INTERROGATING THE SHIFTING PARADIGM OF CASTE HISTORIOGRAPHY: A PRELIMINARY OBSERVATION
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'*Almost everyone who know anything at all about India has heard of he Caste System, and almost every outsider and many people in India condemn it or criticise it as a whole*' ………. Jawaharlal Nehru.[10]

Indeed while thinking about India it is really difficult not to think of caste. In our country 'the laws of the land 'religious or secular are all united and consolidated in one, binding an individual to rules of what is called the caste.[11] Defining the very core of Indian tradition, it is often seen even today as the major threat to Indian modernity. Caste for many centuries has been a real and active part of Indian life, Bengal being no exception. However there are sociologists who believe that caste was not just a single static system that dominated Indian life since ancient times. Western observers have often struggled to conceptualise the complexities of Indian social organization and it became a major agenda of their academic pursuits and ethnological stereotyping.

In this paper I would try to look into how the notion of caste in India, especially in Bengal, tended to be reformulated over time when scholars sought to engage it as a major social category. This was arguably because the changing socio-economic realities of the contemporary society did have much to do in informing the paradigm shift in historiographical exploration. I would try to locate the changes as also the shift in focus, explicating how and why such shifts became imperative in scholarly engagement.

The word caste comes from the Portuguese word "Caste", implying breed, race or

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[10] Jawaharlal Nehru,*The Discovery Of India*(1946 ; Reprint, Delhi:Oxford University Press.1985)pp245-246, Cited in N.Dirks,*Caste of Mind :Colonialism and the Making of Modern India,*(Princeton,Oxford,2001)

[11] "Speech of the opening of the Impeachment of Warren Hastings ,"15February 1788in P.J.Marshall,ed,*The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke,*Vol.6(Oxford,ClarendonPress,1991)pp 302-3[cited in op.cit]

kind; *homen, de boa casta* is 'a man of good family'.[12] Risley defines it as 'a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name; claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogenous community.'[13] He further emphasizes association with occupation and reiterates its endogamous character. According to Nesfield,[14] common occupation was the foundation of caste, and consciously excludes all influence of race and religion and denies the existence of population. He denies any classification of Aryans and aboriginals and believes that caste system springs from the regular evolution of social life though affirms the Brahmans an important place in the genesis of caste system.

For Risley, the essence of caste should be sought in race. The hierarchy which dominates the social system is the sanctification of the ethnological ladder from the Aryans who are the epitome of purity as the highest caste, to the aboriginals herded together in the lowest.[15] Race, according to him, substituted for profession as the driving principle. Risley chose to base his argument upon the early use of the word Varna, and believed that distinction should be sought in the hostility between the conquerors and the conquered, the white and the black respectively.The foundations of caste system was laid exclusively on the endogamous laws. Unlike Nesfield who had ascribed occupation the prime position responsible for the genesis of caste system, for Risley it was marriage laws that dictated the system. Like the other sociologists Risley too accepts the orthodox Brahmanic system. For him, priesthood was probably the principal source of its progress. Thus Risley too accepted the influence of the customs and traditions of the aboriginal tribes on the caste.

Ketkar defines caste as a social group having two characteristics: 1) membership is confined to those who are born of members, and includes all persons so born; 2)the members are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group.[16]The word 'caste' and 'sub caste', it was believed, were not absolute and varies according to situations. The larger group might be called caste and the smaller one called sub caste while in the larger context both might be referred to as caste. The above definition can hardly be totally accepted as there are numerous instances of caste

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[12] J.H.Hutton, *Caste in India :Its Nature,Function and Origin* , Third edition (New York,1961) : 47

[13] H.H.Risley,*People of India,*(New Delhi,1999):68

14John Collinson Nesfield**,** *Brief view of the caste system of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh***:** *together with an examination of the names and figures shown in the census report, 1882*, (North-Western Provinces and Oudh ,1885)

[15] Risley,*Ethnographic Glossary:*xxxiv

[16] S.V.Ketkar ,*History Of Caste in India*, (New York,1909):15

which have evolved from mother castes but are no longer members of the mother caste, e.g Chasa caste of Orissa. N.K.Dutta,[17]though refrains from defining caste, yet, while mentioning its features, he reiterates restriction on marriage outside one's own caste, restrictions on drinking and eating. He also emphasizes the fact that there were fixed occupations for many castes and the Brahmans were placed at the top. Birth according to him was the greatest determinant of one's caste. Hutton was probably right when he viewed that caste as a social unit, present throughout the country, is so variable in nature, depending upon the circumstances, that any concise definition seems difficult. Trying to define caste system, he said that the society is divided into number of social units which he called caste and the mutual relations between such units determined in a graded scale was referred to by him as the caste system.

"Varna' or colour is often confused with caste or *jati, jat,* though it can hardly be said to have shared the same meaning. Varna refers to the four classes into which the Rigvedic society was divided, namely Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra. Below the Sudras were the outcastes or exterior castes. Hutton believed that during the Rigvedic period the four varnas probably represented the four fold divisions of the society into various classes. The priests were mostly Brahmans, the Kshatriyas were mostly found as rulers, fighters or nobles, while the Vaishyas represented mostly the ordinary householders and finally the Sudras were composed of the servile classes drawn from the people of the country. The sages or rishis, the authors of the vedic hymns all enjoyed the highest stature and mostly belonged to the Brahmans. Hutton has further referred to certain colours associated with the four varnas. White for the Brahmans, red was associated with the Kshatriyas, yellow with the Vaishya and black was assigned to the Sudras. Hocart [18]however refused to accept this hypothesis, and related the assigned colours to the different directions. According to him, white with the North, red with the East, yellow with the South and black with the West, has a ritual, not a racial significance. He believed that it probably denoted the places allotted to various varnas in a particular village, the outcastes having to live outside the village. In spite of all differences of opinions, varnas are not only considered to be the nature of castes, but up to a certain extent, they are considered to be castes. It may also be noticed that like castes varna is to some extent fluid. In the early days we do find Brahmans by birth as well as by work. Such flexibility was also observed among the Kshatriyas. The whole of the Kshatriya varna is claimed by Brahmans to have been uprooted by Parasurama. In fact, varna like caste is a somewhat imprecise

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[17] N.K.Dutta ,*Origin and Growth of Caste in India,* (Calcutta,1908) :3

[18] Maurice Hocart, *Les Castes* (Paris ,1938) :46 , translated by,E.J.Levy ,Jeannine Auboyer *Caste,A Comparative Study*,(New York,1968)

term, as persons belonging to one varna in a locality might easily be classified in another.

Inspite of all ambiguity about caste and varna, restrictions and prohibition form important aspects of any caste system and is greatly related to the ideals of purity and pollution, an indelible aspect of caste ranking.

Louis Dumont in his classic work *Homo Hierarchicus*, viewed that it was only through ideology one could grasp the true essence of castes and thus come to know the true principle behind caste system. In his words 'single true principle' is 'the opposition of the pure and the impure'.[19] He chooses the Hindu notion of fundamental opposition between pure and impure as the basis of the caste system.According to him, it is the very principle of purity and impurity that keeps the castes separate. The jatis according to Dumont close their boundaries to the jatis ranked lower, denying them the privilege of intermarriage and other contacts that endangered polluting the higher castes.

It was quite evident that marital restrictions were vitally involved in any caste system and are probably the necessary and inevitable outcome of the taboo on food and drink, rather than the cause of it.The status of a caste depends on whether a Brahman accepts drinking water from those belonging to that caste. Eating restrictions depend not on the supplier but on the status of the cook. Food cooked with water i.e *Kachcha* is much more impure and less preferred than that cooked in ghee or *Pakka* as it is called. Ghee's association with the cow sanctifies the food. Smoking has always been important and the usual phrase for suspending a man's caste privilege is "*huqqa pani band karna''.* The material of utensils used for food transactions are also important. Earthenware is hardly entertained as it cannot be cleaned. McKim Marriott has expressed his views when he said that the giver of food is always ranked higher than the receiver.[20] He concludes by saying that the heart of the system of caste rank is serving and being served, not purity or impurity as Dumont had suggested.

Restrictions regarding clothes, ornaments, all form an indelible part of the caste system. Restrictions of language were also observed.[21] Unclean occupations were not performed by all. In fact, anyone adopting them away from the sanction of the caste members was sure to be ostracized to prevent the whole caste from being

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[19] Louis Dumont ,*Homo Hierarchicus:the Caste System and its Implications,* (London, 1970):81
[20] McKim Marriott, 'Multiple Reference In caste System' ,in James Silverberg, (ed.),*Social Mobility in The Caste System in India.(Comparative Studies in Society and History*), Supplement II ,(Hague and Paris,1968):144-145
[21] Emile Senart, translated by Sir E. Denison Ross, Caste in India : The facts and the system,(London,1930):86

polluted. Differences were observed even among the sub-castes of a particular caste as far as occupations were concerned. Sometimes, such restrictions were laid with purely economic purpose. Castes do perform several functions but one of its most important contributions is to integrate the diverse groups into a community, a community that is typically Indian. Caste as an institution is unique, it ruled Indian society since the early days but later historians and sociologists have shown how it was further constructed to suit the colonial purpose.

Whether good or bad indeed the notion of caste was constructed and reconstructed throughout the 19th and 20th centuries by British colonial intervention. The colonial masters seem to have very often been confused between the real and the ideal situations in the Bengali society, but more often than not, they consciously sought to impose the preconceived models on field data in pursuance of an imperialist agenda.[22] In spite of the extensive study on caste that was undertaken and its implications on the Indian soil being verified colonial government sought to find rather establish their own definition of caste which was constructed not to legitimize a social reality, but to fulfil their own imperial imperatives.

When the British first gained foothold on the Indian subcontinent in the 18th century their primary concern was profit. However, there was a change of attitude from the beginning of 19th century. Amazed and bewildered at the sheer number of people under them and perfect counting being almost impossible, they felt obliged to find a way to compartmentalise chunks of population into manageable groups. The most obvious way was use of India's unique caste system. The British resurrected the *Manusmriti* which was an obscure text and used it to frame the '*Hindu Civil Code'.* It came in very handy in social control. Owing to it's highly repressive and divisive character the *Manusmriti* helped in preventing individual and collective resistance to local authorities. It suited very well in the British colonial project. Though the Indian communities can hardly be bounded in rigid categories the colonial ethnographers present a static view of the structure of social relationship with every group having a fixed role to play. They failed to realize, rather 'declined' to realize the mobility that existed in every stage of its evolution. Caste system in Bengal was less rigid than other parts of the nation, but this regional variation was never taken into consideration. As the high castes questioned the legitimacy of the Raj, the colonial Government sought to legitimize its rule by patronising the depressed classes. The Indians at various levels of society too reacted to the census in attempts to gain or maintain status. Colonial Government's policy of 'protective discrimination' as

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[22] Shekhar Bandyopadhyay , 'Differentiation and Transience ;History of Caste ,Power and Identity in Bengal' Shekhar Bandyopadhyay (ed.), *Bengal :Rethinking History Essays in Historiography*, (New Delhi ,2001) :238

Shekhar Bandyopadhyay viewed, was completed by 1937, when most of the caste movements lost their early protestant character and began to indulge in a politics of 'reservation' under a loyal elite leadership.[23]The leadership used the backwardness of their respective communities for furtherance of their sectarian political aspiration. The spread of education, the impact of western liberal ideas and growing urban– industrial culture so seriously threatened the traditional social milieu that many believed the caste system would automatically wither away'.[24] However it was rather prevented from withering!

Thus it seems very clear that the present caste system was indeed a colonial construction reminiscent only in some ways of the social form that preceded colonial intervention. The caste hierarchy became all the more conspicuous. Conversion to Christianity in the lower rungs became a common phenomenon, an attempt to break away from the strangulating hold of the caste system. Many looked for positional readjustments within the basic framework of caste structure. Grievances mounted, and social movements surfaced among the lower castes in the late 19th century. Previously there has been endogamous development of caste movement, but with the onset of census operation, the whole situation assumed a new dimension. Feelings of envy and inferiority for those above, and one of contempt and superiority for those below were common phenomena. There resulted stubborn opposition to any upward movement of individual or groups although downward movement was a regular occurrence.

In fact since the 1930s, most of the lower caste movement lost their momentum. Many of its leaders preferred to join the Congress and the peasants either got involved in Hindu Mahasabha campaigns or alternatively joined the Tebhaga movement**.** But beyond this popular trend very little is known of the day to day realities of those so called calm period marked by absence of open conflict.

The crucial truth lies in the fact that a community or people needs to speak for itself if its interest and potentials are to be realized. Men like Ambedkar and Periyar had shown the way and today at the dawn of the millennium caste in India, as in Bengal continues to be an important variable in contemporary Indian society as language, religion or regions. Men like Kancha Ilaiah,[25]as a political activists and skeptical of the

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[23] Shekhar Bandyopadhyay , *Caste, Politics and the Raj ,Bengal 1872-1937 ,* (Calcutta ,1990):12 ,96

[24] Shibnath Shastri, *Jatibhed* (in Bengali), (Calcutta,1884) Dilip Biswas,(ed.),(Calcutta,1963):30

[25]Kancha Iiaiah *Why I am not a Hindu –A Sudra critique of Hindutva Philosophy ,Cultture &Political Economy* Samya ,(Calcutta, 1996)

hegemony of the upper caste Hindu chauvinism, has sought to reject the right of the Hindus and Hinduism. Based on his own political identity in lower caste origin, he championed caste mobilization as both a progressive political force and an antithetic to Hindu nationalism.The early scriptures which had effectively led to the textual discovery of Hinduism, has now been newly interpreted.The Hindu nationalists who seek to submerge caste difference in religious unity echo the older argument in new contest .

Thus it can be seen that the notion of caste had all along been subjected to changes, and the historiographical shifts are indeed markers of the popular trends that underline the social movements in the state. Inspite of the of the British government's policy of fanning the latent tensions in Hindu Society, by providing occasional material concessions, the benevolent activities of the missionaries in colonial Bengal. Hindu Society has successfully maintained its structural integrity, ideological discipline and political solidarity by overcoming, co-opting and suppressing challenges to its basic power relations. The caste system survived not just because it was enforced by the legal writ of an elite clan, but as much because it served a social purpose which it was difficult if not impossible to organize the educational & productive activities of society in a more flexible and democratic way. It is of course undeniable that ideology of hierarchy and its associations with relations of power, constitute the essence of caste system, which are yet to loose their relevance in modern Bengali Hindu culture and society, not much of an exception to the general pan-Indian pattern .[26]

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[26] Shekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Culture and Hegemony ,Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal* (London, Thousand Oaks Sage Publication,2004): 247