



सत्यमेव जयते

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सदस्य-सचिव
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भारत सरकार
त्रिकूट-१, भीकाएजी कामा प्लेस, नई दिल्ली - ११००६६

Member - Secretary
National Commission for Backward Classes
Government of India
Trikoot - 1, Bhikaiji Cama Place, New Delhi - 110 066

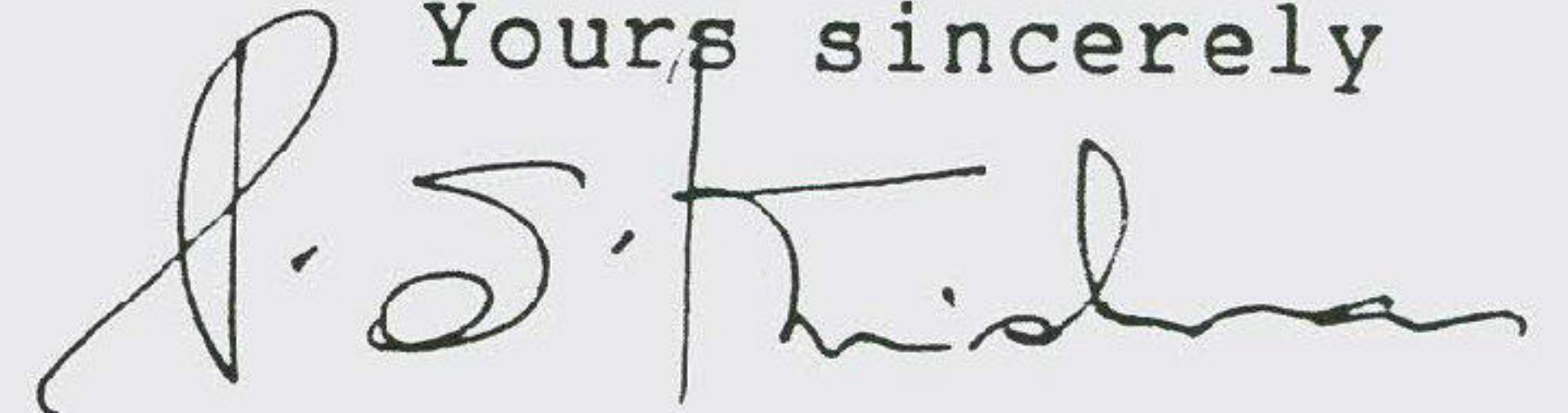
NCBC Advice No. West Bengal 58/99

09.06.1999

Dear Smt. Das,

I am sending herewith the Advice of the National Commission for Backward Classes under Section 9(1) of the NCBC Act for the Rejection of the Request for inclusion of "Saha" caste/community in the Central List of Backward Classes for West Bengal, duly authenticated, for necessary action by the Central Government under Section 9(2) of the NCBC Act.

Yours sincerely


(P.S. KRISHNAN)

Encl: As stated.

Smt. Asha Das
Secretary to Govt. of India
Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment
Shastri Bhavan
NEW DELHI


16/6/99

NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR BACKWARD CLASSES

WEST BENGAL

FINDINGS

Case : Request for inclusion of "Saha" caste/community in the Central List of Backward Classes for West Bengal.

Per Shri Justice P.K. Shyamsundar, Chairperson

This case arises from the Requests received in the National Commission for Backward Classes for inclusion of "Saha" caste/community in the Central List of Backward Classes for West Bengal from the following:-

- (i) Shri Chiranjib Saha
Krishnanagar
Distt. Nadia, West Bengal.
- (ii) Shri Gouranga Ray
Barasar, Paschimpara
North 24-Parganas
West Bengal.
- (iii) Shri Gour Chandra Saha
President
Bharat Saha Samaj
P-79, C.I.T. Road
Calcutta.
- (iv) Shri Dili Kumar Ray
Secretary
Bangiya Saha Samaj
Chandpara Bazar
Distt. 24-Parganas
West Bengal.

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The information in the NCBC's Questionnaire have been furnished by the Bangiya Saha Samaj.

II. Public Hearing

2. The Full Bench of the Commission consisting of Hon'ble Chairperson, Justice P.K. Shyamsundar, Hon'ble Member-Secretary, Shri P.S. Krishnan and Hon'ble Members, S/Shri U.P. Singh and Sahu Akshaya Bhai held a Public Hearing at Calcutta on 5.5.1999 to examine the Request for inclusion of "Saha" in the Central List of Backward Classes for West Bengal. At the Public Hearing the State Govt. was represented by Dr. M.K. Chaudhari, Director and Dr.(Mrs.) R. Gupta, Cultural Research Officer from Cultural Research Institute, Calcutta. The caste/community was represented by the following:-

- i) Shri Indrajit Saha
- ii) Shri Gour Chandra Saha
- iii) Shri Sunil Chandra Saha
- iv) Shri Sambha Nath Saha
- v) Shri Biswa Nath Saha

III. Facts

3. The relevant entries in respect of the caste/community in different lists of Other Backward Classes are as follows:-

- (i) Mandal List
"159. Saha"
- (ii) State List
Not included

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(iii) Central List

Not included

4. Shri Gouranga Ray stated in his representation that the 'Saha' community was identified as one of the OBCs by the Kaka Kalelkar Commission and the Mandal Commission but the WBBCC referred their case, for inclusion in the State List of OBC's, to the Indian Statistical Institute for further information. It is stated therein that the 'Saha' community mostly hail from the earstwhile East Pakistan as wretched victims of the partition and have taken up odd jobs, menial work and labour, hawking and vending, small traders and shopkeepers, etc. Their representation in Govt. services and professions like medicine, engineering, law, etc. is meagre. The 'Saha' by and large have resorted to only first generation education in the backdrop of high rate of illiteracy with a alarming number of school drop-outs driven by abject poverty and humiliating social condition. Though some persons having their title as 'Saha' are found employed at higher level and profession, most of them belong to Saha Sunri class which has been recognized as Scheduled Caste long ago. He has further stated that inspite of having a common origin in the ancient calling of "Shoundika" (liquor-selling) the Sahas of East Bengal have been denied Scheduled Caste status as 'Sunri'. The Sahas as a whole have remained untouchable and their water remained unacceptable for centuries. To avoid the abhorrence of other castes, many Sahas have changed their title of 'Saha' in a vain bid to conceal their undignified birth. Even Dr. Meghnad Saha had been meted out uncouth humiliation down from his student life and was contemptuously treated as a Harijan throughout his life because of the caste stigma. Therefore, 'Saha' caste/community should be included in the Central List of Backward Classes for West Bengal.

5. The Bharat Saha Samaj stated in their representation that the traditional occupation of the community is trading.

6. The filled-up NCBC's Questionnaire received from Bangiya Saha Samaj, mentions that 'Saha' is the main caste having population of 5.56 lakhs and spread all over the State. The caste/community is stated to be socially backward and mainly depend for

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livelihood on the occupation of "hawking & vending, grocery & small trade, lowly & menial occupation like rickshawpulling, domestic servants, agriculture labour" which is mainly non-agricultural. 99% members of the caste/community are landless. 85% members of the community live in kuchha houses and 15% in pucca houses. The literacy rate of the community is reported to be 26% in 1995-96 as against 57.72 State literacy rate in 1991. It is also mentioned therein that traditionally the name 'Saha' is synonymous with 'Sunri' and 'Sahas' are 'Shoundikas' because of their calling of liquor making and selling.

7. The representatives of the caste/community who appeared at the Public Hearing stated that the 'Saha' is a caste as well as a title. They belong to 'Saha' caste which is a trading community and engaged in the trading occupation such as business, hawking, street vendors, etc.

8. In 1931 Census Report of Bengal and Sikkim observations regarding "Saha" as a caste and a caste title are summed up as under:-

"The word Saha is borne as a title or surname by many persons among the mercantile classes in Bengal, Bihar and the United Provinces. It is derived from the Sanskrit word Sadhu, meaning a money-lender and a trader, through the intermediate forms, Sahu, Sawoo and Sah. Both the words Saha and Sadhu are to be found in use as a title or surname among different trading classes in Bengal. Thus there are Saha and Sadhu families among the Gandhabanik, Sankhbanik, Tili, Tanti and Shundi castes. In this respect Saha may be compared with the titles of Rai, Chaudhuri, Majumdar etc. which are borne by men of different castes, high and low, with difference that the former is used only among the mercantile castes

..... There are many families who use the titles or surname of Pramanik, Poddar, Das etc., but belong to the Saha caste

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..... If the occupation of a caste be the sole determining factor in the matter of social gradation, the Saha caste of Bengal, at least those of them who are associated with trade and banking, must be given the status of the Vaishya

..... It is mainly on account of the diverse origins of the Saha families of Bengal and of their juxtaposition in relation to the liquor-selling Shundis that there are a comparatively large number of subdivisions in the Saha community..... While the Sahas proper are numerous in Eastern Bengal and few in the Western districts, the case is exactly the reverse with the Gandhabaniks and Suvarnabaniks. This geographical distribution of the mercantile communities leads to the supposition that the original differences between the various trading groups were not very great, most of them being regarded as Vaishyas, and that the later differences in status were in a large and revived Brahmanism. Thus it is not unlikely that some of the Sahas of Eastern Bengal and the Gandhabaniks of Western Bengal may have been descended from a common stock and that the separation took place not more than one thousand years ago. Tradition is not wanting to show that the forefathers of some of the Saha families of Eastern Bengal traded in those articles which are nowadays regarded as the monopoly of the Gandhabanik caste

8. Jyotirmoyee Sarma (Caste Dynamic Among the Bengali Hindus, Firma KLM Private Ltd., Calcutta, 1980) gives the cases of Sahas as an example of castes which gained higher status, and became identified with new names. To establish this, Jyotirmoyee Sarma gives the following account:-

“The Shaha caste is another merchant caste which has low ceremonial rank but high secular rank. The literacy rates of the Subarnabaniks and the Shahas came, in the order mentioned, directly after that the Kayasthas in the 1921 Census of India. The Shahas, as well as the Subarnabaniks, associate with other high caste members in educational and occupational situations as equal persons

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The Saha caste of Bengal has made claims of Vaishya status. In the Census of India, 1901, the Shahas were listed with the Sunris under the heading of "Sunri or Shaha", the name Shaha being taken to be another name of the Sunri caste. According to the Census of India, 1911:

'One progressive section aspired to a separate record of their community and to recognition as Vaishyas, as they disclaim all connections with the Sunris, and have nothing to do with the manufacture and sale of liquor, the traditional occupation of the Sunris, but are engaged in trade, money-lending and zamindari. Their claim to be Vaishyas has been recognized by certain Hindu authorities, but it was obviously impossible to allow the use of the generic term, and in any case the question of status was beyond the scope of the census A separate entry has been made for Shahas in the caste table..... This heading is by no means a satisfactory one, as the Bengali Sunris from whom they wish to be dissociated, also has the same name. In Calcutta the members of this community (Shahas) returned their caste as Sadhubani – a new and distinctive name used exclusively by them, which means simply a trader and is therefore an appropriate designation.'

By 1931, the status of the Shahas as different from the Sunris was fully established not only in the census returns but also in general estimation. There was now a claim of differentiation within the Shaha caste itself. The two sub-castes of the Shaha caste both claimed to be recorded in the Vaishya Varna, but the Varendra Shahas claimed to be of a more pure blood than the Rarhi Shahas. The professed object of the latter sub-caste was to promote the solidarity of all groups of Shahas through their Vaishya Shaha Mahasabha, while perserving their separation from the Sunris. 'The claim of inclusion within the Vaishya Varna is not supported unanimously by the caste and protests against it were received from caste members who alleged that the caste does not wear the sacred thread or recite the gayatri mantra, that they practice sagotra marriage and observe on bereavement the ceremonial period of pollution for thirty days.' A decision of the Calcutta High Court in 1925 implied that the Shahas were of Sudra status."

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9. From the above account, it is evident that the evolution of "Saha" as a distinct and separate caste from the Sunris has been well established by the time of 1931. The confirmation of this separation can also be seen from the fact, mentioned by Jyotirmoyee Sarma while pointing out endogamy as a significant feature of caste, that "the Shahas do not intermarry with the Sunris."

10. The NCBC has tendered its Advice for rejection of Request for inclusion of "Saha" caste/community in the Central List of Backward Classes for Tripura vide NCBC Advice No. Tripura/17/98 dated 14.12.98.

IV. Findings

11. From the above facts and evidence, the Findings clearly emerge that "Saha" is a title used by both backward and forward castes' members, and even otherwise if it is indeed a caste it is of trading people such as that of the Gandhabaniks, who enjoy a high social status in society, as discussed at length in the NCBC Advice No. West Bengal 52-54/99 tendered to the Government on 10.5.1999 while dealing with the cases belonging to Bania community including Gandhabaniks.

The claim of the representatives of the community that they are Sunris cannot be acceded to because the Sahas have disassociated themselves and separated from Sunris long back, although "Saha" as a title or surname is also used by Sunris as well as by some other castes. From the evidence adduced before the Bench, particularly from the statement of the representatives of the community that they are mostly engaged in "trading", the Sahas of West Bengal at any rate, is an advanced caste/community. It is also unlikely that a trader caste is lower in literacy than the general level of its region and therefore the claim of the caste/community under consideration that they are

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12. The Commission considered and agreed in full with the above Findings of the Full Bench and decided to tender the following advice to the Central Government under Section 9(1) of the National Commission for Backward Classes Act, 1993 for necessary action by the Central Government under Section 9(2) of the Act:-

On account of the unfortunate demise of one of the Members, Shri Navtej Puadhi on 16.8.1998, this unanimous Advice of the Commission does not bear the signature of that Member. The validity of the Advice, notwithstanding the vacancy caused by the demise of the aforesaid Member, is protected by Section 7 of the NCBC Act, 1993.

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