the early years of the colonial regime, the emphasis was on cadastral control. The colonial concern to know India began with the desire to understand local forms of landholding, property relations and agrarian structure. Vast collections of information on land revenue settlements, landownership, tenancy, agricultural production were organized for standardizing the methods of revenue collection. And the village rather than caste was more important as the natural unit for organizing the collected data. The early colonial officials like, Thomas Munro, Mark Wilks, Mountstuart Elphinstone, Charles Metcalfe wrote elaborately on the importance of villages or autonomous village communities in socio-economic and political life in rural India, not on caste as it could hardly explain the traditional system of community landholding, which they thought to be present in the village communities. Their notion of village communities tied to colonial interest in organizing revenue collection and relation of production under the new regime. The lack of British initiative in the systematization of caste in the first half of the nineteenth century can be explained by the fact that in the early years of conquest, the British were more interested in the information about India’s resources and modes of

revenue collection. The vast amounts of information on the working of Indian society, during this period, came to support the idea of Indian “difference”. But, as T.R. Metcalf has pointed out, the British notions of the character of that “difference” were not as yet clearly established, so that caste existed as no more than an ethnographic curiosity.

Insofar as it claimed any meaning for the men of the generation of Macaulay and Trevelyan it was as an emblem of India’s degradation, and as a barrier to its improvement.  

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, when the British began penetrating into the Indian countryside, direct observation became more important in the study of Indian society, which was evident in the extensive tours of Dr. Francis Buchanan through Mysore and eastern India, and of Colin Mackenzie throughout southern India. The East India Company directly supported such surveys, part of whose goal was gaining more systematic information about the subject peoples. One of the earliest and most famous of the surveys was that of Francis Buchanan.

Buchanan’s work in Bengal and Bihar was the forerunner of a continuing effort undertaken by the British in India to collect, collate, and publish for official as well as scholarly use, detailed information about all aspects – physical, cultural, and sociological – of every district in India, which reached its high peak with the Imperial Gazetteer of India, published in the early twentieth century.

Colin Mackenzie collected a large number of local texts, while engaged in cartographic and surveying activities in south India between 1784 and 1821 and played an important role in the rescuing of South India’s pre-colonial history. The activities of such officials and vast collection of information on Indian society saw the beginning of the era of ‘scientific’ understanding of India, based on detailed local knowledge. However, none of them paid much attention to the caste system, which

was later to become the major foundation of Indian ‘difference’. Both referred to caste in a haphazard and unsystematic manner. In fact, in these years, the British attitude toward caste was more guided by intellectual curiosity of the Oriental institutions. They commissioned extensive collections of drawings of various castes and peoples, which were highly idiosyncratic. Information was collected on different aspects of caste but that was not organized into a systematic explanation of this institution. The British analyzed the subject people through a variety of classificatory systems, in which occupational and caste rankings jostled with one another. Sometimes, the British institutional practices defined and recruited would-be collaborators largely according to criteria of caste and racial ascription and the heritage of blood. It has been pointed out that the influence of rigid Brahmanic theory of caste or varna had largely been confined to elite circles before, but under Company’s rule, it, as instrumentalized by the courts, penetrated deeper into the society, restructuring the relations of public worship, physical mobility, marriage, inheritance and even property ownership. The Anglo-Hindu law sketched out an immobile, status bound social order perfectly in keeping with the Company state’s dreams of Oriental despotism and European imaginings of a ‘different’ Oriental civilization.

Over the decades in different regions, the questions of caste status and practices were constantly surfacing and sometimes reached the British court for final verdict. The judiciary, though reluctant to be embroiled in such inter-caste tensions, had to arbitrate to settle them. In fact, one of the first problems faced by the colonial government, as it was settling into the task of governance, was whether it was going to step into the shoes of the ‘king’ in terms of adjudicating caste status, a practice that existed in the pre-colonial times. The Brahmanical view of the caste system was profoundly affected by the actions the Company’s law courts, which looked largely to the authority of Brahmin pundits and Sanskrit scriptural sources in analyzing the caste system, ignoring the fact that it had always been subject to multiple influences and flexible interpretations. Marc Galanter has argued that, “the British period may be seen as one in which the legal system rationalised the intricacies of local customary caste relationships in terms of classical Hindu legal concepts like varna and pollution.
To borrow and slightly distort Srinivas’ terms, we can think of the British period as a period as a period of ‘Sanskritization’ in legal notions of caste.”

By the first half of the nineteenth century, there was general recognition that caste was the foundational fact of Indian society. Thus it was fundamental both to Hinduism and to civilization in the Indian subcontinent.

While both the early colonialists histories and the accounts of the missionaries saw in the institution of caste the cause of India’s backwardness and helped fix it in some sense as the essence of Indian civilization, it was the administrative practices of the British that helped secure caste as a definitive label of identification for the Indian populace.

Through a systemic ordering of caste, the British set out to reduce to a comprehensible order what they saw as the confusing variety of India’s numerous categories of peoples. According to Bernard Cohn, for late Victorian anthropologists, a caste was a ‘thing’ – an entity, which was concrete and measurable. So these ‘things’ could be ascertained and quantified for reports and surveys. Once these ‘things’ were organized into a coherent ‘system’, this could be taken as providing a comprehensive and authoritative understanding of Indian society, which was, in this view, no more than the sum of these ‘things’, i.e., castes. However, the coherent caste ‘system’ was sometimes deceptive, as it had to accommodate kinship, tribe and at times religion as well. The colonial administrators were aware of the complexities of Indian social formations.

Widespread administrative application of caste to a limited reading of ‘Hinduism’ accompanied a relative profusion of terms to describe social categories outside of ‘caste’, of which ‘tribe, became the most prominent by the middle of the nineteenth century. ... In the administrative discourse of the nineteenth century, the distinction between caste and tribe signified the

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breach between settled and unsettled, controlled and uncontrolled, possessing and not possessing property in land.  

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the crises of early conquest and rule, began to give way to other issues of control and surveillance as administrative exigencies demanded a deeper analysis. This is so particularly in the wake of the Great Rebellion of 1857, after which the Company’s rule came to an end, and the British state assumed “direct” rule. At that time, British interest in the institution of caste intensified in some new ways.

If questions of conquest and then revenue collection dominated the formation of official knowledge in the years between Plassey and the rebellion, questions of order and the maintenance of rule took the pride of place for the next century.  

Whereas in the early part of the century, India’s feudal past and then its village communities seemed far more important than the caste system, the colonial ethnographic curiosity that flowered, especially from 1870 on, took caste as the primary object of social classification and understanding. After the Great Revolt of 1857, anxious to consolidate their imperial authority, the British sought to give their ‘scientific’ understanding of India a new dimension, which led the officials to record more social data and to subject wider range of indigenous population to formal techniques of classification and enumeration.

… the shock of the 1857 Mutiny-Rebellion drove both military and civil officials to expand and formalise their networks of control and surveillance, and to pursue the quest for social knowledge in ways which differed significantly from the practices of the Company era.  

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Victoria’s proclamation of non-interference with social customs or religious beliefs needed a new commitment to a comprehensive ethnographic knowledge of religion, custom, caste etc., to claim the loyalty of the subjects on the basis of their ‘tradition’. To Dirks, after 1857, anthropology supplanted history as the principal colonial modality of knowledge and colonial rule took on an anthropological cast of mind. By the late nineteenth century, the colonial state in India can be characterized as the ethnographic state. The ethnographic state was driven by the belief that India could be ruled using anthropological knowledge to understand and control its subjects, and to represent and legitimate its own mission. With the memory of the “Mutiny” still lively, concerns about revenue gave way to a preoccupation with social order and the maintenance of rule. To keep India, the British felt the need to know India far better than they had, and now the knowledge had to be about the society of India, not just its political economy. Thus colonial ethnology took the place that had once been held by colonial history.  

By the end of the nineteenth century, the colonial authorities were in a very different position from those of their predecessors who had involved themselves in the collection of social and statistical data. From mid-century, the wider intellectual climate affecting the colonial data-collectors underwent important changes, most notably through the worldwide elevation of ethnology – the now-discredited science of race – to the status of an authoritative discipline attracting both Western and Asian adherents from almost every branch of the physical and human sciences.

Now, in the quest for more detailed and uniform social knowledge for all of India, ethnographic inquiry got further stimulation. It may be mentioned here that at that time, the Colonial government had still meagre knowledge about the life of the common people and the indigenous sources/texts were of little help regarding the lower depths, as the upper caste literati almost ignored them. Besides, such literary evidence was also impaired by uncertainties. The second half of the nineteenth century saw the rise of modern ethnographic inquiry, which sought to gather detailed information about the lives of ordinary individuals in India. This was facilitated by the establishment of institutions such as the British Museum of Ethnography, which provided researchers with access to a vast array of artifacts and materials. The British government also funded various expeditions to collect ethnographic data, and these efforts were complemented by the work of local scholars and missionaries. As a result, a rich body of ethnographic knowledge about India was accumulated, which provided a foundation for the development of modern sociology and anthropology.


century witnessed the development of a new kind of curiosity about the forces that were shaping the Indian society and mind. Here the British scholars emphasised on the significant role played by caste. Referring to the overwhelming importance of this institution, H.H. Risley remarked:

...its influence is so widely diffused; and it forms so large part of the working consciousness of the Hindu population of India that it can hardly be left out of account merely because it has no foundation in fact. It is indeed a fact in itself, a belief which has played, and continues to play, a large part in the shaping of Indian society, and whose curious vitality throws an instructive light on the inner workings of the Indian mind.\(^{31}\)

Risley felt the need for a deeper study of caste as it would enable the government to understand the people’s perception and help it in successful administration.

To endeavour to understand the people of India, to enter into their point of view, and realize how things strike them, is the first condition of successful administration. As the work of Government becomes more complex and touches the life of the people at a greater number of points, as new interests spring up and old interests assume novel forms, the stronger is the obligation to know as much as possible of the society which our rule is insensibly but steadily modifying.\(^{32}\)

The knowledge of the Indian social world, exhibited first in the manuals and gazetteers that began to encode official local knowledge, grew extensively around the census. By the end of the nineteenth century in colonial sociology, while the eminence/centrality of caste was already announced by a number of ethnographic surveys, it was the decennial census that played the most important institutional role in establishing caste as the fundamental unit of India’s social structure.

After 1858, anxious to rule India without disrupting its traditional social institutions, the British felt the need for more accurate detailed knowledge of the local situation. Responding to this necessity, the new government, at first, tried to compile a gazetteer for Bengal, though attempts in this regard started earlier by the Company’s

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government. But the project met with little success. The Bengal Government then appointed W.W.Hunter, an officer of the Bengal Civil Service, to enquire into various aspects of rural Bengal. The outcome of this enquiry was the famous *The Annals of Rural Bengal*, first published in London on 4th April, 1868. Prof. Max Mueller hailed its publication as a mighty undertaking to write the history of a people rather than their rulers. However, *The Annals* depicted the history of a highly differentiated people in racial terms. In this book, the Bengal region was portrayed as a living ethnological battleground where caste was actually a manifestation of race war between ancient Sanskrit-speaking ‘Aryans’ and the rude ‘aboriginal races’, who were subjugated in the primitive time by the bearers of superior ‘Aryan civilization’. In the Chapter III, entitled, “The Ethnical Elements of The Lowland Population of Bengal”, Hunter observed:

We are too much accustomed to speak of India as a single country, and of its inhabitants as a single nation; but the truth is, that as regards its history, its extent, and its population, India displays the diversities rather of a continent than of a single state…Wide differences of race and creed are known to exist, but the recognition is dim and speculative, rather than practically and substantially realized. Setting aside the Mussulmans and their faith, it is generally supposed that the inhabitants of India are, and for ages have been, Hindus; that the religion of India since the beginning of history has been the Hindu religion; and that from time immemorial Indian society has been artificially divided into four classes, known as the Hindu castes. Such opinions have led to a complete misunderstanding of the Indian people, – a misunderstanding which warps our whole political dealings with India.

Coming to the racial composition of the people in Bengal, Hunter wrote in the same chapter:

The population of Lower Bengal ethnically consists of two elements: first, the Aryan invaders, almost all of whom assumed the rank of Brahmans; second, the aborigines whom these invaders found living in the land, and whom they speedily reduced to the alternative of serfdom on the open country or flight into the jungle. The great gulf between the conquerors and

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the conquered has never been bridged; and the social distinctions that
disgrace Hindu society are not distinctions between various ranks of the same
people, but distinctions between too widely diverse and long hostile races.
Manu’s fourfold classification, which we have seen is strictly predicable only
of the Sanskrit Center or Middle Land, is based upon a twofold classification
applicable to lower Bengal and every other part of India – to wit, the Aryan…
and the non-Aryan tribes. Kshatryas and Vaisyas are to be found in large
numbers only within a limited circle; but the Brahman and the Sudra, with
the mixed classes that sprang from them, form the unalterable elements of the
whole Hindu population throughout India. 34

The above observations of Hunter, one of the earliest exponents of the racial
interpretation of caste within the ICS, highlighted some important aspects of the
British understanding of the Indian society, in the second half of the nineteenth
century. Firstly, emphasis was given on wide diversities, resulted in the absence a
single nation in the subcontinent. Secondly, the religious diversity in India, was not
explained by the Hindu- Muslim divide alone. “The civilization which is popularly
supposed to have been the civilization of ancient India, and which is represented by
the Brahmanas and the Book of Manu, was in its integrity confined to the northern
country, termed by Manu the Middle Land, and now known as the North-west
Provinces and Punjab.” 35 “No one can study minutely the local monuments and
traditions of the Lower Valley (i.e., Bengal), without coming to the conviction that the
Hindu creed, as laid down in Manu and the Brahmanas, is a comparatively modern
importation from the north…” 36 Thirdly, Indian castes, “the unalterable elements of
the whole Hindu population of India”, did not emerge from Manu’s rigid and artificial
fourfold classification, but from two distinct ethnical elements – the Aryan invaders
and the non-Aryan aborigines, the conquerors and the conquered, the hostile racial
distinction between whom” has never been bridged.” Lastly, and more importantly,
the recognition of the above observations was necessary, on the part of the imperial
government, because previous opinions on these issues “have led to a complete
misunderstanding of the Indian people, – a misunderstanding which warps our whole
political dealings with India.”

34 Ibid., pp.77-78.
35 Ibid., 68.
36 Ibid., p.69.
Undoubtedly, such observations came to influence the official policy making, as more and more British civilians were putting forward the image of a sharply divided Indian society, based on caste. M.A. Sherring noted in 1880:

In Europe the Hindu race is spoken of as an integer, which although separable into parts, is nevertheless a whole containing all the parts… But it would be much more correct to regard the numerous Indian tribes and castes as so many distinct integers complete in themselves, independent and unassociated.\(^{37}\)

Five years later, Eustace J. Kitts similarly observed:

India is a land inhabited by a large diversity of people, cut apart from one another by lines other and (in one sense) deeper than those which separate one European nation from another.\(^{38}\)

The all-India census was the key instrument which pushed officials to record and publish more data on social classes, constituting Indian society by formal techniques of classification and enumeration.

Until the launching of the decennial all-India Census, it had never before officially been said that all Indians, rural and urban, elite and lowly, could or should be included in a single master exercise of tabulation which would identify every adult individual by both ‘religion’ and caste or so called tribal ‘community’, as well as by occupation, age and sex.\(^{39}\)

Obviously, all the data collecting by the administration meant to understand Indian society as it was, not to change it. However, with massive scientific and administrative apparatus and the way in which it was done, the census operations had unprecedented impact on the social realities. By the time of the first decennial all-India Census of 1872, caste had become the primary subject of social classification


and ethnographic knowledge. Although the village remained as an important aspect of Indian social life, it came to be analyzed more as a setting for caste relations than the primary building block of the Indian Society. Between 1875 and 1877 the famous series of books, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, were published under the general supervision of W.W. Hunter. The series, comprised of twenty volumes, contained important statistical data, based mainly on the 1872 census and description of socio-economic life in all the districts of Bengal. The section on ‘The People’ elaborated ethnical divisions of the people, socio-economic status of the castes found in respective districts.

However, caste categories, which came to be used in the census, were determined after considerable experimentation because it was difficult to find out the principles through which these categories could be standardized on an all India basis. In order to understand caste related data, classifications were needed to be developed. The most famous caste classification was made by H.H. Risley, who opined that due to various processes of conversion of tribes into castes and a variety of complex social influences, a number of types or varieties of caste had been formed – the tribal type, the functional or occupational type, the sectarian type, castes formed by crossing, castes of the national type, castes formed by migration, and castes formed by changes of custom.\(^{40}\)

The colonial rulers, by the late-nineteenth-century, started a systematic attempt to make a detailed survey of Indian castes. Unlike the early orientalists, the administrators-ethnographers, at that time, did not think the Brahmanical texts to be the best documents to trace the history of caste. Ibbetson saw tribal origins, while Nesfield emphasised on occupation, as the major impetus to the formation of castes. Hutton and Risley argued for a racial origin of caste, using recently developed anthropological knowledge of the West. By the end of the century, the developing academic field of anthropology had become quite influential in the writings of scholars-officials in India. In their effort to collect more ethnological data, the colonial government showed interest in separate ethnological surveys, side by side with the census operations. In 1885, the Government of India decided to undertake a

comprehensive field survey for precise information about the way of life of the tribes, castes, sub-castes of the country for better administration and ethnographic research. H.H.Risley of the ICS – who was ‘the Empire’s leading proponent of ethnology from the 1890’s until his death in 1911’\textsuperscript{41} was charged with Eastern India or the-then Bengal. Risley, like Hunter, contributed significantly to the racial understanding of caste and was widely known for his scheme of hierarchical classification of Indians into seven racial ‘types’, with the ‘primitive’ dark-skinned ‘Dravidians’ at one end and the most ethnologically ‘advanced’ fair ‘Indo-Aryans’ on the other. A number of British scholar-officials at that time, in fact, were influenced by the French race theorist Topinard and his European followers and interpreted caste in terms of biologically determined race essences. Many of the influential compilations of Indian ethnographic data, during this time, were shaped this perspective. Risley, one of the most influential colonial bureaucrats interested in ethnological studies in India claimed caste to be the real factor which gave order to the society. After six years of intensive study and survey, conducted by Risley, the famous ethnographic glossary, \textit{The Tribes and Castes of Bengal} was published in 1891. Regarding the objectives of the study, Risley opined in the Introductory Essay of the publication:

\begin{quote}
It was understood, therefore, from the first that the objects to be aimed at in the enquiry were partly scientific and partly administrative. From the standpoint of the modern science of anthropology, it was hoped that it might be possible, by careful observation and record of the social practices now prevailing in Bengal, to arrive at fresh data throwing light on the ethnological problems which scientific men, such as Sir John Lubbock, Sir Henry Maine…, have discussed in Europe. … From the administrative point of view, …, an ethnographic survey of Bengal, and a record of the customs of the people, is as necessary an incident of good administration as a cadastral survey of the land and a record of the rights of its tenants. The census provides the necessary statistics. It remains to bring out the facts, which lie behind the statistics. The relations of different castes to the land, their privileges in respect of rent, their relations to trade, their social status, their
\end{quote}

internal organization, their rules as to marriage and divorce, -- all these are matters intimately concerned with practical administration.\(^42\)

He was quite clear about the administrative and scientific utility of the study. Risley was the most vocal proponent of using anthropometric measurement of heads and noses in conducting the ethnographic survey of India.

In Europe anthropometry has to confess itself hindered, if not baffled, by the constant intermixture of races which tends to obscure and confuse the data arrived at by measurement. In a country where such intermixture is to a large extent eliminated, there are grounds for believing that divergent types would reveal themselves more clearly, and that their characteristics would furnish some clue to their original race affinities.\(^43\)

Risley’s arguments showed an extreme form of biological racism, grounding caste distinctions in an Aryan-non-Aryan racial distinction, which was supposed to be proved by the physical (anthropometrical) measurement, particularly, the nasal index which was “accepted by all anthropologists as one of the best tests of racial affinity.”\(^44\) In the all-India Census Report of 1901, Risley, as the Census Commissioner, wrote about “the curiously close correspondence between the gradation of racial type indicated by the nasal index and certain of the social data ascertained by independent inquiry.”\(^45\) He elaborated:

If we take a series of castes in Bengal, Bihar, the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, or Madras, and arrange them in the order of the average nasal index, so that the caste with the finest nose shall be at the top, and that with the coarsest at the bottom of the list, it will be found that this order substantially corresponds with the accepted order of social precedence. ...Thus, for those parts of India, where there is an appreciable strain of Dravidian blood, it is scarcely a paradox to lay down as a law of the caste


organization that the social status of the members of a particular group varies in inverse ratio to the mean relative width of their noses.\textsuperscript{46}

However, Risley’s assumptions and anthropometric methods based on race, colour, physical measurements, etc., served other purposes of the Empire, as well. His ethnographical accounts of Bengal depicted a picture of highly differentiated people owing to the caste system. In his perception:

Looked at merely as a scientific experiment, an anthropometric examination of even a small fraction of the people of India promised to yield results of no ordinary interest. Nowhere else in the world do we find the population of a large continent broken up into an infinite number of mutually exclusive aggregates, the members of which are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside of the group to which they themselves belong. …we may perhaps venture to compare the social gradations of the Indian caste system to a series of geological deposits.\textsuperscript{47}

This kind of racism, found in the writings of scholars such as Hunter and Risley was different from earlier ethnocentric attitudes of James Mill or Macaulay. According to Sumit Sarkar, the Orientalism of late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries does not entirely fit with the more aggressive subsequent varieties of European racism in the late-colonial era. He has contended:

It may be helpful …to distinguish between the Macaulay-Mill (as well as missionary) variety of cultural ethnocentrism or racism, which assumed the superiority of one or other set of Western values, and subsequent varieties of biological racism. The Macaulay-Mill views visualized the gradual spread of supposedly superior white values among non-white peoples through processes such as Christian conversion, Western education, and modernizing reform which would eventually eradicate cultural differences between races. These perspectives stood in sharp contrast with the more blatant biological racism during the high noon of European imperialism. Racism of the second kind came to be buttressed by selective appropriations of Darwin which were then deployed to create a dominant assumption – the eternal inferiority of

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 498.

‘lesser breeds’. This variety of racism was interested not in imposing ‘modern’ institutions and values, nor ‘Enlightenment rationality’, but in shoring up what it considered ‘traditional’ in Indian society.\textsuperscript{48}

Such a perception of the subject people undoubtedly influenced colonial policy planning. It is true that some of the more perceptive colonial commentators were far from simplistic in their analysis of operation or importance of caste at different levels indigenous society and the influential scholar-officials like Denzil Ibbetson, E.A.H. Blunt, John C. Nesfield, who believed in the occupational and material basis of caste, differed profoundly from those like Risley. Mr. Nesfield, in his \textit{Brief view of the Caste System in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh}, wrote that the bond of sympathy or interest which first drew together the families or tribal fragments of which a caste was composed, and bound them into a new social unit, was not, as some writers have alleged, community of creed or community of kinship, but community of function. To him, function was the foundation upon which the whole caste system of India was built up.\textsuperscript{49} Mr. Crooke, employed in North-Western Provinces and Oudh and Mr. O’Donnell in Bengal expressed similar views. Mr. Crooke in \textit{The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh} commented:

\begin{quote}
We have thus, mainly on the evidence of anthropometry, endeavoured to establish the fact that, as we find the existing population, the theory of the ethnological basis of caste must to a great extent be abandoned. We have, then, to search for some other solution of the question of the origin of our present castes. This can only be found in community of function or occupation. (p. cxxxix)\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

Denzil Ibbetson in his portrayal of caste in the Punjab, also thought that caste differentials were based on distinctions of occupation, individual achievement and political resources, rather than concepts of higher or lower ‘types’ and ‘races’.\textsuperscript{51}


\textsuperscript{51} Susan Bayly, \textit{The New Cambridge History of India, IV.3, Caste, Society and politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age}, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 142-143.
Ibbetson, in his Report on the Punjab Census (1881), far from generalizing about whole of India as a uniform ‘caste society’, emphasised on diversity and historicity in the making of caste and viewed Brahmanical standards of rank and hierarchy as a marginal feature of the regional society of Punjab. According to Susan Bayly, he saw caste ideologies as having come to be manifested in highly varied ways in different regional settings, insisting on the dynamic and fluid nature of caste, and giving much emphasis to material and political factors in the shaping of these different versions of jati and varna. In this material or economic understanding of caste society, Ibbetson and his fellow believers represented another significant strand in the thinking of Western social theorists. While this divergence suggests that the British colonial presence in India was hardly monolithic, in their studies also the picture of a differentiated people hardly changed. Besides, racial understanding of caste never lost importance in colonial discourse, which was manifest in the Ethnographical reports in the Census of India of 1931. “...while rejecting Risley’s crude differentiation between descendants of ‘pure’ Aryan invaders and ‘aboriginal’ Dravidians, J.H. Hutton and his collaborator B.S. Guha of the Indian Zoological Survey tried to use this Census to reaffirm the value of race science, using elaborate anthropometric techniques to create what they saw as a definitive analysis of India’s ‘racial constitution’. However, Hutton, the last of the British ethnographers-census commissioners, like W. Crooke and others earlier, came out for more eclectic theories of origins of caste. He provided an inclusive list of fourteen “...more obvious factors which have been indicated as probably contributing to the emergence and development of the caste system.”. His list included, apart from clash of races, colour prejudice, and conquest, the other factors like, the geographical isolation, deliberate economic and administrative policies, exploitation by a highly intelligent but by no means entirely altruistic hierarchy etc.

Despite difference in opinions, among the British officials and ethnographers, regarding the essential characteristics of caste, there was a general agreement on the centrality of caste as an organizing principle for Indian society – a society which was

52 Ibid., p.139.
53 Ibid., p. 143.
no more than a conglomeration of myriad units, cemented by caste. Because castes were sharply demarcated from each other, it was thought that, caste would stand in the way of nationalist mobilization, claiming primordial loyalty from its members. Scholars like, Risley certainly were in no doubt about the political implications of a racially based caste system. The persistence of fragmented ethnic identities at the heart of Indian society, in the view of most British ethnographers, prevented any effective unity amongst the country’s peoples. In this vision, British presence in India was needed for the foreseeable future to provide unity and leadership. Thus the British notion of caste became a major foundation of their idea of Indian ‘difference’ which in turn, provided the justification for imperial rule over India.

Susan Bayly has pointed out that in many instances, the ‘colonial’ knowledge is “richer and more nuanced than is sometimes thought.” She has argued:

It is certainly not a case fabricated ethnographic findings being somehow imposed on Indians in ways that then made them change their values or everyday actions.55

It is true that British administrative and ethnographic accounts provided significant comprehensive information on the social world of the common people in India, – their origin, culture, social institutions, religious beliefs, condition of women etc., which was not readily available earlier. Such information was beneficial in number of ways and the government took some positive measures to ameliorate the material condition of the common people. But this was not the sole purpose of these accounts. The scholars like B.S. Cohn, C.A. Bayly, N.B. Dirks, have shown the tendency of the colonial state to use caste for certain purposes. The colonial government had, in fact, sponsored these ethnographical investigations for specific political purposes. It urgently needed a better knowledge about the internal divisions of Indian society, so that it could identify its collaborators among the Indians themselves, in an era of growing opposition to the imperial rule. The classification and categorization of Indian society in official surveys, helped the colonial rulers in their notions of inner cleavages of the subject people. The tradition of official studies that had started with Dr. Francis Buchanan’s survey of Bengal and Bihar or Colin Mackenzie’s survey of

various parts of southern India in the early nineteenth century, therefore, developed further through the decennial census reports and the publications of the administrators-ethnographers. Here, among the important contributors, were Colonel Edward T. Dalton, M.A. Sherring in the mid–nineteenth century, James Wise, W.W. Hunter and H.H. Risley in the late nineteenth century and L.S.S. O’Malley, J.H. Hutton and Blunt in the early twentieth century. Sekhar Bandopadhyay has aptly pointed out that, the official studies on caste, it is true, reflected anthropological interest and theories of the period and the anthropometric data, which were collected, were partly to satisfy such purely academic interest. But the fact that, all these studies, in the second half of the nineteenth century were sponsored by the government, indicates non-academic motives as well.

In India, the imperatives of an empire facing resistance, forced upon the ethnographers new responsibilities, i.e., to determine the structure and identify the polarity of subject society which had to be used to popularise the colonial regime. The ethnographers were, therefore, in great demand. They had to dissect, disaggregate and thus determine the structure of the subject society and at the same time provide an exhaustive as well as intelligible (to the foreign rulers) account of its customs and belief-systems.56

Sumit Sarkar has argued:

With the advance of anti-colonial nationalist movements that sought to ground themselves in notions of Indian patriotism and equal citizenship, there also grew the colonial need to play off, against one another, varied kinds of alternative community identities: of religion, caste identity, language, region, or class.57

The colonial ethnographers, no doubt, endeavoured to meet this imperial need. Thus between the late eighteenth and the early twentieth century, the British Orientalists, civilian ethnographers and census superintendents had managed to establish and regularise what Bernard S. Cohn has called “a discourse of differentiation”. Here we may point out that, the British were very much aware that not all of India was in the

grip of caste and in many government reports, the social organization of tribes and nomads which was quite different from that of caste, was elaborately documented. That, the tribes were different social entities from that of caste, was obvious to the colonial officials is evident in their naming of the books, such as *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* by Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bombay* by R. E. Enthoven, *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, by R.V. Russel, etc. Moreover, all British commentators did not subscribe to the simplistic view of a homogenous, rigid caste society based on racial difference and differed from one another in their interpretation of caste. In their emphasis on diversity and historicity of regional caste societies, the scholars such as Ibbetson, Crooke, Blunt, Nesfield, anticipated some of the modern caste theories. However, some general trends in the Western scholarship on caste, can be identified. For the colonial rulers, the hierarchical ordering of Indian society was the ‘other’ of the Western society, which was based on the idea of equality among individuals. Such theorization of Indian social order was not merely an academic exercise.

The famous contemporary Indian sociologist G. S. Ghurye remarked in 1932:

> It is difficult to see any valid public reason for this elaborate treatment of caste in the Census Report. The Government have never avowed their intention of helping every caste to retain its numbers and prosperity. ...Not even the declared policy of the Provincial Governments to provide special representation either by election or nomination to certain classes of people necessitates an enumeration of the people by their castes. For this representation is not dependent on numbers. It is not proportional. ...The conclusion is unavoidable that the intellectual curiosity of some of the early officials is mostly responsible for the treatment of caste given to it in the Census, which has become progressively elaborate in each successive Census since 1872. The total result has been a livening up of the caste-spirit.\(^{58}\)

With the systemization of caste difference as more or less immutable, the importance of caste, (side by side with religion) as a potential divisive force in Indian society, was being gradually perceived by the colonial Government, in the second half of the nineteenth century. To them, the security of the colonial regime came to be associated

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with the persistence of division in Indian society. Many British officials were convinced that caste would prevent nationalist mobilization claiming primordial loyalty from its members. To resist any possible Indian unity against the Raj, caste, along the religion, was considered to be an effective tool by many British officials. Hindu society was stereotyped as a permanently stratified one with a central/significant dichotomy between the privileged higher castes at the one end and the depressed lower castes and the untouchables at the other.

This perception gradually began to influence colonial policy planning. As the nationalists, mostly belonging to the high castes, started questioning the legitimacy of the imperial rule by the end of the nineteenth century, the British government sought to get closer to the ‘depressed classes’, later called the ‘scheduled castes’, through the policy of ‘protective discrimination’, that sought to grant special favour to the backward classes in matters of education, employment and constitutional rights. Of course, the philanthropic motive of redressing the existing social-economic imbalances was present in this policy, but political implications of such a policy were also no less prominent. This policy of patronage, partly sought to draw the attention of the larger section of the Hindu community from the rising waves of the nationalist movement. Thus in the colonial perception, in addition to religion, caste also became a politically relevant category. Caste was transformed into an interest group, a rallying symbol for the political mobilization of a large section of the Hindu community, as caste status determined the nature of entitlement to government patronage. The already existing schism between the upper and lower strata of our caste system was reinforced and taken advantage of, by the colonial government, in order to encourage the development of a separate lower caste politics, which would weaken the nationalist struggle and provide legitimacy to the Raj, in the same way as Muslim separatism. G. S. Ghurye was among the first contemporary Indian intellectuals to criticize the racial interpretation of caste and to visualize its political implications. As he pointed out, the theory of racial origins of caste provided the basis for the idea of Brahmns as the descendants of Aryan invaders and fed the political processes of the non-Brahmin movements, with an erroneous racial justification in southern and western India.

Perhaps the first explicit treatment of the anthropological politics of British colonial sociology in India can be found in the work of the eminent
sociologist G.S. Ghurye. In his *Caste and Race in India*, first publishrd in 1932, Ghurye took up Risley’s theory of race, as well as his use of anthropometric methods and data. Ghurye was ...determined that only in the Punjab and parts of the United Provinces was there a possible correlation between race and caste, in which Brahmins betrayed physiognomic indications of their hereditary connection to the ‘Aryan’ invaders of the subcontinent. Everywhere else, and for all other groups, general miscegenation had eroded any racial distinctiveness in caste.\(^5^9\)

Ghurye was directly critical of government policies of reserved representation for the non-Brahmin castes, as hampering the creation of the feeling of the national community:

> Reserved representation is thus not necessary. Nay, it is harmful in so far as it tends to perpetuate the distinction based on birth. ...To harp on the caste-differences and to allow special representation is to set at naught the fundamental condition for the rise of community feeling.\(^6^0\)

Though, Orientalist scholars, missionaries and British administrators differed widely in their approaches to caste, they generally believed that this institution was fundamental to ‘traditional’ India, making it ‘different’ from the ‘modern’ west. Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, the caste system, as interpreted by the British ethnographers, anthropologists and other commentators, came to serve two important purposes of the Raj. On the one hand, caste, being a major element of India’s ‘difference’, helped in the British endeavour to legitimate their rule over India and on the other, as the colonial administrators or scholar-officials, sometimes ‘discovered’ a central contradiction in racial terms, between the ‘high’ castes and the ‘depressed classes’ or wide socio-economic differentiation in these groups, caste came to be looked upon by the British government as a potentially divisive force in Indian society, along with religion. Sumit Sarkar has opined that British officials often showed considerable awareness that their pursuit of empirical knowledge through statistics and classification was fundamentally political, and did not so much reflect


ground realities as help to reshape them through the ordering devices that they tried to impose on refractory human material.\textsuperscript{61} Consequently, the imperial government acted according to this perception, when political developments necessitated a concrete caste policy, in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Both the colonial discourse on caste, in which most pre-colonial social and cultural practices were recast, framed and contained within a colonial taxonomic apparatus and colonial policies on the basis of it, had in multiple ways influenced social mobility castes all over India.

... census operations from the 1870s insisted on firm definitions and boundaries. This transition to enumerated communities quickly became productive of acute rivalry between groups now being imagined in increasingly homogenized terms.\textsuperscript{62}

The nationalist, mainly upper caste advocates of national/Hindu unity and the leaders of caste movements sometimes reacted to such colonial policies and discourses in divergent ways. The caste movements were gaining strength at a time when there was an urgent need to form a cohesive nationalist unity and mobilize masses through the anti-colonial agitation and the caste assertions were generally considered ‘divisive’ in nationalist circles.

\textbf{PERCEPTIONS OF CASTE IN THE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY BENGALI SOCIETY}

The colonial discourse on caste is neither monolithic nor all-pervasive, as far as its impact on the indigenous intelligentsia is concerned. The latter were decidedly not mere recipients of Western ideas or speculations of British scholar-officials on caste. The colonial perception itself was built up both on the basis of Western anthropological concepts and indigenous knowledge of a native society at various levels, which sometimes resulted in contradictions in how census officials understood the caste system as an empirical reality. The officials like, Risley, Ibbetson, Nesfield were never unanimous on its essential features. The census officers of particular

\textsuperscript{61} Sumit Sarkar, \textit{Modern Times: India 1880s -1950s, Environment, Economy, Culture}, (Ranikhet: Permanet Black, 2014), p. 34.

provinces often tried to add to the existing knowledge. B. C. Allen, the Superintendent of Census operations in Assam in 1901, in his report commented:

No less than 83 per cent of the persons shown in the Assam scheme of precedence are members of undoubted race castes, and it is by no means certain whether all the remainder are functional. In Assam Proper, in fact, the whole of the Hindu social system is very different from that found in Bengal. Caste has been said to be a generic term, usually referring to traditional occupation, which links together a large and heterogeneous group of sub-castes, the members of which cannot intermarry, and do not usually eat together, the whole organization being one of extreme complexity, and including a large number of connubial groupings; but this description would hardly apply to the Valley of the Brahmaputra. I have already shown that in Assam Proper caste as a rule is racial and not functional, and in matters of matrimonial we also find that what holds good of other parts of India is not applicable here.63

The census enumerators sometimes tended to go by their own understanding and sometimes to seek opinion of the indigenous intelligentsia on certain questions, related to this institution and thus the colonial discourses also absorbed significant inputs from the Hindu scriptures, while understanding the ideological depths of caste. The Indian intelligentsia though with varied interests and inclinations, generally belonged to the upper castes and hardly doubted the analysis of development of caste provided by the sacerdotal texts. In the 1881 census, the Sanskrit scholar Rajendra Lal Mitra was consulted in the caste matters by the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, who made Mitra the arbiter of the social position of various castes. Mitra, in turn, argued that caste questions should be settled by the census authorities by following the textbooks of the Hindus, and not by conceding particular claims on their own.

Rajendra Lal Mitra based his scheme on what he termed ‘Hindu ideas’ of classification. He felt it was not the responsibility of the census to deal with claims for higher social positions, such as were put forward by the Vaidyas of Burdwan, the Subarnabaniks and the Kayasthas. ‘Its [the census’] duty is

clearly to follow the textbooks of the Hindus and not to decide on particular claims.\textsuperscript{64}

Dependence on such normative texts, obviously favoured the Brahmanical view, obscuring empirical understanding.

A view of Indian society which was derived from the study of texts and cooperation with Pundits and \textit{Sastris} (scholars of Hindu scriptures) had several consequences. In the first instance it led to a consistent view that the Brahmans were the dominant group in the society. This was the function of the view which came from the texts themselves – a view which sees the Brahman as the centre of the social order... The acceptance of this view is all the more odd in that it flew in the face of the evidence of the political structure of the late-eighteenth-and early nineteenth-century India, in which there were few Brahman dynasties, and political military power rested in the hands of other groups in the society.\textsuperscript{65}

The intelligentsia, though emphasised on normative texts, differed among themselves, as to the questions of origins or social precedence of castes. Sometimes, the intelligentsia as representatives of certain social groups were keen on creating genealogies and mythical-historical accounts of their respective castes. In 1901, Risley in drawing up list of castes, ordered on the basis of social precedence, sought help of a large number of educated Indian correspondents/informants, who cited sacred texts, legends or referred to the opinions of Sanskrit scholars to support their positions, but failed to come out with a unanimous list. In this respect, E. A. Gait, the Census Superintendent of Bengal in 1901, commented:

The nominal decision in caste matters rests with the colleges of pandits at Nabadvip and Benares, but it is doubtful if, in practice, it would be accepted by anyone who was adversely affected by it. Moreover, the pandits look to the old \textit{Shastras} and take no account of changes that have taken place, owing to the great progress made in recent years by some castes, whose nominal position is a low one, but whose wealth, education and influence are such as to place them in practice on a much higher level than that assigned to them in

\textsuperscript{64} Bernard S. Cohn, \textit{An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays}, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 245.

\textsuperscript{65} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 142-143.
the old religious books. ...The test laid down by the Census Commissioner (Risley) for fixing the scale of social precedence is not the rank assigned by the pedantry of pundits, but “Hindu public opinion at the present day.” It is very difficult to say precisely what constitutes Hindu public opinion. The Hindus as a body are strangely indifferent to the circumstances of castes that do not clash with their own.\textsuperscript{66}

The colonial knowledge was a result of an intricate process of interaction between the colonizers and the colonized, in which the Indian intelligentsia participated actively and the knowledge evolved through a constant adjustment between Western and Indian knowledge systems. Though the official classification and enumeration sometimes helped to mould social realities, colonial-Western cultural hegemony, was not homogenous, abstracted from internal tensions and not so irresistible, making the indigenous intelligentsia only capable of ‘derivative discourses’. Pre-colonial India, with its very long traditions of written culture produced numerous texts directly and indirectly referring to origin, evolution and features of caste in different regions. Apart from the histories of castes, there were Puranic dynastic chronicles and lists of kings, mythical and historical, accounts of religious sects and saints, genealogies (Kulajis) of prominent families, etc. which threw light on this institution. In its long history, caste distinctions had been questioned and the social disabilities inherent in caste distinction of certain kinds were not widely accepted as desirable. But caste in pre-colonial period developed certain characteristics in making a sense of obligation that the individual carried towards the group into which he was born and in ranking of such groups as superior and inferior. Andre Beteille has pointed out,

There were continuous fluctuations in the force and significance of caste, and it was not the inflexible, invariant and unchanging system it has often been made out to be. Nevertheless and despite these fluctuations, it retained for many centuries a very distinctive character. There is no other way to account for the correspondence between representations of caste in the ethnographic record of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries, and in the record of classical Indology.\textsuperscript{67}


The European scholars sought for basic principles of caste society in religious texts. Despite fundamental differences in their assessment of Indian culture and society, the orientalists and the missionaries agreed that religious ideas and practices underlay the entire Hindu social structure, where the Brahman exercised primacy as the maintainer of the sacred tradition. In James Mill’s view also, caste was a product of Brahmanism or priest-craft which was responsible for social depravity inherent in this institution. Mill, who believed in Utilitarian principles and wrote one of the first historical accounts of India—*The History of British India* in eight volumes—in the early decades of the nineteenth century, was opposed to many views of the orientalists such as Sir William Jones.

Despite his virulent critique of the Orientalists, on the subject of caste he completely conceded their authority, though he maintained a missionary-like disdain for the institution. Like most colonial commentators in the early nineteenth century, Mill’s view of caste derived from Jones’s 1794 published translation of *The Laws of Manu (Manu Dharma Sastras).*

The influence of the orientalists, in colonial discourse faded away after the early decades of the nineteenth century, due to the missionary and the Anglicist critique and development of new empirical administrative knowledge. Nevertheless, their textual understanding of Indian society continued to provide one important basis on which empirical observations and analysis would be made.

In the colonial period, partially due to contribution of European Orientalist scholars, and Sanskrit educated Indian intelligentsia, the influence of ancient Brahmanical Sacred texts, the Hindu scriptures of medieval Bengal and of notions of *varna* hierarchy had been extended and deepened by wider dissemination through translation and print. Such texts had profound impact on Bengali intelligentsia, though it remains undeniable that the Western/British scholarship, such as that of Sir William Jones, Max Mueller and certain structural features of colonial rule, such as law and the census, added new dimensions in their conceptualization of caste.

As in the colonial sociology, caste also featured more prominently in the intellectual climate of Bengali society of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century, due to

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68 Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India,* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2006), p.34.
certain developments both in the government policies and ideologies or aspirations of varied sections of indigenous intelligentsia. Beteille has observed:

Since the Indian intelligentsia is today most troubled about the hierarchical distinctions of caste, it needs to be emphasised that in the past and up to the middle of the nineteenth century, those distinctions were at least among the Hindus, acknowledged, upheld and reinforced by law, religion and morality. Things began to change thereafter, as a result of the British presence as well as the Indian response to it. It would be seriously to misrepresent the dialectics of that change if we were to attribute it solely to the colonial intervention and ignore the nationalist response to it.69

This period witnessed attempts on the part of upper caste intelligentsia to view caste and nationhood as intersecting concerns and to handle the questions of caste in the interest of unifying projects Indian nationalism. The middle and lower caste leaders while expressing their socio-political aspirations and grievances against their present caste status were not unresponsive to the concerns of nationhood. These caste movements which utilised certain aspects of colonial ideologies and the state policies in their favour, often participated in general political and social movements. The recent researches of the scholars like Sumit Sarkar, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay have emphasised on the caste politics in Bengal, which was often critical of upper caste dominated nationalist ideologies and politics, though there was no neat binary disjunctions. In such a context, we need to explore the factors which made the questions of caste such an important theme and facilitated caste mobility movements, such as that of the Mahishyas.

Establishment of the British rule in Bengal had little disruptive impact on the pre-existing solidarities of religion and caste. The internally differentiated, hierarchized structures of communities of the pre-colonial times remained more or less undisturbed. During late-medieval times, some anti-caste sects did emerge but most of these sects “... were probably absorbed into the local hierarchies as new jatis with special beliefs and practices.”70 The nineteenth century Western-educated Bengali or


the Indian intelligentsia in general, mostly belonging to the upper castes, viewed caste and debated among themselves, generally in the context of emerging conceptions of Indian unity. Many of them did not subscribe to the orientalist view that saw caste as an immoral institution, preventing Indians from achieving nationhood. Referring to this controversy Susan Bayly has written:

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, controversies about whether caste was a degenerate social evil or an embodiment of progressive spirituality and nationhood were pursued both in the liberal Anglophone journals, especially the *Indian Social Reformer*, and in pronouncements by defenders of ‘orthodox’ Hindu tradition. Those who involved themselves in these debates included such major sage-polemicists as Swami Dayananda Saraswati, ...and Swami Vivekananda... Many other important social and political activists took part as well, most notably M.G. Ranade and other leaders of India’s most influential pre-First World War ‘reformist’ voluntary association, the National Social Conference.\(^71\)

In Bengal, the Brahmanical domination and caste hierarchy were questioned in the educated middle-class circles. However, caste discrimination did not attract major social reform initiatives, which gave more emphasis to women’s question or gender injustice in the context of upper-caste beliefs and practices. This was partly due to preponderance of upper-caste members in such circles and partly, to the colonial context. Sumit Sarkar has opined:

Caste was critiqued in such circles primarily for contributing to disunion, as a hindrance to process of gradual unification of the Indian people thought to be in progress under a fundamentally ‘provindential’, modernizing British rule. The social injustice argument, while not absent, remained secondary.\(^72\)

This is evident in the social thinking of Rammohun Roy, a pioneer of social reform movement in India and some other Brahmo leaders, who at least theoretically condemned caste discrimination or injustice. Denouncing the caste system Rammohun wrote in a letter dated 18 January 1828, to a friend:


... I regret to say that the present system of religion adhered to by the Hindus is not well calculated to promote their political interest. The distinction of castes, introducing innumerable divisions and sub-divisions among them, has entirely deprived them of patriotic feeling, and the multitude of religious rites and ceremonies and the laws of purification have totally disqualified them from undertaking any difficult enterprise ... It is, I think necessary that some change should take place in their religion, at least for the sake of their political advantage and social comfort.  

However, Rammohun and his close associate Dwarakanath Tagore did not oppose caste restrictions in their personal life. Debendranath Tagore, though gave consent to inter-caste marriage among the Brahmos, was too orthodox in his attitude to support giving up the Brahmanical sacred thread and this was one of the major issues on which he differed with Keshab Chandra Sen and his followers. The Brahmo rejection of caste was more evident in the activities of Brahmo leaders like, Keshab Chandra Sen and Sibnath Sastri. Some Brahmos of Brahmin descent publicly discarded their sacred thread and caste restrictions in the matters of administration of the Brahmo Samaj were relaxed. Keshab took caste primarily as a Hindu religious institution and talked of reforming the established religion to do away with caste oppression. Amiya P. Sen has argued:

For Rammohan as well as for Keshab, caste was a religious institution and the mitigation of caste oppression therefore required inroads into established religion. In some ways, Keshab only reinforced Rammohan’s position when he argued that a spiritual emancipation had to precede an intellectual and material reformation, and that caste hierarchies would go once the Hindus ceased to be idolatrous and discontinued worshipping multiple gods and goddesses.

However, first elaborate Brahmo critique of caste appeared in a lecture in Calcutta, by Sibnath Sastri, entitled Jatibhed in 1884 (1291 B.S.), which was published in the same year by the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj. In this lecture, Sibnath Sastri made an


analysis of formation of four varnas in the Vedic period by division within the ‘Aryan’ society and subordination of ‘non-Aryans’ and its degeneration in later times. He strongly criticized sastric injunctions, especially Manu’s diatribes against the Sudras, who were burdened with numerous disabilities. Pointing out the disastrous impact of caste discrimination on society, he said that he hated the caste system as it was based on total injustice or adharma. Criticizing the evils of contemporary caste discrimination or jatibheda, he emphasised on the political consequences of divisiveness and lack of fraternal feeling among the social groups in India, resulting from such discrimination. According to him, this lack of unity was responsible for loss of India’s freedom.\(^75\) He also said that caste restrictions were responsible for our poverty, lack of physical and mental strength and this institution stood as a strong barrier to socio-economic and political progress of this country.\(^76\) Here also the harmful effects of caste rules on national integration were referred to. He concluded the lecture by saying that this system was a thorn on the way of progress and the enemy of the country (unnatir kantak o desher shatru).\(^77\)

However, “...Brahmo leaders like Rajnarayan Bose and Akshoykumar Datta ...were apologists of the caste system. Similarly, men like Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee and Pearychand Mitra, once known as ultra radicals failed to show any firmness in ignoring caste restrictions in personal life.”\(^78\) Sumit Sarkar has stated:

Subsequent Brahmo thought and action regarding caste tended to remain tokenistic, confined in practice to giving up Brahmanical sacred thread and the promotion of inter-caste marriages within their own community.\(^79\)

Shib Chunder Bose, writing more or less at the same time as Sibnath Sastri, similarly criticised the baneful effects of caste, both on social and political life.

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The distinction of caste is woven into the very texture of Hindoo society. In whatever light it is considered, religiously, morally, or socially, it must be admitted that this abnormal system is calculated to perpetuate the ignorance and degradation of the race among which it prevails. ... It is emphatically the curse of India and the parent of India’s woes. It is the great enemy of enlightenment and improvement and advancement in India.  

Romesh Chunder Dutt, in 1877, criticised caste from the point of view of ‘national progress’, though somewhat differently – in an anti-Brahmin tone:

There is a desire on the part of all sections, orthodox and heterodox, to draw closer together, and work for national progress and general good. The domination of the priestly caste which impeded the nation’s progress is becoming feebler, the endeavour to bolster up priestly privileges is becoming fainter, the hurtful restrictions of caste are becoming weaker, among advanced Hindus of Bengal.

Swami Vivekananda, too, was sharply critical of excesses perpetrated by the Brahmans in the name of custom or religion and talked of an impending ‘Sudra revolution’. Vivekananda, in his Bartaman Bharat, published in 1899, denounced the oppressive treatment of so-called untouchables and other subordinate castes and talked of a need for a Sudra emancipation, but ultimately favoured brotherhood among all social classes avoiding any basic change in social structure. In his views on social reform, Vivekananda recommended restraint and caution. Amiya P. Sen has observed:

All the same, it was in upper-caste, brahmanical culture that he located new sources of legitimacy and well-being for a powerless people. Unlike Periyar, ... his cry for ‘root and branch reform’ envisaged some kind of political equality, not social. It aimed at dethroning the brahman, not brahmanism.

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Such critiques on caste, pointing to its divisive role in the Hindu society in an era of emerging nationalism, however, did not call for an elaborate reforming programme or abolition of caste hierarchy, hoping that, with time it would lose its vitality as principle and practice of social organization. These critiques hardly dealt with growing aspirations and grievances of the intermediate and lower castes of that time. But even such limited critique attracted high-caste reaction.

Jogendra Nath Bhattacharya, the President of the College of Pandits, Nadia, in his book *Hindu Castes and Sects* (1896), which was one of the first modern treatises in English on various castes and sects of all over India to be written by an Indian scholar, found condemnation of caste by M.A. Sherring and Dr. Wilson as inconsistent and fallacious.\(^3\) Pointing to the critique of the Brahmins by Sherring, who was regarded by him as one of the chief authorities on the caste system, J.N. Bhattacharyya wrote:

> At any rate, he may certainly be credited with having possessed sufficient knowledge of history to be aware of the shortcomings which existed in past generations, and still exist, among the priestly classes in other countries, and there can be no justification whatever for the severe censure that he has passed on the Brahmans. Yet the same views have been accepted by some of the foremost of modern Hindu scholars.\(^4\)

J.N. Bhattacharya criticised R.C. Dutt’s view that the caste system permanently placed the people under the priestly and military castes, and thereby hindered popular progress and the growth of popular freedom in India, as erroneous. He wrote:

> The great living poet of Bengal, Babu Hem Chandra Banerji, gives countenance to similarly erroneous views, when he calls upon his countrymen to cause a clean sweep of all caste distinctions, in order that they may, by united action, recover their ancient greatness.\(^5\)

J.N. Bhattacharyya was right in criticising the one-sided condemnation of Hindu social order and the Brahman in the missionary view, but he seemed to have been

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\(^4\) Ibid., p.3.

\(^5\) Ibid., p. 3.
convincing like many of the missionaries and the orientalists that the Hindu scripture were accurate guides in understanding the caste based society, which consistently emphasised the sacredness or central position of the Brahman. To prove the superiority of the Brahmins, he simply quoted from Manu – “Since the Brahman sprang from the most excellent part, since he was the first born, and since he possesses the Veda, he is by right the chief of the whole creation.” (Manu, I, 93.)

M.A. Sherring, whom he criticised, wrote earlier that caste, owed its origin to the Brahman and made the Brahman’s selfish ambition to subjugate the intellects of all other Hindus, responsible for such invention. Bhattacharyya, in this respect, wrote:

Caste has had its origin, no doubt, in Brahmanical legislation. ... The authors of such legislation deserve certainly to be admired for their large-hearted statesmanship, instead of being censured for selfish ambition and narrowness.

Obviously, he did not subscribe to the contemporary views of Hutton and Risley on the Brahmanical fourfold division of caste, which were highly influential in administrative discourse. Bhattacharya found no fault with this Brahmanical legislation, which was discriminatory to the Vaisyas and Sudras:

... in all probability, the majority of traders, artisans, and agriculturists never cared for the honour of being invested with the sacred thread, or for the privilege of reading the Vedas. And when such was the case, the Brahmans themselves could not be too anxious to force these honours and privileges upon them. The chief concern of the Brahmins, in the efforts they made to realise their ideal of social polity, was to keep the fighting clans in good humour, so that even if the vaishyas sought for the honour of the thread, the Brahmans could not have given it to them without depriving it of the value which it came to acquire in the eyes of the Ksatriyas.

The above view though lacking in logically and historically, indirectly pointed to the contemporary caste uplift movements in Bengal for ‘twice-born’ status, which demanded to be invested with the sacred thread. He underplayed European critique of

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86 Ibid., p. 7.
87 Ibid., pp 4-5.
88 Ibid., p.8.
caste and the grievances arising out of the caste hierarchy, by praising the values of the fourfold varna scheme:

Caste is often described by European scholars as an iron chain which has fettered each class to the profession of their ancestors, and has rendered any improvement on their part impossible. This view may, to some extent, be regarded as correct so far as lower classes are concerned. But with regard to the higher classes, caste is a golden chain which they have willingly placed around their necks, and which has fixed them to only that which is noble and praiseworthy. Any little split that is caused by caste now and then is far outweighed by the union of races and clans which it has promoted and fostered, and there is no justification whatever for the abuse which has been heaped upon its authors.  

Bhattacharya’s writings provided a significant example of passionate defence of established Brahmanical norms against the campaigns of evangelical missionaries in a period of assertive nationalist ideals.

Despite hegemony of European discourses, the Indian scholars were often in disagreement with orientalist, evangelical (missionary) and utilitarian characterisation of Indian society and caste, and yet relied on the same textual sources, such as the Manu Dharma Sastra, which codified the traditional Hindu law, as the primary authority and shared the view of four original varnas, encompassing all castes in the sub-continent, in defence of caste. Risley noted that the concept of varna, though lacked an objective reality, had deep roots in popular imagination:

We have seen how the legend of the four original castes evolved in the active brain of some systematizing pandit, has filtered downwards, has taken hold of the mind of the people, and has become almost article of faith with the general body of Hindus. No one cares to enquire whether it rests on any basis of facts, yet it holds its ground, it gains constantly wider currency, and it undoubtedly does in a way influence practice in matters of social usage.  

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89 Ibid., p.8.

The upper caste dominated nationalist intelligentsia were aware of the caste solidarities and social movements of subordinate groups, which were embarrassing for their vital projects of national unity and progress but could not reject caste in principle, without jeopardizing their status in society. Caste was considered by many members of the upper caste intelligentsia, as the basis for denying rather than conferring social privilege. In the context of the loss of political and cultural sovereignty, suffered at the hands of the British, the appeal of high caste status was quite significant in the upper caste dominated intelligentsia. Obviously, Brahmanical versions of caste appealed them most. They hardly cared to look even into the official reports of British census commissioners and superintendents, which provided detailed picture of caste, quite contrary to these versions. As a result, except for some token gestures, an awareness and anger about caste oppression were “... rare among the bhadralok intelligentsia of nineteenth-century Bengal.”\(^\text{91}\) The intelligentsia in Bengal took a cautious, defensive attitude towards the caste question and it was never as sensitive a question as it was in some parts of western and southern India, at least in the nineteenth century. The forms and values of ‘traditional’ caste remained prominent and active, even if in a modified form among the liberal reformists. Nemai Sadhan Bose has contended:

Thus, the citadel of caste was too strong to be brought down by Rammohun or indeed by any other reformer or group of reformers in the nineteenth century.\(^\text{92}\)

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has written similarly that the caste system “was never the central focus of any reforming endeavour in this province.”\(^\text{93}\) The intelligentsia needed to build up a notion of united Hindu community, without disrupting existing power relations of caste, exercised through a hierarchically differentiated order. Though some nationalists favoured discarding caste for the sake of nationhood, many others acknowledged it as a glorious inheritance from ancient Indian civilization, despite some degradation in the later times. The general political and social stance of


the Bengali intelligentsia was conservative in that they accepted the status quo. They saw stability and order in the theory of caste. However, they were aware of critiques of caste and potentiality of the institution as a detriment to their vision of nationality. The nationalist leaders of early Congress excluded caste, along with other ‘divisive’ social matters from its deliberations.

In such a context, the concept of *adhikari-bheda*, accommodating and keeping differences in beliefs within certain limits, was useful for the upper caste intelligentsia. According to Sumit Sarkar, *adhikari-bheda* (literally, differential rights, claims, or powers) conveyed the notion of each *jati* and *sampradaya* (caste and sect) having its own rituals and beliefs in a unified but hierarchically differentiated structure within which each knew its appropriate place.\(^94\) Sumit Sarkar has pointed out “... the prominence of the concept of *adhikari-bheda* in mid-and –late-nineteenth-century Bengal discourses leading up to construction of unified notions of Hinduism.”\(^95\) Justification of caste hierarchy as inevitable and justifiable inequality often entered these discourses, as evident in many printed tracts of the period. Sumit Sarkar has quoted from one of such tracts – Lokenath Basu’s *Hindu-dharma-marma* (Calcutta, 1856) – “Remember that distinctions of *varna* (*varna-vivedha*) are indispensable to *mukti* (salvation). Parameswar has given different kinds of powers (*shakti*) to different *jatis* – if one takes up the *dharma* of another, only harm can follow.”\(^96\)

So both critique and the defence of caste hierarchy were discernable in the perception of nineteenth century Bengali intelligentsia, comprised of traditional and western-educated literati. Despite criticism, caste never featured prominently in social reform agenda of the colonial middle class, while caste inequality was asserted still in an open, matter-of-fact manner as natural inequality. The necessity of caste system and the Brahman’s spiritual superiority within the social order was presumed in the contemporary conceptual frameworks for caste. Caste continued to dominate Indian social world.


\(^95\) Ibid., p. 368.

\(^96\) Ibid., p. 373.
Though there were arguments about shortening the social distance between the high-born and the low-born, these did not amount to abolition of it or effecting any substantial change of place. Such defence of caste did not come under any serious attack in Bengal, unlike in South India. The changes brought by the colonial rule in Bengal, though limited, did pave the way for material success and upward social mobility of some groups with a humble social background. These groups, however, did not feel comfortable with such mobility only, without making their caste ‘respectable’ in society. Caste mobility was there in medieval Bengal, when caste provided a very significant channel for mobility. In colonial times, with the emergence of new middle class, *bhadrolok* society new channels were opened, but importance of caste was not at all marginalized to any appreciable extent.

THE IMPACT OF COLONIAL DISCOURSE AND PERCEPTION OF THE INDIGENOUS INTELLIGENTSIA REGARDING CASTE ON SOCIAL MOBILITY IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

The colonial discourse and perception of the indigenous intelligentsia on caste generally accepted all pervading existence of this institution in Indian life and in researches, since colonial times, Indian society has been referred to as a ‘caste society’. Since the 1970s, however, scholars, such as Cohn, Dirks, Inden, have criticised such opinions as over emphasizing the importance of caste. It has been also suggested that the so called ‘caste society’ was a fabrication of British administrators and their Indian collaborators. Here Susan Bayly has contended that in this respect, while colonialism deserves much emphasis, so too do the many changes which were underway well before the British conquest. Caste has been for many centuries a real and active part of Indian life and not just a self-serving orientalist fiction. Yet she has tried to show that until well into the colonial period, much of the subcontinent was still populated by the people for whom the formal distinctions of caste were of only limited importance as a source of corporate and individual lifestyles. This would include much of Bengal, the Punjab and southern India, as well as the far northwest and the central Deccan plain. She has denied the existence of ‘a single static system of caste’ dominated Indian life since ancient times, despite the fact that a reverence for certain generalised caste ideals was extolled in important scriptural writings. Caste in the present sense of the term has been engendered, shaped and perpetuated, even in
parts of the so-called Hindu heartland of Gangetic upper India, by comparatively recent political and social developments since the early eighteenth century. From this time onwards, British rule, with the help of the Indians significantly expanded and sharpened caste norms and conventions, building many manifestations of caste language and ideology into its structures of authoritative government. The Indian social reformers and political leaders, in their treatment of caste appropriated, reformulated contemporary racial theories and sought to identify caste as vital concern for emerging nationhood. Susan Bayly has stated:

For better or worse, the phenomenon of caste came to be regarded both by many Indian ‘modernisers’ and by European theorists as a defining feature of Hindu ethnicity, morality and even biology. As a result, those who debated the so called modernisation of Hinduism from the late nineteenth century onwards, framed their vision of the Hindu heritage around these emotionally charged concepts of nation, caste and race.98

It appears that by the end of the eighteenth century, the institution of caste took a comprehensive shape. Beteille has opined:

...when we first encounter caste in the writings of nineteenth century observers and scholars, we encounter it as a more or less complete system. We encounter not only the existential order of caste, as something that might be observed on the ground from the outside, but also its normative order, as something regarded by its individual members as both meaningful and morally binding. This is not to say that there was perfect consensus regarding the values of caste, but that caste distinctions were considered significant and legitimate by most members of society, and particularly by those belonging to the upper castes...99

So, it may be said that caste was not an ‘invention’ of the policies and politics of the ‘ethnographic’ colonial state, but it did acquire some new dimensions in the colonial period. Here, it should be kept in mind that during this period, the British scholarship

and the official policies, sanctioning such scholarship contributed very significantly in identifying caste, the foundational fact of Indian social formation. Caste came to exercise significant pride of place in the imagination and the discourses of both colonial administrators-cum-ethnographers and contemporary Indian writers. They often presented ambiguous and somewhat contradictory accounts on several aspects of this institution, which betrayed the dynamics of caste in the colonial period.

Both in colonial discourse and in the discourse of indigenous intelligentsia, caste was evaluated in relation to its place as fundamental to Hinduism, as well as in terms of a basic opposition between the individual and the community. Caste became for many, the core symbol of community in India, some single system that reflected a core civilizational value, whereas for others, even in serious critique, still the defining feature of Indian social organization. The defenders of caste thought it to be based on interdependence rather than on conflict. The views of caste differed, sometimes sharply but all these views hardly questioned the significance of caste in Indian socio-economic order. Dirks has argued that caste endures and is so significant because it has been the precipitate of a powerful history, in which it has been constituted as the very condition of the Indian social.

I argue that the history in which caste has been constituted as the principal modality of Indian society draws as much from the role of British Orientalists, administrators, and missionaries, as it does from Indian reformers, social thinkers, and political actors.¹⁰⁰

In the colonial period, caste, institutionalised in economy, culture and everyday social life, remained as a prominent fact of social life. Political uses of caste varied. Sometimes they went well beyond the mandate of nationalism, by either being indifferent or opposing to it. It had been, at times, the necessary vehicle of social and political mobilization, for nationalist cause.

Many of the Indian scholars could not get rid of the myth of a golden age, when caste was perceived as an ideal system of mutual responsibility, interdependence, and genuine spiritual authority. Only a few upper caste nationalist leaders, apart from the

non-Brahman and Dalit voices, rejected this kind of nostalgia, shared by both a large number of orientalists and Indian scholars. The critiques of Indian culture or social order, too, were based on the perception that caste was the essence or constituted the totality of Indian social forms. Besides, most of the Indian intelligentsia increasingly guided by the demands of anti-colonial nationalism tended to minimise, all critiques of Indian culture and civilisation, including caste, which were considered to be divisive.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, caste became more pervasive and uniform in the discourses of both the colonisers and colonised. Caste as one of the most significant social identity in Hindu society got approval in ‘official’ understanding of Indian social order and in that of the Indian intelligentsia, in the complex, changing context under colonialism. As in colonial times, in pre-colonial India, there were multiple social identities, the significance of which varied according to socio-economic and political contexts. Apart from caste groupings, lineage/family units, occupational sections, artisan/trading guilds, territorial groups, sectarian or politically dominant communities etc. also were significant units of identification at various times before the coming of the British. Importance of castes or caste groupings varied as a category of organizing and representing identity in relation to other referents of social identity. Under colonialism, such heterogeneity of referents of social identity got minimised and caste was conceived the most important, if not the only, systematic category, characterising the Indian/Hindu social system. Caste was defined basically as a religious social order, minimally affected by political processes in the pre-colonial period.

Thus in the colonial period, caste became pervasive and institutionalised in economy, culture and social life across regions and communities of the subcontinent, which was evident from emphasis on caste both in official and indigenous discourses. The British rulers could not avoid dealing with caste as a part of their governance and they dealt with it on such a wider scale that caste became the basis of social interaction and identity. In fact, though there was no agreement on the essential attributes of caste for the majority of the indigenous society, there was something obvious and self-evident about caste, which made caste, the most significant model of social emulation for the social groups. As caste prevailed as an important determinant of social interaction,
vertical mobility in secular context had to be ritualised through moving upward in the scale of caste-ranking. Greater occupational mobility and spread of education had enhanced status aspirations and caste was the significant reference group of this status mobilization. Despite various inner divisions, marked by class differentiation as well as by different endogamous and exogamous units within a caste, its members mostly considered their caste was the valid social category for social mobilization. The leaders of these movements tried meticulously to construct a caste ideology through a reinterpretation of historical accounts and skilful manipulation of traditional cultural concepts or symbols. The idea of caste became deeply embedded in the self-image of the intelligentsia and the educated middle class, where the orientalist and colonial images of India played an important role. This was evident both in their appropriation and reformulation of the racial theories of European scholars and in their dealings with the institution of caste, which was far less critiqued than defended. G. S. Ghurye has noted in *Caste and Race in India*, first published in 1932:

> The community aspect of caste has thus been made more comprehensive, extensive, and permanent. More and more of an individual’s interests are being catered for by caste, and the needy who were helped by their caste-funds naturally owe much to their caste and later in life look upon it with feelings of gratitude and pride. They feel it their proud duty to strengthen the caste-organization, remembering their obligations to it. ...The feeling of caste-solidarity is now so strong that it is truly described as caste-patriotism.101

Social status of groups or individuals came to be interpreted in terms of caste, in which issues like racial origin or varna status were given importance. Such discourses, either derived from European anthropological concepts or Brahminical caste literature often tended to minimise social mobility in traditional society. The non-Brahman castes, even the socio-economically superior groups among them, were considered Sudra or hinjati as opposed to the ‘twice-born’ varnas, in scriptural terms or as belonging to the Dravidian type or Mongoloid type as opposed to the Aryan type, in anthropological terms. Under such circumstances, mobile non-Brahmin social groups strived to reconstruct their caste identity claiming ‘twice-born’ varna status or

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Aryan origin for themselves. The attempt of castes or caste-like groups at upward mobility was not unfamiliar in pre-colonial period. But the British policies towards caste during the later nineteenth century, made such attempts more convenient. Uma Chakravarti has observed:

Now for the first time the scale on which the caste status could be renegotiated or arbitrated was much wider, operating on an all-India basis. Moreover, the hold of the administrative system was much wider, and it was a single power that was to apply its mind to the issues at stake. Thus, instead of individual kings or dominant castes determining the formal status of a caste, there was a more encompassing body that was responsible for determining caste status. This was bound to make a difference to the way caste was understood or came to be understood.¹⁰²

Susan Bayly similarly has argued:

...growing numbers of Indians acquired an interest in orientalist writings and statistical exercises, particularly the classified caste tables in the provincial Census reports. It certainly was an innovation for these publications to rank, standardise and cross-reference their caste listings on principles derived from Western zoology and botanical classification. These exercises purported to aggregate and rank supposedly comparable castes from different regions under a variety of general occupational headings with the aim of establishing who was superior to whom in any part of India by virtue of their supposed purity, occupational origins and collective moral worth.¹⁰³

Partly in response to attempts of the colonial state and indigenous intelligentsia to redefine Indian society in terms of the Aryan/non-Aryan or ‘twice-born’/Sudra varna dichotomy and partly as a result of achieving better socio-economic status under the colonial rule, various social groups or individuals all over India, as in Bengal tended to comprehend social mobility in the idiom of caste, though not necessarily in terms of race essences or binding cultural codes. In this context, we situate the Mahishya movement, as one of the most significant expressions of the status mobility of the Chasi Kaibarttas. The next chapter deals with the movement.