CHAPTER - 4

LOOKING FOR ‘TWICE-BORN’ IDENTITY: THE MAHISHYA MOVEMENT

In a society, where socio-economic achievement of individuals or groups is significantly determined by caste identities, a claim to a higher caste status through corporate mobility is a significant dimension of social mobility. Individuals or groups, irrespective of material achievement, desire to elevate the status of their caste. Socio-economic mobility of the members of respective castes, in this respect provides the ground or opportunities for climbing up to a better rank in the caste hierarchy. The socio-economic mobility of the Chasi Kaibarttas during the colonial period, though limited, enhanced their status aspiration, which was articulated through caste idiom. This prepared the ground for the Mahishya movement, through which the Chasi Kaibarttas adopted ‘Mahishya’ as their new caste name. By adopting the new name they actually created a ‘twice-born’ *varna* identity for themselves, relinquishing their existing name ‘Chasi Kaibartta’ indicating Sudra *varna* status. In the traditional Brahmanic texts, such as the *Manusmriti*, the authors laid down the rights and duties of the first three varnas, which were regarded as ‘twice-born’ (*dwija/dvija*) on account of their undergoing the ritual donning of the sacred thread or the initiation ceremony (*upanayana*), symbolizing rebirth, while the fourth or the last varna of Shudras was denied the right to *upanayana*, indicating its lowest social status in the *varna* model being once-born (*ekajati*).¹ In the colonial period, most of the castes, generally considered in the caste literature as belonging to the Sudra varna, claimed to be included into either of the first three *varnas*, or ‘twice-born’ *varnas*. The Chasi Kaibarttas built up a vigorous social movement – the Mahishya movement, to achieve this ‘twice-born’ *varna* status. By claiming this status they tried to fulfill two major objectives – first, getting a ‘traditional’ respectable status in the colonial society,

where varna identity became significant & second, disowning any connection with the Kaibarttas or more specifically with the Jalia Kaibarttas, who were unanimously treated as Sudras or low caste (hinajati), in ancient and medieval caste literature.

In this chapter, we shall analyse first, the circumstances leading to growing importance of ‘twice-born’ varna identity among the social groups such as the Chasi Kaibarttas, in the colonial period, which will be followed by a discussion on the necessity for rejecting any connection on the part of the latter, with the Jalia Kaibarttas or any other groups of the Kaibarttas. The various aspects of the Mahishya movement will be analysed thereafter, in this context.

Varna & jati were two models of the caste system operating in the colonial discourse on caste. In colonial perception of caste, apart from jati, the varna order, which had for long been cast in textual tradition, got renewed acceptance as a substantive category. In both official and indigenous discourses, the Vedic origin stories of varnas and their interpretations in later Brahmanic texts, the most important of which was Manusmriti, providing trans-regional and meta-historical understanding of ‘traditional’ caste system, got more importance. The idea of varnashramadharma inclusive of all castes into four hierarchical orders, dictated by Brahmanical legislations clearly appealed to the imagination of both the British scholars and Indian intelligentsia though for different reasons. To some, varnashramadharma was a manifestation of tyranny of Brahmans or upper castes, while others took it as benevolence of the Brahmin law givers, ensuring stability and wellbeing all groups within the Indian social order for such a long time. In their formulations, varna and jati were not opposed but rather the principles of varna underlay the actual organization and articulation of hierarchical relations between and among the jatis. Whatever be the reason, the textual idea of varna along with jati became deeply anchored in the social conventions of the subcontinent, which in turn conditioned the social mobility or caste-based mobilizations, of the time, where jati and more importantly varna status were significant referents of social identity.

Before analyzing the necessity for ‘twice-born’ varna identity in the colonial period, we need to examine the conceptual relation between varna and jati, as conventionally caste was understood both in these two distinct, though related concepts of corporate affiliation.
RELATION BETWEEN Varna, Jati and Caste

Caste has been generally considered as a pan-Indian institution, though its functions and operations are regionally diverse. Categories such as varna, jati or zat and the corresponding social divisions and hierarchies of status were often represented as caste in the colonial period. Both varna and jati were polysemic terms and there was a possibility of large overlap of meaning between the two. Ghurye wrote in 1932 that jati was the vernacular term for a ‘caste’.

A rigorous demarcation of meaning between ‘varna’ and ‘jati’, the former denoting the four large classes and the latter only their sub-divisions, cannot, however, be maintained. The word is sometimes indiscriminately used for ‘varna’.2

Ghurye’s observation revealed the confusion in the colonial period as to the use of the term ‘caste’. Declan Quigley has observed:

The word ‘caste’, as used in various European sources, is an extremely unhappy translation of two quite different indigenous concepts, varna and jati, which are generally believed, both by Hindus and by outside observers, to correspond in some way. In a sense, the history of the debate about the nature of caste can be viewed as the attempt to discover what exactly the correspondence between varna and jati is.3

Generally, varna referred to ranked, non-hereditary occupational orders, while jati primarily referred to the social identity ascribed by birth and also to ranked hereditary, endogamous and occupational groups. The varna, (which literally means colour in Sanskrit), were originally outlined in the Vedic texts as the four divisions of society in terms of function, which was necessary for ensuring social harmony and cosmic stability. In the Vedic classification of fourfold varna scheme, there was no provision for the so-called Untouchable, who “occupy an ambivalent place below, outside or parallel to this varna scheme.”4 According to some scholars, a fifth varna, comprising

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2 Ibid., p. 56.
‘untouchables’ had been added later. The sense of *jati* was quite different as the basic idea was not of function but of birth. The members of a *jati* were primarily supposed to be members of a descent group or of common origins, being fundamentally different from those who did not share these origins. ‘*Jati*’ referred to an endogamous unit or all the lineages within which one could intermarry. “As an endogamous group, *jati* conserved elements of the lineage system.”\(^5\) Jati was a local system of ranked, hereditary and mainly endogamous, groups – each of which associated with two or more traditional occupations. The idea of *jati* is also old as that of *varna*, and has been used since ancient times.

The *varna* model of the caste system has developed since the Vedic period in the Brahmanic literature and in such literature only four classes or *varnas* were emphasized ‘so much so that popularly Hindu religion has come to be identified as Varnashrama Dharma’.\(^6\) Ghurye opined:

> It must be mentioned at the outset that all the literary accounts of the important aspects of caste centre round the four orders in society, namely Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra, and not the multifarious groups which are the present-day castes.\(^7\)

Within India’s long intellectual tradition the literati mostly represented caste in the idiom of *varna* rather than *jati*. Andre Beteille has remarked:

> In the classical literature of India, caste was represented as *varna* and for two thousand years, when Hindus wrote about it, they did so characteristically in the idiom of *varna*\(^8\).

The author of *Manusmriti* (*Manava dharma shastra*), written between 200 BC and AD 200,\(^9\) repeated the Vedic theory of the origin of four *varnas* from the mouth,

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arms, thighs and feet of *Purusha* in a different form and admitted ‘over fifty jatis’. Ketkar wrote that the author used *varna* as a comprehensive term for four divisions which included several *jatis* or castes but he often used the word ‘jati’ in a very comprehensive sense, calling Brahmana a *jati* and a Sudra a *jati*. Thus, though many jatis together form one varna, the whole varna may be a jati. This use clearly shows the fact, that the use of the word ‘jati’ to denote both smaller and larger groups prevailed at the period of our writer as it prevails now, and I suppose that this confusion existed at a period still more remote.

This confusion sometimes perpetuated misconceptions and impeded comprehension of mobility of caste groups in a regional hierarchy within a given period, though the varna concept was not irrelevant in understanding certain aspects of caste. Reacting against the Indological representation of caste as *varna*, Srinivas argued that caste was frequently misrepresented as *varna* and examined the manner in which the influential concept of *varna* successfully obscured the dynamic features of caste during the traditional or pre-British period. To him, the way people actually lived was different from how they were supposed to live according to the *varna* model. The concept caste in terms of *varna* suggested that there was a single, clear, immutable all India hierarchy devoid of regional variations. Srinivas stated that caste was undoubtedly an all India phenomenon in the sense that there were everywhere hereditary, endogamous groups of Brahmins, peasants, artisans, trading, service castes, untouchables, which form a hierarchy, expressed in terms of pollution and purity but the existence of some universal features should not lead us to ignore that caste mainly existed and functioned as a regional system.

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10 Ibid., p. 76.
11 Ibid., pp. 76-77.
12 Ibid., p.77.
In fact, all the Brahmins speaking the same regional language, let alone all the Brahmins in India do not form a single endogamous group. There may be a dozen or more endogamous groups among them. Again, even within a small region a caste normally interacts with only several other castes and not with all. …There are hundreds of jatis or endogamous groups in each of the linguistics areas of modern India. The four or five varnas represent only broad all-India categories into which the innumerable jatis can be grouped for some very limited purposes.\textsuperscript{14}

One such purpose was to get a rough idea of relative status of specific castes, distributed in different regions under study. As a local system of social stratification, castes and their ritual ranking in one region could not be comprehensible to the castes of another region without a reference to the varna status of respective castes.

To the average peasant, moreover, the names of castes in other linguistic areas are pure abracadabra. They make sense only when they are fitted into the Procrustean frame of varna.\textsuperscript{15}

But the position of castes as it really existed in the regional hierarchy was liable to change and hardly overlapped with the fixed varna ranking and it was not known whether awareness of varna concepts was universal or confined to a few sections of the hierarchy. It was jati which provided the framework for understanding the local hierarchies within a given region. Unlike the varnas, the jatis were not thought of as being exhaustive in a formal sense. While there were only four or five varnas, no one could draw up a complete list of all the jatis, as new jatis never ceased to emerge, which is evident in our study on the Mahishyas. The dynamics of caste could be comprehended mainly in the concept of jati as an active principle of social classification.

Besides, it was difficult to use varna as a standard of reference for describing the relations between castes. Each varna was said to be comprised of several castes with different ritual and secular ranking. In Bengal, traditionally all non-Brahmin castes,

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., pp. 3-4.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p.3.
from the Vaidyas and the Kayasthas to the Namasudras, belonged to the Sudra varna only, though nobody doubted the existence of a complex hierarchy within these non-Brahmin castes. Broadly there were three major divisions among the non-Brahmin castes of colonial Bengal: the upper division comprised of the Vaidyas and the Kayasta; the middle division, comprised of castes such as the Sadgops, the Mahishyas, who were not polluting; and the lower division comprised of castes, such as the Namasudras, the Bagdis, whose touch was often regarded as polluting. In colonial Bengal, no one could understand the perceptions of the Kayasthas, the Mahishyas and the Namasudras, only by resorting to their varna status, as there was possibility of missing the nuances and subtleties in their caste ranking. So it is clear that varna and jati had different connotations in that period. The four or five varnas comprised mostly a theoretical category, seldom encountered on the ground, while the numerous jatis were the actual operational units, the real castes, which could be theoretically slotted into any one of the more embracing varna categories of the sacerdotal texts. Dipankar Gupta has remarked in this respect:

Strangely, much as India is an oral society, specialists are inclined to trawl sacerdotal texts, especially when plumbing the ideological depths of caste. Obviously, such a dependence on the written word favoured the Brahmanical view of obscuring what was actually happening in the ‘field’. If they had cared to look even into the records of British officials such as H.H. Risley or R. B. Enthoven, they would have had a detailed glimpse of other non-Brahmanical versions of caste.¹⁶

Thus emphasis on the varna status tended to underestimate the actualities of caste ranking and the dynamic features of caste, in different regions during the pre-colonial and colonial periods. The approach has changed and as Beteille has remarked, “…caste is now represented much more typically as jati, or its equivalent in the regional language. This displacement of varna by jati indicates much more than a

simple linguistic shift. It indicates a change of perception, a change in the meaning and legitimacy of caste…”  

**NECESSITY FOR ‘TWICE-BORN’ VARNA IDENTITY IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD**

Whatever the limitations of the influential concept of *varna*, in understanding caste dynamics and mobility, in colonial period, most of the castes, generally considered to be of the Shudra *varna*, aspired to improve their social positions more in *varna* terms and sought ‘twice-born’ *varna* identity for themselves. The idiom of *varna* was used extensively in the early decades of the twentieth century in the process of upward social mobility. And obviously, due to difficulties in mapping *jatis* on to functional categories of the *varnas*, such attempts ultimately resulted in endless disputes regarding *varna* status of a particular *jati*.

However, this necessity for ‘twice-born’ *varna* identity on the part of so many *jatis* in the colonial period needs to be analysed as this was less noticeable in pre-British period, when it is doubtful whether even the upper Sudra castes paid heed to the rules governing the conduct of the *varnas*. Commenting on the significance of *jati* & *varna* norms in colonial times, Susan Bayly has written:

> Even well into the 1820s, India was not a homogenous ‘caste society’ in the sense in which this phrase is employed today. It does seem, though, that *jati* and varna titles were in more widespread use at this time than they had been in past centuries.  

Pointing to the diminishing importance of *varna* in post-colonial India, Andre Beteille has argued that though most Indians recognize, *varna* and *jati* as two meanings of caste, they now think of it more as *jati* than as *varna* while the educated Indians “…probably thought of it as *varna* much more commonly until after independence

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when the role of caste became increasingly prominent in politics.”\textsuperscript{19} Beteille has referred to the perception of the famous social historian Niharranjan Ray:

…the historian Niharranjan Ray (1945) wrote a book on caste in Bengali which he entitled \textit{Bangali hindur barnabhed}, meaning distinctions of \textit{varna} among Bengali Hindus. He was following a well established usage for the representation of caste, a usage which was, however, changing.\textsuperscript{20}

In another article, Beteille has showed the anthropologist, Nirmal Kumar Bose freely used the term \textit{barna} in describing caste:

There is a repertoire of terms relating to \textit{varna} or \textit{barna}: \textit{barnabyabastha}, the affairs of caste; \textit{barnabinyas}, the arrangement of castes; \textit{asabarnabibaha}, inter-caste marriage; \textit{barnasankar}, offspring of mixed unions; and so on. My impression is that these terms are now far less commonly used among Bengalis than in the thirties and forties.\textsuperscript{21}

Beteille has argued that both Niharranjan Ray and Nirmal Kumar Bose were well aware that the actual divisions of Bengali Hindu society did not fit all well into the traditional scheme of \textit{varnas} as except for the Brahmin castes, all other castes were considered Sudras, “yet the old language continued in use right until our own time.”\textsuperscript{22}

The extensive use of the idiom of \textit{varna} in reference to caste or in the perception of the intelligentsia and upwardly mobile castes, was to some extent conditioned by certain developments in the colonial period. In the previous chapter, we notice emergence of the accounts in both British and Indian scholarship, in which caste was considered a key symbol of Indian social relations and a single system, encompassing some core Indian tradition. A great deal of the ‘orientalist’ scholarship on caste, in the early nineteenth century, depended more on textual interpretation than on ethnographic or empirical knowledge of actual distribution of highly differentiated


\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 170.


\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Ibid.}, p.6.
localized social groups in a particular context as the latter did not develop comprehensively, during that period. As a result, caste hierarchy was reckoned mostly in ritual terms. And here, *varna* theory or the *Purushasukta* theory of Brahmanism, as referred to in the Vedic texts and the later Hindu law books like the Code of Manu, (*Manu Dharma Sastra*, c. 200 BC – AD 200) emerged very influential to account for the formation, interrelation and ordering of numerous castes within one single system. Drawn mostly from the ancient Hindu texts, the early orientalist writings theorized caste as a hierarchical system by deploying the idea of *varna* as a substantive category. However, as Romila Thapar has pointed out:

Social categories even in Panini are more often discussed in terms of *jati* rather than *varna*, the currency of the former being in any case post-Vedic. The etymology of these two terms are distinct and separate and *jatis* are described as having evolved out of the common bonds of mutual kinship. Buddhist sources rank *jatis* into a high and a low category, a dual division which is commonly adopted in Buddhist classifications. The frequency of reference to *jati* as compared to *varna* would suggest that the *jati* became the more evident category of social perception and *varna* the more theoretical.\(^{23}\)

In any case, the colonial period, *varna* category came to acquire more prominence among wider sections of the people. It was seen as an ideology of spiritual orders and moral affinities, and a fact of Indian life. Srinivas has observed:

There is no doubt, however, that the varna model has been regarded by urban and educated Indians as providing a more or less true picture of caste as an ongoing system.\(^ {24}\)

According to him:

Translating *jati* into *varna* terms has its hazards, though it is unavoidable when discussing India as a whole.\(^ {25}\)

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On the other hand, Quigley has observed:

The idea that the varna system provides some kind of cultural unity is impossible to sustain because there is a great deal of disagreement about how the varnas should be interpreted. European interpretations have normally taken as axiomatic that the four varnas should be presented in the order brahman, ksatriya, vaisya, sudra – and that each successive category is inferior to, less pure than, the preceding category. I would argue that this view is at best of very limited utility and at worst completely misleading.26

Cohn has shown how the British attempted to reduce the complexity of castes by slotting all into a neat series of varna-ordered pigeonholes.

Attempts were made in the first census of 1871-2 to collect information on caste. The principle of organization was to try to place castes (jatis) in the four varnas or in the categories of Outcastes and Aborigines. …From the beginning of the census operations it was widely assumed that an all-India system of classification of casters could be developed.27

Declan Quigley has pointed out two mistakes in the colonial understanding of caste in this regard. To him, the British made the confusion of the varna system with caste systems as no such thing as the caste system existed, only so many political units with a basic common structure – the units, each of which was divided into different castes. The second mistake, to Quigley, was the assumption that there was one unambiguous interpretation of the varna system which outstanding Sanskrit scholars had access to.

The varna system is a set of ideas developed to explain an early division of labour, but these ideas have always been interpreted in different, contradictory ways.28

The varna view of caste, itself, was not of great significance in the ethnographic accounts of scholar-administrators, such as, Hunter, Risley, Nesfield, who analyzed the varna classification scheme in the context of their respective racial or

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occupational theory of origin of castes. Commenting on the tradition of primary *varna* division of society and evolution of the caste system from a series of complicated crosses, first between members of the four original groups and then between the descendants of these initial unions, Risley wrote:

> It is small wonder that European critics should have been so impressed by the unreal character of this grotesque scheme of social evolution, that some of them have put it aside without further examination as a mere figment of the systematizing intellect of the ingenious Brahman. Yet, fantastic as it is, it opens indirectly and unconsciously an instructive glimpse of pre-historic society in India. It shows us that at the time when Manu’s treatise was compiled, probably about the second century A.D., there must have existed an elaborate and highly developed social system, …

Risley was confident of limits of *varna* in the social organization even in the second century A.D.

> Then, as now, the traditional hierarchy of four castes had no distinct and determinate existence; still less had the so-called mixed castes supposed to derived from them; while of the Sudras in particular no trace at all was to be found. Then, as now, Indian society was made up of a medley of diverse and heterogenous groups, apparently not so strictly and uniformly endogamous as the castes of to-day, but containing within themselves the germs out of which the modern system has developed by natural and insensible stages.

But even when *varna* categories were losing importance in empirical accounts of caste in the late nineteenth & early twentieth century, which directly questioned its relevance, *varna* remained to signify caste relations in some ultimate sense in both in the discourses upper caste nationalist intelligentsia & those of the leaders middle and lower castes, aspiring to elevate their caste status in *varna* terms. The appeal of *varna* status was irresistible even to the two higher castes of Bengal - the Baidyas and Kayasthas, who were no less powerful, economically and socially than the Brahmins but placed in the Sudra category in the medieval sacerdotal texts. “The kayasthas

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sought at one time to establish as kshatriyas, and the baidyas also made efforts to establish their claims to being Brahmin.  

Risley, who questioned the justification of *varna* theory of origin of caste, was aware of its growing importance in the consciousness of the Hindu population. He noted in 1915:

> Several theories of the origin of caste are to be found in the literature of the subject. The oldest and most famous is accepted as an article of faith by all orthodox Hindus, and its attraction extends, as each successive Census shows, through an ever-widening circle of aspirants to social distinction.

Srinivas tried to explain the popularity of the *varna* model tentatively as a result of a series of developments during the colonial period.

> It is my hunch that the varna model became more popular during the British period as a result of a variety of forces: the institution, which prevailed till 1864 of attaching Brahmin Pandits to British-established law courts, the presence in every town of a body of Western-educated lawyers who tried to apply Brahminalical law to all Hindus, the translation of a vast mass of sacred literature from Sanskrit into English, the rise everywhere of caste *sabhases* who tried to introduce reforms by Sanskritising the way of life of their respective castes, and the growth of vigorous anti-Brahmin movement which attempted to displace Brahmins from the positions of power and influence which they occupied in some parts of the country.

The importance of ‘twice-born’ *varna* status in social mobility can be understood from the very definition of ‘Sanskritisation’. According to Srinivas:

> Sanskritisation is a process by which a ‘low’ Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently, ‘twice-born’ caste.

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34 Ibid., p.6.
Varna status became a major concern with the myths of origin of various castes. Castes, both high and low, began to reconstruct their own histories in terms of their own perception of varna. The Sudra castes frequently claimed their own humble status as a consequence of a betrayal of some kind, or an act of usurpation at the hands of some other jealous castes. These representations were a reaction as well as an inversion of the Brahmanical theory of low origin of Sudra castes through the varnasankara concept.

It may be argued that the appeal of varna was rejuvenated by the invention of Aryan race theory, in the nineteenth century in which the varna system was interpreted on racial lines, making the members of the ‘twice born’ varnas descendants of the Aryan ‘race’. The universal Aryan language family of Sir William Jones and the racial unity of the Aryans assumed by Max Mueller, came to form the basis of a race theory that conjectured certain racial relationship between the Europeans and the upper caste Indians, predominantly Brahmans. Sanskrit, the important language in the Aryan language family curiously came to be associated with the language of a race – i.e., the ‘Aryan race’ – and the Brahmans, as the main speakers of Sanskrit, came to be considered as the principal representatives of the Aryan race in India. As the speakers of the Aryan language were identified with a race, which migrated to India either as conquerors or as colonists, the Aryan-non-Aryan divide, found in ancient textual sources came to be interpreted in racial terms. To R. S. Sharma:

In the later Vedic texts, the term arya denoted the first three varnas, excluding the shudras and dasas. Even in the Buddhist context, the arya was considered a noble. Aryanization meant the adaptation of the non-Aryan tribals to the brahmanical culture.\(^{35}\)

Now, in the colonial period, the Indo-Aryans and non-Aryans were assumed to be of different racial stock, the latter being the original or pre-Aryans inhabitants of the subcontinent. In the varna scheme of classification, it was thought that the first three varnas were constituted by different groups of Aryans. The non-Aryans were supposed to have been made servile people and given the appellation Sudras, the fourth or last varna, though the likelihood of considerable racial intermixture between

the two was admitted. The members of the first three *varnas* were considered in the Brahmanic texts, as ‘*dwija*’ or ‘twice-born’ as they were entitled to a second birth by adopting the sacred thread. Now, they all were considered to be of the Aryan race, which made the Aryan/Indian civilization possible. The members non-Aryan race or Sudra *varna*, were considered as both a conquered or colonized people and a people at very low level of civilization. Obviously, in this context, the non-Aryan descent or the status of Sudra *varna* was the least desired by any mobile caste looking for a better status.

The Aryan theory of race, though fallacious and a myth, deeply influenced the imaginings European and Indian scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The theory emerged in nineteenth century Europe and to some extent became associated with the search the Indian past history. In the initial years of their rule, the officers of the East India Company, guided by requirement of knowledge of the subject population and curiosity, started exploring law, religion and languages of India. In this effort, among other things, similarities between Greek, Latin and Sanskrit were noticed, which formed the basis of Sir William Jones’ famous theorization of the Indo-Aryan family of languages. Jones’ ideas had been developed in Europe by German comparative philologists in the 1840s and 1850s. Romila Thapar has stated;

> Comparative philologists, such as E. Burnouf and F. Bopp were primarily interested in the technicalities of language. Vedic Sanskrit, as the earliest form of Sanskrit, had primacy. Monogenesis was strengthened with the notion of an ancestral language, Indo-Germanic or Indo-European as it came to be called, as also the origins of some European languages and their speakers being traced back to Iran and India or still further to a central Asian homeland. ... The scholars associated with these studies and therefore with interpreting the Indian past, were generally based in Europe and had no direct experience of India.³⁶

Soon, attempts were being made at establishing inter-relatedness of language, culture and the notion of biological race, in the context of validating superiority of the

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European ‘races’ and ‘Aryan’ came to be used both for language and the race in Europe, though there were difference in opinion regarding the exact relation between these two concepts.

Max Mueller strengthened the application of these ideas to Indian origin, through his studies in the Vedic literature, in the second half of the nineteenth century. He believed that the Rigveda, developed by the Aryans in India was the most ancient literature of the world, where the roots of the Indo-European family of languages could be traced. The idea of common origin of Indo-European languages – among which Indo-Aryan was very significant – was curiously extended, by some European scholars, such as Mueller, to the common origin of the speakers of these languages, the argument being the speakers of the same language were of the same biological race. Mueller assumed that the ancestors of the speakers of this group of languages or the Indo-European languages lived in Central Asia, who in course of time migrated to different parts of Europe, as well as to Iran and Indian subcontinent. On this assumption, Max Mueller propounded the well-known theory that the speakers of the Indo-European languages in India, Iran and Europe were of the same Aryan culture and Aryan race.

The Aryans, according to Max Mueller were fair-complexioned Indo-European speakers who conquered the dark-skinned dasas of India. The aryavarṇa and the dasa-varṇa of the Rigveda were understood as two conflicting groups differentiated particularly by skin colour, but also by language and religious practice, which doubtless underlined the racial interpretation of the terms. …The Dasas were the indigenous people, of Scythian origin, whom he called Turanians.37

The most significant consequence of the Aryan theory of Race, as far as varnashrama was concerned, was that the formation of this institution came to be interpreted as an attempt of the Aryan race at segregation from the non-Aryans. The first three varnas were considered to be of the members of the Aryan race, speaking the same language, i.e., Sanskrit, and practicing different occupations, while the fourth varna was taken to be comprised of all non-Aryan races, speaking different languages, other than

37 Ibid., pp. 5-6.
Sanskrit, who were subjugated by the Aryans and made to serve the first three varnas. As it was considered that all castes had developed from the original four varnas, the upper castes, particularly the Brahmans were said to be of respectable Aryan descent and the lower castes/untouchables, of less civilized non-Aryan stock. According to Thapar:

Max Mueller popularised the term Aryan in the Indian context, arguing that it was originally a national name and later came to mean a person of good family. As was common in the nineteenth century, he used a number of words interchangeably such as Hindu and Indian, or race/nation/people/blood – words whose meanings would today be carefully differentiated.38

Though later on, Mueller started denying any necessary link between the Indo-European languages and any specific biological race as such, he himself, continued to confuse between the two.39

The books of the Western scholars like that of Max Mueller were widely read and endorsed in India. Their racial speculations had deep impact on contemporary British and Indian scholars, – studying Indian society and culture, specifically caste, – who used the assumptions in support of their own interpretations. Among the eminent British scholar-officials, propounding Aryan race theory in relation to caste, the most important were Hunter and Risley. In Chapter 3, we already have noted Hunter’s views in The Annals of Rural Bengal (published in 1868), of caste as manifestation of a race war – a protracted struggle between the higher race of Aryan invaders and the lower aboriginal races, who were subjugated in the primitive times by the former. Risley in his The Tribes & Castes of Bengal, published in 1891, mentioned the advice of Max Mueller against speculation of racial affinity on the basis of philological similarity.

In adopting, even tentatively, the designations Aryan and Dravidian I am aware that I am disregarding advice which Professor Max Muller was good enough to give me, about three years ago, in a letter… He warned me against

38 Ibid., p.6.
39 Ibid., p. 6.
the confusion which might arise from using philological terms to denote ethnological conclusions. I am entirely sensible of the value and necessity of the warning, and fully recognize his right to speak with authority on such questions. But we must have some general names for our types: it is a thankless task to invent new names; and I trust to justify my invasion of the domain of philology by the universal practice of the Indians themselves, and by the example of Professor Sayce, who did not hesitate, on a recent occasion to speak of the Aryan race as an established ethnic aggregate.  

Risley’s view here elaborated the strong appeal that the myth of Aryan race exercised on the contemporary British and Indian scholars. Like Hunter, Risley was also very much confident about racial interpretation of caste.

So far as anthropological considerations are concerned, there would be no great difficulty in our recognizing the Brahmans, Rajputs, and higher trading castes as descendants of the three upper classes – Brahmans, Kshatriyas, and Vaisyas – of the ancient Aryan Commonwealth. The Sudras alone have no compact aggregate as their modern representative. But the fourth caste in the ancient system was apparently not of pure Aryan descent, and it is a plausible conjecture that it may have been constantly recruited by the admission of Dravidian elements. The dominant Aryan society must have exercised a strong attraction on the Dravidians, but the only caste into which the latter could ordinarily expect to be received would be the Sudra.  

Apart from equating caste with varna, Risley expressed the notion that the Sudras were of ‘inferior’ non-Aryan ‘races’, generally vanquished by the Aryan race, which undoubtedly had a deep impact on the self-perception of the jatis, in their mobility efforts.

In the late nineteenth century, the missionaries in their attack on caste began interpreting exploitation of the lower castes by the higher castes, in terms of racial oppression by the Aryans on the non-Aryans. Both the missionaries – John Muir, in his Original Sanskrit Texts (1858-1863) and John Wilson in his Indian Caste (1877) – 

41 Ibid., p. xxxv.
viewed oppression of the Brahmans went back to Aryan invasions and resulted from Aryan-non-Aryan struggle. The argument that Brahmans and non-Brahmans were of different racial stock was quite pronounced in A *Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Family of Languages* (1856), by Robert Caldwell, a famous missionary in southern India. In this work, Caldwell emphasized, through a combination of historical speculation and philological conjecture, on the essential autonomy of Dravidian culture from the colonizing Aryan Brahmans.42

Nicholas B. Dirks has commented:

Caldwell’s articulation of the racial and historical basis of the Aryan-Dravidian divide was, in fact, perhaps the first European valorization of the Dravidian category cast specifically in racial term, though Caldwell admitted the likelihood of considerable racial intermixture. At the same time, Caldwell was merely modifying conventional wisdom in his uncritical acceptance of an Aryan theory of race, in which Dravidians were seen as pre-Aryan inhabitants of India.43

Caldwell’s writings influenced in many ways the intellectual history of the Dravidian movement, by excluding Brahmanism from the basic features of Tamil culture. The famous Tamil social reformer and the pioneer of the Self-Respect Movement in the 1930s, E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, along with many others in the movement, referred to Caldwell’s work “as fundamental for understanding the history of Aryan imperialism and the foundational character of Dravidian self-reconstruction.”44 The concept of Aryan dominance was central also, to Jyotiba or Jotirao Phule’s critique of caste system in Maharashtra, which developed earlier than Naicker. Phule’s critique was in a sense a response to the Brahmins who thought them to be Aryans, sharply demarcated from the Dravidians. Commenting on the attitude of the Brahmins, S. V Ketkar wrote:

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Some Maratha Brahmanas … try to maintain sharp separation from the rest because they are Aryans and the rest of the castes are Dravidians, and if they fuse, it would be an unspeakable sacrilege and a disaster. Some other castes below them who call themselves Brahmanas and are very virulent in their attacks against recognized Brahmanas and talk of the principal of equality when their betters wish to exclude them, try to separate themselves just as sharply from the population below them, because the former are Aryans and the latter are Dravidians.\textsuperscript{45}

Phule, in his race-invasion theory, was directly critical of Brahman privilege and domination, who in his opinion, came to Maharashtra as Aryan invaders and subdued the non-Aryan indigenous people. To him, the Brahmins invented the caste system to perpetuate their religious authority and social privileges over the rightful inheritors of the land, who were reduced to the status of \textit{dasas} or \textit{sudras} in the Brahmanical texts. To provide an ideological basis for struggle against religious and social hierarchies, embedded in conventional Brahmanical literature, Phule came forward with alternative accounts of the popular texts, myths or stories in Brahmanical Hinduism. He reinterpreted the Brahmanical \textit{varna} division to accommodate social aspiration of the Marathas to be considered as \textit{kshatriyas}, drawing skillfully on their traditions of martial heroism. Rosalind O’Hanlon has stated:

\begin{quote}
In arguing that all lower castes could rightfully call themselves \textit{Kshatriya}, Phule was able to harness the impetus of an existing process of upward social mobility to a very unconventional and radical end: that of suggesting a permanent and irreconcilable hostility between Brahmans and all other lower castes in society.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

Phule used the dominant racial framework of the Aryan theory to illustrate violent subjugation of indigenous people by the Aryan conquerors. Phule was perhaps the first to develop this kind of critique, which viewed Brahmanical \textit{varna} division as unacceptable for the lower castes, in marked contrast to the views of most upper-caste

\textsuperscript{45} S.V. Ketkar, \textit{History of Caste in India}, (First Published, 1909, Reprint, Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1993), p. 79.

reformers and at the same time reclaiming Kshatriya status for non-Brahmin castes in Maharashtra. B.R. Ambedkar made a more radical critique of varnashramadharma and Hinduism and his strident politico-cultural denunciation of the caste system generated the new identity ‘dalit’ for the oppressed castes.

Debjani Ganguly has stated:

In his tracts, ‘Who Were the Shudras?’ and ‘Shudras and the Counter-Revolution’, he dismissed the race theory of the early dalit activists such as Phule. Jyotiba Phule had held that the shudras and the ati-shudras were the original inhabitants of the land, later dispossessed and deterriorialized by the Aryan invaders. The racial divide ran deep, with the ‘dark’, ‘flat-nosed’ non-Aryan relegated to the fringes of a society now dominated by fair-skinned, swashbuckling conquerors. Ambedkar steered clear of this eugenic interpretation of the origin of the dalits…

To Ambedkar, caste distinctions were not really distinctions of race and caste system did not represent racial division but the social division of people of the same race. However, he could not dissociate himself completely from the myth of an Aryan race. Debjani Ganguly has observed:

In one of his tracts, ‘Shudras and the Counter-Revolution’, he cited evidence from the Vedas, from the Mahabharata and from Kautilya’s Arthashastra, to claim that the dalits were originally Aryans and that they enjoyed all the privileges accorded to the upper castes including the right to be a monarch. It was only much later that internecine political conflict led to them being downgraded and disenfranchised.

The racial speculations by some of the Western scholars drew criticism of at least a section of contemporary upper caste intelligentsia. Here, we may cite the opinions of Shridhar Venkatesh Ketkar, a Chitpavan Brahmin and the well known Maharashtrian sociologist and historian. Commenting on the treatment of caste in general by some European scholars, Ketkar, in his History of Caste in India (1909) argued:

48 Ibid., p.150.
On account of some unhappy mistakes by some Western scholars, and on account of their words passing as authority, a host of beliefs have sprang up in the minds of Indians educated in English, who often display a lack of judgment in their estimate of the work of European scholars. And these beliefs often find their expression in the vernacular literature or through the English newspapers conducted by educated Hindus, which have their influence on the masses.49

He repudiated the idea of mutually antagonistic Aryan and Dravidian races. Discarding the Aryan theory of race, Ketkar stated:

Still more confusion is created by the various meanings which the word ‘arya’ acquired in India and which the word ‘Aryan’ acquired in the Western World. The word ‘arya’ was never used in India in the sense of the word ‘race’ (if we take the word ‘race’ in its larger sense). The conception of race is a very modern one if it exists in any definite form at all. Ethnologists with all their labor do not yet know what the word really means, and if we interpret the Indian documents with modern or foreign ideas in our minds, the result will be a mischief to science and social institutions.50

In his discussion regarding castes and varnas, Ketkar attached very little importance to race. But unlike Ketkar, most of the Indian intelligentsia of the colonial times, believed in the Aryan myth, which equated the upper castes or ‘twice-born’ varnas with the Aryan ‘race’, which vanquished the indigenous non-Aryan ‘races’ (which were supposed to be the lower or untouchable castes) and forced them to take the burden of labour and the Shudra varna status. Such a myth ensured for the upper caste intelligentsia an ‘Aryan’ descent and nourished the idea that the ‘Aryan Indians’, unlike their ‘non-Aryan’ countrymen shared a common racial heritage with their British conquerors. Sometimes, the ‘Aryan’ descent was extended to the entire Hindu population in a regenerated ‘Aryan’ nation.

It has been pointed out above that though for the most of the Indian literati of the colonial society, jati order together with ‘varnasramadharma’ (the code governing

49 S.V. Ketkar, History of Caste in India, (First Published, 1909, Reprint, Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1993), p. 76.
50 Ibid., p. 77.
the appropriate conduct and life-stages of the different *varnas*) became a part of life, every caste hierarchy had its historical limits, specific to time and region, which should not be confused with the *varna* order of eternal quality. The regional caste hierarchy, and its elaboration during a specific period depended on local alignment of socio-economic & political power and here *jati* as the ethnographic fact with historic origin was more important. It was the *jati*, which was the unit of organized self-improvement or ‘uplift’. The possession of secular power by a caste as *jati* was either reflected in its ritual ranking or led, sooner or later, to an improvement of its position in the said ranking. Besides, it may also, be pointed out that no unanimous caste hierarchy existed even at the regional or local level. Although theoretically, caste position being determined by birth was immutable in the upward direction, in reality, no such immutable and unanimous hierarchy of castes existed. All castes, irrespective of their status in the eyes of other castes, had an elevated version of their origin and position in hierarchy. In such a situation, there was logical possibility of many variations of the caste hierarchy.

Dipankar Gupta has argued:

Contrary to Louis Dumont’s interpretation, India’s so-called pure hierarchy is not left uncontested on the ground. Everywhere, across time and space, castes have been competing and warring for prestige and power. … Therefore, should a particular caste ranking appear the norm in a particular context, it is nearly always because it has been enforced by superior economic and political power.\(^{51}\)

Variations in the caste hierarchy even at the local level contribute to uncertainty of status of respective castes. To Srinivas, this is an important feature of caste hierarchy at the empirical level.

Certainty of position in the ranked order of castes is not, however, a characteristics of caste at the existential level. …It is clear that vagueness or

doubt regarding mutual position is not accidental or unimportant, but is an essential feature of caste as an ongoing system. Two castes each of which claims superiority to the other should not be regarded as exceptional in their behavior but as the typical product of a dynamic system in which there is some pushing and jostling in the attempt to get ahead. In pre-British India, disputes regarding caste rank occasionally reached the King, whose verdict was final.\(^52\)

Thus, in view of existence of variations and ambiguities in regional status hierarchy, aspiration for a better caste ranking is only natural among jatis or endogamous groups under favorable circumstances, particularly after achieving some socio-economic mobility. During the colonial period, the castes trying to move up through various means, hoped that since there was a new secular power, the British, which did not believe in maintaining upper caste privileges, their status could be renegotiated or enhanced by appealing to the new authorities. Depending on the relative upward mobility in socio-economic structure, the aspirant castes did have varying degrees of success in status uplift of respective communities in the period, which had a demonstration effect on other castes with similar unenviable social status of the Sudra varna or servile toilers. Between the 1880s and the 1930s hundreds of caste associations and caste conferences came to promote uplift of respective communities.

Bayly has analysed:

> These regional organizations claimed to speak as moral exemplars for certain named jati and varna groups; in most cases they involved people of scribal, trade and middle-status cultivating backgrounds. Some of these, like the north Indian Kayastha population …were of clean or superior status in Brahmanical terms; others like the celebrated Tamilnad Shanar/Nadars, were regarded as very low in dharmic terms. It was this that gave small groups of educated and newly prosperous men good reason to claim that they spoke for communities which had been wrongly stigmatized as unclean and ‘backward’.\(^53\)


These caste associations often had sizable membership and received much attention in census and other official reportage as well as the native vernacular and English press. In many cases, these associations had their own journals and treatises to put forward their status aspiration. In the context of growing influence of the *varna* concept, their claim to higher social status was put forward in terms the ‘twice-born’ *varna* status. Most of the caste mobility movements sought to be affiliated to any one of the three twice-born *varnas* of the classical texts which is evident in the census reports and numerous caste tracts. There castes resorted to some origin myths in the religious texts, associating them with these *varnas*, and secured favorable opinions from the pundits and the intelligentsia, who were sometimes more guided by the present socio-economic status than by the ritual status of the concerned caste. We are analyzing the Mahishya movement in this socio-economic and ideological background.

**THE MAHISHYA MOVEMENT**

The Chasi Kaibarttas had a humble position in the pre-colonial Bengali society which was reflected in their ritual ranking at the middle level in the regional caste structure. In the late nineteenth century Bengal, they were placed at the intermediate level with Sudra status in the general caste literature. Obviously, they did not subscribe to this position in hierarchy. Dissatisfied with their position, in the dominant hierarchy, the Chasi Kaibarttas resorted to various attempts to gain better socio-economic and political power to make their version of hierarchy acceptable in the society. The Mahishya movement was one such attempt at improving their ritual ranking by claiming the ‘twice-born’ *varna* status, which acquired new dimensions with popularization of the Aryan theory of race.

The beginning of the Mahishya movement can be placed in the late nineteenth century. Sailendranath Sengupta has opined:

> Chasi Kaivartas have persuaded pundits from 1864 onwards to admit their claim that they are identical with the ancient Mahisyas. They obtained Vyavastha Patras from the foremost pundits of Bengal and among the
It seems that the Chasi Kaibarttas refrained for some decades from using the name publicly in a large number. When Risley published his *The Tribes & Castes of Bengal* in 1891, he mentioned the names, Namasudra and Rajbansi which were adopted by the time by the Chandal and the Kochh but no such reference to Mahishya had been made by him in his account of the Chasi Kaibarttas, though he emphasized their higher status in comparison to the Jaliya Kaibarttas. He came to know of the title of Mahishya during the census operations of 1901, when he was the Census Commissioner of India. In his Report he commented:

> …at the recent Census the Chasi Kaibartta called themselves Mahishya, the name of the offspring of a legendary cross between Kshatriyas and the Vaisya, and posed as a separate caste.

Referring to Risley’s book, E.A. Gait observed in his Report as the Census Superintendent of Begal, 1901:

> This was written only ten years ago, and at that time, not only had the Mahisya theory not been developed, but the word is not even mentioned in Risley’s book. Even now the claim is confined to Central and Western Bengal, and the lower sections of the community are still but imperfectly acquainted with their new name and the improvement in their status which it intended to connote.

It seems that the Mahishya movement got publicity in the last decade of the nineteenth century. In previous decades, status mobility of the well off section of the Chasi Kaibartta sometimes took place at individual or familial level. Here we may point out the temple-building and other philanthropic activities of Rani Rasmoni and

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her family. Sometimes members of the caste by individual effort moved into the bhadralok class of Calcutta. There were few instances of some others of becoming members of higher castes. S.N. Mukherjee has cited one such instance of ‘the Kaivarta family of Bejoyram Kale of Tikali village, Burdwan district’:

Bejoyram had five sons. The descendants of the third son remained Kaivarta and some of them like Pritiram Mar were accepted as Kaivarta bhadralok in Calcutta. The descendants of his second and fourth son claimed Kayastha status but never got recognition in Calcutta. The descendants of the first son bribed Gopimohun Deb and the Dharma Sabha Rs. 6,000 and were accepted as Kayasthas. The descendants of the fifth son were unlucky and received the status of Goala. The story illustrates the mobility within the caste system and the power of the dalapatis to decide the caste status.  

It is said that the ancestors of Mathurmohan Biswas, the son-in-law of Rani Rasmoni, were Kayasthas of Burdwan who became kulin among the Kaibarttas and settled in 24-Parganas. A section of the family again moved to the Kayasthas of Calcutta and took the title ‘Dutta’. Similar attempts were found in Eastern Bengal also. E.A. Gait in his Report on the Census of Bengal, 1901 observed, regarding the Chasi Kaibarttas:

In Sylhet, when able to afford it, he takes Kayasth girls in marriage and describes himself as a Kayasth or Sudra. … In Noakhali, a small section of the Chasi sub-caste there known as Halia Das, tried unsuccessfully to get themselves returned as Deba Das.

Such attempts, however, did not help in status mobility of the caste at the corporate level. The leaders of the Chasi Kaibartta needed to take other measures to uplift the status of their caste and here they mainly depended on Sastric traditions of origin of the caste system. Despite the spread of Western thoughts, the value of Sastric traditions among the Hindus in any social movement in nineteenth century Bengal (and also in India) was unquestionable. The leaders of all non-Brahman castes, who

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started status uplift movement decades before the emergence of the Mahishya movement, claimed twice-born status interpreting suitable Sastric traditions in favour of them and competed for better status than their equivalents in the caste hierarchy. The Baidyas and Kayasthas, though superiors to all other non-Brahman castes, tried intensely in the nineteenth century to relegate their Sudra status and contended for long with each other for superiority, not on the basis of socio-economic differentiation but on Sastric tradition. Regarding this inconclusive contest between these two upper castes Risley in his Report, as the Census Commissioner of India, 1901 wrote:

The former pose as the modern representatives of the Ambastha of Manu and assert their superiority to the Kayasthas on the ground that the latter have been pronounced by the High Court of Calcutta to be Sudras, a Kayastha judge concurring, and that their funeral usages confirm this finding; …The Kayasthas, on the other hand, claim to be Kshatriyas, who took to clerical work; deny the identity of the Baidyas with the Ambasthas; describe them as a local caste, unknown in the great centres of Hinduism., who were Sudras till about a century ago, when they took to wearing the sacred thread, and bribed the Brahmans to acquiesce in their pretensions.  

In fact the Baidyas adopted the sacred thread, a mark of the twice-born castes, in the late eighteenth century:

The investiture of the sacred cord was purchased for the caste about a hundred years ago by Raja Raj Ballabh of Rajnagar, Prime Minister, and afterwards Governor of Dacca under the Muhammedan Government. The thread, however, differs from the true Brahmanical cord, in consisting of only two instead of three strings.

The other non-Brahman leaders more or less adopted the similar strategy of finding respectable Sastric origin for their castes and tried to reform their caste customs in accordance with such origin. Various Brahman castes also contested among themselves emphasizing on one Sastric tradition or another, to prove their superiority over others. The Mahishya leaders generally followed this dominant trend in this

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respect. It was observed by the Editor of Mahishya Samaj, Pandit Sebananda Bharati in 1318 B.S. that the Hindu society in Bengal at that time was witnessing different types of social claims – some were claiming to be Kshatriya or Vaisya, some were demanding sacred thread or the status of a jalacharaniya caste. The Kayasthas were determined to be Kshatriya, while the Sadgops, the Gandhabaniks, the Subarnabaniks, the Shahas etc. claimed to be Vaisya. Even the Namasudras, the Bhualmalis, the Patnis, the Dhibars etc. were claiming Aryan descent. All these movements, according to the Editor were emulation of the traditional principles of varnashramadharma, which were still persisting.63 The Chasi Kaibarttas, – unlike the castes, such as the Baidyas, the Kayasthas, the Aguris, the Sadgops – had their Sastric origin as the Kaibarttas in the Vedas and Manu’s Text. But the origin of the Kaivarttas in Manu’s text, indicating their non-Aryan ancestry, with plying of boats as profession was not glorious enough for the status mobility movement of the Chasi Kaibarttas. So they opted for another Sastric origin for the Kaibarttas which they found in a much later text, the Brahmavaivartapurana. In accounting for the origin of the Kaibarttas the compiler of this purana remarked that they emerged from the union of a Kshatriya father and a Vaisya mother. Interestingly in the ancient law books by Gautama and Yajnavalkya, it was claimed that the Mahishya emanated from the union of a Kshatriya father and a Vaisya mother. Thus the Kaibartta became synonymous with the Mahishyas on account of their same parentage. This was the logic on which the whole Mahishya theory of the Chasi Kaibarttas depended. They preferred to be known as Mahishyas, as it was an ancient respectable caste of twice-born origin. Sailendranath Sengupta has commented in this regard:

According to Brahma Vaivarta Purana, Kaivarta is born of a Ksatriya father and Vaisya mother. He became patit in Kali age because of association with fishermen (Tivara). This would identify all Kaivartas with Mahisyas of Yajnavalkya and Gautama. …As to whether the Halika or Chasi Kaivartas now calling themselves Mahisyas are the same of Yajnavalkya (1.92) or Gautama (4.17), we must say that the matter still remains inconclusive.64

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The Mahishya movement, was started mostly by the emerging middle class leaders within the Chasi Kaibartta community, who did not initially get full support of the traditional leaders of this community. This possibly explains to some extent, the comparatively late beginning of the movement. Rajat Kanta Ray has opined:

Those who held the traditional levers of power in the community were generally opposed to the movement. These were the samajpatis who as substantial landholding families had from generation to generation stood as the social leaders of different local samajs of the Kaivarta community. They were either former territorial magnates (such as the Rajas of Mayna and Tamluk) or superior estate officials and village heads. The samajpatis administered the villages, exercising civil and criminal jurisdiction, organizing public festivals, enforcing caste customs and repairing roads and embankments: their special powers were outcasting and the stopping of the services of the barber and washer man. The office of samajpati had for long been monopolized by certain families. The growth of new sources of influence left these families behind the times.65

The new middle class leaders were critical of the attitudes of these traditional leaders. One of them remarked:

On observing the activities of most samajpatis nowadays, it appears as if they are so many living embodiments of sin. …As a result a full scale social revolution is on the way.66

In 1928, one of the leaders of the Mahishya movement, Gopalchandra Sarkar (an Inspector of Schools, Rajshahi & Dacca Divisions) had written a book, titled *Mahishya-Namoddharer Itibritta*, copyright of which was held by the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti. In this book, Gopalchandra Sarkar opined that before the Census of 1891 no serious attempt was made to popularize the name, Mahishya, among the community. In the Census Report of 1891, the Kaibarttas were not given respectable position in the caste list, which according to him led the educated section among the

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Chasi Kaibarttas to take up the name, Mahishya, again.\(^{67}\) Here it is to be mentioned that the Mahishya leaders always claimed that original name of the Chasi Kaibarttas was Mahishya, which had fallen into disuse for a long time and they were only taking measures for getting back it again (punaruddhar).\(^{68}\)

The title of the above mentioned book, in fact, means a ‘historical account of the restoration of the name, Mahishya’. In a petition to the Census Commissioner of India in 1903, the members of the Presidency Mahishya Samiti (later known as the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti) stated the reasons behind such endeavour and the importance of government intervention in this regard:

Your memorialists do not hesitate to state that their chief reason for the adoption of this name was the necessity of clearly distinguishing their caste from the Jaliyas who also are known by the name of Kaivartta. …this necessity had been felt by their community from a very remote time, that is from the days of Ballal Sen; and that the names Haik Das, Parasar Das and Halik Kaivartta were adopted in various parts of the province for differentiating their people from the Jaliya community. But your memorialists have found that all these names have created greater confusion as regards the origin and social status of their caste. They have therefore revived the ancient name of their community; since its adoption would not create any more confusion between themselves and the Jaliya Kaivarttas.

The recognition of this name by government will not lead to any confusion of the castes. On the contrary, it will remove the present confusion regarding the classification and enumeration of the two castes known by the name of Kaivartta. Your memorialists therefore humbly pray that you will be graciously pleased to retain the name Mahishya as the recognized name of the Chasi Kaivartta community in the Census tables of the Government of India.\(^{69}\)


To Gopalchandra Sarkar, due to ignorance of the social leaders of the community for centuries, the Chasi Kaibarttas could not regain their actual name and owing to the spread of Western education and greater access to Sastric knowledge, attempts were being made in this direction since the late nineteenth century. He observed that during the Census of 1891, though no claim was made to return the Chasi Kaibarttas of Bengal as Mahishyas, individual attempts were made by a few from Dacca and Midnapur districts for the first time to return themselves by that name. The leaders of Dacca did not take the name publicly at that time, due to humble socio-economic condition of the community, there. But the situation was different in south-western Bengal. In Midnapur, initially, attempts were made to unify different sections of the Chasi Kaibarttas, known by several local names, to reform their social customs and to uplift the status of their purohits (priests).

Satyaranjan Biswas (a bank officer, associated with the movement and the editor of *Mahishya Samaj* between 1382 and 1387 B.S.) in his book *Mahishya Andolaner Itihas* (*History of the Mahishya Movement*, Calcutta, 1395 B.S.) wrote that Narahari Jana, the zamindar of Tajpur (in Midnapur) in 1889 obtained a *bhashpatra* (authoritative decisions) which mentioned that the Chasi Kaibartta was synonymous with the Mahishya. Both Gopalchandra Sarkar and Satyaranjan Biswas viewed that Narihari Jana took initiative to organize three conferences from 1304 B.S. onwards to discuss the justification of adopting the name Mahishya by different sections of agriculturist Kaibarttas and accordingly reforming their social customs, such as the duration of period of mourning, funeral usages etc. It was decided in these conferences that the ancient Mahishya community still existed and all agriculturist Kaibarttas were members of this community. There were however intense debates regarding reform of various social customs of the Chasi Kaibarttas. However, it may be said that the Mahishya movement began from these efforts. Rajat Kanta Ray has remarked:

> The Mahishya movement was started in 1304 B.S. (1897/1898) by a local zamindar of Midnapur who called together a big conference in Tajpur where

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the agricultural Kaivartas were identified with the ancient Mahishya caste mentioned in the shastras. From the conference originated a permanent body called the Jati Nirdharni Sabha which received financial assistance from a large number of respectable Kaivartas, mostly local proprietors of Midnapur.72

Another development, referred to by both above mentioned Mahishya authors, took place in 1304 B.S. Lalmohan Vidyanidhi, the Head Pandit of Normal School, Hugly, wrote a book on the origin and social status of castes, titled *Sambandhanirnaya Or A Social History of the Principal Hindu Castes in Bengal*, second edition of which was published in 1896 (1303 B.S.) where he wrote that the Hele (Chasi) Kaibarttas were previously *ajalachal* citing the legend that Ballal Sen made them *jalachal*, making their water acceptable to the higher castes and their purohits were still *ajalachal*.73 On behalf of the Mahishyas, Sudarshanchandra Biswas first protested against this view in a weekly newspaper, *Education Gazette*, dated Chaitra 14, 1303 B.S. The debate continued for a year and ultimately Lalmohan Vidyanidhi acknowledged that the Halik Kaibarta were identical with the Mahishya in an essay in the *Education Gazette*, dated Chaitra 19, 1304. Some other newspapers also discussed about this debate. During this time, the Chasi Kaibarttas also got some favourable comments from Reverend R.K. Gupta’s *Ambastha Darpan*. The objective of the book was to prove social superiority of the Baidyas. However, in this book, the author negated the legend of making the Chasi Kaibartta, *jalachal* by Ballal Sen and accepted that they were the successors of the ancient Mahishyas. These acknowledgements of Lalmohan Vidyanidhi, who was considered an authority on the questions concerning caste74 and R.K. Gupta encouraged the leaders of the Mahishya movement.75 They also produced a number of caste tracts, seeking to justify their adoption of the Mahishya title. As


these leaders claimed they were originally Mahishyas in ancient times, they made some ‘historical’ accounts of their glorious past in their writings. For instance, Sebananda Bharati, the Editor of *Mahishya Samaj* wrote a series of articles on the Mahishya kings in medieval Bengal (‘Banglay Mahishyadhikar’), in some issues of the journal.  

By the end of the nineteenth century, different local samitis came up at district levels, among which Pabna Mahishya Samiti and Nadia Mahishya Samiti with its centre at Dariapur deserved special mention. The Pabna Samiti was led by Sudarshanchandra Biswas, who was a teacher in the local school and Gopalchandra Sarkar, whom we have already mentioned. The Nadia Samiti was led by Hiralal Biswas, zamindar of Dariapur and Gagan Chandra Biswas, zamindar of Madhabpur & District Engineer of Jalpaiguri. There were also Samitis in Howrah, 24 Parganas, Faridpur, Mymansingh etc. in 1900, though no central samiti was there. Regarding the measures to be taken during the forthcoming census operations of 1901, a difference of opinions emerged. The Dacca Mahishya Samiti did not favour the idea of an open movement and mass appeal to the Government for returning the Chasi Kaibarttas as Mahishyas. It thought that if a large number of Chasi Kaibarttas returned themselves as Mahishyas in the Census of 1901, the Government would acknowledge the name in the records. It was not agreed by the leaders of Pabna & Nadia Samitis. The Government by this time established a committee for determining social precedence of castes in Bengal for the Census Report of 1901. Sir Gurudas Bandyopadhyay was appointed the President of this committee. Gopalchandra Sarkar, on behalf of the Pabna Committee, sent a letter to him regarding the social status of the Mahishyas.

It was ultimately decided to send a specific printed memorial to the Government office, addressing Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, from different Mahishya samitis situated all over Bengal. This memorial, drafted by the Pabna Samiti, containing the prayer of the Chasi Kaibarttas that in the forthcoming census the caste to which they belonged, might be returned as Mahishya and not Kaibartta as had been done in the previous census. The copies of the memorial were sent in 1900 from the Pabna Samiti.

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to other local samities or places. Most of the samities in turn sent these copies, duly signed by the members, to the Government by the end of 1900. From some places in Howrah slightly different petitions were sent. In some places, few educated persons refused to sign the memorial.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 16-18.}

This memorial is a very important document, providing us with the perceptions and demands of the Mahishya leaders at the initial stage of the movement. It was observed by the petitioners that there were two castes in Bengal, distinct in their origin and occupying very different positions in society who were commonly designated by the common name of Kaibartta. One of these two castes belonged to the class of fisherman, and was included among the low castes from whom the higher class Hindus such as Brahmins, Baidyas and as well as the members of the caste to which the petitioners belonged would not take water. The latter belonged to the community commonly designated by the names Kaibartta Das, Parasara Das, Mahishya Das etc. and had the same rights in Hindu society as the other high castes. The inclusion of the caste in the class of the Kaibarttas had considerably lowered the petitioners in the general estimation and created grave erroneous notions with regard to their social position. It was then argued that the members adopted their ancient class or caste name of Mahishya to avoid confusion in future in classifying them under the common and misleading name of Kaibartta. To provide Sastri evidence to their claim, reference was made to the acknowledgements of Lalmohan Vidyanidhi and two books, Mahishya Bibriti & Ambastha Darpan were submitted. It was ultimately prayed before the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, for issuing orders to the census officers in Bengal for inclusion of the Chasi Kaibarttas under the name Mahishya.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 72-74.}

The Census Superintendent of Bengal E. A. Gait, on receiving same petitions from different districts, sent a copy of the petition to district census officers. On 11\textsuperscript{th} November, 1900, a five-member-delegation of the community met Gait in Calcutta. Among the delegates were Trailokyanath Biswas and his elder son of Janbazar family of Rani Rasmoni, Hiralal Biswas of Nadia, Gopalchandra Sarkar of Pabna and
Pyarimohan Sikdar of Faridpur. Gopalchandra Sarkar was the spokesperson of the delegation.\(^{80}\)

Regarding the discussion with Gait, Gopalchandra Sarkar wrote in his book that Gait emphasized on the same origin of the Halik and Jalik Kaibarttas, as both shared the common name, Kaibartta and paid little attention to Sastric traditions. However he assured that separate enumeration would be done for the ‘Mahishya (Chasi Kaibarta)’.\(^{81}\)

The opponents of the Mahishya movement, on the basis of Manu’s Text and the legends associated with Ballal Sen, criticized the Mahishya leaders. To counter this, Trailokyanath Biswas of Janbazar secured a *vyabasthapatra* (opinion of pundits) from the Calcutta Sanskrit College, signed by the Principal of the College, Nilmoni Nyayalankar and some other pundits. Sudarshanchandra Biswas, another leader of the movement collected the existing *bhashpatras*, including the *bhashpatra* (mentioned earlier) obtained by Narahari Jana of Tajpur. All these opinions or authoritative decisions were sent to the Census Superintendent, Gait who in turn asked for further suggestions of pundits and requested the Maharaja of Nadia to take opinion on the pundits of Nabadwip.

At his request the Maharaja of Nadia secured the decision of the Nadia Pandits, who conceded the distinction between the fishing (Jalia) and the agricultural (Chasi) Kaivartas and the claim of the latter to the name Mahishya.\(^{82}\)

The prolonged efforts of the Mahishya leaders perhaps led Gait to remark in his Census Report (published in 1902):


The most vigorous of all agitations that arose in connection with the caste question was that of the Chasi Kaibarttas.\(^{83}\)

In the footnote he wrote:

The agitation was pursued with great energy, and in the 24-Parganas, Nadia, Midnapore and other districts, influential committees were formed to draw up petitions, to inform the lower classes of their community of their newly discovered status, and to urge them to return themselves as Mahisya at the census. They were allowed to do so, as Mahisya is a name assumed by no other modern caste and there was thus no risk of confusion. The so-called Mahisyas were all classed as Chasi Kaibartta in the course of tabulation.\(^{84}\)

It is clear from this opinion that the Chasi Kaibarttas were allowed to assume the name Mahishya, not on the basis of any Sastric justification, which was so fundamental to most of the caste movements seeking higher status. Gait was not willing to attach much importance to the decisions of “the colleges of pandits at Nabadvip and Benares”.

They support the pretensions of a few castes to a higher rank than has hitherto been accorded to them, but they do so, not on the ground that their position has improved, but by the fiction that their true origin has hitherto been misunderstood and by identifying them with some ancient caste of greater respectability than their own. In this way the Chasi Kaibarttas have obtained recognition from some of them as the representatives of the ancient Mahisya.\(^{85}\)

He in fact, doubted the Sastric arguments of the Mahishya agitators:

The Chasi Kaibarttas claim to be Mahisyas on the ground that they have been the same origin, and quote slokas from the *Padma Puran* and the *Brahma Vaivarta Puran*, in support of this claim. They have also succeeded in obtaining vyavasthas from some eminent pundits acquiescing in the desired

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identification. The *sloka* from the *Padma Puran*, however, is said not to be found in the ordinary editions and the quotation from the *Brahma Vaivartta Puran* is incomplete; the next *sloka* goes on to say; “but by their connection with the Tivars in the Kali Yuga they became fishermen and were fallen.” This passage, therefore, even if it supports the alleged origin of the Kaibarttas as a whole, disposes at the same time of the claim of the Chasi sub-caste to be distinct from the Jaliya, and also to rank higher than they do on the strength of their alleged descent, even if it be genuine. It is argued, however, by the opponents of the Mahishya movement that the whole passage is spurious, and does not occur in many trustworthy editions, such as that in the Sanskrit library at Benares.\(^{86}\)

Gait in his Report stuck to his view that both Chasi and Jaliya had common origin, which he expressed earlier during the discussion with the Mahishya delegation in 1900 (mentioned above). Despite his observation negating the Sastric claim of the Chasi Kaibarttas, Gait allowed separate enumeration of the Chasi Kaibarttas and gave them a higher position in the scale of social precedence than other groups of Kaibarttas. Here, it may be said that he only subscribed to an accomplished fact. In Appendix VII, on analysis of certain subcastes, of his Report, the Kaibarttas were divided into four sub-castes – Adi (North Bengal), Madhya or Haliya or Chasi (West, north and East Bengal), Anta or Jaliya or Machhi (West, North & East Bengal) and Das (West Bengal). It was noted that the Madhya was highest in rank and next came the Das, while the Machhis or Antas were regarded as the lowest. In North Bengal, the Adi ranked next to the Madhya. Intermarriage among them was absolutely forbidden on pain of excommunication, Commensality was also forbidden except in Howrah, where all the sub-castes could smoke together. No member of one sub-caste could gain admission to another, and each had a separate Panchayat.\(^{87}\) So the social division between the Chasi Kaibarttas and the other classes of Kaibarttas was quite distinct to the government, by 1901.


\(^{87}\) *Ibid.*, p.LIII.
Rajat Kanta Ray has opined:

The vigour of the agitation persuaded the Census Commissioner to enter separate columns for the Jalia and the Chasi Kaibartas and to allow the Chasi Kaibatatas to return themselves as Mahishyas.\(^{88}\)

It seems that apart from the agitation, the Census authority here also gave importance to the existing socio-economic differentiation between the two communities, which resulted from mobility of the Chasi Kaibarttas at a greater pace. In this census, the Census authority did not give much importance to the name Mahishya. But they took into consideration the existing socio-economic differentiation between two functional communities – the Chasi & Jaliya Kaibarttas. Though in the above mentioned Appendix VII, the claim of the Halia or Chasi ‘to be called Mahisya’ had been noted, the Appendix VI (Abstract of Caste Table, with some explanatory notes) simply referred to two castes of Bengal, both known as Kaibarta – Kaibaratta (Chasi or Halia) & Kaibartta (Jaliya) with separate occupations, cultivation and fishing.\(^{89}\)

Here another issue may be mentioned. Even in 1901, the Census authority was not still sure whether the Chasi Kaibarttas constituted a caste or a sub-caste. In the Appendix VI, they were considered a caste, while in the next appendix, i.e. Appendix VII, they were a sub-caste.

The adoption of new name was, however not free from trouble. It was said that in Mymensingh, many members of the caste withdrew their claim to the name Mahishya on its being stated that the word meant ‘pertaining to a Mahish’ (buffalo). In Nadia on the other hand the new title became so popular that many Mahishyas in domestic service under other castes quit their job saying it to be beneath their dignity. But, getting no other job, they had to return to their old service. In Nadia, some instances were reported where the higher caste, disapproving the agitation, refused to take water.

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from them. \(^\text{90}\) All these proved the importance of the movement both among the Chasi Kaibarttas and the opponents to the movement.

The Report of Gait created discontent among the Mahishya leaders. Though they were allowed to assume the name Mahishya, and given a better social position compared to the Jaliya Kaibartta, some of the comments in the census report did not go in their favour. They decided to protest against some of his opinions. By the time of publication of the Census Report of Bengal (1902), a central association of the Mahishyas was founded in Calcutta. Up to 1900, there was no such association of the Mahishyas and the leaders came from local organizations of different districts of Bengal, who tried to coordinate the movement. But need for a central association, operating from Calcutta was felt and in 1901 the Presidency Mahishya Samiti was founded, which became Bangiya Mahishya Samiti two years later (December, 1903). \(^\text{91}\) This central association was patronized by the educated and wealthy men of the Mahishya community -- Trailokyanath Biswas of Janbazar, Prakash Chandra Sarkar, pleader of the High Court, Ananta Ram Das, mukhtar of the High Court, Mahendranath Halder, editor of Sevika, Ishan Chandra Ray, pleader of Gaya, Sashi Bhushan Biswas, zamindar, Mahendranath Ray, pleader of the High Court etc. Both the president Trailokyanath Biswas and the Secretary of the Samiti, Narendra Nath Das, were zamindars. Many existing local associations came under the Central Samiti, which also opened new branches. The Presidency Mahishya Samiti took up the issue for protesting against the Report of Gait. To discuss the future course of action a big conference was organized by the Samiti, which was the first general meeting of the Samiti. It was decided at the meeting that a petition would be sent to the Census Commissioner of India, protesting against the adverse comments of the Census Superintendent against the community. Gopalchandra Sarkar drafted the large petition in 1903, which was signed by 72 members of the Presidency Mahishya Samiti of Bengal, belonging to various strata of the educated Mahishya Samaj. The first signatory was Raja Kali Prasanna Gajendra Mahapatra. Interestingly, at that time the Census Commissioner was Gait himself, against whose comments as the Census

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\(^{90}\) Ibid., p.380.

Superintendent in Bengal, the petition was made.\(^92\) So the petitioners began the memorial by stating:

> Your memorialists humbly pray that you will be pleased to modify the opinions, you have stated in the Bengal Report, should the facts and reasons, which they take the liberty before you, be deemed deserving of consideration.\(^93\)

It was argued in the memorial that the *sloka* of the *Brahmavaivarttapurana*, which was considered spurious by the opponents of the Mahishya movement, as noted by Gait, did exist in the manuscript copies of the *Purana* in the library of the Benares College as well as in other old manuscript copies to be found in Bengal, Orissa and Bombay. Pandit Mahendra Nath Tattvanidhi, the Editor of *Sevika* wrote a letter to A. Venis, Principal, Government College, Benares regarding the existence of the *sloka* in the *Brahmavaivarttapurana*. Venis, in his letter dated January 8, 1903, confirmed its existence. The letter was published in *Sevika* (1310 B.S.)\(^94\) This letter was referred to by the petitioners. Besides, the interpretation of the *sloka* that, by their connection with the Tibars, the Chasi kaibarttas became fishermen and fallen, was stated to be erroneous. They also denied that their Brahmanas were generally degraded and the Chasi kaibarttas did not take food in the house of their priests.\(^95\)

Thus they questioned in the memorial, the justification of inclusion of the Chasi Kaibarttas in Group IV of the list of social precedence in the Census Report. However, regarding their non-Aryan origin, assumed in the Report, what they stated, is commendable and deserves special mention:

> Judging by the light of historical evidence alone, and ignoring altogether the authority of the Hindu Shastras, it would, in the opinion of your memorialists, be extremely difficult to prove satisfactorily that, not to speak of Kayasthas,

Navashaks and other mixed castes, the numerous groups of Brahmins in this country, whether Rarhi, Barendra or Vaidik, are of true Aryan descent. What results may be disclosed by anthropometric tests, your memorialists cannot venture to guess; but judging by outward appearance or the test of physiognomy, and by standard of intellectual development, your memorialists may say, without the fear of contradiction by the people of other castes in this country who are said to be of Aryan origin, that the Chasi Kaivarttas have as good a claim to Aryan blood as the others have. If Shastric authority be alone relied upon, then your memorialists have a better claim to be recognised as being of Aryan descent than many other Sudra castes.  

This opinion of the members of the Presidency Mahishya Samiti clearly illustrates their perception in justifying their search for an Aryan or twice-born identity through the Mahishya movement. In their endeavor, they looked for Sastric justification abiding by the dominant perception of the then society:

In all questions concerning caste and other institutions in society the opinions of the Pandits of the old school in this country are still regarded as the final authority. Your memorialists have collected the opinions (the Bhashpatras or authoritative decisions) of the several schools of Pandits of this country.

At the same time they were aware that socio-economic status also played an important role in ascertaining caste status, which varied regionally and there existed wide economic differentiation within a caste in the same locality:

That the position in society of all the Sudra castes, Kayasthas not excepted, depends very much on their circumstances in life. …Not only Nabashaks but poor Kayasthas also serve as domestic servants of Chasi Kaibarttas in many places as well as of rich Nabashaks. On the other hand Chasi Kaivarttas also serve the Kayasthas in the capacity of servants. …Society allows all this, because it cannot help doing so. There is as wide a gulf between the rich Kayastha zemindars and high officials or professional men on the one hand and …the Kayastha hawkers of Calcutta, as between the historic houses of Tamlook, Suja Mutha, Turka & c., in Midnapore and the poor Mahishya

96 Ibid., pp.115-116.
97 Ibid., p. 104
cultivators who were their tenants. Not only in different districts, but in different parts of the same district, no particular Sudra caste can be said to possess the same position in society. The Navashaks do not occupy and they have never occupied a higher position in society than the Chasi Kaivarttas in all the districts we have already named. ...They and the Chasi Kaivarttas and in many places the Kayasthas are feasted at one and the same time, and not one after another. This is one of the crucial tests recognised in Hindu society with regard to the precedence of castes. But this fact does not seem to have been considered by the members of the caste-precedence committee of Bengal during the last census, in assigning the position of the caste to which your memorialists belong, with respect to that of the Navashaks.  

The petition was sent to the government on 10\textsuperscript{th} July, 1903. In response to this petition, the Samiti was informed a few months later, that as the Census Report had been published, no change in the Report was possible.  

However by this time difference of opinions within the Mahishya community came to surface, which was indicative of socio-economic differentiation of the community. According to Rajat Kanta Ray, the movement became divided at a conference called together at Subadi by local zamindars of Midnapur, between those who claimed Vaisya status for the Mahishyas and those who were content with a clean Sudra status. He has described from Indranarayan Jana’s \textit{Subadi Mahishya Sabha} (Subadi, Midnapur, 1912) that Ashutosh Jana, a Mahishya scientist trained in America, opened the session by reading a paper recommending the adoption of the Vaisya rites by the Mahishya community. The local high-born conservative Kaibarttas did not attend the meeting, pleading illness. 

The samajpatis and big zamindars belonging to the traditional elite, opposed the attempt of the emerging educated Mahishya zamindars, landholders, lawyers and journalists to claim Vaisya status. The prosperous Mahishya farmers who managed cultivation and marketing of the produce through servants, however, took to their new identity with avidity. To elevate their caste status, they forbade their poorer caste members from taking part in the feastings and other Vaisya rituals.

\begin{flushright}
99 \textit{Ibid.}, p.46.
\end{flushright}
brethren to personally sell their products in the market. It was not possible for the latter for economic constraints. Some of the poor peasants even preferred to remain as simple Chasi kaibartta, which created the possibility of a differentiation between the Chasi kaibarttas and the Mahishyas. Indicating to this the Census Superintendent of Bengal in 1911 noted that among the Chasi Kaibarttas, the more advanced and better educated ones claimed superior status and returned themselves as Mahishya. The prosperous agriculturists and the professional men however had sufficient influence to carry the whole community with them and the split within the community on the issue of the new designation did not occur.

The Mahishya leaders took some measures beforehand in the Census of 1911. This time they emphasized, apart from other issues that their Brahmans should not be regarded as Barna Brahmanas or degraded Brahmans. Both in Castes and Tribes of Bengal by H.H. Risley and in Hindu Caste and Sects by J.N. Bhattacharya, the Brahmans of the Kaibarttas of Midnapore were mentioned as ‘vyasokta’. This was protested in several Mahishya tracts, such as Mahishya o Mahishyayaji Gauradya Brahman Parichay (Khari, 24 Parganas, January 1911) by Trailokyanath Haldar, Bangiya Mahishya Purohit (Habashpur, Faridpur, October 1912) by Sudarshanchandra Biswas, Bhranti-Bijaya (Howrah, Andul, 1917) by Harishchandra Chakrabarti. The latter writer, who was himself a Gauradya Vaidik Brahman contended that the priests of the Mahishyas (the Mahishyayaji Brahmans) were ‘Gauradya Vaidik Brahmans’ or early Brahmans of Bengal, who preceded the Kanaujia Brahmans. The ‘Gauradya Vaidik Brahmans’ were pure Brahmans, who only officiated the Mahishyas, a twice-born caste, belonging to the Vaishya varna.

In the previous Census Report, the Mahishyas were said to have degraded Brahmans. This was the main reason for their being included in Group IV, despite their jalacharaniya status, as Group III was comprised of jalacharaniya castes (clean Sudras) with good Brahmans. It was said in the Report that the Brahmans of the

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Mahishyas were more degraded than those of the Goalas, who were also included in Group IV. Evidently, in the perception of Mahishya leaders the status of their Brahmans was required to be raised, if the Mahishyas needed a better social status or the twice-born status. A twice-born caste must have pure Brahmans, according to the religious texts. As there was no polarization between the Brahmans and the non-Brahmans in Bengal, unlike Western India and the Madras Presidency, which saw the non-Brahman movement, the Mahishyas could not spare their Brahmans. In the Mahishya movement, the question of status of their Brahmans, thus remained very significant from the very beginning. On the other hand, the ‘Gauradya Vaidik Brahmans’ (the priests of the Mahishyas) also needed the status of their client elevated, in their effort to bring up their own status among the Brahmans. Thus the status mobility movement of both castes came to depend on each other. Each assisted the other in claiming higher status. Pandit Mahendra Nath Tattwanidhi, the Editor of Sevika in a letter No. 1165, dated November 6, 1901 drew the attention of the Bengal Government to the pure status of the priests of the Mahishyas. L.E.B. Cobden Ramsey, Under-Secretary to the Government of Bengal forwarded the letter on November 13, 1901, together with the copy of the Sevika for the month of Ashwin,1308 B.S. enclosed therein dealing with the question of the purity of the priests of the Mahishya caste, to the Census Superintendent of Bengal. In the above mentioned petition (1903) a lot of arguments were made to prove that the priests of the community were not patit or degraded, unlike the Brahmans of the Jaliya Kaibarttas. It was said that in the case of anyone of the Mahishya priests, serving the Jaliya Kaibarttas, he would surely be boycotted by the members of his own community as well as by the Mahishyas. The Mahishya priests still possessed Brahmattor lands (lands donated to the Brahmans) granted to their ancestors by the Raj families of Natore and Nadia, as well as by many other Brahmin zamindars in the province. But no priest of the Jaliya Kaivarttas could point to a single instance of any such grant of land having made to his ancestors. On the eve the census operations of 1911 renewed attempts were made in this direction along with other issues.

In a long letter dated, 31st December, 1910, Narendra Nath Das, the Secretary, Bangiya Mahishya Samiti, wrote to L. S. S. O’Malley, the Superintendent of Census Operations, Bengal for his ‘kind consideration’ of ‘the following points’:

a) About issue of distinct orders to District Officers for returning Chasi Kaibarttas as Mahishyas as done in the previous Census.

b) About provision for separate heading “Mahishya” in the abstract final tables which will be published hereafter with reports,

c) The priests of the Mahishyas are not degraded Brahmins (Barna Bipras) like those of Goalas, Sunris & c. but they are ancient settlers of Bengal long before the migration of Rarhi Brahmins.  

To justify the first two points, the Secretary reiterated the views of separate origin of two classes of Kaibarttas, one of whom was pure and possesses a higher social status, and the other was impure. Both had descended from quite different parents – the pure Kaibarttas or Mahishyas, from a Kshatriya father and a Vaisya mother, and the impure Kaibarttas or Jaliya, from a Nishad father and a Ayogabi mother. As regards the last point, he stated the reason for degradation of the Mahishya priests:

…the priests of the Mahishyas, as is well known, are Drabir Baidik Brahmins, who form a separate class by themselves having come to Rarh country long before the advent of the Kanauj or Rarhi Brahmins about the time of Maharaja Adisur, and they being the ancient settlers of Bengal; but they were thrown into the back ground by the advent of the above Kanauj Brahmins, and afterwards ostracized in society because of their unwillingness to submit to the authority of the newcomers.  

While negating the view of degradation of their priest, he found no fault with degradation of the priests of other castes:

It is an undeniable fact that these Brahmins are the family priests only of the Mahishyas who were described in the Bishnu Puran as Semi-Kshatriya caste,

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as Saraswat Brahmins act as priests to the Kshatriyas only, while the priests of all the low castes, otherwise called ‘Barna-Brahmins’ came from Rarhi Brahmins and they are rightly designated as such.\textsuperscript{106}

However, he pointed out the fallacy of a jalacharaniya caste being served by Barna Brahmins because such a caste could not have degraded Brahmins and vice versa as per Sastric rules:

Had these Brahmins been degraded, the Mahishyas who partake of food cooked by their Priests … would not have been clean castes, whose waters are drinkable by all good Brahmins, whether Rarhi, Barendra or otherwise. Those who officiate as priests to a caste from whose hands good Brahmins do take water can never be stigmatized as ‘degraded’ in society.\textsuperscript{107}

He concluded the letter with the request:

To exclude the priests of Mahishyas from the category of Barnabipras after considering the arguments fully and logically and impartially as set forth in the annexed Extracts from ‘Bhranti-Bijoy’, a short history of the Brahmins of Bengal, edited by Harish Chandra Chakrabarty and ‘Mahishya Prokash’ by Babu Prokash Chandra Sarkar, Vakil, High Court, Calcutta.\textsuperscript{108}

O’Malley was gave a quick and short reply to this letter from the Secretary of the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti, which he referred to as the ‘Central Mahishya Samiti’. In the letter, dated 3\textsuperscript{rd} January, 1911, he wrote to the Secretary of the Samiti:

With reference to your letter of the 31\textsuperscript{st} December, 1910, I have the honour to say that the District Census Officers are being informed that there is no objection to Chasi Kaibarttas entering themselves as Mahishya on the occasion of the census.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., pp. 465-466.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., p. 467.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., p. 467.
As regards the Brahmans who officiate as priests to the Mahishyas I have the honour to inform you that, Brahmans of all classes will be entered in the Census schedules simply as Brahmans.\textsuperscript{109}

This letter shows that while O'Malley was unwilling to comment on the origin and social status of the Mahishyas and their priests, his steps hardly left them dissatisfied. But the Mahishya leaders came to face problems from other corners. The Jaliya Kaibarttas and the Patnis publicly tried to be returned in the Census of 1911 as the Mahishyas. The Patnis were, according to the Appendix VI of the Bengal Census Report, 1901, a caste, originally Doms, with more than 63,000 members, chiefly found in East Bengal and by profession they were fishermen. It was said here that in Rangpur the Patnis were basket makers. In Backergunge and Kuch Bihar, ‘they are ferrymen and look up fishing as a degrading occupation.’\textsuperscript{110}

Previously many such groups, particularly the Jalia Kaibarttas attempted to get returned as Chasi Kaibarttas secretly and the Mahishya leaders were aware of that. In the above mentioned memorial (1903) they stated that in the Eastern districts of Bengal, many families of Jaliya Kaibarttas who had adopted agriculture as their profession attempted to pass for, and they did not know if the Jalia Kaibarttas had succeeded in getting themselves returned as Mahishyas or Chasi Kaibarttas.\textsuperscript{111} To refrain the Jaliya Kaibarttas and the Patnis from calling themselves Mahishyas, a case was filed in Pabna, where the judge on the basis of evidence of some other higher castes decided against such claims.\textsuperscript{112}

Rampada Biswas, the Editor of \textit{Mahishya Samaj} in its first issue (1317 B.S.) wrote on the duties of the Mahishyas in the upcoming census (1911) and cautioned against the attempts of the Jaliya Kaibarttas to be returned as the Mahishyas in the census.\textsuperscript{113}

\begin{itemize}
\item[109] \textit{Ibid.}, p. 469.
\item[112] Satyaranjan Biswas, \textit{Mahishya Andolaner Itihas},(Calcutta, 1395 B.S.), pp.59-60.
\item[113] \textit{Mahishya Samaj}, No. I, 1317 B.S., pp. 1-12.
\end{itemize}
Some members of the Jaliya Kaibartta established the ‘Calcutta Mahishya Samiti’, Secretary of which, Radha Nath Das sent a letter to L.S.S. O’Malley, dated February 19, 1911 requesting him to return all Kaibarttas under the general heading as Mahishya. On receiving it, in a letter dated, February 23, 1911, O’Malley informed the Secretary, Central Mahishya Samiti, i.e., Bangiya Mahishya Samiti that he had received a memorial from the Secretary of the Calcutta Mahishya Samiti and requested him to inform whether this Samiti was connected with his Samiti and whether the Calcutta Mahishya Samiti represented the interests of the same community. Evidently, Calcutta Mahishya Samiti of the Jaliya Kaibarttas requested for something against which the Chasi Kaibartta leaders of the Mahishya movement fought so far. The Secretary of the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti was quick to reply the letter on the very next day, informing the Census Superintendent that:

…the Calcutta Mahishya Samiti, which you referred to, is in no way connected with the ‘Central Mahishya Samiti’, Bengal (Bangiya Mahishya Samiti) and it does not represent the interests of the community to which we (Chasi Kaibarttas) belong.

We strongly protest against the request of the ‘so called’ Calcutta Mahishya Samiti to return all Kaibarttas under one general heading Mahishya, which will be highly prejudicial, objectionable and will deeply wounds the feelings of the Mahishya community formerly known as Chasi Kaibarttas.

It may not be out of place to mention here, for your information that some of the ‘Jelia Kaibarttas’ as I come to learn, induced out of a malicious spirit by a few members of the other communities, are trying to mislead the Government, and the general public, by recently setting on foot a curious movement, the object of which is to get the Jelia Kaibarttas also returned as Mahishyas.114

Consequently, O’Malley informed the Secretary of Calcutta Mahishya Samiti that his request could not be met as the use of the term Mahishya was confined to the Chasi Kaibarttas. By this time, the Patnis also sent a letter to O’Malley with the similar

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request. On their behalf, Uma Prasanna Das stated that the chief occupation of the Patnis was cultivation and therefore they should be treated as the Chasi Kaibarttas and be placed under the category of the Mahishya. O’Malley refused to do so on the ground that no proof was produced to show that the Patnis and the Chasi Kaibarttas formed one and the same caste.\textsuperscript{115}

The view of the Census Superintendent expressed in these letters, points to the understanding of the government that the name Mahishya, could not be used by other castes as it was first adopted by the Chasi Kaibarttas; besides, the Jalia Kaibarttas or any other Kaibarttas could not call themselves by that name as they were not identical with the caste of the Chasi Kaibarttas, though they shared the name, Kaibartta. Thus by 1911 the Government became more conscious of a separate caste identity of the Chasi Kaibarttas and the Mahishya movement did play a significant role in developing such perception.

In the Census of 1921 the Jaliya Kaibarttas again tried to return themselves as Mahishyas and here the Patnis were more active. Rampada Biswas, a pleader and the former Editor of \textit{Mahishya Samaj} cautioned the Mahishyas against such attempts. He pointed out that some educated people in East Bengal instigated the Patnis and others and publicly propagated in their favour.\textsuperscript{116} The Mahishya leaders came to know that the Jalia Kaibarttas and the Patnis obtained \textit{vyavasthapatras} and were preparing to appeal to the Census Superintendent, W. H. Thompson to be considered as the Mahishyas. Sudarshanchandra Biswas wrote a tract, criticizing this attempt. In an article in the \textit{Mahishya Samaj} he gave detailed arguments against the claim of the Patnis and commented that the attempts of the Patnis would create a social revolution by degrading the Mahishyas from the status of a \textit{jalacharaniya} pure caste.\textsuperscript{117} The Jalia Kaibarttas and the Patnis in Assam already sent a petition to the Government for inclusion as the Mahishyas. Pyari Mohan Das, the Secretary of the Mahishya Samiti at Sonamganj wrote a protest letter. The District Magistrate of Sylhet, J. Hezlett wrote in reply that he did not think that the Jalia Kaibarttas and the Patnis would be allowed

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\item \textsuperscript{115} Satyaranjan Biswas, \textit{Mahishya Andolaner Itihas}, (Calcutta, 1395 B.S.), p. 129.
\item \textsuperscript{116} \textit{Mahishya Samaj}, Vol. X, No. I &II, 1327 B. S., pp. 3 - 5.
\item \textsuperscript{117} \textit{Mahishya Samaj}, Vol. X, No. V &VI, 1327 B. S., pp. 33 – 39.
\end{itemize}
to style themselves as the Mahishyas in the coming census. Under these circumstances, the Secretary of the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti, Narendra Nath Das and the Editor of the Samiti’s magazine *Mahishya Samaj*, Pandit Sebananda Bharati and other leaders decided to write about this matter to the Governor of Bengal, Lord Ronaldshay. On behalf of the Samiti, Sebananda Bharati sent a ‘humble memorial of the Mahishyas of Bengal and Assam’ dated June, 23, 1920 to Lord Ronaldshay to show:

1. That Chasi Kaibartta is the only local name or term for the Mahishya of western and northern Bengal Districts and Das and Halik Das are the only two names for the Eastern Bengal Districts and the District of Sylhet, in Assam. …

2. That the Mahishyas as a class worked and are working for the welfare of the Community in deep loyalty to Government for which they have become an eye-sore to many interested people in creating enthusiasm for putting obstacles in the way of development in the country.

3. That the Jalia Kaibarttas and Patnis are both fishermen and boatmen and are unclean, and as such are low Hindu castes and at whose hands no member of good castes of the Hindus, namely the Brahmins, Kayasthas, Vaidyas, Mahishyas and Nabasakhas can take a drink of water without losing his caste and that caste matter is religious and serious with the Hindus.

4. That the said interested people have managed to bring these fishermen and boatmen under their clutches and set them against the Mahishyas by way of retaliation for their political attitude and this is one of some methods to overawe people.

5. That being then backed, the Patnis and Jalia Kaibarttas are preparing to memorialize the Government to be enumerated as Mahishyas in the coming census and they have already memorialized in Assam. A copy of D.O. reply of the District magistrate of Sylhet to the protest memorial of Babu Pyari
In the memorial among other things, two points need to be emphasized – first, the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti was agitating with close association with the Mahishya Samitis in Assam and second, it was ‘working for the welfare of the Community in deep loyalty to Government.’ The petitioners concluded the memorial by appealing the Governor not to allow the the Patnis and Jalia Kaibarttas to style themselves as Mahishyas and thus ‘save the Mahishya community from disgrace and humiliation’. However, the memorial was forwarded from the Government’s office to the Census Superintendent for disposal. The Private Secretary of the Governor requested the petitioners to address the Census Superintendent for any further correspondence on the subject. Accordingly, Sebananda Bharati stared correspondence with the Census Superintendent, W. H. Thompson who assured them that no change would be made from the arrangement of the previous census. Thompson in a letter dated, September, 13, 1920 informed the former that the use of the words ‘Mahishya or Chasi Kaibartta’ and also the necessity of distinguishing between these persons and Jalia Kaibarttas and Patnis had been prescribed in a Caste Index, which was being printed and distributed to the census staff.

The Mahishya leaders, however, wanted to omit the name Chasi Kaibartta, retaining only Mahishya in the Census Schedule. On the other hand, Thompson opined that it was impracticable to attempt to eliminate the term Chasi Kaibartta from the schedule and substitute the term Mahishya as the former was by far the commoner term, in general use even by the majority of the community itself. Contradicting this observation, Sebananda Bharati wrote to him in a letter, dated November 17, 1920 that it was not the fact that the term Chasi Kaibartta was by far the commoner term in general use than that of Mahishya; because the former was being used in Western districts of Bengal only, whereas in the Northern, Central and Eastern Bengal and in Assam, different local names were in use such as Halik Kaibarttas, Parasar Das, Das, Halua Das and Sudra Das (in Assam). But throughout all the parts of Bengal and

Assam there was only one common term Mahishya in general use. He pointed out that about twenty years ago having assembled in one general meeting at Calcutta from different parts of Bengal, the leading members representing the community passed resolutions and petitioned the Government to be known and styled by one common term ‘Mahishya’, which had after a great deal of enquiries, obtained the approval of the Government, (vide the Government Resolution No. 3435 dated July 14, 1913, published along with the Bengal Census Report, 1911). Since then the members of the community hardly used the former term, Chasi Kaibartta, either in speaking or writing. In view of these developments he requested Thompson to substitute the term Mahishya in place of Chasi Kaibartta in the census schedules and final tables, as it was being done in the case of the Namasudra, which had been formerly described as Chandal in the Census Tables of 1891 and 1901. Thompson, however, instructed the district officers to record the term Mahishya in the Census Schedule whenever it was claimed by the concerned person to be returned as his caste.  

Thompson made arrangements for a separate name for the Jalia Kaibarttas in the census. In a letter dated February 8, 1921, he informed the Editor of Mahishya Samaj that he did not propose to admit the entry of Mahishya for Jalia Kaibarttas or Patnis but was permitting Jalia Kaibarttas to enter as Adi-Kaibarttas.  

The Patnis being refused to return as Mahishya, appealed to call themselves as Lupta Mahishya. Thompson wrote in a letter dated April 18, 1921 to the Editor of Mahishya Samaj that he proposed to mention in the Census Report without comment on its correctness the claim of the Patnis to be called Lupta Mahishya. The Mahishya leaders opposed to it in a meeting in Calcutta and sent a letter, with the proceedings to Thompson. He replied that the claim of the Patnis to be known as Lupta Mahishyas would be mentioned only in the Census Report, not in the Census Schedule as Patni (Lupta Mahishya). The leaders were not satisfied with this response.

121 Ibid., pp. 91-93.
122 Gopalchandra Sarkar, Mahishya-Namoddharer Itibritta, (First published in 1928, Reprint, Calcutta: Bangiya Mahishya Samiti, 1405 B.S.), pp. 63-64.
In fact during the period 1920-21, exchange of letters between the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti and the Census Superintendent went on. Thompson, in his Census Report particularly referred to the strenuous efforts of the Mahishya leaders to discuss the characteristics of the return of caste among the Hindus:

But the leaders of all but the highest castes frankly looked upon the census as an opportunity for pursuing and perhaps obtaining some recognition of social claims which were denied by persons of castes higher than their own. This was however, no sign of general revolt against the caste system. None made any suggestion of social equality for all. Each individual community was clamant to obtain a step upwards on the ladder of society, but it was equally insistent that those stand below it, should not be permitted to do the same thing. This was particularly noticeable in the attitude of the Chasi Kaibarttas. At the last census their claim to use the term Mahisyas as a caste name was acceded to, and their energies on this occasion were devoted to ensuring that such castes as the Jalia Kaibarttas, Patnis, and others, who claimed to use the same term or a variant of it, should not be permitted to do so.\footnote{\textit{Census of India, 1921, Vol. V, Part. I, Report, (Calcutta, 1923), p. 346.}}

Thompson gave a list of claims of certain caste names, most strongly pressed by the castes in this census. This list showed that apart from the Chasi Kaibarttas, the name Mahishya was claimed by the Jalia Kaibarttas, Patnis and Tiyars (fishermen). Thompson mentioned in the list that the Patnis also claimed to be Lupta Mahishya. This issue was previously discussed by him with the Mahishya leaders. Probably the Patnis could not be restrained from secretly returning themselves as the Mahishyas. Their number decreased, particularly in Mymensingh compared to that of 1911. Thompson remarked that a number of them in Mymensingh concealed their true caste and were returned as the Mahishyas.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 358.} In this list another interesting point is that both the Jalia Kaibarttas and Tiyars, apart from claiming the name Mahishya, also claimed to be Rajbanshi. They were denied to use any of these caste names. The number of the Tiyars, like the Patnis also decreased in 1921. Thompson noted that a movement of dissatisfaction with their position had been started among them of recent
years and individuals seemed to have returned themselves as the Mahishya and the Rajbansi, instead of using their current caste name.\textsuperscript{125}

Thus it may be said that in spite of their long sincere efforts, during the census operation of 1921 the Mahishya leaders were not successful in resisting infiltration of members of other castes within their fold. Such infiltration was also common in the case of the Kayasthas, the Sadgops etc. However a new caste name, Adi Kaibartta had been admitted to the Jalia Kaibarttas, which was added in brackets after the old name, in the census report.\textsuperscript{126} This matter was also previously discussed by Thompson with the Mahishya leaders.

But the Jalia Kaibarttas did not remain happy with their new name. In the Census of 1931, despite the attempts of the Mahishya leaders and official orders, they continue to return themselves as Mahishyas, which was evident from their declining number. Compared to 1921, their number decreased by 8.3 per cent in 1931. The Census Superintendent of Bengal in 1931, A.E. Porter observed that this decline was certainly due to the claim of many members of the caste to be recorded as the Mahishyas whose number on the other hand increased, undoubtedly including a number of Jalia Kaibarttas who took to cultivation and for that or some other reasons had secured their return as the Mahishyas in the Census of 1931.\textsuperscript{127}

Apart from them, like the previous census, some members of the Patnis and other fishing castes, who became cultivators, claimed to be entitled to use the name Mahishya. By successful evasion of the restriction on the use of the name, they came to be included in that community, though strongly resented by the Mahishya leaders.

In 1931, some of the Mahishya leaders gave more emphasis on their Kshatriya status than the Vaisya status. The Mahishyas, being descended from the \textit{anuloma} marriage between a Kshatriya father and Vaisya mother, the Mahishya leaders were not unanimous regarding their \textit{varna} status. We have already noted that at the earlier

\textsuperscript{125} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 360.
\textsuperscript{126} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 348-349.
stage of the movement Vaisya status was preferred to pure Sudra status. Later the claim for Vaisya status became popular, which was essential for claiming twice-born origin. Harish Chandra Chakrabarti, who belonged to the caste of Gauradya Brahmans (the priests of the Mahishyas) and played an important role in the Mahishya movement, in the book *Bhranti-Bijaya*, edited and published him, stated that the Mahishyas were Vaisyas on account of their mother’s *varna*. Regarding the issue, A.E. Porter observed:

The claim which appeared for the first time at the present census in the case of the Mahishyas, was to be recorded as Kshattriyas or Mahishya Kshattriyas. …Their claim to Kshattriya status rests upon the traditional derivation of their caste said to exist in sacred writings in which they were represented as the offspring of a Kshattriya father and a Vaisya mother. In 1901 and so far as I know until the present census they have claimed to be Vaisyas and this is the status which their priests of the Gaudadya Brahmans also claim for them. …The movement is young and professed to find an identification of the Mahishyas with the *Mahesris* of Maharashtra and the *Maheswaris* of Rajputana. It is not an agitation which has received the considered opinion of the caste association although considerable numbers of printed applications were received from districts all emanating from the same press and evidently distributed to branches of same organization.

It may be said here that the search for higher *varna* status than the earlier one, after three decades of agitation, indicated the persistence of twice-born status in the society.

However, in the Census of 1931, the name ‘Chasi Kaibartta’ was entirely dropped in favour of simply ‘Mahishya’. In 1901 they were returned either as ‘Chasi Kaibartta’ or ‘Kaibartta (Chasi or Halia)’, though their claim to the title Mahishya was referred to in the Census Report. In the Census Report of 1921 saw the ‘Chasi Kaibartta (Mahisya)’ while in 1931 it was ‘Mahishya’ only. And in this process the Mahishya movement played a determining role, though much to the disappointment of the

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Mahishya leaders even in 1931 the Census authority was disinclined to consider that the Mahishyas were of separate origin from that of the Jaliya Kaibarttas:

It is unnecessary to recapitulate the history of this caste which is of the same origin and derivation as the Jalia Kaibarttas and was known as the Chasi Kaibartta on first differentiating itself from them. It is sufficient to state that they have succeeded in establishing as a different caste from the Jalia Kaibarttas and that they have secured the official recognition by Government of the caste name by which they appear in the present reports.\(^\text{130}\)

The Mahishya leaders were well aware of the fact that without socio-economic or educational advancement of their community, a mere claim to respectable caste status could hardly fulfill their aspirations. They attempted to organize a broader movement for socio-economic welfare of the community and called upon its members to become self sufficient and self reliant. Several organizations were started either by the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti or by individual initiatives at local levels for promotion of self reliance. The Bangiya Mahishya Samiti, while claiming a higher social status, stressed the virtues of agricultural work. Its magazine, *Mahishya Samaj* published articles on the government’s agrarian policies, methods of improving agricultural production. Emphasis was also given to commercial and industrial enterprises. To provide investing opportunity for the members and to promote agriculture, commerce and industry among the Mahishyas, the ‘Mahishya Banking and Trading Company Limited’ was established by Gaganchandra Biswas, one of the presidents of the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti. This company was registered under Company’s Act of 1882 and it had a capital of rupees one lac, divided into 10,000 shares. It had started working for economic welfare of the community, since 1903, with Gaganchandra Biswas, as the Managing Director.\(^\text{131}\) The Samiti got financial support from the Company.

Apart from the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti and its branches in several districts, many local Mahishya samitis took some steps at reforming social customs and spread of education. Sebananda Bharati, the Editor of *Mahishya Samaj* emphasized on the need


for spread of education, promotion of agriculture, industry and commerce for social uplift of the community. He stated that some schools *(pathsala and chatuspathi)* were founded recently. For the education of the priests of the Mahishyas a ‘Brahmacharya Ashram’ was founded at the home the Secretary of the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti, Narendra Nath Das in Calcutta.\(^\text{132}\) Manmatha Nath Biswas, a member stressed on organized effort for promotion of education, on the part of the Samiti, in the absence of individual initiative and suggested that a free institution and boarding school be established. The Secretary proposed to create a fund for it. The *Mahishya Samaj* stated many small schools were established. It was observed that the Barkhali Minor School was founded by the local Mahishyas in the village of Barkhali, Diamond Harbour, 24-Parganas, five or six years ago. The school was receiving grant-in-aid of rupees 18, annually from the Government and financial assistance from local educated Mahishyas.\(^\text{133}\)

Prakash Chandra Sarkar, a pleader and an important leader of the movement argued that lack of education mainly caused the decline of the community from its old status and every member of the community should take part in promotion of education. He appealed to every educated Mahishyas to support the proposal (bill) of free school education of Gokhale, which he submitted to the Viceroy.\(^\text{134}\) Mahendra Nath Tattwanidhi, the Editor of *Mahishya-Bandhab* suggested that libraries be established in districts and villages to facilitate education in the community.\(^\text{135}\)

Gopalchandra Sarkar, who was an Inspector of Schools, wrote that nobody would disagree that development of a community was dependent on growth of education, without which the Mahishya movement would not be successful.\(^\text{136}\)


Though there was unanimity regarding the necessity for promotion of education, conflict of opinions surfaced as regards appropriation of Brahmanical or upper caste cultural norms. The ‘sanskritizing’ efforts of the Mahishyas resulted only in some selective appropriations. There was intense debate on duration of days of mourning particularly in Midnapore. Previously the Chasi Kaibarttas generally observed thirty days of mourning, as the other Sudra castes. With the claim of Mahishya title and Vaisya status, there emerged a need to reduce the days of mourning to fifteen days. But many members of the community were hesitant to give up their traditional custom. In Mahishya-Bandhab (Jaistha, 1319 B.S.) Probodhananda Saraswati commenting on the issue stated that it was not at all desirable to weaken the Mahishya movement over it. If one claimed to be a Mahishya, he needed to observe the Sastric regulations associated with it. He favoured fifteen-day mourning for the Mahishyas. Both the editors of Mahishya Samaj and Mahishya-Bandhab supported fifteen-day mourning. Similar problem arose over taking the sacred thread. The Mahishyas, claiming a twice-born origin, were entitled to the sacred thread. But most of them were reluctant to adopt it. There was also controversy over other social issues, such as changing titles, promotion of marriages and social interaction between different sections of the community, residing in different parts of Bengal, etc.

However, the attitude of the Mahishya leaders toward the women’s question was quite complex. Some of them maintained zeal for uplifting the status of the community and combined it with pleas for improving the lot of women within it. Some on the other hand favoured imposing tighter restrictions on their womenfolk in imitation of Brahmanical norms or extending gender control.

In pre-colonial colonial Bengal, generally the high caste women were subjected to the Brahmanical gender code. During the colonial period, due to spread of education, efforts of the state and the indigenous intelligentsia, the position of women improved to some extent. However, more and more people belonging to the middle and lower strata of the society, during the period, came to have a detailed knowledge about the upper caste models of womanhood and ritual behaviour, leading to universalising of traditional gender codes. As Brahmanic or upper caste models were the referral points

for respectable social behaviour, the socially mobile castes in the colonial period tried to emulate these. Consequently they also try to follow the Brahmanical codes of marriage and patriarchy having distinctive impact on the status of their women. Adherence to the rules of Brahmanical patriarchy now became a symbol of status for an increasing number of socially mobile groups. We discuss the impact of the Mahishya movement in the context of an increased tendency on the part of the middle peasant and trading castes to reproduce Brahmanical gender codes within their communities.

The Mahishya leaders were particularly aware that respectability of their womenfolk, in terms of upper caste gender code was essential for their status mobility movement. Here we may specifically mention a comment of Gait in determining the social status of the Mahishyas in the Census Report of Bengal, 1901. Gait noted among other things that ‘their women do not usually observe Jatyachar.’\(^{138}\) Gait did not explain the term Jatyachar, but it seems that he took the term from his upper caste Bengali assistants and it possibly meant the upper caste patriarchal gender code. The observation of Gait clearly indicated the necessity for strict adherence to that code in the then social estimation. The Mahishya leaders responded to this comment in an expected manner. They emphasised that their women tried to conform to the respectable social behaviour of high caste women, as far as possible. In the memorial (mentioned earlier) to the Census Commissioner in 1903 they argued:

> What is meant by Jatyachar your memorialists, do not clearly understand. Probably it means the observance of Ekadashi of fasting by widows on the 11\(^{th}\) day of the lunar month, and the abstaining from taking fish by them. If this be the meaning of Jatyachar then your memorialists venture to say that among the well-to-do and educated sections of the Chasi Kaivarttas and also among the cultivators living in villages where the Brahmins and Vaidyas, the widows do universally observe Ekadashi and abstain from taking fish. But the custom is not universal among the poorer section of the people living in

localities where the influence of the example of Brahmins and Vaidyas is not so much felt.\textsuperscript{139}

Evidently the leaders of the Presidency Mahishya Samiti were little apologetic for not entirely conforming to the austere widowhood of the Brahmin and Baidya women. Such conformist attitude was also apparent in Mahishya-Mahila, a bi-monthly journal edited by Krishnabhabini Biswas an educated and progressive Mahishya woman. Krishnabhabini Biswas was married at the age of nine. Later, she went to England with her husband, Debendranath Biswas and had the opportunity for higher studies. She was a member of Bharat Stree Mahamandal and encouraged education among women.\textsuperscript{140} Being attracted to the Mahishya movement, she took initiative to publish Mahishya-Mahila for the Mahishya women in 1318 B.S. In this journal she urged the Mahishya women to take pride in the Mahishya identity and familiarize their children with the word Mahishya since their childhood.\textsuperscript{141} Mahishya-Mahila was welcomed by the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti and its journal Mahishya Samaj, from the very beginning. Mahishya Samaj published in 1318 B.S., an article regarding the title of Mahishya women – ‘Mahishya Mahilaganer Upadhi’ originally published in Mahishya-Mahila in the same year. In this article, the author argued that by God’s grace, the designation Mahishya-Kshatriya had been restored to the community and the Mahishya women should use “Devi” or “Dei” as in earlier times. The author also appealed to the Mahishya males to assist the females of their families in their education and Sadachar Brata (good conduct).\textsuperscript{142} Mahishya-Mahila remained generally conservative on family and gender issues, though sometimes sorrows of women in the patriarchal society, evils of dowry system within the Mahishya community were also highlighted (Mahishya-Mahila, 1320 B.S. & 1321B.S.). Mahishya Samaj in general, supported female education and in the issue of Jaishtha, 1329 B.S., it was said that the progress of caste was impossible without the progress of women. However, one year earlier, Dhanapati Nath Das, a pleader of High Court

\textsuperscript{139} Gopalchandra Sarkar, Mahishya-Namoddharer Itibritta, (First published in 1928, Reprint, Calcutta: Bangiya Mahishya Samiti, 1405 B.S.). p. 112.

\textsuperscript{140} Mahishya Samaj, Centenary Volume, 2010, pp.153-154.

\textsuperscript{141} Mahishya-Mahila, Vol. I., 1318 B. S., pp. 1-7.

and a prominent member of the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti wrote in *Mahishya Samaj* of Jaishtha, 1328 B.S that female education should be different from that of the male. He was also opposed to higher education for females as it might create problems in male dominated professional world.

The Mahishya leaders, in fact, like their upper caste counterparts dealt with the social issues related to female education, child marriage, widow remarriage etc. in a cautious manner. It may be said that they desired their womenfolk to emulate the model of an educated *bhadramahila* (gentlewoman) and they, themselves, like the other *bhadraloks* embraced colonial modernity, with all its associated dilemmas and contradictions.

Though shifts and tensions were visible, the Mahishya movement, however, succeeded in mobilizing, a primarily agriculturist community to a better level of respectability in the Hindu society. As caste identity or twice-born status was perceived to be inseparably associated with the Hinduism, the Mahishya leaders also emphasized on their Hindu identity. In the attempts to glorify their past they spared no chance to project themselves as a respectable Hindu community since ancient times. Joya Chatterjee has referred to a report in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 3 April 1939, on a Mahishya Conference organised at Jalamutha in Midnapore (April, 1939) where the President in his address dwelt upon the glorious past of the Mahishya Community and said:

> The Mahishyas represented a large section of the Hindu Community like the similar other castes and in the matter of reorganisation and reconstruction of the greater Hindu Society the ... Mahishya Community was connected inseparably.143

The emphasis on Hindu identity by the Mahishya leader was quite consistent with their status mobility movement. In society, where the state and the indigenous intelligentsia strengthened the ideology of caste as a determining socio-political institution, caste continued to be a very significant criterion of status mobility. The Chasi Kaibarttas accomplished a socio-economic status, which was not compatible

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with their ritual status. As a positive co-relation between secular and ritual status was significant in popular mind, they launched the Mahishya movement, which was one of the most organized caste mobility movement of colonial Bengal. Social mobility of this community also had significant political dimension, in our period of study, which has been discussed in the next chapter.