

Caste and Political Consciousness of the Malos in Colonial Bengal

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Abstract: *‘Transition of ‘caste consciousness’ into a political consciousness has been a major theme of historical studies in the context of twentieth-century South Asia. Along with other parts of the Indian subcontinent, ‘the community consciousness of the lower caste communities of Bengal’ (classified as Scheduled Castes since 1936) has been analyzed by several scholars with new approaches and theoretical tools. Historians and social scientists, however, have not paid attention to the caste and political consciousness of the Malos of this region. A comprehensive study, however, would show that the Malos had aspired to reject the traditional views on their caste identity to construct their history. This gesture was transformed into a political consciousness in the second quarter of the twentieth century. The Malos had participated in the electoral politics of late colonial Bengal with both ‘nationalist’ and ‘class’ outlooks. However, after the partition of Bengal (1947), they lost their political presence in East Bengal while in West Bengal they transformed into a community of struggling fishermen. This article seeks to contextualize the caste assertion of the Malos of twentieth-century Bengal with an objective outlook.*

Keywords: Community Consciousness, Caste Assertion, the Malos, Scheduled Castes, Caste Politics, Constituent Assembly, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Partition of Bengal

The transition of ‘caste consciousness’ into a political consciousness was a common story of the prominent Scheduled Caste communities of late colonial Bengal. Along with the major Scheduled Caste communities of this province (like the Rajbanshis, Namasudras and Poundras), the Malos (Malla Kshatriyas, a prominent fisherman community of Bengal) accepted the colonial rule with a positive attitude. They not only rejected the traditional views on their caste identity transmitted by the leading scholars but also constructed their history with available theoretical tools and historical sources. This gesture of the Malos was transformed into a political consciousness in the second quarter of the twentieth century. They had participated in the electoral politics of late colonial Bengal with both

'nationalist' and 'class' outlooks. However, after the partition of Bengal (1947), they lost their political presence in East Bengal while in West Bengal they were transformed into a community of struggling fishermen. In this article, I'll highlight the origin and growth of caste and political consciousness among the Malos of Bengal with an objective outlook.

The Malos of Colonial Bengal

The Malos (also called Jhalo Malos) of Eastern and North-eastern India (including present Bangladesh) have hailed from the fishermen's people. They have been living in these regions since the very beginning of settled human civilization.¹ The precolonial Bengali and Kamrupi literature have referred to the existence of this community in the riverine Bengal and Assam. But it is very difficult to estimate their population and mode of life before the beginning of the colonial rule. Among the colonial administrative scholars, Buchanan Hamilton was the first one who left an elaborate sketch of the Malos. During his survey (1807-1814 CE) in different districts of Assam and Bengal, Buchanan described the social, economic and cultural lives of the Malos of Calcutta, Dinajpur, Goalpara, Rangpur and Mymensingh.²

However, with the beginning of the population census in India (in 1871-72), the Malos got considerable attention from the colonial government. The census data of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (1872-1941) show that the Malos had a chief concentration in Mymensingh, Tipperah (Comilla), Dacca, Pabna, Jessore, Khulna, Nadia, Murshidabad, Hooghly, Rangpur, Rajshahi, 24 Parganas, Faridpur and Bakharganj districts which were/are full of rivers and other internal water bodies. 'The colonial administrative scholars' had also left their understandings of the racial and physical features as well as the social status of the Malos. Dr. James Wise (1835-1886, a notable ethnographer of Dacca) wrote (in 1883):

"they (Malos) are remarkable for strength, nerve, and independent bearing. The finest examples of Bengali manhood are found among them, and their muscular figures astonish those inhabitants of towns."³

It means the Malos were stronger than the common people of Bengal. According to Wise, the Malos have been living in the Bengal Delta since the ancient past. H.H. Risley [(1851-1911), Indian Civil Servant, a notable administrative scholar] in his *Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (1891) had expressed that 'the Malos are the remnants of a distinct aboriginal tribe and not merely an occupational group.'⁴ The colonial versions thus offer us an impression that the Malos were/are indigenous people of Bengal. The features of the indigenous origin of the Malos have also been noticed in their occupational behaviour, particularly in 'collective action' and 'clan-based social life'.

As 'primary captured fishers', the Malos had developed their techniques and technologies for fishing including different types of fishing boats, nets and fishing implements. The Malos also took up other professions (such as

agriculture and boating) when and where fishing was not sufficient for their livelihood.⁵ However, the Malos were predominantly fishermen of colonial Bengal who were dependent on the internal water bodies.⁶ They often used to take lease of rivers, *beels* (floodplain lakes) and ponds from the zamindars (owners of fishing rights of small water bodies and flood plain lakes) under their community leader called *Matabbar/Matbar/Modol*.⁷ This trend of collective bargaining in taking a lease of fisheries was a contributory factor to maintaining a strong community feeling among the Malos.

Economically, all Malos were not marginal. There were wide differences in their class characters. Those who had their boats and nets were the Malos of the first category. They used to hire other 'asset-less' Malos as 'co-fishers' or as 'water-labourers'. As owners of capital goods, this class had the opportunity of enjoying a considerable amount of profit generated from fishing. The *araddars* or *nikaris* (commission agents) had also their place in the first category of fishermen. The fishermen of the second category were those who had their own boats and nets but did not employ any other Malos as co-fisher. Only the family members were the helpers in fishing and selling fish. They were thus 'independent fishermen' but not marginal.

A bulk of the Malos had a position in the bottom (third class) in the class hierarchy. The Malos without boats and nets (or other fishing implements) was the fisherman of the third category. They were basically 'share-fishers' or workers under the fishermen of the first category. They were thus 'water labourers'. The ordinary fish *paikars* (fish retailers) were also very poor like the fishermen of the third category. They too did not have capital goods except pairs of scales, choppers and fish pots.

Though the Malos were/are Hindus they were considered to be inferior in social rank in the Hindu society. So, the dominant institutions of Hinduism (such as temples maintained and controlled by the upper castes) were not open to them. Although their products (i.e. tasty fish of different varieties) had great demand among the people of Bengal the Malos as 'social beings' were considered to be inferior (*adham* or despicable creatures or almost untouchables) by the upper caste Hindus (which was social injustice and discrimination). Thus in spite of having a difference in the class hierarchy, the Malos were unequivocally treated and identified by the non-Malos merely as 'Malos', i.e. inferior social beings. So the educated caste-Hindus (including the prominent literary figures of Bengal) had constructed a very derogatory social rank of the Malos in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁸

The inferior social status of the Malos was also recorded in the administrative records of the colonial government. H.H. Risley wrote in 1891 that:

"Malos, as a rule, belong to the Vaishnava sect. Their *Purohit* is a *Patit-Brahman*, and their *Guru* is a *Gossain*... The dead are usually burned on the

bank of a river, and the ashes are cast into the water. *Shraddha* is performed on the thirty-first day after death.... The social rank of the Malos is low, and Brahmans will not take water from their hands. The only titles met with among Malos are Majhi, Patra, and Bepari."⁹

This comment indicates the nature of 'social injustices' as faced by the Malos. The ordinary Malos (without education and not knowing the traditional Hindu scriptures) could not raise any questions about this social humiliation. However, with the beginning of the twentieth century, a section of the Malos was empowered with modern education. The Malos, those who entered the educational institutes (established by the colonial government and the Christian Missionaries) had gained considerable knowledge about the colonial administration, court, rule of law, and course about 'rationalism'. This modern education had motivated them to raise their voice against 'social injustices' for achieving 'social respect' which will be discussed in the next section.

Caste Consciousness of the Malos of Colonial Bengal

The caste consciousness of the Malos for attaining social respect was initiated in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The educated Malos (particularly lawyers, teachers, officials and other officegoers) had come forward to develop a sense of 'self-respect' to fight against social injustice. Initially, the Malos had emphasized their structural integration through the foundation of an organization of their own. In 1913, they founded the 'Jhalla Malla Kshatriya Samity' to place the Malos as a respectable 'Kshatriya' caste community of Bengal.¹⁰ Within a decade; this organization became popular among the Jhalo Malos. The Malos of several villages and towns of Eastern Bengal and Assam (with their local bodies) was greatly organized by this association.

The second step of the social movement of the Malos was the construction of a history of their culture, society and Kshatriyahood. In the case of the Malos, this trend was initiated by Mahendranath Malla Barman of Chhatrapur (Mymensingh). With the support of Dinanath Malla Barman of Achargram (Nandail), Mahendranath produced an excellent historical work on the Malos of Bengal called '*Dwitiya Varna Kshatriya Ba Jhal-Mal Tattwa : Pratham Bhag* (Mymensingh, Dinanath Malla Barman, 1914).¹¹ He published the second part of his work as *Sanschipta Kshatriya Tattwa: Dwitiya Bhag* in 1916.¹² In these works, Mahendranath had claimed that the Jhalos had migrated to Bengal from Jhalwar of Rajasthan and the Malos from Mallagarh of Northwestern India. Both the Jhalos and Malos were the descendants of the Kshatriya dynasties of those regions. They took up fishing as an occupation in Bengal which was in no way an inferior one in the ancient period.¹³ He wrote:

"fish is a common item in the life and culture of the people of Bengal. It has every respect in society. So as a profession, fishing should be respected in society."¹⁴

Mahendranath had argued with testimonies that 'fishing' and 'selling of fish' as professions are in no way substandard. Hence, as fishermen, the Malos deserve respect.' And as the successors of the Kshatriyas of Rajasthan, the Malos of Bengal must adopt Kshatriya surnames as a symbol of their respectable caste identity. He suggested the Malos to accept the surnames like—Jhal Barman, Jhalla Barman, Mal Barman, Malla Barman, Mal Barma, Jhal Barma, Das Barman, etc.¹⁵

Mahendranath Malla Barman's work inspired the Malos of different districts of Eastern Bengal for writing their history. So the Malo scholars of Bengal produced several other historical pieces [like *Jalla Malla Kshatriya Itihas* (1920) of Brajanath Das Barman,¹⁶ *Jyoti* (1921) of Shashi Bhusan Das Ray,¹⁷ *Sanschipta Jalla-Malla Kshatriya Tattwa* (1923) of Dharmachand Malla Barman,¹⁸ etc.]. These works strengthened the arguments of Mahendranath Malla Barman in regards to the Jhalla-Malla Kshatriya identity of the Malos as well as highlighted their achievement in different fields.¹⁹ These works also contributed to integrating the Malos as a distinct caste community of Bengal. Thus Dharmachanda Malla Barman wrote:

"Today, all the caste communities of Bengal have united themselves by establishing their own respective caste organizations and by composing their own history. We the Jhalla Malla Kshatriyas must work unitedly for our own progress. So I have compiled the names and addresses of the notable Malos for integrating our caste members."²⁰

It was clearly inspiring for the Malos of Bengal.

In 1924, Mahimchandra Malla Barman composed supplementary historical documents on the Jhalo Malos. In his work titled '*Jhalla-Malla Parichay*'²¹ Mahimchandra added sixteen appendices for fortifying the previous historical construction of the Malo scholars (as published from 1914 to 1923). In appendix one, Mahimchandra reproduced the relevant verses from the *Manusmiti* (Chapter X: verses 20-24) with authentic English translation as well as *Sabdakalpadran* (a Bengali lexicon) to argue that the Mallas, the Jhallas, the Licchivis, the Karanas, the Kshashas and the Dravidas were/are all 'Bratya Kshatriyas'. Mahimchandra had also added the second appendix from *Manu* (Chapter XII: verse no 44). This *Sloka* of Manu shows that the Jhallas and the Mallas were 'men living by the trade of arms'.

The appendices from three to thirteen (of this work) have reflected the origin and concentration of the Jhallas and Mallas in Rajasthan (particularly in Jhalawar and Mallagarh). In the subsequent appendices, Mahimchandra presented the relevant evidence of 'Kshatriyahood' of the Jhallas and the Mallas, their migration to different parts of India including Bengal and their adoption of new occupations. He had argued that the Jhalla-Mallas of Bengal (being the descendants of the Bratya Kshatriyas) must feel proud of their caste identity. Like the previous Malo scholars, Mahimchandra had strongly

advocated that the Jhalo-Malos of Bengal must embrace appropriate surnames like the upper caste Kshatriyas (such as Jhalla Barman, Malla Barman, Jhalla Barma, Malla Barma, Mal Barma, Das Barman, etc.).

With the self-constructed history, the Malos had started unifying their caste fellows of Bengal (mainly of Mymensingh, Dacca, Pabna, Bogra, Tipperah, Jessore, Nadia, Murshidabad, 24 Parganas, Faridpur, etc.) and Assam (Sylhet and Goalpara). They had also started publishing their caste journal called '*Jhal Mal Badhav*'.

All these activities of the Malos had developed a sense of belonging among them, especially in the early twentieth century. Dharmachand Malla Barman had prepared (in 1923) a list of villages and towns of Bengal with the considerable influence of the caste movement of the Malos. From his work, it appears that the Malos of Mymensingh (present Mymensingh, Netrokona, Sherpur, Jamalpur and Kishoreganj), Bogra-Pabna (present Bogra, Sirajganj, Natore, Pabna), Tipperah (present Comilla and Brahmanbaria), Dacca (present Tangail, Gazipur, Narasindi, Manikganj, Dhaka, Narayanganj, Munshiganj), Jessore (present Jessore, Meherpur, Chuadaga, Jhinaidaha, Magura, Narail), Murshidabad, Nadia, 24 Parganas of Bengal, Dhubri-Goalpara and Sylhet (present Sunamganj, Sylhet, Maulavi Bazar and Habiganj of Bangladesh) of Assam were considerably influenced by the Malla Kshatriya movement. It appears that the Malos of Eastern Bengal were organized under their Jhalla Malla Kshatriya Samity having its branches and organizers in different towns, markets and villages.²²

The third step of *kshatriyaization* of the Malos was the adoption of rites, rituals and sacraments (*sanaskaras*) of the upper caste Hindus of Bengal. Earlier, the Malos used to follow 30 days post-death pollution (*ashouch*, for maintaining social distance) in their society. But this position was changed in the early twentieth century. Instead of 30 days, they had introduced the ritual of performing *shraddha* on the 13th day after the death of any member of the family. They had also adopted Kshatriya surnames like Barman, Malla Barman, Jhalla Barman, Das Barman, Mal Barman, Malla Das, etc.²³ [instead of surnames (like Malo, Majhi, Patra and Bapari) as recorded by H.H. Risley in the last decade of the nineteenth century].²⁴ Simultaneously, the Malos had also started holding sacred thread (*paita*) after performing certain Vedic rituals (*Bratyostom Yagna*) approved by the Brahmin priests.

All these features of the caste consciousness of the Malos are identical to the social reforms and caste movement of the lower caste communities of Bengal who had asserted for establishing a respectable caste identity (what may be conceptualized as '*sanskritisation through kshatriyaization*'). However, the fourth step of the caste movement of the Malos to some extent was different. It was directed towards the economic and educational attainment of the Malos, i.e. 'caste assertion for consolidation and empowerment. The Malos gave considerable importance to the spread of education among their caste

fellows as well as their engagement in the government services, legal professions, judicial service, teaching and other official jobs. An analysis of the contents of the *Jhal Mal Bandhav* and *Sanskhipta Jhalla-Malla Kshatriya Tattwa* (1923) of Dharmachand Malla Barman [as well as the records prepared by Mr. Ranabir Singha Barman and Nirmal Chandra Shah (of Adwaita Malla Barman Educational and Cultural Society, Kolkata) show that the Malos had a large presence in government jobs, teaching in schools and colleges, medical practices and engineering sectors in the 1920s and 1930s (particularly in Bengal, Bihar, Assam and Burma).²⁵

However, recognition of Kshatriyahood of the Malos was not an easy one. In spite of the construction of a Kshatriya identity (at least in the literary works), the Malos could not get recognition as Kshatriya from the colonial Hindu society in the 1920s. Their demand for Malla Kshatriya identity was, however, recognized by the Government of Bengal in the census of 1931. Just in the next year (1932), the Hindu Mahasabha had accepted the Malos into the mainstream Hindu fold with great enthusiasm. Dr. Sashi Bhusan Ray Barman (a Malo doctor of Toknayan Bazar of Dacca) organized a huge gathering of the Malos in 1932 where Digindra Narayan Bhattacharya (a Congress-cum-Hindu Mahasabha activist) had recognized the Kshatriyahood of the Malos.²⁶ This gesture of the Hindu Mahasabha had fulfilled the aspirations of *Kshatriyahood* of the Malos of Bengal. However, the Malos had accepted the Scheduled Caste status (in 1936) without much criticism.

The caste movement of the Malos had an exceptional feature (than other Kshatriya aspirants of Bengal) in regards to their occupational consolidation. While the Malo scholars had advocated for Kshatriyahood and the adoption of sacraments of the upper castes but they did not contempt their traditional livelihoods. Rather, they always looked into their caste-based occupations as a matter of pride. Thus Mahendranath Malla Barman wrote in 1914 that 'profession cannot destroy the caste of any community. Since we eat fish we must catch them.'²⁷ Concurrently, the Malos gave substantial importance to defending their occupational interest in an organized way. They (along with other fisherman communities of Bengal) founded a provincial-level organization in 1922 called 'All Bengal and Assam Provincial Fishermen Society' (Nikhil Bangiya O Assam Pradeshiya Matsyajibi Sammilani or NBOAPMS) for their economic development. NBOAPMS was organized under the leadership of Ramani Mohun Biswas (a Malo fishermen leader of Barishal). The main objectives of the NBOAPMS were:

- (i) to protect the customary rights of the fishermen in water bodies (rivers, *beels* and *baors*),
- (ii) to ensure the rights of the share-fishers in big fishing operations under the *mahajans* (suppliers of capital goods for fishing and moneylenders),
- (iii) to protect the rights of the fish retailers and commission agents (*aratdars*),
- (iv) to mediate in dispute between the fishermen and other occupational bodies,
- (v) to assists the fishermen in

taking lease of water bodies in reasonable rate, (vi) to assist the needy fishermen , (vii) to institutionalize the cooperative traditions of the fisherman , (viii) to look into the educational and economic development of the students of the fishermen communities.²⁸

Incidentally, NBOAPMS had received the attention of the Swarajya Party [founded by Chittaranjan Das (1870-1925, a prominent lawyer and a politician of Bengal) and his close supporters]. The Swarajist leaders like Hemanta Kumar Sarkar (1897-1952), and Hemaprabha Majumder were very much active in NBOAPMS.²⁹ In its third conference (held at Madaripur of Faridpur district on 11-12 March 1926) NBOAPMS showed its interest in the working-class movement for the protection of the rights of the Malos.

Political Consciousness of the Malos

The social assertion of the Malos took a new turn at the beginning of the 1930s when they got interest in the political mobilization of their caste consciousness. There were of course several causative factors for this transition. Firstly, the demand of the Jhalo-Malos for Malla Kshatriya identity was accepted by the colonial government, especially in the census of 1931 followed by the recognition of the Hindu Mahasabha (1932).³⁰ Secondly, the communities like the Rajbanshis, the Poundras and the Namasudras took interest in the provincial electoral politics which had induced the Malos for their political empowerment. Thirdly, the political reforms [particularly the Round Table Conferences (1930-1932), the Communal Award (1932), the Poona Pact (1932), adoption of the *Government of India Act (1935)*, and the journey of the bicameral Legislative Assembly in Bengal (1937)] had provided an opportunity to the Depressed Castes [henceforth Scheduled Castes (SC)] including the Malos to contest in both SC-reserve and the Non-Muhammedan (Unreserved/ General/Open) constituencies of the Legislative Assembly of Bengal.

In such a background, the Malos had proceeded to the election of 1937 [the first election held under the *Government of India Act (1935)* for the Legislative Assemblies of British-ruled provinces]. Two provinces of British India like Assam and Bengal were suitable for their political empowerment. Though the Malos had comparatively less population in the districts of Assam (Goalpara and Sylhet), the districts of Eastern and Central Bengal (particularly Mymensingh, Tipperah, Pabana, Bogra, Faridpur, Nadia, Jessore, Murshidabad and 24 Parganas) were full with Malo population. So in these districts, they had possibilities for political mobilization.

The Malos, however, could not transform their caste organization (Jhalla-Malla Kshatriya Samity or JMKS) into a political organization [through the Namasudra Samity (of the Namasudras), Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samity (of the Rajbanshis) and Poundra Kshatriya Samity (of Poundras) had practically played the role of political parties]. Rather, the socio-political consciousness

of the Malos was diverted into three different paths. The Jhalla Malla Kshatriya Samity (controlled by the lawyer and landed class) continued its activities within the social and economic domain of the Malos. The Nikhil Bangiya Assam Pradeshiya Matsyajibi Samity (NBOAPMS) was more interested to ensure the rights of the fishermen and fish traders and retailers. On the other hand, the Bangiya Malla Kshatriya Samaj Unnayan Sabha [BMKSUS (centred in Calcutta, founded in 1932)] was engaged in the educational attainment of the Malos especially to facilitate the Malo students in the urban centres (particularly in Calcutta and Dacca).³¹

In spite of the limitations of the Malos, we have noticed that a few Malo leaders [from the Malla Kshatriya Samity] had contested the election of 1937 from several Non-Muhammedan constituencies. Among them, Ram Ratan Barman, Dwarakanath Malla Barman, Harendra Kumar Malla Barman and Jogesh Chandra Malo were prominent. However, they could not get victory in any constituency. While Ram Ratan Barman was defeated in the Mymensingh West Constituency (by Amritlal Mondal, a Namasudra leader), Dwarakanath Malla Barman was defeated (by Manomohun Das) in the Mymensingh East Constituency. Harendra Kumar Malla Barman, on the other hand, had contested the election as a candidate of the Indian National Congress (INC) from Tipperah SC-Reserve Constituency. He was defeated by Jagat Chandra Mondal (a Namasudra independent candidate). Similarly, Jogesh Chandra Malo was defeated by Birat Chandra Mondal (an influential Namasudra leader) in Faridpur Constituency. It means the Malos could not send any representative to the Legislative Assembly of Bengal. However, the success of the Namasudra, Rajbanshi and Poudra lawyers and land-owning classes (as MLA) had inspired many Malos to be prepared for future electoral contests.³²

On the other hand, after the election of 1937, the Scheduled Castes had established themselves as a political force in Bengal. Besides the 30 SC-reserved seats, they won two general seats [(Iswar Chandra Mal, INC) and (Jogendra Nath Mondal, IND)]. Even the SCs were encouraged with a ministerial berth [Mukunda Bihari Mullick (a Namasudra leader elected from Khulna) as 'the Cooperative, Credit and Rural Indebtedness' minister] of the Bengal Government led by Fazlul Huq. However, the SC MLAs had failed to establish themselves as a politically homogenous group because of their political difference [INC: 6, Hindu Mahasabha: 2, Independent: 24 (elected under the banner of several caste organizations)]. The Independent Scheduled Caste MLAs, however, had organized themselves in the Legislative Assembly under the umbrella of a newly formed 'Independent Scheduled Caste Party' (ISCP, 1938).³³

The Government of Bengal [formed by Fazlul Huq (1937-1941) of the Krishak Praja Party (KPP) with the All India Muslim League (ML)] had to face many political complexities including ideological differences, individual ambition, the interplay of British imperial interests, and Muslim League's

hostile attitude. The issues like 'land revenue and tenancy rights', education policy and 'rural indebtedness' were contradictory for the partners of the Coalition Government of Bengal. The radical members of the KPP had raised questions against sharing power with the League.³⁴ They continued with their old demands of the abolition of the *zamindari* system and all repressive laws and the introduction of free education at the primary level. The situation became more perplexing when 21 radical members of the KPP left the Coalition in 1937.³⁵ It compelled Fazlul Huq to rely on the Muslim League. However, during the Second World War (1939-1945), the political difference between Fazlul Huq and the Muslim League burst out publicly. Huq resigned from the Government (on 2nd December 1941).³⁶

However, Fazlul Huq could form the Progressive Coalition Ministry in Bengal (on 12th December, 1941) with the support of the MLAs of the Forward Bloc-led Congress (28), Nationalists (14), KPP-Shamsuddin (19), ISCP (12), KPP-Huq (42), Labour (1) and the Anglo-Indians (3).³⁷ The new ministry of Huq with a total of nine members represented a variety of views. In this ministry, the Scheduled Caste members occupied an important position.³⁸ 'Progressive Coalition Ministry' did not last long. Resignation of Shyama Prasad Mookerjee (on 20th November, 1942) from the cabinet, the failure of the Cripps Mission (1942), the growth of the Quit India movement in India including different parts of Bengal (1942), the formation of the *Jatiya Sarkar* (National Government) in Tamluk (Medinipur district), an outbreak of famine in Bengal in 1943, shortage of food and irregularity in the food supply, etc. had worsened the political situation of Bengal. Thus Huq resigned from his post (on 28th March).³⁹

The fall of the Progressive Coalition Ministry had provided an opportunity for the Muslim League to regain power in Bengal. Khwaja Nazimuddin of the Muslim League (as Chief Minister) had formed the ministry of 13 members with the support of Bengal Swarajya Party, Scheduled Caste MLAs, Europeans, Anglo-Indians, Indian Christians, Labour Party and the independents. However, the Ministry of Nazimuddin fell on 28th March (1945) on the occasion of discussion of the Agricultural Budget when the ministry was defeated by a cut motion moved by the opposition.

In the general election of 1946, the Muslim League got an overwhelming victory in Bengal. Out of 117 Mohammedan seats, the League won 114 seats and got the support of two independent Muslim members. INC won 86 seats. The KPP won only 4 seats while the Communists entered the Bengal Legislative Assembly of Bengal by gaining victory in three seats. The result of the Scheduled Caste organizations [like 'All India Scheduled Caste Federation' (AISCF) and Kshatriya Samity of the Rajbanshi sub-caste] was very much shocking. Although Jogendra Nath Mandal from AISCF and Nagendra Nath Ray from the Kshatriya Samity got victory, most of the Scheduled Caste candidates who contested with their caste symbols were

defeated. Congress alone got 26 out of 30 SC-reserved seats. Among these 26 Congress MLAs, two were the Malos. They were Haran Chandra Barman (from Bogra-cum Pabna) and Dr. Bholanath Biswas (from Jessore). It indicates that the Malos of Bengal had a heavy inclination towards the INC or nationalist agenda.

Apart from the INC, the Malos had also received the Communist ideology in their political consciousness. In fact, CPI (the Communist Party of India) was very much active among the peasants and workers of different districts of Bengal since 1938. Participation of the Scheduled Castes in the electoral propaganda of the CPI was a serious issue in 1946. This involvement had contributed to submerging the caste consciousness of many SC sub-castes into 'class consciousness'.

The SCs had contested the election as CPI candidates in Dinajpur, Rangpur (Harikanta Sarkar and Nirmalendu Barman), Jalpaiguri-Siliguri (Radhamohun Barman), Jessore (Krishna Binode Ray), Khulna (Satish Chandra Halder) and in Dacca East (Brajendra Chandra Das). It is important to note that out of 10 CPI candidates (those who contested in non-Muslim Seats), 7 were Scheduled Castes. The CPI candidate Rup Narayan Ray (a Rajbanshi peasant leader of Dinajpur) got victory in the election in Dinajpur. Although Jyoti Bose (Railway Trade Union) and Ratanlal Brahmin (Tea Garden Labour) had entered the Bengal Legislative Assembly as CPI candidates, they were not representatives of the common voters. In fact, most of the prominent communist leaders had contested in 'Trade Union Labour' constituencies (total of 8) including Indrajit Gupta, Bankim Mukherjee and Somnath Lahiri. So it appears that 'whatever mass support the CPI had in 1946 was because of the Scheduled Castes. It indicates that the SCs also turned towards class ideology.'

In this context, it would not be irrelevant to analyse the influence of the class-based political movement on the Malos. It has already been cited that the Malos were inclined towards class-based mobilization of their caste fellows, especially under NBOAPMS. NBOAPMS was active among the fishermen for rallying them as a class. On the other hand, the Malos of Mymensingh district were highly influenced by Communist activists [like Rebati Mohan Barman (1903-1951), Nibaran Pandit (1912-1984) and Mani Singh (1901-1990)]. The Malos (who by traditions were following the cooperative type of production system and sharing of profits of their earnings) of Mymensingh were mobilized by the Communist ideologies.

The third force that influenced the Scheduled Castes in 1946 was the Hindu Mahasabha (HM). Even though the caste Hindu traditions made the Scheduled Castes 'outcastes or untouchables' but in the election, they were accepted with great enthusiasm by the Hindu Mahasabha. The Hindu Mahasabha was more popular in the rural areas, especially among the Scheduled Castes. In the election of 1946, altogether 27 Hindu Mahasabha

candidates contested the election but only Dr. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee got victory (from Calcutta University Constituency). On the other hand, out of 21 Hindu Mahasabha candidates of rural general constituencies, 10 were Scheduled Castes. The success of the Scheduled Caste Hindu Mahasabha candidates was comparatively higher than the non-SC candidates. Among them, Kanti Bhusan Biswas (Jessore: 8,367), Kshetra Mohun Sikdar (Faridpur: 9,743) and Manmohan Das (Mymensingh: 13,971) got a considerable percentage of votes although they could not turn out as MLAs. The election records of 1946 show that these three candidates got 40% of the votes secured by the Hindu Mahasabha in the election 1946.⁴⁰

So it seems that the Scheduled Castes (in 1946) were not unified as a collective category. Nor were they politically homogenous. They were easily influenced by the nationalist, caste, class and Hindutwa propagandas. However, due to the overwhelming victory of the Muslim League, the Scheduled Caste Federation (which had only one MLA) came forward to mobilize the Muslim League for political power. The Muslim League, on the other hand, was looking for Hindu support. H.S. Suhrawardy (as a leader of the Muslim League) had formed the Government in Bengal with very minor Hindu support. Initially (23rd April to 15th October) Suhrawardy had appointed seven other ministers in his Government including one member from the Scheduled Castes (Jogendra Nath Mandal).

Suhrawardy, as the premier of the Bengal Government, had to work in a very critical situation. The communal tension and violence for the Pakistan demand of the Muslim League, an outbreak of the *Tebhaga* movement (1946) led by the Scheduled Caste peasantry with the moral support of the urban educated non-Scheduled Caste Communists and other political developments had submerged the whole Bengal under political uncertainty. The condition was further worsened with the publication of the proposal of the Cabinet Mission (on May 16, 1946). The Cabinet Mission had proposed to divide the Indian states into three major categories such as (a) the Hindu majority provinces (Madras, Bombay, Central Province, United Provinces, Bihar and Orissa), (b) the Muslim majority provinces like Punjab, Northwest Frontier Province, Baluchistan and Sindh; and (c) Bengal and Assam, which would be allowed to frame their own constitution. An Interim Government headed by the Viceroy and a constituent assembly were to be formed to finalize the process of transfer of power from the British to the Indians.⁴¹

Congress had welcomed the proposal since there was no mention of the partition of India. And it was ready for the election of the Constituent Assembly where the members of the provincial Legislative Assembly were very much important. By August 1946, the election was completed and Congress alone got 208 seats (out of 296) while the Muslim League got all the Muslim seats (73).

From Bengal, 25 Congress members were elected to the Constituent

Assembly including 3 SC members. However, the non-Congress Scheduled Castes found that their future would be unsaved in the newly formed Constituent Assembly since Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and the AISCFC could not send their representatives. In such a critical situation, Jogendra Nath Mandal (of the Namasudra sub-Caste and an MLA of the AISCFC) had started assembling the Scheduled Caste MLAs of Eastern Bengal. And, finally with the support of two MLAs of the Malo sub-caste (Haran Chandra Barman and Dr. Bholanath Biswas elected as INC candidates), two of the Namasudra sub-caste (Gayanath Biswas and Dwarkanath Baruri elected as INC candidate) and one of the Rajbanshi sub-caste (Nagendra Nath Ray elected as Kshatriya Samity candidate), Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had entered the Constituent Assembly for drafting India's Constitution. Subsequently, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has been recognized as the 'Father of the Indian Constitution'. So it is an important part of India's national history that the Scheduled Castes of Bengal (including the Malos) had contributed immensely to establishing Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as the 'Father of the Indian Constitution'.⁴²

However, the journey of the Constitution Assembly was not very smooth. The Muslim League was not ready to work with Congress. Rather it adopted a resolution in Bombay (on 19th July) for 'Direct Action' for attaining Pakistan. The Working Committee of the Muslim League had preferred 16th August as the 'Direct Action Day'.⁴³ 'Direct Action' turned violent in Calcutta resulting in murder, rape, indiscriminate killing of the Hindus and destruction of their properties which became infamous as the 'Great Calcutta Killing' in the history of the Indian subcontinent.

As a response to the 'Great Calcutta Killing', the Hindus had started taking revenge against the Muslims in Calcutta. The only way for the government to turn down this dreadful violence was to get the League into the Interim Government. On 13th October 1946, Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1876-1947) decided to enter the Interim Government. With this decision, the composition of the ministry of Suhrawardy was changed. Jogendra Nath Mandal had joined the Interim Government as the Muslim League's representative. Fazlur Rahman, Tarak Nath Mukherjee, Nagendra Nath Roy (an SC MLA of the Rajbanshi sub-caste) and Dwarkanath Baruri were given a berth in the ministry of Suhrawardy (on 25 November, 1946). [Last two were allied with Jogendra Nath Mandal and actively involved in Ambedkar's election to the Constituent Assembly through the Malo MLAs were excluded from ministerial power].

However, League's entry into the government did not stop the communal tension. Even the Muslims (with the support of the Muslim League) had started forced conversion, murder, burning and destruction of properties of the Hindus, raping, abduction and forced marriage of the Hindu womenfolk including the Scheduled Castes at Noakhali and Tipperah in East Bengal (with an organized way).⁴⁴ This trend had resulted in the forced migration of the

Hindus (including the SCs) from Noakhali and some other places of East Bengal.⁴⁵

In such a background of horrific clashes between the Hindus and the Muslims, British Prime Minister Clement Attlee (1945-1947) had hinted (on 20th February, 1947) at the possibility of a partition of India and Bengal as well. On 8th March (1947), the Congress Working Committee announced that 'if India is to be divided, Punjab and Bengal are also to be divided'. Provincial Committee of Bengal of the Hindu Mahasabha and even the Communist Party of India had strongly supported the partition of Bengal.

In such a background, the Scheduled MLAs were in dilemma. Jogendra Nath Mandal, Nagendra Nath Ray, Dwarkanath Baruri and a few others (who were attached to the Suhrawardi's Government) had apprehended the Scheduled Caste of Western Bengal would be subject to perpetual slavery of the caste Hindus. However, most of the SC- Congress MLAs had uncritically supported the option of 'partition of Bengal' (as accepted by the Congress).

On 20th June 1947, the representatives of the non-Muslim majority districts accepted the partition of Bengal by 58 to 21 votes and agreed to constitute a separate assembly. The members representing the Muslim majority districts had also accepted the partition by 107 to 34 votes and decided on the amalgamation of Sylhet districts with Pakistan if the referendum results in favour of such amalgamation.

Finally, the *Indian Independence Act* was ratified on 18th July, 1947 in the British Parliament and Bengal and Punjab were divided by 15th August 1947 to form independent India and Pakistan. Partition of Bengal and Punjab appeared before the people of the respective provinces as a serious threat which had generated the forces of forced migration from both sides of the newly created states. The Malos of Eastern Bengal could not escape from this trend. Along with minority communities, a huge number of the Malos of East Bengal had migrated to West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya and other states of India.

After the partition of Bengal in 1947, the majority of the SC-reserve seats had remained with East Bengal (16 seats out of 30) since the Scheduled Castes had their main concentration in East Bengal's districts. So the Scheduled Castes came under the direct control of the majority community (i.e. Muslims) in Eastern Bengal. The Partition of 1947 had also generated a new trend in the power politics of West Bengal. In such a context, the Malos had little opportunity of utilizing their caste background in electoral politics (because of their small population figure). Moreover, the Malos was divided along different political lines. After the partition of Bengal, the old generation of the Malos had remained attached to Congress politics. Kuber Chand Halder had continued to contest the election as a Congress candidate from Sagardighi (Murshidabad, 1946, 1952, 1957, 1962). Since Dr. Bholanath Biswas had

supported Dr. B.R Ambedkar in 1946 by discarding Congress, he did not get Congress ticket in 1952. So he contested the Assembly Election in 1952 from Bishnupur (24 Parganas) as an Independent candidate. The young radical Malos were, however, inclined towards the class-based mobilization of the Malos. Though in Assam, the Malos could maintain their identity as distinct fishermen caste community they lost the Scheduled Caste status in Tripura.

Conclusion

Caste consciousness among the socially marginalized communities of colonial Bengal for establishing a respectable caste identity was a common trend. Adoption of rituals from the dominant castes and constructions of self-history was a common method for ensuring justice in the caste-ridden society of Bengal. The first part of the caste movement of Malos also reflected similar features since it was initially attached to the 'Sanskritisation process' mainly because of the 'demonstration effect'. However, the second part is different. The Malos had developed a sense of respect for their occupation instead of discarding it. In the third stage, the caste consciousness of the Malos had been transformed into political consciousness. Thus they participated in the political movements led by Indian National Congress, and Hindu Mahasabha as well by the Communists. However, the partition of Bengal (1947) had dispersed the Malos as a marginal caste community in Bengal.

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