

Seeking New Identity: The Mahishya Caste Movement in Midnapore, 1896-1921

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Abstract: *The late 19th and the early 20th century witnessed a crucial phase of Census-based caste movements in different parts of India as various castes now attempted to utilize the Census to improve their social status. Caste associations were formed to channelise their demands. While most of the caste organizations in Bengal adopted a loyalist stance, the Mahishyas of Midnapore, despite being initially loyalist, played a significant role during the Non-Cooperation Movement. This paper focuses on how the Chashi-Kaivartas not only demanded Mahishya status for them but also tried to refute the claims of the Jalia-Kaivartas and the Patnis. Thus, it is important to note that each community aspired for upward mobility in the caste ladder and at the same time, they tried to ensure that the relatively lower castes would not get the permission to attain upward mobility. Moreover, the socio-economic distinctiveness of Midnapore helped in the formation of a homogeneous peasant community. Thus, this paper argues that the crystallization of 'peasant pride' played a vital role in the political mobilization of the Mahishyas during the Anti-Union Board Movement.*

Keywords: Mahishya, Jati Nirdharani Sabha, Census, Anti-Union Board Movement.

The late 19th century experienced the crystallization of various identity politics based on region, religion, caste, etc. among different communities of Bengal. Emphasizing the distinctiveness of their particular communities, each of them was looking for a 'new identity which would upgrade their social status and ensure their material interests. Thus, Semanti Ghosh argues that such 'other identities' came to challenge the overarching concept of a unifying nation.¹ However, at the same time, such other kinds of identity formation did not always essentially hamper the cause of nationalism. We find such a new kind of identity formation among the chashi-kaivartas of Midnapore, who claimed 'Mahishya' status. They formed their caste associations which initially undertook a loyalist stance.² However, while the other castes like the Namasudras refused to join the Congress-led nationalist movement,³ the Mahishyas actively participated in the Anti-Union Board Movement in 1921.⁴

With the advent of the Census, caste-based identity politics started influencing the political scenario of Bengal. William Chichele Plowden, the Census Commissioner of India, in the 1881 census, decided that the caste tables as found in the reports should reflect information regarding those castes which contained more than 100,000 people. It was also decided that the castes should be grouped into five categories: Brahmins, Rajputs, Castes of good social position, Inferior Castes and Non-Hindus or Aboriginal Castes.⁵ H. Risley decided to grade the castes in the 1901 Census according to their place in the social hierarchy. This persuaded the members of various upwardly mobile castes to organize their associations to place their demands for social upliftment. Census-based caste movements led by voluntary caste associations grew up in different parts of Bengal. Such new kinds of movements sprang up because of a widely shared perception regarding the Census in which the Census was seen as a medium to 'fix the relative status of different castes and to deal with questions of social superiority.'⁶ The chashi-kaivartas also formed several organizations like Jati Nirddharani Sabha, Bangiya Mahishya Samiti, etc. to raise their demand for having the Mahishya status.

This article has three sections. The first one deals with the socio-economic condition of Midnapore in the late colonial era. The land tenure system, the predominant role of the jotedars and caste-homogeneity among the Mahishyas conjointly played a pivotal role in the development of Mahishya caste movement and the subsequent political mobilization of the Mahishyas against the colonial rule. The second section focuses on the various aspects of the Mahishya movement. It excessively deals with the debates regarding the identity of the chashi-kaivartas, their initial loyalist stance, the formation of Mahishya caste organizations, and their attempt to resist the upward mobility of the lower castes like Jalia-kaivartas and the Patnis. The final section shows how during the Non-Cooperation Movement, the District Congress leadership successfully mobilized the Mahishyas in an Anti-Union Board Movement.

Socio-economic Peculiarities of Midnapore:

Midnapore, a district of Southwestern Bengal, was essentially rural as the Census of 1911 shows that 2.71 million people, 96% of the entire population, lived in rural areas.⁷ L. S. S. O'Malley in the District Gazetteer of Midnapore points out that 77.2% population earned their living from agriculture, while 9.8% from industries, 2.9% from other professions and 0.5% from commerce.⁸ O'Malley also shows that in no other parts of West Bengal or Central Bengal, people were so distinctively involved in agricultural activities than Midnapore.⁹

Though there were seven towns in the district, none of them were of 'any great size'. Hitesranjan Sanyal argues that traditionally Eastern Midnapore was a vibrant economic zone with flourishing agriculture and industry. But

during the 19th century, major industries of this area like salt, silk, sugar and cotton textiles 'suffered phenomenal decline'.¹⁰ Consequently, those artisans who previously were partially engaged in agrarian activities were left with no other choice but to devote their full energy to cultivation. Thus, the crisis of land scarcity arose in the latter half of the 19th century.¹¹

While the financial condition of the poor peasantry deteriorated, the wealth of the landowning class, both zamindars and jotedars, continued to flourish. Thus, control over land became the essential prerequisite for attaining political influence in Midnapore. The chashi-kaivartas or the Mahishyas were the predominant castes of Midnapore. In areas like Tamluk, Contai, Ghatal, Sadar etc. the Mahishyas possessed a vast area of lands as zamindars or jotedars.¹²

There were 10 large zamindari estates in Midnapore. But as the bulk of the settlement was made with more than 3000 petty zamindaries, the district lacked any decisive center of power.¹³ Moreover, most of the zamindari holdings were not located in a 'single geographical area'. Rather, they were scattered in different local regions. Such dispersed nature of zamindaries made the supervision and extraction of revenues extremely difficult and expensive. For an instance, an average medium-sized zamindar like Jatindra Nath Mullick had his holdings in thanas Kharagpur, Moyna, Midnapore, Daspur, Dantan, Bhagwanpur, Naraingarh, Patashpur, Binpur and Debra.¹⁴ Thus, the Midnapore zamindars had to establish a cordial relationship with local prosperous tenants, i.e., jotedars,¹⁵ who exerted a considerable amount of influence at the village level through their control over credit and market productions.

As there was no professional moneylending class, the sole source of rural credit for the villagers was the jotedars and occasionally the zamindars. Moreover, the jotedars had control over the marketing of the food grains. Thus, they gained excessively by exploiting the poor peasantry. But as they provided loans during the crisis period, they were hailed by the poor villagers. The zamindars were mainly absentee landlords whose basic focus was to extract revenue. Thus, the villagers found in the jotedars a saviour in their quotidian life and particularly in the time of emergency.¹⁶ As most of the jotedars belonged to the Mahishya caste, they gave leadership in the Mahishya Caste Movement. The 'horizontal differentiation' of different classes never caused any impediment in the political and social mobilization due to the 'vertical loyalties of the caste'.¹⁷

The Mahishya Caste Movement:

The term 'Mahishya' means 'agricultural people'. 'Mahi' refers to earth or soil, and 'Sho' means tearing; hence, the secondary meaning is cultivation, the suffix meaning about.¹⁸ J. S. Sen, a high-class Vaidya, a senior deputy magistrate, on 13th July 1907, in his report on the Mahishya Community to the Government stated that the Mahishya caste formed a significant section of the

Hindu community. Table 1 shows that demographically they were the most dominant caste of Bengal in the first half of the 20th century. They were known in different names in different parts of Bengal. For example, they were called 'Parashar Das' and 'Mahishya' in Dacca. Describing them as 'clean caste' Sen pointed out that the Mahishyas of Eastern Bengal were identical with the Chashi-Kaivartas of Midnapore, Nadia and other districts of Western Bengal.¹⁹

The Kaivartas of Bengal were categorized into two groups based on their occupation. Those who were involved in agrarian activities came to be known as the Chashi-Kaivartas, while the primary occupation of the Jelias-Kaivartas was fishing. The Chashi-Kaivartas claimed Mahishya status for them and detached themselves from the Jelias-Kaivartas.²⁰ A. K. Mitra extensively studies the ancient texts to find out the status of the Kaivartas. In the Brahma Vaivarta Purana, it is mentioned that the Kaivarta is born of a Kshatriya father and a Vaishya mother. Mitra argues that Kaivartas were divided into three categories- agricultural kaivartas or mahishyas, untouchable fishermen or dhivaras, and Patnis or Ghattajivins or ferrymen, all of them having the 'same ethnic origin'.²¹ But chashi kaivartas started persuading several pundits from 1864 onwards to admit their claim as they wanted to identify themselves with the 'ancient Mahishyas'. They even obtained 'Vyavastha Patras' from stalwart pundits like Sitikantha Vachaspati, Shivanatha Vachaspati, and Ajitanatha Nyayaratna.²²

In Midnapore, the Mahishyas were financially affluent and influential. Table 2 shows that they constituted 31.6% of the entire population of Midnapore. However, their social position on the caste ladder was relatively low. They were treated as inferior to even the intermediate artisan, trading and agrarian castes.²³ Financially affluent Mahishyas attempted to achieve upward mobility in the caste ladder by undertaking extensive temple-building activities. Hitesranjan Sanyal finds out that these temples are mostly located in the subdivisions of Ghatal, Tamluk and the Pingla, Sabang and Debra thanas of the Sadar subdivision.²⁴ Even, from the late 1890s, the caste movement gained tremendous support from even the lower class Mahishyas, i.e., poor peasantry, sharecroppers, and the agricultural labourers, whose imagination was captivated by the prospects of higher social status. Moreover, most of the poor Chashi-Kaivartas and sharecroppers possessed some tracts of land. The possession of land not only enabled them to have a minimum status in the local society, but also prevented any kind of financial divisions within the community.²⁵

Table 1
Variation of Castes in Bengal, 1901-1931

<i>Caste</i>	<i>1901</i>	<i>1911</i>	<i>1921</i>	<i>1931</i>
Baidya	81,218	88,796	10,2931	1,10739
Brahman	1,166,919	1,253,838	1,309,539	1,447,691

Kayastha	9,84,443	1,113,684	1,297,736	1,558,475
Mahishya	1,952,794	2,137,948	2,210,684	2,381,266
Namasudra	1,848,483	1,908,728	2,006,259	2,094,957
Rajbanshi	1,898,241	1,808,790	1,727,111	1,806,390

Source: *The Census of India*, Vol. V, part I, Statement No. XII, p. 454

Table 2
Mahishya Population in Midnapore

<i>Name of the Subdivision</i>	<i>Total Population</i>	<i>Total Mahishyas</i>
Sadar	860,622	145,836 (16.9%)
Jhargram	389,130	7436 (1.9%)
Ghatal	273,308	96,701 (35.4%)
Tamluk	643,157	353,544 (54.9%)
Contai	632,836	229,848 (44.2%)
Total	2,799,093	883,367 (31.6%)

Source: The table, prepared from the information available from the Midnapur District Gazetteer, District Statistics, 1921-2 to 1930, Calcutta, 1933, pp. 2-3

The figures in Table 2 uphold more or less the same picture which we find from the statement made in 1896 by Jogendra Nath Bhattacharya, the president of the College of Pundits, Nadia. Bhattacharya also pointed out that in Tamluk and Contai subdivisions of the district, Kaivartas constituted the majority portion of the population. In these parts, a group of Mahishya land controllers like the big jotedars, forest settlers and salt land reclaimers possessed the bulk of the cultivable lands.²⁶ Another president of the college of the Pundits, J. N. Smartashiromoni corroborated the view of Jogendra Nath Bhattacharya.²⁷ Rajat Kanta Ray maintains that the upper-class people among the Chashi-Kaivartas initiated the Mahishya Caste movement, while the samajpatis were opposed to it.²⁸

The Mahishya Caste Movement was started in 1897 when the zamindar of Tajpur, Narahari Jana organized a conference to raise their demands for having the Mahishya identity. By mentioning the Ancient texts, the participants tried to identify the Chashi-Kaivartas with the ancient Mahishyas. This conference resulted in the establishment of the Jati Nirdharani Sabha.²⁹ The Sabha received patronization from several important Chashi-Kaivartas, mostly local jotedars of Midnapore. However, soon the need for a central caste association was felt by the leaders which led to the formation of the Presidency Mahishya Samiti in 1901. This was transformed into the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti in 1903.³⁰ They received healthy

patronization from the educated and wealthy element of their community. Rajat Kanta Ray points out that Trailokyanath Biswas of the Janbazar Kaivarta family of Rani Rasmani, many pleaders of the High Court like Mahendranath Ray, Prakash Chandra Sarkar, muktar of the High Court Ananta Ram Das, and other eminent personalities like Mahendranath Halder, Ishan Chandra Ray actively supported this association. Zamindar Sashi Bhushan Biswas acted as the president of the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti.³¹ Moreover, during the 1901 census, various Mahishya samitis sprang up in different regions of Bengal. Even the Census Commissioner admitted that of all the caste movements, the agitation of the Chashi-Kaivartas was the most vigorous.³² The Maharaja of Nadia at the request of the Census Commissioner secured the decision of the Pundits of Nadia, who distinguished the Chashi-Kaivarta from the Jelia-Kaivartas and ascribed Mahishya status for the former group.

However, the Chashi-Kaivartas were themselves of divergent opinions regarding their claims. Some of them claimed the Vaishya status, while the others were 'content with a clean Sudra status'.³³ The clash became prominent in the Subadi Mahishya Conference. A Mahishya scientist trained in America, Ashutosh Jana inaugurated the session by reading his paper where he championed the cause of the Vaishya status for the Mahishya community. However, the traditional Mahishyas or the samajpatis refused to accept the Vaishya status of the Mahishyas. Furthermore, a split was about to occur as the jotedars wanted to outcast those who, unlike them or other affluent families, did not have the luxury to sell their agrarian products in the market through their servants. The poorer Chashi-Kaivartas raised their voice against such a move as they had to sell their home products to the markets as they could not afford to have servants to accomplish the task. Eventually, the problem was solved and with the influence of the Jotedars over the rural population, the class differentiation could not have any perilous impact on the Mahishya Caste Movement in Midnapore.³⁴ Thus, the leaders of the movement gradually realized that to unite the Chashi-Kaivartas more prominently, they should help the financially backward section of the Mahishya community. Mahishya Banking and Trading Company developed which acted as a ladder for the upward mobility for the economically backward Mahishya people.³⁵

Rajat Kanta Ray argues that the Mahishyas had a peculiar social status that was sufficiently high so that they would not turn their back to the nationalist movement like the Namasudras. At the same time, the status was low enough so that they realized the importance of mobilizing the Mahishya population to improve their social as well as educational status.³⁶ The author of the text 'Mahishyakarika', a pleader of the High Court, and an influential leader of the Mahishya movement, Prakash Chandra Sarkar lamented that the community had been suffering from lack of education which was the primary cause behind its low social status. Thus, every Mahishya should actively participate in the promotion of education. Sarkar appealed to the educated

Mahishyas to support Gokhale's proposal for free school education, which Gokhale submitted to the Viceroy.³⁷ The editor of 'Mahishya Bandhav', Mahendranath Tattwanidhi also prescribed that Mahishya leaders should build up several libraries in different villages to facilitate education among the members of the community. The 'Mahishya Sikkhabistar Bhandar' was established. Women who belonged to the Chashi-Kaivarta community also participated in the movement. The 'Mahishya Mahila', a monthly journal for Mahishya women, edited by Krishnabhamini Biswas, appealed to its readers to spread literacy among the Mahishya women.³⁸ The journal urged its women reader to let themselves be known as Mahishyas instead of Kaivartas.

Eventually, in the 1921 Census, the Chashi-Kaivartas were distinguished from the Jelia-Kaivartas and they were given the Mahishya status. Jelia-Kaivartas were also trying to get the Mahishya status and the Patnis were looking for 'Lupto-Mahishya' status.³⁹ But their claims were vehemently criticized by the Chashi-Kaivartas, who tried to dissociate themselves from these 'lower castes'. The significant feature of the Mahishya caste movement was that it also tried to resist the upward mobility of the relatively lower castes. To prevent such kind of 'Sanskritization' of the lower castes, the Mahishya leaders decided that those Mahishyas who married out of caste would be socially ostracized. Moreover, to distinguish themselves from the other lower castes, they started following 'pakshashauch' or fifteen-day mourning for their dead, rather than the 'masashauch' or a month of mourning.⁴⁰ For an instance, the editor of Mahishya Bandhav, Mahendranath Tattwanidhi followed 'pakshashauch' to mourn the death of his father-in-law.⁴¹

The Mahishyas fiercely refuted the claims of the Patnis to be regarded as the Kaivarta Mahishyas. According to Risley, Patnis were low boating, fishing, basket-making, trading and cultivating caste of Eastern Bengal.⁴² However, Patni's claims were supported by Brahmin pundits like Kamakshya Natha Tarkavagia, Pramatha Natha Tarkabhusana, and Rajendra Nath Vidyabhusana.⁴³ However, the Mahishyas vehemently protested against such a claim by stating that Patnis were no better than the 'Doms'.

Mahishya Participation in the Nationalist Movement:

Generally, most of the caste organizations suffered from a dilemma in the question of their participation in the Congress-led nationalist movement, as they considered it to be a movement of high caste Hindu *bhadraloks'*. The Namasudras not only refused to join the movement but vehemently opposed it, the Rajbanshis of North Bengal sometimes took part in the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Tilis also were critical of the anti-colonial movements.⁴⁴ However, the Mahishyas were the significant exception who, though initially adopted a loyalist stance, joined the nationalist movement with great enthusiasm. Srilata Chatterjee points out that while the Mahishya

Caste Associations showed their loyalty towards the colonial rulers, the Mahishya common population actively joined the nationalist movement.⁴⁵ Partha Chatterjee states that while the peasantry of the Eastern Bengal considered the zamindars to be their arch enemy, the peasantry of the Southwestern Bengal, due to their caste solidarity, joined hands with the local jotedars in the anti-colonial resistance.⁴⁶ Such a unified consolidated mass base for the nationalist movement developed in Midnapore due to the preponderance of a single caste, i.e., Mahishyas, among all levels of the peasantry.⁴⁷

Hitesranjan Sanyal shows that under the leadership of Birendra Nath Sasmal, the local Mahishyas of Midnapore participated in the Anti-Union Board Movement during the Non-Cooperation Movement. But it is important to note that the Mahishya leaders had long been connected with the Congress. From the annual report of the Mahishya Banking and Trading Company in 1913, we come to know that their managing director Gangachandra Biswas could not attend the meeting as he went to Karachi as a delegate to participate in the annual conference of the Indian National Congress.⁴⁸

After getting the Mahishya status in the 1921 Census, a sense of 'peasant pride' eventually crystallized among the Mahishya peasantry. This paved the way for the political mobilization of the Mahishyas during the Anti-Union Board Movement.⁴⁹ According to the needs of the Bengal Village Self-Government Act (1919) to strengthen state control in the grassroots, the Government introduced Union Boards. Though initially it was supported by the educated people of the Mahishya community, soon they withdrew their support after they found that they had to tolerate the burden of an extra 50% increase in the chowkidar tax due to this. Birendra Nath mobilized the Mahishyas against this Board as they feared that the Union Board would enable the colonial officers to intervene in rural affairs. Such intervention would be fatal to 'their position in the villages and their claim to rural leadership'. Thus, the presidents and members of the Boards started resigning from their posts and raising their voices against such institutional intervention in rural affairs. Some of the board members were compelled to resign their posts due to the 'popular pressure brought on them through social boycott'.⁵⁰ The popular agitation against the Union Board among the Mahishya peasantry was capitalized by local leaders like Sasmal. During the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Gandhian method of the constructive program was enthusiastically adopted by the Mahishyas who considered it as a means of 'restoring their rights and self-respect.

The Mahishya Caste Movement resulted in the re-awakening of the Mahishya community. It not only gave them a distinct caste identity but also strengthened their caste solidarity. The economically affluent Mahishyas came to realize that to pursue their demand, they had to support them financially backward people of their castes. The Mahishya Banking and Trading

Company provided them with loans so that they would not have to depend on the moneylenders of other castes during the period of crisis.⁵¹ Thus, remarkable caste solidarity grew among them which prevented any possible class antagonism among the upper and lower stratum of the community. This particular characteristic played a catalytic role in the development of nationalist consciousness among the Mahishya population. While in Eastern Bengal, the zamindar-peasant clash acted as an impediment for the growth of the nationalist movement, the Mahishya peasantry of the Southwestern Bengal, due to such caste solidarity, participated in the anti-colonial resistance with great enthusiasm along with the local Mahishya jotedars, zamindars or traders. Such political mobilization was also possible for the crystallization of a 'peasant pride' among the Mahishyas. It may be argued that the movement crystallized their caste-peasant identity, which consequently made their socio-economic upliftment possible.

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of the village society. However, Ratnalekha Ray and Rajat Kanta Ray have argued that the real control of rural society did not rest in the hands of the zamindars. Rather, political power was more localized, generally enjoyed by the jotedars, who constituted 'an intermediate stratum of non-zamindar tenure-holders with varying degrees of income and influence'. See, Ratna Ray and Rajat Ray, 'Zamindars and Jotedars: A Study of Rural Politics in Bengal', *Modern Asian Studies*, 1975, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 81-102.

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