
Research

Emergence of Mahishya: A Forward Agrarian Caste of South Bengal

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Abstract: Mahishya is a Bengalee Hindu agrarian caste. They are traditionally found in the Indian states of West Bengal, Tripura and Odisha. In West Bengal, they live especially in Howrah, Purba Medinipur, Paschim Medinipur, Hooghly and South 24 Parganas. In this paper, I would like to discuss the origin of the Mahishya caste with special reference to their relation with the Chasi-Kaibartta caste as well as their socio-economic and cultural condition during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Keywords: Mahishya, Agriculture, Business, Chasi-Kaibartta.

INTRODUCTION

Mahishya is a Bengalee Hindu agrarian caste. They are traditionally found in the Indian states of West Bengal, Tripura and Odisha. Their origin has been mentioned in some ancient texts. According to the ancient text Manusmriti, the term Mahishya refers to those people who are born to a Kshatriya father and a Vaishya mother; that is, the Mahishya people originated from the Anuloma Marriage system. As regards their profession, the ancient texts mention that Mahishyas are engaged in the profession of music, Astronomy and agriculture. In recent times, it is generally believed that Mahishyas are basically "Halia' Kaibarttas or Chasi (ploughmen) Kaibarttas who abandoned traditional occupation like fishing and took up agriculture but it is difficult to say definitely that from the ancient time to the starting of the colonial period what professions they performed. In recent times, Mahishyas are one of the predominant castes in West Bengal, especially in southern Bengal in the districts of Howrah, Purba Medinipur, Paschim Medinipur, Hooghly and South 24 Parganas. Besides agriculture, some members of the Mahishyas are now employed in the business and service sectors. They are considered a forward caste.

There is no mention of the Mahishya caste in the Census report of 1772; there is mention of the Kaibartta caste as an agricultural community and the Jalia caste as a fishing community. H. H. Risely, in his famous book "Tribes and Castes of Bengal did not mention the Mahishya caste; rather, he mentioned the Kaibartta caste residing in twenty-four districts of undivided Bengal. According to him, the social status of the Kaibartta is not altogether easy to determine, as the fisher sub-castes would necessarily occupy a lower position than purely agricultural groups. The Halia kaibarttas are usually allowed to smoke in the same hookah with members of the Nava-Sakha, and this fairly marks their position as standing first below that group. The same privilege is not accorded to Jalia Kaibarttas. At present Brahmans will not take water from the hands even of the Halia sub-caste but it seems likely, as time goes on, that this sub-caste will rise in social estimation and altogether sink the Kaibartta, so that eventually it is possible that they may succeed in securing a place with the Nava-Sakha, an elastic group, which has already been expanded beyond its original limits."

The following statement shows the number and distribution of Kaibarttas in 1872 and 1881.

District	1872	1881	District	1872	1881
Burdwan	56702	315592	Faridpur	13649	24010
Bankura	12644	25250	Bakarganj	29341	18080
Bhirbhum	11081	9129	Maimansinh	77798	24217
Midnapur	692140	753435	Chittagong	3698	4543
Hughli	288620	142526	Noakhali	20263	16151
Howrah	288620	155653	Tipperah	53806	50130
24 Parganas	182486	179758	Chittagong Hill Tracts	-	07
Nadiya	114857	126063	Darbhangha	494	390
Jessore	44001	32505	Saran	06	-
Khulna	-	25895	Champaran	471	-
Murshedabed	102517	100355	Monghyr	55	-
Dinajpur	38301	37785	Purniah	56321	44221
Rajshahye	60440	63134	Maldah	27566	23556
Rangpur	35396	30612	Santal Parganas	2994	10740

Bogra	14833	15566	Cuttack	-	5120
Pabna	19255	23306	Balasore	-	361
Darjiling	24	219	Tributary States	-	319
Jalpaigori	29700	5838	Singbhum	-	800
Kuch Behar	-	2678	Manbhum	-	5140
Dacca	32317	40422	Bhagalpur	311	267

According to the Midnapore Gazetters, there were no Mahishya people before 1901. It has been mentioned here that nearly all are cultivating Kaibarttas or Mahishyas, and only a small minority are fishing Kaibarttas or Jelias, who occupy a very low position in the social scale. The name Mahishya is a new one adopted since the census of 1901, when the Chasi Kaibarttas urged that they were entirely distinct from the Jeliya Kaibarttas, and that their proper appellatio was Mahishya, an ancient caste of much respectability, which is said to be descended from a Kshatriya father and a Vaishya mother. Not only that, but the report of the age of consent committee 1928-29 has mentioned that in Bengal, the Chasi Kaibartta class is the largest caste among the Hindus, its population being over 2 million. The members belong to the depressed classes and cannot be affected so much by texts of Manu, Parasara or Raghunandan. In the book B.R. Ambedkar Rachanahali (in Bengali), first volume, the author mentions the 1931 census report where 23, 81, 266 people of Bengal have been mentioned as Chasi Kaibarta (Mahishya), which proves that someone can say the name Mahishya as the neck name of the Kaibarttas, but it's not the real name of the Mahishya.

According to a letter forwarded to the project officer cum-district welfare officer, Midnapore, from the Backward class welfare Department, Govt. of West Bengal, dated 7 August 2001 there is a possibility to link Mahishya to the Kaibartta or Hele. In this letter, it is required to inquire into whether "Kaibarttas are locally known as "Mahishya' or "Helo". It is interesting to note in this regard that W.W. Hunter in "A Statistical Account of Bengal Vol. I, Part III, did not mention the Mahishyas; instead, he mentioned 'Kaibarttas' whose profession was cultivating and fishing, which proves that the mainly cultivating community 'Mahisyha was the new name of the "Kaibarttas". Bhagini Nivedita has mentioned Rani Rasmon, i the founder of Dakshineswar Kali temple, as a queen of the Kaibarttas. The same queen has been mentioned by Mahishya Welfare Society as the Mahishya queen, which indicates that "Mahishya' was the later name of the Kaibartas.

Nihar Ranjan Ray has also mentioned that the Chasi Kaibarttas of Hooghly, Bankura and Midnapore have called themselves Mahishya. Probably, by adopting the name Mahishya, they wanted to uplift themselves in the caste structure. The identification of Mahishya with the Chasi-Kaibarta has been approved by the Govt. of West Bengal. In this connection, a letter from the Deputy Secretary, Commission for Backward Classes, Govt. of West Bengal, with memo no 269RL 6/94 dated 02.11.1995 can be mentioned. Last but not least, a letter from the SPIO and the Deputy Secretary, Govt. of West Bengal BCW Department with memo no 535-BCW/RT1-01/2009 could be mentioned where it has been mentioned that "... a section of Chasi-Kaibartta class socially conscious, educated, affluent and enlightened had successfully agitated for recognition of the Mahishya class". It further mentions that "... the class Mahishya born and grown out of Chasi-Kaibartta class may have considerably advanced and may not constitute a backward class".

It is worth mentioning in this regard that although many Mahishya people are still involved in traditional work in rural areas, within a generation, Mahishyas gave up agriculture in large numbers in favour of engineering and skilled labour in the urbanized areas of Howrah and Kolkata. In Howrah, the Mahishyas are the most numerous and successful business people. At the turn of the 20th century, much of the land and factories were owned by the Kayasthas, but by 1967, the Mahishya community owned 67% of the engineering business in the district not only in Howrah, East Midnapore, West Midnapore and South 24 Parganas Mahishyas are also engaged in business and service sector, but here the agriculturist Mahishyas are in a dominant number. Although the financial, social and political success of Mahishyas is notable, they have often been stigmatized due to their agrarian roots. Mahishyas have not been averse to manual labour (often considered demeaning by higher castes), for example, famous freedom fighter and patriot Despran Birendranath Sasmal was refused the post of chief executive of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation by Chittaranjan Das on the grounds that his appointment would offend the Kayasthas of the city; as a result, the job ultimately went to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose.

CONCLUSION

To conclude the discussion about the emergence of the Mahishyas, it would be very necessary to mention that the emergence of the Mahishyas was due to a process of cultural and economic upliftment of the economically and culturally backward caste Chasi Kaibarttas. It is worth mentioning in this regard that in medieval period the so called Kaibartta caste, due to their economic backwardness were confined to the jobs of

agriculture, fishing, hunting etc. but in the eighteenth and nineteenth century some sections of the Chasi Kaibarttas or Heles tried to uplift their economic and cultural condition and for that purpose they used to educate themselves, started new business, their education helped them to get jobs in Industries and Govt. Sectors. By following the Kayastha caste, they included themselves with the work of reading, writing, administration, etc. As a result of the whole process economic and social status of the same people was upgraded. To separate their upgradation, they adopted the title of Mahishya. But it is noteworthy to mention in this regard that they did not fully divest themselves from their traditional agricultural work; they performed agricultural work on their lands by the poor Chasi-Kaibartta or Hele people. Last but not least, it should be remembered that as of now, in independent India reservation system has been started in Govt. Sector, and due to the less growth in the industry service sector has faced a considerable challenge, so the scope of getting service have been reduced. In this respect, being an unreserved caste, educated Mahishya youths have been facing difficulties in getting appropriate jobs, and for that, a large portion of the Mahishya people of South Bengal are doing agricultural activities, but their social status or respect has remained high in localities.

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