

The Intricated Issue of Hierarchical Recognition and Mobility: A Study on the Ground of Territorial Remoteness of Several Castes

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Abstract: *In Colonial Bengal, caste systems received articulation, but they changed as a result of interactions between pre-existing social structures and the legal and administrative framework of the colonial state. Social mobility and caste perception were impacted by the colonial state's focus on caste as a homogenous, all-encompassing category, even while historical inequities still existed. The idea of homogeneity and mobility, however, appears fluid and fascinating in nature. Therefore, caste structures based on the ideas of purity and contamination were regularly reinforced by colonial administrative practices and ideology. In certain places, the amorphous nature of the caste system remained in place despite the colonial state's attempts to establish a uniform framework. As a result, the administrative guidelines for castes have changed throughout time. This caused the emphasis on uniformity to frequently create rather than mobilize more complicated difficulties. The sub-sectional authorities of distinct castes from southern Bengal and the so-called organizational authority of upper-class Hindu Bengalis have also contributed to this issue. In light of this, the regionally hierarchical dualism that hindered the mobility of a caste, as well as the mobility of Bengali Hindus in general, is examined in this study.*

Keywords: *Regionality of Caste, Mobility, Hierarchy, Colonial Government, Caste Movement*

Introduction

Unquestionably, a crucial standard for the Bengali caste system was the colonial framework used to classify caste in their ethnographic surveys and reports during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The scholarly discussion starts here since these studies offered diverse approaches in an articulated form. Existing social groupings began to compete with one another as a result of the colonial worldview that validated the rule itself. Therefore, social

misunderstanding resulted from the different viewpoints of administrative authorities regarding this articulated categorization, particularly between the 1880s to 1920s, when it was decided whether or not to be classified into depressed castes. Furthermore, a number of castes from far-flung parts of Bengal advanced into the caste hierarchy's motions. Due to the fact that the upgrade of one caste from a region did not impact the other members at the same time, the process of inclusion and exclusion encountered a number of challenges, including the mobilization of individual castes whose populations were dispersed throughout Bengal. Because the social advancement of a certain caste was dependent on the ethnographers or colonial officials, the movements were not always effective. Their advice, which was interchangeable by location, made the task more complicated.

The other governmental problem was that there would inevitably be jurisdictional overlap between the federal and municipal governments, which may be embarrassing. For example, in Bengal, the local government ordered everyone to return their caste in a notification officially issued under section 6 of the Act.¹ As a result, everyone was required by law to disclose their caste, if they had one. Subsequently, the federal government declared that people might not be required to file a return if they had a conscientious objection to disclosing their caste. This meant that the central government's assurance to the legislature on a matter that always caused a great deal of agitation at the time of the census, but had not really aroused any feeling in Bengal, was at odds with the statutory obligation created by the local government's notification. Additionally, because Islam rejects any caste divisions, the vulgar antagonism to the record of group differences among Muslims made it much more difficult to insist upon. The issue became more intricate when it had to be assimilated with the Kulin system. In order to formally acknowledge it, they gave it the name Ballal Sena. Later, the Kayastha, Vaidya, Sadgope, and other groups adopted it after the Brahmin community did. Indeed, there is proof that the kulin method was implemented in the 17th and 18th centuries, respectively, in the Vaidya and Sadgop communities.² There is no doubt that this system weakened society by identifying different castes as high and low in a homogeneous society. On the contrary, the caste system created various restrictions to maintain its prestige, making the society increasingly complex, and as a result, various evil practices were created which often became an obstacle to the recognition of the own community of an individual caste.

The emergence of this complex issue dates back to 1753, when the East India Company began hiring Hindus from higher castes- Brahmins, Baidyas, and Kayasthas- for administrative and secretarial positions. These castes were valued for their administrative expertise and literacy, which provided the British with a trustworthy network of local supporters. Eliminating the British idea of Bhadrolok recruitment in administrative jobs may be the reason why caste hierarchy is not recognized. In colonial Bengal throughout the 19th

century, the Bengali Bhadroloks, literally gentlemen, became a separate elite that controlled British administrative positions, landed property, and literary and artistic output. Their manners, speech, attire, housing, eating habits, jobs, and cultural beliefs set this group apart from the rest of society.³ If we ignore it, there was no such thing as hierarchical discrimination; however, a deeper examination reveals that the growing segment's social conduct was to appear different from others. The potential for the higher castes that now hold positions in the services will be jeopardized as long as they acknowledge individuals hierarchically. The British government's hiring practices are well supported by the comment made by British official Birch. He advocated against hiring troops from lower castes, as Sekhar Bandyopadhyay quoted that the "ill-effects of caste" made them insecure. These opinions helped create a military that frequently harboured prejudices against particular social groups. These were some of the ways colonial regimes created hierarchical issues that unavoidably impeded the process of mobility.

Some Castes and the Issue of Regional Mobility

A senior Deputy Magistrate of Dacca, J.S. Sen, reported in his letter on the Mahishya caste of Eastern Bengal,

One significant segment of the Hindu population is the Mahishya caste. They are referred to as Parashar Das and Mahishya in the Dacca area, and the Halia (Halik) Das is used more as a word of derision than to denote their ethnic or Sastrik occupation of agriculture. The Chashi-Kaibartas of Midnapore, Nadia, and other regions in Western Bengal are the same as the Mahishyas of Eastern Bengal, and they are unquestionably a pure caste.⁴

In order to comprehend the hierarchical and ambivalent stances, the hierarchical scenario must now take into account the Mahishyas' position in Western Bengal. Since the Kaivartyas of Eastern Bengal have been compared to the Mahishyas of Eastern Bengal. Although there is substantial overlap and historical disagreement, Mahishyas are frequently seen as having a greater position than Kaivartyas in this complicated system. The Kaivartyas were a bigger, more varied group that comprised both agriculturalists (Chashi-Kaivartyas) and fishermen (Jelia-Kaivartyas), whereas the Mahishya caste was traditionally a higher-status group of farmers. In order to improve their social status, the Chashi-Kaivartyas started pretending to be Mahishya in the late 19th century. The colonial era cemented the division between Mahishyas and Kaivartyas, especially in the census of 1921, when the Chashi-Kaivartyas were formally identified as Mahishyas, setting them apart from the Jelia-Kaivartyas.⁵ This enabled the Mahishyas to maintain a higher social rank, often associated with land ownership and influence.

While the already-designated Mahishyas of Eastern Bengal were considered

to be the Kaivartyas' equivalent in status, the Kaivartyas of the western portion had to organize for their upgrade to Mahishyas and had to wait until the 1921 census. A kind of Kaivartya known as Khyan existed in the northern areas, such as Rangpur and Dinajpur. To the others, they introduce themselves as Kaivartya, the real Kaivartya; however, they capture them. When a northern Kaivartya had saved some money, his first thought was to stop fishing and work as a fishmonger (nikari), using just a cast net during his free time.⁶ Here, one thing to mention is that Jalia was a segment of the Rajbanshi caste in the northern region, and there might be a connection in this event. However, in any event, in some areas, even the top castes, like the Brahmins, are subject to their practice of servitude. Parashar Das is a type of Kaivartya found in eastern regions, such as Dhaka and Mymensingh. They engaged in slavery as well. The descendants of the Kaivartya, in whose house Satyavati dwelt, are referred to as Parashar Das.⁷ Notably, they belonged to the Haliya caste, similar to the Chasi Kaivartyas of West Bengal. However, their hierarchy and acceptance into society were different.

Nonetheless, the permanent settlement was established with nearly all of the Mahishyas' top and middle classes, who were Zamindars and significant landowners in the Dacca area from the Mughal era. Respectable and influential positions were held in the communities by the Roy Zamindars of Nannar (Police station Shavar), the Hazra Zamindars of Dokachi (Police station Srinagar), and the Biswas Zamindars of Joymantap (Police station Manikganj). In addition to this, the area was home to several sizable Taluqdars. The Mahishyas in the eastern region were not organized with the same caste as those in western Bengal, despite their impressive qualifications.

However, in the case of a section of Kaivartyas that is Chasi Kaivartyas, categorized as Mahishya later, J.N. Smartasiromoni, Dewan of Burdwan Raj, wrote,

A significant portion of Bengal's rural population is made up of Chashi-Kaibartas, also known as Mahishyas. They might be considered a member of the local nobility in the Midnapur district. Their location is only adjacent to that of the Kayasthas in the other places where they were discovered.⁸

It's interesting to note that the Mahishyas of South-Western Bengal disagree with the viewpoint presented in the last phrase of the aforementioned passage; on the other hand, they ignored the Mahishyas of Eastern Bengal, who had the same hierarchical status as the Kaivartyas of Western Bengal. Since the Tumluk and Contai Sub-divisions of the Midnapore district may be considered to comprise the highest echelons of the local populace, Chasi Kaivartya's legacy in the hierarchy was the same. Many of them held significant tenures and were Zamindars.⁹

Meanwhile, a letter to Pyari Mohan Das, C. Tindall, I.C.S., under Secretary to Government, Shilong, expressed his appreciation for the Mahishyas of Sylhet,

which makes the scenario contradictory. He wrote,

I am to state that the government will always be willing to assist your community in any educational program that may be proposed to improve it. I should also add that if you bring the cases of qualified applicants for government service in your community to the attention of the local officers, the lieutenant governor is confident that their claims will be given careful consideration.¹⁰

The letter explicitly recognized the societal status of Mahishyas and agreed to provide governmental support to the East. However, in practice, they received total denial from the Westerners and experienced only the local hierarchy.

In the case of dominating Navashakha, Sadgope changed their assigned occupation from pastoralism to agriculture, hence creating the legacy of hierarchy.¹¹ Together with Tillis, Hitesranjan Sanyal investigated the mobility of the newly dominant Sadgopes and demonstrated the validity of their hierarchy. However, he was confined to Rahr Bengal, which is in the middle and southern region of present-day West Bengal. With notable historical and current concentrations in the districts of Bardhaman, Birbhum, and undivided Midnapore, the Sadgope community is indeed mostly located in the Rahr area of West Bengal. There was a difference in movement between the two regions, and there is a lesser but still significant population in other parts of South Bengal. As far as the Sadopes are concerned, though, they have also made their homes in other regions of the state. Binoy Ghosh claims that, although having significant regional influence, many of the petty rulers in Midnapore were essentially from the lower ranks of dissident Gopes.¹² It is important to note that the Sadgopes were acknowledged as 'Sadgope-Brahmins' by the Privy Council of England, the Jail Court of Midnapore, and the Civil Court of Calcutta at the beginning of the 19th century.¹³ It is also crucial to remember that the recognition was limited to Sadgopes in the Midnapore region, which caused a divide in mobility between the northern and southern Sadgopes. As a result, the Rahr region's agricultural Sadgopes elevated themselves to a higher position, but they also distinguished themselves with a subset of Sadgope-Brahmins. In regard to Sadgope mobility, there is a statement that Sadgopes of the western bank of the river Kangsavati are hierarchically different from the Sadgopes of the eastern part.¹⁴ The intention of the statement was not to show a difference from the other part, but the issue of immobility among the caste. The river, basically originating from the Chhotonagpur Plateau in the Purulia district, flows through the West Midnapore district towards the Bay of Bengal. It means that the Sadgopes of the remote regions in the south-west of Kolkata were distinct from the mainstream position of Sadgopes in the hierarchy, not only from other upper castes but its own.

Adhering to the idea, the Purba Kuliya Sadgopes of Mrshidabad's hypergamous Gope division accepted daughters from other Sadgopes but only gave their daughters to their own regional community.¹⁵ However, the

hypergamous division of the Purba Kuliya Sadgopes in Midnapur, which included Biswas, Neogi, and Sur, and the Paschim Kuliya Sadgopes, which included Bhalki, Kanksa, Praharaj, and Siur, were the only areas designated for Kulinism in the caste.¹⁶ And the estimated Sadgope population of the region was 78.30 per cent, which confirms the probability of all-around mobility of the caste.¹⁷ But in reality, the divergence shows the introduction of sub-sectional divisions. However, there is an inevitable assumption of kulinity among the Sadgopes of Murshidabad and the neighbouring areas if they do not provide their daughter to other Sadgope sections. In actuality, though, they did not have a kulin rank in the ethnographies. The two Sadgope divisions, Kulina and Maulik, and their propensity to hold onto their distinct designations, are the second reality; this caste's overall movement was impeded.

Eventually, the community's disapproval of the caste system and their passion for their work were also seen. The traditions of the Sadgope monarch Dwarpal and the region's numerous secret treasuries are based in Dwarbasini, which is located in the present-day Hooghly district in Bengal, which is home to the Sadgope population. They hold that only a real Sadgope can locate the treasures; not even a Brahmin can find them in his dream.¹⁸ Hearsay fosters disapproval of the Brahmin hierarchy while also enforcing Sadgope mobility throughout Bengal, not just for Sadgopes in a particular area. Given that Bengal is home to a number of Sadgope Samanta rulers, including those of Amrargarh, Kanksa, Bhalki, Midnapore, and others, the presence of the Dwarpal Samanta king may be real.

Castes of ajalachal group such as Namasudra, their status also varied greatly within Bengal; according to some accounts from the late nineteenth century, in areas where they were numerically strong, especially in the eastern districts, they were regarded by the public as being in the middle of the Sankarajati hierarchy, far above the few actual untouchable menial castes, including Teor, Bagdi, Muchi, Dom, Hadi, Bhuimali, etc. For instance, in a circular circulated by Herbert Risley in July 1886, the Deputy Magistrate of Faridpur categorized them in Group 13 out of 25 caste groupings, along with the Sahas, Sutradhars, and Dhobas. In a slightly enlarged list of twenty-seven, they were put in Group 19 by the district engineer of the same district, who was also Indian.¹⁹ In a similar vein, they were grouped alongside the Sahas, Sutradhars, and Chasi Kaibartyas in Group 16 out of twenty-three such groupings in both Dacca and Jessore. In Dacca, however, they were permitted to enter temple courtyards, but not the sanctum sanctorum. However, they had been demoted to the tenth position out of eleven in Mymensingh, where they were weaker. Additionally, their standing was almost at the bottom in regions further west, such as Burdwan, where they were numerically considerably weaker. Therefore, the evidence that is currently available makes it abundantly evident that, even within a specific linguistic region, like Bengal Proper, there were significant differences in the social rank of a given caste, and that these differences were

clearly correlated with the distinct material status of those individuals. The dominant idea of a set universal rank for a specific caste has only gained traction due to the standardizing tendency of colonial ethnographers. In this instance, Risley seems to have disregarded the minor differences in the Chandals' rank that his own data suggested. The interesting thing, though, is that the Namasudras and their social neighbours gradually started to define their true social location in relation to these standardized official constructions of rank; Sekhar Bandyopadhyay referred to this as Bernard Cohn's 'objectification' of colonial culture.²⁰

In order to avoid being forced to perform this dirty work, they were also requesting directives from the government. Due to their protest, Faridpur's magistrate, W.S. Wells, agreed to their request and sent a letter to the Inspector-General of Jails: 'It is a very degrading insult that need to be eliminated right away. Men are equal under our legislation, but Chandals are not if they are required to undertake the most dehumanizing tasks as a class.'²¹ Here, Chandals demand of hierarchy was in normal to the upper castes but their demand of occupational change or hierarchy created the first demand in a issue for upper castes. However, there were disparities between theory and practice. The Joint Secretary of the All-Bengal Namasudra Association wrote about the challenges that people, particularly those from lower castes, faced, including caste hierarchy, education, and sustainable livelihood.²² However, in the next statement, the Association stated that

'The Government of the country, although making impartial and just pronouncements from time to time with regard to its attitude towards these millions of people, has not been able to carry out the said utterances into action.'²³

As a result, the unintentional process of claiming hierarchy and other privileges got very intricate. Even though the Association mentioned the likely answers, they were not acknowledged.

Despite this, the Namasudra movement did not have the same level of success in different places. For example, it was more well-liked in Dacca, Faridpur, and the adjacent districts than in northern areas like Shylhet, Mymensigha, etc. The issue of mobility within their own caste is one example of the consequences in the modern era. Initially, caste hierarchy acknowledgment is a broad concern; however, the Namasudras who live in Kolkata and the southern regions of West Bengal are not as mobilized as those in the northern and middle regions. The caste's community organizations have not impacted the other regions and remain static in the border area. As a result, these people in the isolated places consider themselves to be unique in terms of their culture and religion. They were unable to be effectively influenced by the anti-hierarchical movement and the uniqueness of Matuaism from the community's Hinduism. The worship of Harichand Thakur in place of other Hindu gods is gradually declining, which is significant in politics. Instead, Namasudras from Kolkata and the surrounding

areas are more focused on gaining hierarchy in the Hindu caste system after feeling deviated.

The Rajbanshis, Namasudras, and others were positioned at a relatively low level, if not the lowest, in Bengal's conventional social system. The Rajbanshis in the advanced sector felt the need for a new identity since they were not receiving the social attention they deserved and wanted to be on par with the upper castes. The Rajbanshi caste movement was primarily sparked by this perception of sociocultural disparity and the ensuing desire for better social status. By asserting their identity as members of the twice-born caste, the Rajbanshis were further encouraged to overcome the stigma associated with their lower caste rank by the Census's classification of castes based on social precedence. As a result, the movement began with a claim for kshatriyahood, which was followed by the development of myths to support their Kshatriya ancestry, a request for favourable rulings from the pandits to support this claim, a modification of customs to embrace Brahmanical culture, the establishment of caste associations, and community mobilization in the name of caste solidarity.²⁴ One of the Rajbanshi movement's main concerns at this latter stage was their representation in different colonial institutions, which had become the new sinews of power. This was in line with the broader trend of castes becoming more politicized.

According to reports, all Koch sub-sections were listed as Rajbanshis in 1901, while Paliyas were listed as Rajbanshis in 1911 and 1921. Many Rajbanshis were identified as Kshatriyas in 1921.²⁵ Koches were listed as members of the Rajbanshi caste in the 1911 census. Koches were considered to be distinct from Rajbanshis in the 1911 data. Many Koches in North Bengal were sent back as Rajbanshis in 1901. In the Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in Dinajpur 1934-1940, F. O. Bell writes: 'They (Rajbanshis, Rajbanshi Kshatriyas, that are found in large numbers in Rangpur, Jalpaiguri, and Cooch-Bihar) were known as Paliys or Paliyas.'²⁶ Officially, in the census, they were listed as Rajbanshi Kshatriyas. There has always been some difficulty in distinguishing them from Koches. In this regard, it should be noted that a review of census data from other Bengal areas suggests that a number of other tribes and castes separated from their original group and identified as Rajbanshis. Jalia-Kaibartyas, Tiyars, Bagdis, Malos, Barua-Mogs, Dhimols, Pods, Rabha, Garo Paliya, Desi, Koch, Mech, and Kantai were among them. They were dispersed over West and North Bengal. West Bengal's converted Rajbanshis e. g., of Nadia, Murshidabad, 24 Parganas, and the Rajbanshis of North Bengal have nothing in common with Howrah, Hooghly, or Midnapur.²⁷

The claim of Kshatriyahood, which was common prior to their initiative or movement of inclusion in colonial service, should be examined in this instance. The transition from a hierarchical structure to an administrative one inevitably put the higher classes at risk. Had it occurred, social standards and opportunities would have been governed by the upper class's conventional dominance, which

may have caused division and rivalry. It's interesting to note that the Rajbanshi leaders opposed the Rabhas' attempt to rise in the social scale in north Bengal. Therefore, the lower caste movements were not against the caste system itself, even though their claims of higher caste rank had indirectly challenged the upper castes' customary authority.

Conclusion

According to the study, regional, administrative, and colonial activities significantly influenced caste hierarchy and mobility in colonial Bengal rather than making them fixed or uniform. Despite being meant to standardize, the colonial state's bureaucratic and ethnographic categories rather strengthened fractured hierarchies and increased local complexity. Caste identity evolved into a geographical statement as well as a political claim, with colonial authorities' interpretative latitude and proximity to administrative hubs frequently determining recognition. It is clear from the Mahishyas, Kaivartyas, Sadgopes, Namasudras, and Rajbanshis that social mobility was geographically unequal. Different recognition trajectories were seen in Western and Eastern Bengal, with certain castes experiencing partial elevation in one area while staying stagnant or deteriorating in another. Even among the same caste groupings, the colonial census and categorization procedures created internal differences by fostering both new kinds of exclusion and chances for self-assertion.

Furthermore, despite the fact that reform movements and caste organizations aimed to redefine social identity and dignity, their influence was nevertheless divided by local power dynamics and geography. The goals of oppressed groups such as the Rajbanshis and Namasudras show that, rather than outright rejecting the hierarchical structure, the fight for mobility frequently included negotiating inside it. In the end, the problem of hierarchical recognition in Bengal highlights a paradox: colonial attempts to codify social order resulted in a hierarchy that was both more challenged and more flexible. Caste was not just a social identity but also a dynamic indicator of regional power, aspiration, and exclusion due to administrative prejudice, territorial remoteness, and the interaction between colonial rationale and indigenous social logic

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