

# **THE COMPANY'S POLICY & THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE *BHADRALOK* CASTES**

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It may be interesting to recall the story of a teacher whose students were puzzled to find him crawling on his knees under the dim light of a lamppost, looking for something. When his students asked him what he was looking for, he said he had lost the keys to his house somewhere. So the students also went down on their knees and palms and started looking for the keys, but after a futile search, they brushed the dust off their hands and clothes and asked the teacher if he had any idea where he may have dropped the bunch. The teacher replied immediately that he had heard the keys jingle in his pocket when he had walked through a dark field and then they stopped jingling, before he reached the lamppost. His students naturally asked in unison why he was not searching for the keys along that dark path that led through the field, the teacher said quite triumphantly: “Oh, but I can't see in the darkness there, can I? And besides, there is certainly more light here!”

This, in short, explains the predicament of those who try to make sense or try to interpret the events of 1753 — that led to the first collective empowerment of what would later be described as the bhadralok castes of Bengal. We come across a lot material and light on the bhadraloks once we come to the well-lit nineteenth century, or even shuffle through the records of the post-Plassey period in the latter half of the eighteenth century — thanks, considerably, to the British. But we tend to avoid looking into the dark phase just before Plassey where there are hardly any records regarding the behaviour of social groups or castes, but without some reliable materials, it is difficult to construct any meaningful social history. Our interest is, of course, more on the emergence of the bhadralok identity and we shall study the change in the trading or investment policy of the British East India Company in 1753 — strictly from the viewpoint of social history. The events of 1753 when the Company decided to dispense with their age-old allies, the baniks or merchant castes, for experimenting with a new class of clerical assistants, the *gomostahs*, have been studied in considerable detail in the past. But these were by economic historians or political commentators, not for the purpose of social history. Students of modern Indian history may thus be familiar with them, but we are yet to come across any writing that explains the happenings as a ‘transfer of power’ to the nascent bhadralok conglomerate of Brahmans, Baidyas and Kayasthas of Bengal.

We submit that this caste angle is a new path to take, as economic historians have so far been so focussed on the trade angle that they may not have noticed that these documents also represent the first written evidence of a major and unique collaboration between the three so-called upper castes of Bengal. Their coming together in supporting each other, in writing, has hardly ever been highlighted by historians in terms of the ‘arrival’ of the bhadralok formation — even though the names (and castes) of all the actors, big and small, of the 1753 drama in (old) Fort William have been staring at historians and researchers for several generations. The Fort William Correspondence, the Home Miscellaneous and the Home Public files as well as the Bengal Public Consultations have been studied almost threadbare. Historians have pored over the records pertaining to British affairs in Bengal in the nineteenth century at the India Office in London, the National Archives (NAI) in New Delhi and the West Bengal State Archives for many decades and have examined the events of 1753 several times over to understand political and economic history. They may not have noticed facets of social history pertaining to the three bhadralok castes that

openly ‘cross-supported’ each other and formed an unusual social alliance. This paper seeks to view the events from this standpoint — the angle of social history.

To social historians, this ‘act of coming together’ signified that the three castes were conscious of their collective identity (that was later to be termed as ‘bhadralok’) and that these *jatis* were capable of transcending ritual barriers and work together, in their mutual interest. This tripartite formation of *jatis*, incidentally, accounted for only 6.4 percent of the population of Bengal according to the last caste-wise count that was undertaken during the 1931 census operations. 1753 marked the beginning of a long journey of the budding bhadralok community that ensured thereafter that its social and cultural hegemony would remain unchallenged, till the present period. The *jatis* could convert this unity to monopolise to the extent possible, as long as it was possible all facilities for English and other superior avenues of profitable education as well as employment in government and other respectable services of the time. Since social history deals with identities and attitudes, both of which take long periods to find acceptance overriding ingrained or embedded prejudices, the single episode of 1753 also reveals that the three upper castes of Bengal must have decided over a considerable stretch of time not to contest or quarrel — unlike upper castes that fought caste-based battles in many other states of India, in history or even now. The fact that the bonhomie was limited to just these three castes also indicates that this social pact was, in a way, meant to keep out other castes and social groups from enjoying benefits that were monopolised by this triumvirate of castes. The developments that followed this bonding opened up economic opportunities to the members of the castes that had joined this confederacy and we shall come to the evidence that supports these premises of social history as we proceed down the subsequent paragraphs.

It was not directly against the traditional merchant castes of Bengal that were synonymous with wealth, then and for at least a century thereafter. It was, in a way, an alliance between the ambitious bhadraloks or proto-bhadraloks (as the term bhadralok was not in use before 1821) and their masters who represented the British Company. It surely proved very beneficial to both. While the trade and profits for the Company rose considerably with this alliance — this aspect has been studied *ad infinitum* — this proximity proved more rewarding to the Company’s British servants whose own ‘side business’ prospered phenomenally, with the active assistance of the new class of gomostahs they appointed in 1753. The Brahman-Baidya-Kayastha combine also gained to an unimaginable level, through this unscrupulous collaboration. We must also note the remarkable timing — because this alliance between the British and their three comprador castes, that now appeared to act as one socio-economic group, happened just four years before the British made their entry as the rising military power and made it clear that they would supplement economic gains with guns. The Company defeated the ruling Muslim gentry of Bengal at Plassey and the winning combination ensured that both sides gained substantially from every step that the British advanced — for well over a century and beyond. We may pause here to note that while term bhadralok has been used quite frequently and effectively, the caste composition of the bhadralok *sreni* has never really been firmed up on any authoritative basis by anyone.

We shall soon refer to certain astute observers, mainly foreigners, who grasped the existing social reality of Bengal and had no hesitation in equating the term bhadralok with the three so-called upper castes — that we do as well, in this paper. While it is surely a fact that some other castes and social groups in Bengal have also claims that fit into this nebulous description of ‘bhadralok’, we cannot be grossly faulted if we may adhere to the postulate that bhadralok generally refers mainly to the educated and culture loving Brahman, Baidya and Kayastha of Bengal. Our reasons are very practical, in the sense that:

(a) it is these three castes that occupy the popular imagination when the word bhadralok is uttered, and we may remember that we are dealing basically with an ‘identity’ and this is surely governed by perception;

(b) there is no other befitting term in Bengali that could better describe this ‘conglomerate’ of three castes that is not only a stark reality of Bengal and a hegemonic force in West Bengal and yet it is taboo to discuss caste composition;

(c) despite the fact that other castes from the *banik* group or educated subaltern castes could also be deemed, on certain occasions, to qualify as members of the bhadrakok elite in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, by the time we reach the twentieth, the term bhadrakok meant only the educated segment of three so-called upper castes — that had, thus, monopolised the definition.

A caveat is essential here and this is that while the term bhadrakok aptly describes the educated segment of the three castes, it does not mean automatically that all others are *abhadra* or do not fall in the gentleman’s category. We use the term mainly to delineate the three castes that came together in an unwritten alliance in 1753 — which is the core of the submission in this paper — for want of any other ready term. We need a constant term to define this conglomerate of three castes the continuing hegemony of which in education, culture and politics cannot be hushed into silence — because it violates the norms of the genteel. A small but unspoken fact is, for instance, that no chief minister of the state in 72 years since Independence has been from any other castes other than these three. Academics are, however, still reticent to compartmentalise caste groupings of Bengal with such finality, but we reiterate that just as the term *banik sampradaya* covers so satisfactorily all trading and merchant castes, the term bhadrakok does the same to describe the three castes of Brahman, Baidya and Kayastha — or at least, the educated and cultured layer within these castes. JH Broomfield, who has researched on the history of the bhadrakoks in the twentieth century has no hesitation in equating the three castes with the description bhadrakok. He is clear that “the term bhadrakok was frequently used in the late nineteenth century as a synonym for high caste”, which he specifically mentions as “Brahmin, Baidya and Kayastha” (1968, 6).

SN Mukherjee deals extensively with the nature of the bhadrakok castes and states that “it would seem that the Brahman, Baidya and Kayastha together formed a sub-elite group in the power structure of the traditional society and all rulers of Bengal, the Palas, Senas, Pathans and Mughals had to rely on their support (p 30). He cites several factors like education and land holding “which led many scholars, old and new, to believe that the bhadrakok was a traditional elite, consisting of Brahmin, Baidya and Kayastha, which continued to enjoy high status and exercise power as junior administrators and landowners throughout the nineteenth century” (p 31). But then, Mukherjee does not agree that bhadrakoks were almost invariably from the three upper castes and he mentions that in the nineteenth century, self-made men from other castes like Motilal Seal, a gandhabanik and Gaurchand Basak, a weaver (actually from a caste of weaver-merchants) were also leaders of the Bhadrakok;ok community. That was in the nineteenth century. Our point is, however, that by the twentieth century, the term bhadrakok was almost synonymous with the three so-called upper castes.

There appears little point in further flogging this argument as the term bhadrakok is essentially a social or colloquial one and though historians have been fond of using it for a long, long time they have not left behind any formal criteria or definition. Our restricted use of the term bhadrakok relates to a phenomenon that appeared in the early eighteenth century, in the formative years of a tripartite alliance, for which we feel no other term fits in so well. The term *abhijaat* or aristocrat appears quite presumptuous. To understand the events of 1753, we need to distinguish two distinct conglomerates of castes, one belonging to the trading castes and the other consisting of the three upper castes. The latter came together to fulfil certain requirements set forth by the British, for which the term bhadrakok appears quite appropriate. Many other historians have defined their own bhadrakoks in the spatial and temporal contexts of their studies and two such works that come to mind are Joya Chatterji’s “The Decline, Revival and Fall of the Bhadrakok Influence in the 1940s” (2001) and the latest book by Parimal Ghosh entitled *What Happened to the Bhadrakok* (2016). Those who are still quite averse to defining the bhadrakok conglomerate as consisting of only the three so-called upper castes are at liberty to view the developments of 1753 by categorising one

class as *baniks* (there is no dispute here) and the other as the Brahman, Baidya and Kayastha alliance. This makes the describing of the binary a bit too large and wordy — that is all.

Anthropologists, who have spent a disproportionately large amount of time on castes and *jatis* (as the latter represent the real-life operational units of castes) just do not recognise the term *bhadralok*. It is almost impossible to find any serious anthropological literature on the *bhadralok* phenomenon. No respectable directory or dictionary of Indian anthropology deals with this conglomerate of castes, treating the subject of *bhadralok jatis* to be outside the domain of respectable or academic anthropology. We need to understand that we are dealing with an identity and strong shades of subjectivity are bound to creep in anyway. The purport of any identity is often quite open to interpretation, between those who desire or aspire towards that identity and others who view them from outside — as constituents of the social conglomerate. And, what is critical to remember, is that an identity is a social construct that takes quite a while to firm up in the public mind and requires a longish spell of ‘cultural marination’ to sink in gently into our social life and find mention in our speech.

We have mentioned 6.4 percent as the total population of the three upper castes of Bengal in 1931, while in 1900 it was even less, i.e, 5.1. But we may note that not every member of the three castes actually belonged to the *bhadralok sreni*, that we define, quite telegraphically, in the next paragraph. It is quite possible that almost half the members of these three castes were either not literate enough to qualify or that they belonged unequivocally to the stock of peasants and workers. This places them beyond the core of the term *bhadralok* — but let us not open yet another front for debate. Social history is notoriously subjective but we do need it to supplement the other more precise historical approaches. We may pick up where we left the definition of the term *bhadralok*, with Broomfield and Mukherjee and take up another scholar. Richard P Cronin, who is quite clear that “while *bhadralok* status was generally limited to members of the three highest Bengal castes, membership in this social elite depended primarily upon the acquisition of education, both Western and Sanskrit” (1975 pp 99-100). To understand how this small three percent or so of Bengal monopolised government employment, we may now turn to numbers provided by Broomfield (1968 10). In 1900, the three *bhadralok* castes occupied 80.2 percent of ‘high government appointments’, while Muslims who constituted 51.2 percent of the population could get only 10.3 percent and the ‘lower caste Hindus’ managed a mere 9.5 percent of these jobs even when they accounted for 41.8 percent of the population. Though the concept of bracketing only three upper castes as *bhadralok* may often appear a bit debatable, all arguments cease when such a gross reality stares sternly at us. There is absolutely no problem of amorphousness here, when we grapple with hard socio-economic truths and theoretical terms like hegemony come out in flesh and blood. We are surely within our rights to delineate only these three participant *jatis* as *bhadralok*, at least for the purposes of this paper.

There is an argument that, at a conceptual level, all educated Bengalis could be brought under the scope of the term *bhadralok*, but we submit that the *bhadralok* it is surely more than just education. J.H.Broomfield defines it elsewhere as “a socially privileged and consciously superior group, economically dependent upon landed rents and professional and clerical employment; keeping its distance from the masses by its acceptance of high-caste proscriptions and its command of education; sharing a pride in its language, its literate culture and its history; and maintaining its communal integration through a fairly complex institutional structure that it had proved remarkably ready to adapt and augment to extend its social power and political opportunities” (2016, 218). We can dilate on every phrase used in this definition, but let us just absorb the rest of Broomfield’s well-observed criteria for qualifying as a *bhadralok* — other than the membership of the three castes — that every Bengali knows for sure to be true. While introducing his chapter ‘Bengal and the *Bhadralok*’, Broomfield summarises these characteristics as (a) aversion to physical labour or farming work; (b) an unusual attraction towards owning some land or zamindari right, mainly to

boost one's social standing; (c) partaking of English education at any cost (d) pursuing educational and cultural interests, often musical, (e) preferring an urban home or habitat and (f) seeking salaried employment (1968, 6-10). We can, again, agree or debate each point but we need to move to the core of our argument which is how a set of castes that constitute the bhadraloks were impacted by the policy of the East India Company and how this dispensation eventually led to the consolidation of their collective identity. Tithi Bhattacharya, who studied the bhadralok's class for its educational and cultural preferences in the period between 1848 and 1885, places more weightage to these factors. "In Bengal upper casteness, unfortunately, came to be naturalized as part of the bhadralok's intellectual identity, as did its largely Hindu spirit" (Bhattacharya 2005 4).

At this stage, let us try to pin down when exactly the term bhadralok came into circulation. Since Indians outside West Bengal and Tripura are hardly aware of this peculiarly Bengali classification and the few who do know or have heard of it are quite content to take it at its face value, we need to move to Bangladesh where almost two-third of the Bengali speaking people reside. *Banglapedia* or the *National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh* mentions that "in its institutional sense, the term was first used in 1823 by Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay (1787-1848) in his literary works. Native clericals and petty officials serving the British colonial state, the *nouveau riches*, new zamindars and entrepreneurs were made the themes of satirical works like *Kalikata Kamalalaya* (1823), *Naba Babu Bilas* (1825), and *Naba Bibi Bilas* (1831). Bhavani Charan ridiculed the emergent class using the term bhadralok." The *Banglapedia* also describes it as "an elitist social class that emerged through the processes of social changes brought under the impact of British colonial rule. In pre-modern times, the word Bhadra, a Sanskrit term, denoted several values including property, particularly homestead property. The homestead granted to a person rent-free was then known as *bhadrasan*. The occupant of the *bhadrasan* was bhadra and from that root, bhadralok. The term bhadralok began to be used later for the behaviourally refined people. From early nineteenth century, a bhadralok class was emerging as a social category and became practically an institution in the mid-nineteenth century."

*Banglapedia* then makes a significant distinction between etymology and history and delinks the bhadralok from the respectability that the term *bhadrasan* conferred. It states that "the bhadralok did not really come from *bhadrasan* but from the clerical, commercial and the new landed class, who built their fortune through their association and transactions with the Europeans. They amassed wealth, according to Bhabanicharan, after coming in contact with the Europeans, and being influenced by them, they became indifferent about religion and culture of their forefathers". We need to read between the lines, carefully. Scholars also agree that the first person to use this term was Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay, in his *Kalikata Kamalalya* of 1823. In *Kalikata Kamalalya*, there is a short imaginary description of the bhadralok as basically an educated Bengali who has to put in long hours in office and return to their city dwellings called *basha*, which signifies a temporary nature. In her section on "The Curious Case of the Bhadrakok: Class or Sentiment" (2005, 35-37), Bhattacharya follows Sumit Sarkar (1997 176-77) in distinguishing this urban 'house' or shelter from the real home or *bari* of the early generations of bhadraloks in their ancestral villages — to which they went back, periodically.

We turn next to the comprehensive *Bibartanmulak Avidhan* or the 'Diachronic Dictionary of the Bengali language' that traces the earliest stages of the evolution of words. The Bangla Academy of Dhaka published these three bulky volumes of the *Bibartanmulak Abhidhan* in 2013 the collaborative effort of several researchers. It further fine tunes the first date when the term bhadralok was used to 1821, instead of 1823. According to this very comprehensive dictionary, the word first appeared in print in 1821 in the *Samachar Darpan Patrika* of Kolkata. The *Avidhan*, incidentally, mentions the word appeared again in the same newspaper in 1822. It also traces several other later uses of this term in colloquial usage and in popular literature. For our purposes, we now have a definite period when the term is found in use. But this may not be the last word on

the subject and we must remember that a new word or phrase may often take a long time to move from the streets to the parlour or vice versa. We are, however, yet to come across any reference to the word *bhadralok* being in use at the level of the people before it crept into print. In a sense, therefore, it could be argued that Nabakrishna Deb and his ilk were not *bhadraloks* as the term had not yet been conjured, but these are facile arguments. Sumit Sarkar reminds us, for instance, the Rabindranath Tagore used the term ‘*bhadralok-sampraday*’ to convey a similar meaning (1997 26).

As we explained in the opening paragraph, in the early eighteenth century, we face the problem of scarcity of reliable materials on the social history of the Bengalis — with special reference to emerging formations like *bhadraloks*. The position improves a bit as we enter the latter half of the eighteenth century, from which the ‘modern era’ of Bengal and of India begins. In the nineteenth century, we get a lot of materials and records thanks to the obsessive compulsion of the British to keep records all levels of governance, commerce and economics. The unbounded curiosity of the colonial traders and rulers, coupled with their incorrigible habit of trying to extract profits out of every situation or resource, meant that they left behind voluminous correspondence and tracts describing in detail India’s people, communities, customs, commodities, nature and minerals. But in the pre-Plassey period, such records had not been built up or attempted and it is extremely difficult to negotiate social history of the *bhadralok* group with the desired precision. Historians can still draw some materials from sources like the Fort William Correspondence and India Office Records, disciplines like anthropology could hardly profit at that stage as colonial ethnography was yet to be born. In other words, we have hardly any material on the castes of Bengal in the decade that matters most to us — where the 1750s are concerned and hence we turned to economic and political records to glean our granules of social history.

We find the first important grouping of *bhadralok* castes was prepared by Radhakanta Deb in 1822 for HT Prinsep, that SN Mukherjee reproduces in his article on “Caste, Class and Politics in Calcutta, 1815-38” (p 18-19). As we have seen, the term *bhadralok* had just about appeared in print in 1821-1822 and Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay’s *Kalikata Kamalayaya* had not yet been published. It is not surprising that Deb’s list did not carry the term ‘*bhadralok*’ but stressed on “respectable and opulent natives of the Presidency” (Mukherjee 20 ff). We shall have to encounter this problem of navigating between different formations when referring to caste composition of the *bhadralok* conglomerate. As many as 12 of the 23 top families mentioned in the list were Kayasthas, 3 were Brahman, one was Baidya — signifying that the three core castes of *bhadraloks* accounted for 16 in number or 65 in terms of percentage. We shall see subsequently how three so called upper castes became almost synonymous with the term *bhadralok* and it is interesting to note that while these three *jatis* counted for just four to six percent of the Bengali-speaking population, they constituted 70 percent of the upper strata in Deb’s list in 1822. Among the other castes that find their names of the list we have three Subarnabaniks, two weavers (actually Tantubaniks or merchants from the weavers’ community), one Tili (oil-presser) and one from the caste of distillers. So skewed is the earliest historic list of caste positions in Kolkata, that appeared some seventy years after the ‘Company policy’ that we allude to took its shape in 1753.

Radhakanta Deb’s list is a not perfect, but it is surely something concrete. It does not include Rammohun Roy — perhaps because he had settled in Kolkata only eight years before this list was prepared and was not *bonedi* (ancient/aristocratic) enough to qualify. Or, his name was anathema to Radhakanta Deb — because while Deb was an arch conservative Hindu, Roy was certainly the most iconoclastic reformer. SN Mukherjee points to more serious omissions like Baidyanath Mukherjee, Motilal Seal, Ramkamal Sen, Hidaram Banerjee’s family, Biswanath Motilal, Bhabanicharan Banerjee, Brinaban Mitra and Kalinath Munshi. But, if we analyse these names with reference to their castes, we shall see that four are Brahmans, two are Kayasthas, one is a Baidya and only one is from a caste of merchants. If these eight were also added to Deb’s list, then the three upper castes would increase their percentage to seventy five. This is the point that we need to note, i.e, by the

early 1820s, it appears that the Brahman-Baidya-Kayastha combine was more rich and powerful than the merchant castes which benefitted the most from British rule and represented wealth in Bengal from the medieval period. They were settled in Kolkata and other important markets even before Job Charnock settled in these parts in 1690 and relocated British trade to the east bank of the Hughli river. What caused this turn of fortunes against the original trading partners of the British, the merchant castes, and in favour the three castes who would almost monopolise the term *bhadralok*, from the middle of the late nineteenth century?

We need to realise the gravity of the ‘transfer of importance’ in 1753 when the newly formed Brahman-Baidya-Kayastha alliance replaced the *baniks* as the most favoured class where the British were concerned. The trading castes had, indeed, occupied a prime position in Bengal’s social history if we go by the most down to earth stories contained in the *Mangal Kavyas*, composed mainly from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is interesting that the target for conversion from ‘high religion’ to the religion of the folk is usually a merchant like Chand Saudagar or Dhanapati Saudagar who is held high and there is hardly any role ascribed from the Brahman or Baidya or Kayastha — despite the fact that almost all the poets who composed these ballads were from these castes. In fact, the Kayastha, Bhanru Dutta, is depicted quite pejoratively as a villain. At the folk level, it was the merchant who counted the most and all attempts were made therefore by the folk goddesses, Manasa and Chandi, to win them over — not the Brahman or Baidya or Kayastha. These nuggets gives some indication of the relative importance of the merchant castes vis a vis the three upper castes who emerged later, in unison, to become their rivals— from the middle of the eighteenth century.

But before we finally come to 1753, the year that we have already mentioned as the turning point, it may be useful to touch upon the *jatis* in question — especially for those who are not familiar with Bengal’s caste system. Caste, as we realise, is basically a social construct that relies very heavily on what one would like to believe and how one views the whole social hierarchy. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when the game of the *bhadraloks* was being played out, Bengal was quite conscious of caste differences and entitlements. Anthropologists agree that there is nothing called a ‘pure’ caste, but despite this reality, all castes invariably claim a ‘high status’, at least in comparison to some others, and also insist on the purity of their blood. Indigenous blood has penetrated, without doubt, every social group and the fact that inter marriages are ritually prohibited even between sub-castes within the same *jati* obviously signifies that there are historic suspicions about the so-called purity claimed by each. Almost all groups of Brahmans claim to have descended from some legendary ancestors who came to Bengal from some purer stock in the Gangetic valley. No reference is made to the large indigenous groups of ritual practitioners that were co-opted into or assimilated by the different sub-castes of Brahmans in Bengal.

The Baidyas who are next in terms of ritual standing and next in the caste hierarchy also have their own origin tales linking them with Ambastha mentioned by Manu. Because they claimed to be equal in status to Brahmans there were sharp retorts from the latter. The very Bengali modus of settlement that was finally arrived was that while Brahmans performed the last rites of their deceased ancestor eleven days after the date of their death, the upper-grade Kayasthas did this on the thirteenth day, the Baidyas were entitled to do so on the twelfth. There is no doubt that some amount of social mobility existed within the layers of Brahmans and Baidyas, especially in absorbing some indigenous religious and medicinal practitioners into their fold. But, by the time we come to these castes, there was a reasonable amount of freezing of status — even though Risley mentions one and a half centuries later that there existed a popular saying even in the 1880s: “Rising and falling is the Baidya’s lot, provided the original stock remainssound (p 48, volume 1). The Baidyas are a tiny community compared to the other two.

Where the larger Kayastha caste was concerned, it was more porous. Legends abound about how some enterprising families, clans and sub-castes moved up the social ladder in pre-modern and modern periods. Kayasthas, are almost certainly of local origin as this indicates why have no blood or kinship relationship with any caste outside Bengal, not even those north Indian social groups that carry the same name. Yet, they too claim they arrived in Bengal in some mythical past and are 'superior'. The Anthropological Survey of India's authoritative volumes, *The People of India* series mention under West Bengal that the Kayasthas "are supposed to have crystallised into a caste only in the medieval times" ((volume XXXXIII, part one, p 640). In fact, the bottom layer of Kayasthas called under different names like the *bahattor ghors* (seventy two clans) or *Bansaj* (Risley 440) were virtually open. Risley gives a few examples of absorption of other social groups in Kayasthas and, as we are aware such mobility took place in many castes throughout history with convenient Brahmanical genealogies being invented, for appropriate fees. For our purposes, we note that only the two upper layers of Kayasthas, the kulin consisting of three, four or just five surnames (depending on which interpretation is adopted) and the moulik or saat-ghor or aat-ghor (agin, depending on school) consisting of seven or eight surnames are usually admitted as members of the bhadrakok sreni — provided they fulfilled certain other conditions. The short submission is that there is a certain open-endedness where Kayasthas were concerned.

Hitesranjan Sanyal explains the operational mechanics of the caste or *jati* system of Bengal and repeats the de jure stand that Brahmans took, that all *jatis* other than Brahmans are Sudras, and how the concept of pure and impure was ensured by the principle of *jalchalachal*. This latter term delineated which castes could offer water to which castes and the acceptance or refusal to partake of it was determined by strict codes of who was higher or roughly equal or positively inferior. According to him, "in Bengal, the Baidyas.....and Kayastha..... are the top of the internal hierarchy of the Sudras and occupy the highest position among the ceremonially clean Sudra *jatis*' (1981 19). He iterates that the degree of Sanskritisation adopted or accepted or adopted by a particular caste determined its rank in the social hierarchy and he comments that "the Baidyas and Kayasthas are the most advanced *jatis* in this respect" (p 20). From the standpoint of social history what is important for us to note in this convoluted discussion on 'purity' and hierarchy is that these arguments and beliefs helped bring the three upper castes closer. These justified the entry of the Baidyas and Kayasthas into the Brahmanical fold, in partial modification of the rigidity that Brahmans have insisted upon in other parts of India. The real compulsions that prompted such adjustments and social engineering are explained in the next paragraph. As Sanyal confesses, "the degree of impurity in a *jati* is measured by the attitude of Brahmans towards it ( p 21) — thereby conceding that it is all very subjective. Caste accounts and genealogies are not useful in tracing the historic development of castes and those that are suspected to have arisen almost certainly from indigenous roots in Bengal had taken adequate care to cover their tracks with paid-for accounts and genealogies and purchased Brahmanical blessings. Let us appreciate the flexibilities that the apparently-rigid system and hierarchy permitted when the occasion so arose — that is our submission.

The point of raising these issues is to highlight the internal differences and inter se rivalries among the three upper castes that were subsumed as they seized the opportunity to serve under the British in 1753 and replace the banik or trading classes thereafter. To understand how the Baidyas and Kayasthas could finally get together with the Bengali Brahmans in the bhadrakok group, we need to appreciate the basic difference between the culture of this far flung province and the other north Indian states, where internecine rivalries and battles between the upper castes are proverbial. While the Brahmans, Bhumihars, Rajputs and Kayasthas fought it out in the Gangetic heartland and similar inter-caste wars plagued other states as well, Bengal had no such situation. The pan Indian scene was that all castes joined in caste contests and rivalries most seriously, with obviously the depressed and most depressed castes being at the extreme receiving end — who occasionally rose in revolt. True, inter caste differences did exist even in Bengal but there were four reasons and special

circumstances that ensured that Bengali Hindus behaved differently and why the inter caste conflicts did not generate into ugliness. As SN Mukherjee observed, “the caste structure of Bengal during the pre-colonial period was far less rigid than it is supposed to have been in other parts of India” (1970, 29).

The first is that by the late medieval period, most of Bengal swung to Sufism and Islam, which left the caste Hindus in a minority — as the census results of the nineteenth century proved. So much so, that at present, only about 34 percent of the Bengali speaking people profess the Hindu faith — that too, includes a large percentage from the previously-shunned groups like tribals and dalits. The Hindus in Bengal appeared to be in a minority which became clear from the early census operations and within the Hindus, the upper castes were an even smaller minority that could not afford to be further split into too many caste formations. This may have accounted for them coming closer but it is not spelt out so sharply in the sparse materials on which the social history of the Bengali Hindus rests, but we may infer this from the manner in which social formations behaved. It is clear from the narrative of the small community of upper caste Hindus that the three treated the vast masses of the so-called lower caste Hindus and the overwhelming Muslim agriculturist with equal contempt. The second reason was that Muslim Bengalis were seen by these castes as hardly Bengali. This comes out clear from the oft-repeated statement “*Amra Bangali Ora Mussalman*” — that we are Hindus are Bengalis and they are basically Mussalmans. In protecting the Bengali Hindu from the impure meant that everything relating to Muslims considered unacceptable — their lungi, their onion-garlic food, their chicken/beef diet, their customs. This sort of a cultural trench that separated the Hindus and Muslims actually resulted in some amount of bonding within the members of each community and a special bonding emerged among the five or six percent of the population that comprised of upper caste Hindus. This s reflected quite strongly within the bhadralok castes. The third allied reason was that most of the social groups at the vast bottom of the pyramid of Bengal had walked over to Islam and they had severed whatever loose or imperfect linkages they had with Brahmanical Hinduism. Conversely those who did remained within the Hindu fold were less prone to caste-based acrimonious among themselves — as compared to other states. And the last circumstance was that since the upper caste Hindus were kept out of administration and power for the first two centuries of Islamic rule in Bengal, and admitted only in dribblets thereafter until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there were lesser reasons for inter-caste rivalries for political patronage and strength among the upper castes.

There is another dimension worth noting, and this is that Baidyas and Kayasthas were almost at par with Brahmans where education and religion were concerned. No one has any idea when these two castes appeared on the horizon but we find them as ‘arrived entities’ from the 14<sup>th</sup> century or thereabouts. We see that the earliest translators of the *Mahabharat* or sections thereof from Sanskrit to Bengali were Kayasthas like Kabindra Parameshwar Das and Srikara Nandy in the 14<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> centuries (Sukumar Sen 107 ff). In the same period, we see how Vijay Gupta, a Baidya, composing the *Manasa Mangal*, while Maladhar Basu, a Kayastha, produced his *Srikrishna Vijay*, between 1473 and 1480. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, we also come across Narayan Deb, again a Kayastha, who composed the *Padma Puran*, which is *Manasa Mangal* by another name. As Dineshchandra Sen notes, some of Chaitanya’s closest companions and followers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century were Baidyas or Kayasthas — Murari Gupta, Paramananda Sen, Narahari Sarkar, Basudeb Ghosh, Madabananda Ghosh and Raghunath Dasa (DC Sen 1917 100ff). We may also note other Baidyas and Kayasthas in this revolutionary religious movement — like Shivananda Sen. Chaitanya’s hagiographies were composed by Baidyas like Murari Gupta, Krishnadas Kaviraj, Govindadas Kaviraj and Premananda Sen. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, we see how another Kayastha, Kashiram Das, attained fame for his translation of the *Mahabharat* while others from this caste like Narasimha Basu, Ketakadas Kshemananda and Manik Dutta (S Sen 112ff) carried on the *Mangal Kavya* tradition. We repeat the point — that is, in Bengal, these two castes were considerably at par with the Brahmans where education and religion were concerned. In fact, they were the biggest gainers from Chaitanya’s

inclusivism — for soon after his death, the ‘six Goswamis’ of Vrindavan who led the Gaudiya Vaishnava movement reintroduced caste barriers that had been lowered by Chaitanya. But the Kayasthas and Baidyas were firmly ensconced with the Brahmins as clean Sudras who were acceptable to the Goswamis and thus bracketed with Brahmins.

Returning to our main theme, we note that in the early decades of the eighteenth century, the British in Kolkata and Bengal usually traded through the *baniks* or the merchant castes, especially the *tantubaniks* or weaver-traders, and sourced their cloth and other goods from this class of brokers. Explaining this in some more detail, NK Sinha says in his *Economic History of Bengal*, volume 1, that in early eighteenth century Bengal, the British policy of trade or ‘investment’ (as it was called) was dependant on Indian brokers and agents and it revolved around a system of making advance payments to them known as *dadni*, to book and purchase goods on their behalf. Indian merchants then paid cash to the weavers and other producers to supply goods for onward transfer to the East India Company, but quite often, these *baniks* had risk their own money as the money advanced to them by the Company was not enough to cover the total bill. At times, they were told to pick up goods for direct cash sale to the British under the ‘ready-money system’. This involvement of both capital and risks meant that the *dadni banians* had to be men of some substance. Besides, transactions involved a lot of haggling over prices at every level and only those *dadni* merchants who were solvent men could survive as they also had to be strong enough to bargain with the British at every step. Sinha says “the most important *dadni* merchants were the Seths and Basaks at Sutanati (in Kolkata, who) had preference over others in this business because they had lived long in Calcutta and were under the protection of the British” (6). Sinha also refers to a north Indian trader like Ominchund who was also a prominent *dadni* merchant. He mentions that “in 1751-52, the notable *dadni* merchants in Calcutta were Gopinath Seth, Ramkrishna Seth, Lakshmi Kanta Seth, Sobharam Basak, Ominchand and the Cotmahs” (6). SN Mukherjee goes a step ahead and explains that the “Setts controlled the broker’s office of the Company in Calcutta until the end of the *dadni* system in 1753” (p 13). He then links the *banians* to a longer timeline of Bengal’s history, when he summaries that “by the beginning of the nineteenth century, they had become *shroffs* (money lenders) in Calcutta and their descendants helped the cause of the modernists in 1820s and 1830s” where knowledge of English education and western Enlightenment was concerned (p 13).

Shubhra Chakrabarti feels it is not correct to lump all intermediaries in English trade under one category called *banians* and points out to researches that establish “that their existed a complex hierarchy among the middle, according to their roles.” They were classified as “*banian, dewan, contractor, gomostah, dalal and pykar*” (1994, 107). The *banian* was the chief operator and interpreter, who was actually a trading partner who put his capital into the business while the British provided him the *dastak* or document from the officials of the Mughal empire and the Nawab of Bengal permitting them to purchase and transport goods without the payment of taxes and duties. PJ Marshall suggests that the *banians* actually traded under cover of the *dastak* and invested their own funds for profits, while the British official simply offered his name and authority — for a fee (1967, 55). “Europeans traded on the capital of their *banyans* or Indian agents, or to be more exact, the *banyans* traded on their master’s name and authority’ (Sinha 1967a 115). One must understand that in the eighteenth century, British rule in Bengal rested on “Indian junior administrators who worked more like speculators or contractors than as civil servants” (Mukherjee 14). After the *banian* came the *dewan* who did not participate in funding, but actually supervised the entire operation on behalf of the *banian* where the Indian producers and suppliers were concerned and controlled the subordinate agents like *gomostah, dalals* and *pykars*. While the *dalal* actually brought the producer-supplier in contact with the purchaser for a commission, the *gomostah* was merely a salaried employee and we find mention of this post as employees of the merchants, such as “Maneekchand’s *Gomostah*”, from as early as 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1707 (India Office Records, microfilm reel 1, BPC or Bengal Public Consultations, in the National Archives, the NAI, New Delhi). We shall soon see

how this class later gained the most from the rupture in relations between the main players, the Company and the *banians*. He carried the funds given to him by the *banian* or the *dewan* and made the actual payment at the field level, after checking the goods in term of quality and quantity. The *pykar* was a mini-*banian* who used his capital to purchase on behalf of his employer or supplied goods on a much smaller scale, for a fee. It was the *gomostah* who was held responsible in case goods were not supplied or were of poor quality or delayed. He knew every producer or weaver within his beat.

This system worked well enough in its early days but moved into rough weather from the early 1750s. Incidentally, the Sinha quotes from British records to surmise that “the *dadni* merchants themselves were not very eager to do business with the English East India Company and considered that the provision of goods for the French and Dutch more lucrative and more convenient” (7). He also summarises why the Court of Directors of the East India Company agreed with their servants in India to dispense with the services of the *banians* and these were (a) bad relations with the *banians* as well as their insolence (b) their notorious non compliance with contracts (c) their constant obstinacy. This part of history has been traversed in the past as well but what is perhaps new in this examination is the caste character of the players. In short, it is submitted that till 1753 the Company supported and enriched a class of Indian entrepreneurs in Bengal that was positively *banian* and constituted of people from the merchants castes of *tantubaniks* and other traders. Many economic historians have studied this phase — without getting into caste compositions of the ‘winners’ — and we may pick notes from any of them. Kalikinkar Datta states, for instance, that the “*dadni* merchants could not always make good their contracts by procuring goods to the full amount of the *dadni* money, and the Court of Directors (of the Company) sent instructions about the year 1746 to the members of the Council in Calcutta that they should advance *dadni* as little as possible and should encourage them to purchase goods at ready money”. Obviously, the merchants were unwilling to risk more and more of their own capital to purchase goods on behalf of the Company and then haggle with the English about quality and price and finally end up by receiving their payments rather late (Datta, 1984 85).

Relations were thus quite unsettled from 1746 and there are several notes and letters on this subject. The Fort William and India Office records contain blow by blow details. In a long letter dated 30<sup>th</sup> November 1746 addressed to the Court of Directors in London, the Calcutta Council mentions how the merchants were informed about the decision of the Court and how they refused, more or less, with the new term of the English Company. We must remember that, in 1746, the English were just one more of the three or four European entities that were operating in Bengal and were vying for the same or similar goods. More important is the fact that before the Battle of Plassey, Britain had not emerged as the most powerful player in Bengal and the merchant castes did not obviously look up them as overlords in the same manner as the Brahman-Baidya-Kayastha *gomostahs*, writers and cash keepers employed by the Company a decade later did. In any case, the *banians* of Kolkata were so accustomed to treating them as equal trading partners that they may have failed to grasp the early signs of the superior strength of this London Company. On the other hand, the *gomostahs* and other Indians who sought for and received employment under the Company did so mainly for their own economic reasons. The fact that they later gained the most from the new dispensation of 1753 and from the end of the *dadni*-purchase does not imply, ipso facto, that they were endowed with extraordinary foresight to understand the course of history — which is extremely difficult. They may just have happened to be on the winning side, but whatever be the reason, it marked the beginning of a great partnership in the acquisition of wealth, never mind the means.

Returning to where we left, we may move straight to the two large volumes of records in the NAI entitled Home Public Proceedings of 1753, volumes 1 (January to June) and 2 (July to December) where every page bristles with angst about how the *banians* of the merchant castes

refused to oblige the Company. We have detailed accounts of how the London office finally agreed to the proposal of the Calcutta Council in Fort William — which was then located more or less at the site of the present GPO or General Post Office in Kolkata. And, this proposal was to do away with the system of advancing money (*dadon, dadni*) to the *banians* for purchase of goods and instead, to engage the Company's own *gomostahs*. To check whether the new proposal of early June 1753 received the approval of the Court of Directors of the East India Company in London, we see that at that end an entry is available as late as 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1753, that says it all. Before we read the exact quote, we may appreciate that we have to make allowances for several months of delay in shipping letters from the Calcutta Council to the Court of Directors of the East India Company and these finding entries in the records kept at London. We have, therefore, to be prepared for identical or similar entries on different dates, in Kolkata and in London, that also depended on which date it was copied and the authority that ordered it to be copied and preserved. We know for certain that the Calcutta Council at Fort William finalised its policy to change the purchase system in the first half of June of that year and now we see the letter recorded on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September 1753 that reads “we ordered a publick advertisement to be affixed at the first gates, giving notice that we intended to employ *gomostahs* at the *aurungs* on account of Your Honours (i.e, on behalf of the Company)” (Datta 1958 684).

The developments leading to this new policy are available from the NAI records of 7<sup>th</sup> June 1753 where it is clear that the instructions of the Court of Directors to insist on reducing the percent of *dadni*/advance to be given by the Company to the traditional *banians* “were placed before the merchants”. It is, further, recorded that the *banians* “absolutely refused, insisting that could not deviate from their own proposals.....(and) demand for 85 percent advance on *Dadney*” (p 290, volume 1). The subsequent notes only reiterate the refusal of the merchants to sign the new contracts (p 291) and also record the problems created by the Danes and the Marathas (p 293). The novel proposal of the Company to finally discard the age-old *dadni* system and “to send (their own) *Gomostahs* to the different *aurungs* (stores in the interior where cloth procured from weavers were processed) also come out clearly. The justification given was that the Company's own *gomostahs* could “purchase such goods as are directed by the (Company's) List of Investment (procurement) on the best and most reasonable terms”. Not a whisper was made of the private trade that these newly-appointed Indian servants of the Company were to make on behalf of the British officials, under the cover of the Nawab's tax-free and duty-free *dastak* or permit that was meant for the Company's purchases only. Far from it, the notes make it appear that it was a self righteous and courageous decision that the Company's servants knew that they would find obstruction and sabotage (10 June 1753, p 292 ff).

That this was given effect to by the middle of the month is clear from another reference that we come across in volume 1 of 1753 of the NAI that notes that on 20<sup>th</sup> June, Roger Drake, Factor, informed the Board in Kolkata that “several persons had been offered to be employed in the Company's services as of *Gomostahs*, Cash Keepers and Writers to *Aurangs*” mentioned later. The Board decided to “make enquiry of their character and substance and if approved, we may entertain them accordingly” (page 327-28 of volume 1 of the Home (Public) Proceedings. The same page gives the names of the applicants and their security or surety, that is, solvent Indians who guaranteed to the local Council that they would make good if the employed person absconded after causing losses to the Company. This system of taking security or indemnity before entrusting government money still exists, in a diluted format even today. The list is interesting and we reproduce it below, with comments regarding possible castes.

1. Kissendass Tagore (Brahman), who was to be appointed as *Gomostah*, with wages of 75 rupees per month, with Govindaram Mitre (Kayastha) as his security.
2. Ramsundar Das (caste not determinable) as Cash Keeper on wages of 27 rupees per month, with Permanaund Bysack (Tantubanik) as his security.

3. Sitaram Cor (Kayastha) as Under *Gomostah* at 30 rupees, security Govindaram Mitre (Kayastha).
4. Ramanand Chuckerbetty (Brahman) as Under *Gomostah*, at 30 rupees, security Govindaram Mitre (Kayastha).
5. Ramchurn Gupta (Baidya) as Writer on 20 rupees a month, with Ranaut Sen (Baidya or Kayastha) as security.
6. Neemoi Paulit (Kayastha) as *Gomostah*, on 60 rupees a month with Ramjiban Cubberage (Baidya) and Ramnarain Bose (Kayastha) as security.
7. Chundermohun Bose (Kayastha) as Cash Keeper, at 22 rupees, with Durgaram Mitre and Kissenram Paulit (both Kayasthas) as security.
8. Ram Chunder (most probably Kayastha) as Writer, on 17 rupees a month, with Ramshuner Gose (Kayastha) as his security.
9. Ramnaut Sircar (Kayastha) as Writer on 17 rupees, with Anandraram Metre (Kayastha) as his security.
10. Bollinut Bose (Kayastha), *Gomostah* at 50 rupees a month, with his security being a Brahman, Anandakumar Mookerjee.
11. Juggernaut Nundee, Cash Keeper, at 25 rupees a month, with Kripraum Nundee as his security — both names appear to be Kayastha.
12. Totarand Bose (Kayastha) as Writer on rupees 15, Nunderam Metre (Kayastha) as his security.
13. Alluma Chund as *Gomostah* on 70 rupees a month, with Radhakishen Belleh as his security — the surnames do not reveal their caste.
14. Sookdeb Majoomdar, Cash Keeper, at 24 rupees a month, with Chandon Majoomadar as his security. The names are probably Kayastha or Baidya.
15. Jugut Hazareh as Writer on 15 rupees a month, with Pratapananda Chowdree as security — both surnames appear quite upper caste.
16. Shunohari Tagore (Brahman) as Writer on 15 rupees a month, with Nufsernan Gose (Kayastha) as security.  
( pages 327-28 of volume 1 of Home- Public, 1753).

There is another separate entry in the same volume where other appointments are mentioned, namely:

1. Ramsundar Bose, Cash Keeper, 20 rupees, with some Bose (the name is smudged) as security — on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June. Both are Kayasthas.
2. Kissenchurn Mitre, Writer, 15 rupees, with Nundram Mitre as security. Again, both are Kayasthas (both on page 320, vol 1). On 23<sup>rd</sup> June, the first seven were called from the list mentioned on 20<sup>th</sup> June and their ‘security bonds’ executed. We get these names — Chundersoondar or Chandra Sundar Bose, Raichund Cur or Ray Chand Kar, Ramprasad Sircar or Ram Prasad Sarkar, Kissendeb Tagore or Krishna Deb Thakur, Ramneddy Chuckerbetty or Ramnidhi Chakrabarty, Ramsaran or Ramsharan Dass and Ramchurn or Ram Charan Gupta (Home- Public, 1753, volume 1, page 336). These prove quite firmly that social considerations mattered most where the wealthier or better known person who stood as security was concerned. The ‘securities’ came from the three upper castes and they supported only those applicants who were from these three castes. It did not matter to a Brahman who acted as security that the applicant was nor a Brahman, he risked his name and wealth as long as he belonged to any of the three upper castes. This applied, *mutatis mutandis*, for securities from the other two casts as well. Where Bengal was or is concerned, such open declaration of caste affinities are rare to come by — at least at the upper levels. The degree of cross support by the three castes for candidates who belonged to any of the three castes is really remarkable — and very rare, indeed. How this was missed out by earlier researchers is rather strange — but obviously, they were not peering into the caste angle, as we have done.

The volumes of the NAI were not always stitched very systematically and we get data from one additional volume, numbered as 3A, covering July to December 1753. In it we find on page

399, a reference of advances made to five *Gomostahs* being approved in a Consultation meeting on 18<sup>th</sup> July 1753 that was chaired by Roger Drake. The hand writing is not fully legible and considerably faded but one can retrieve the names of the *Gomostahs* as Hurrenanda Paul, Mungalundoo Tagoor, Hirpernan Sircar, Saun Sircar and Hurrynaunt Tagoor, with Monich Tagoor and one Dutt standing in as security. From subsequent entries made in these volumes, we come across advances and payments made to *Gomostahs*, whose surnames appear to be typically Brahman, Baidyas or Kayastha. The surnames of the *gomostahs* that appear on the accounts of 31<sup>st</sup> July 1753 (p 568, 570 in vol 3A) are Roy, Sein, Mookerjay, Paul, Tagoor, Buxy, Mokkerjay again, and Bose. Again, on 31<sup>st</sup> October we get these surnames for the 15 *gomostahs* listed under the accounts of the East India Company in Bengal for 1753, namely, Gose, Sircar, Tagoor, Bose, Das, Paulit, Gosaul, Biswas, Saumont and one Jafeir (p 666, vol 3A).

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 1753, we get another list of gomostahs and others who are appointed (p 365-66, volume 1). We get a very similar picture of appointments made almost entirely of Brahmans, Baidyas and Kayasthas. The details are of appointees, post, salaries and security are, as follows:

1. Ramchond Mookurjee, *Gomostah*, Rs 34, Protap Naran Chowdree
2. Manohar Mitre, Cash Keeper, Rs 22, Connai Mitre
3. Kissen Mozumdar, Writer, Rs 15, Ramjibon Cubberage
4. Roghu Bysack, Writer, Rs 15, Rammohun Tagore
5. Jaggernaut Sen, *Gomostah*, Rs 20, Nundokishore Cubberage
6. Nilumber Dass, Cash Keeper, Rs 20, Ramjibon Cubberage, Ramram Bose
7. Gadadar Bose, Writer, Rs 20, Sasidas Sircar
8. Dullol Dass, Writer, Rs 15, Sam Tagoor
9. Hidaram Bose, Writer, Rs 15, Benode Mitra

We can locate more such evidence to prove that the newly-appointed *gomostahs* and allied staff like cash-keepers and writers were almost all from the three upper castes of Bengal, namely, Brahman-Baidya-Kayastha. We have already mentioned that we come across the first known instance in the nineteenth century where a new class appeared that was strongly conscious of its caste identity. This class devised a unique method of cross-supporting each other as long as beneficiaries belonged to their three upper castes. We submit that the British records of trade in Bengal during the first half of the eighteenth century may now be viewed from this angle of social history also — now that they have been wrung dry by those who extracted economic and political history from them. We seem to have finally located an exact period when the three upper castes coalesced their interests, in every sense of the term, and came together to become the dominant social force in Bengal for the next two and a half centuries. But, then, this did not mean the end of the banik *sampraday* (community) because they continued to trade with all the three or four colonial powers and the same records reveal that they dominated the Company's import business. All it means is that we now have a new class of men of very moderate means, all from the three upper castes of Bengal, who rose to phenomenal heights quite rapidly and benefitted directly from British rule as few social groups have ever done.

Before the existence of this open avenue for economic empowerment, for social mobility for collaborating with British power in India — first in trade and wealth creation and then in administration — we do not come across such large scale engagement of upper caste Hindus by previous regimes in Muslim-dominated Bengal — between 1204 and 1757. We find, for instance, some sparse evidence of a few literate Kayasthas being appointed to high posts by the Muslim sultans of Bengal, but not many Brahmans, if any at all. We are not certain what these appointments meant in terms of percentage of population or in quantum of power and they were rare exceptions rather than the rule, before Akbar's (imperfect) conquest of Bengal in 1576. But we come across a handful of upper caste Bengali Hindus being employed as revenue collectors by Jahangir, called zamindars and rajas. His rule penetrated deeper into the eastern heartland of Bengal and his

Subhadars subdued much of the countryside, rather effectively. We see how the first Nawab of Bengal, Murshid Quli Khan also embarked on a deliberate policy of appointing quite a few high caste Hindu zamindars — who were men of substance, unlike our gomostahs — and how he encouraged the consolidation of zamindars into big, compact territorial units. Ratnalekha Ray mentions how the revenue of Bengal was controlled by fourteen large zamindars (rajas) in the middle of the eighteenth century, out of which eleven were with Bengali, Brahmans, Rajputs and Kayasthas (p 26-29). Ray also refers to a class of Brahmans, Baidyas and Kayasthas all over rural Bengal who were known as the '*grihasthas*' or respectable people "who, however humble in their circumstances, consider it derogatory to their honour to hold the plough" (p 30). This prototype of the bhadralok were ranked separately by the nawab's regime and clubbed with the Muslim gentry consisting of *Ashrafs*, *Qazis*, *Maulavis*, *Khondakars* and the like.

But the class that emerged in 1753 consisted of men who came from all ranks and this class was much more open-ended, provided, of course, one belonged to any of the three select castes. There was no direct mention of this grand alliance within any the three *jatis* or how members of any one collaborated with members who did not belong exactly to one's own *jati*. In social history, we have to make inferences from both acts of omission and of commission. It is clear that though marriage alliances among the three were yet unimaginable and a discreet social distance maintained between them in terms of ritual purity, there was mutual regard and respect that was to the exclusion of other *jatis* beyond the select three. This alliance proved to be the foundation of an unwritten partnership between the three for the next two centuries and more. This is the point to note, as we hardly ever come across such protracted inter-*jati* collaboration with so much recorded evidence. The complete silence that was maintained thereafter by both the players themselves and those who observed the phenomenon is what makes social history so challenging to construct, and so fascinating to behold. This exclusive middle class continued to swell its ranks with every passing decade and continued to benefit from every twitch and turn made by British policy in India, while the old landed gentry, also from the three upper castes, lurched from crisis to crisis. By the end of the century most of the original zamindar families were gone and they were replaced by brash adventurers from the new tri-*jati* brotherhood. The mutual assistance rendered by the three castes revealed a new consciousness in a common identity that we have designated as bhadralok, a few decades before the term actually appeared.

Let us now take a look at their operational techniques. We begin by NK Sinha's reiteration that the appointment of *gomostahs* "enabled them to mix up private trade (of the Company's servants) with the Company's own investment in a more efficacious manner... (whereby the *gomostahs*) could cover this trade in return for valuable considerations in a much more far-flung manner than before" (1967b, 9). Sinha and other historians have pointed out that it was this gross misuse of the tax-free permits, the *dastaks*, that contributed to the misunderstanding between Nawab Siraz-ud-daula and the British, that led to the capture of Calcutta by Siraz and the Battle of Plassey thereafter. Talboys Wheeler also attributes the Battle of Plassey indirectly to the appointment of *gomostahs* which meant that *banians* like "Ominchand lost a lucrative branch of his business and was vexed beyond measure" (p 225). This, he claims, goaded him to him to foment trouble between the Nawab and the British, which led to Plassey.

The new *gomostah* system soon resulted in its rampant misuse and illicit enrichment of both the *gomostahs* and their masters. Bangladeshi historian Muin-ud-din Ahmad Khan mentions that "a special police report of 1762 states that the whole country was overrun by the *gumastahs*, who monopolised markets, compelled people under duress of flogging and confinement to purchase their goods at a high price, bought up local products at a low price, forced the primary producers to receive *dadni* or advance money and to enter into utterly disadvantageous contracts with them for supplying goods to them at the end of the season, arbitrated disputes like judges and perpetrated many other forms of oppression" (p 52). Earlier, Mazharul Haq had also mentioned that the

Company's Resident at Maldah described the *gomostahs* in 1764 as "a set of rascals.....who lord it over the country, imprisoning the riots and merchants, and writing and talking in the most insolent manner" (p 229). Haq quotes a report of 1794 from the Company's Chief at Qasimbazar addressed to the government that he was "receiving an amazing number of complaints of grave excesses committed by the *gomostahs* all over the country" (p 227). In fact, Shubhra Chakrabarti mentions how in the period between 1868 and 1874, the *gomostahs* were deactivated and *dadni* merchants appointed once again, for a while (1994 112-113). In fact, NK Sinha corroborates how "*banians* and *gomostahs* compelled merchants and shopkeepers to take goods at 30, 40 or 50 percent above the market price" (1956 12). Sinha also mentioned the methods utilised by the Company's servants who "remitted their ill-gotten wealth home". We get a fair idea of the depredations let loose by the colonial power in Bengal in the form of the *gomostahs* belonging almost entirely to the three upper castes of Bengal. We have no corresponding records of the castes or religious affiliation of those who suffered — but there is every chance that the poorer members of the three upper castes were not spared either.

We are aware of how those sections of this new class that served as *Munshis* or *Banians* to individual officials of the East India Company in Kolkata made their huge fortunes, quite openly. Bhattacharya mentions that Nabakrishna Deb's official salary was just 60 rupees in the early 1760s, when he spent a fabulous amount of nine lakh (900,000) rupees on the funeral of his mother. When he was elevated to the rank of a raja and awarded a salary of 2000 rupees, he declined most politely, and accepted only 200 rupees (p 46), obviously because his fortunes came from other illegitimate earnings. It is this group of *bhadraloks* who actively participated in bidding during the settlement of land and zamindaris, even while they carried on money lending or other businesses. Land was considered as safe investment. By the second half of the eighteenth century, "most zamindars were Kayasthas, Brahmans and Kshatriyas" says Rajat Datta (2000 135). It is this same group who worked not only as powerful albeit unscrupulous agents of British colonial power as *gomostahs*, *munshis*, *dewans* and money lenders and invested in land as well in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it also monopolised English education through the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It had an overwhelming presence in government employment and later in the professions of law and medicine but, more important, it is the same social group that inspired the national movement against British rule and had to suffer a lot even as it finally succeeded in ending British rule in India. We have traversed a lot of material to lead to the developments that took place in and around 1753 and 1757, to explain the circumstances that revealed for the first time (and maybe the last) when caste and economic considerations converged to create a new class — for which evidence is available in black and white. It is, indeed, rare to find an instance like the documents of 1753 that clearly narrate an aspect of social history that has remained snowed under mountains of materials on economic and political history — for so long. We end with an observation made by Sumit Sarkar more than two decades ago that's "social history of a kind had received considerable attention from nationalist intellectuals working on the 'Hindu' period, but much less so far for the 'Muslim' or 'British' centuries. Caste, for instance, can hardly be avoided in studies of ancient Indian history, whereas it is only very recently that caste has started to figure significantly in historical works in the colonial era" (p 38). This small contribution is in that direction.

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