

## **Caste, Untouchability and Social Conflict in Nineteenth Century Bengal**

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[Editorial Note: The present paper discusses on the deeply embedded evils of the Caste system and untouchability in the 19th Century Bengal. The hierarchical division of the caste system gave rise to social conflict which resulted in numerous protests against their low social positions and submitting of petitions before the British for their social upliftment.]

***Abstract:** Caste system and untouchability were an integral part of social life among the Hindus and Muslims of pre-Plassey Bengal. These two customs were deeply rooted in self-sufficient villages where people lived with their fellow caste-men adopting their hereditary occupations. The social conflict, generated due to the hierarchical division of the caste system, was felt in the society just like mild waves. East India Company servants ruined the self-sufficient village economy of Bengal through their ruthless exploitation of artisans and craftsmen. Consequently, they had to move from their village abodes and adopt alternative occupations generated under the Company's rule. Very soon, some ambitious individuals with low social backgrounds amassed huge wealth and began to claim higher social status for their castes. Leaders of many castes began to lodge protests against their low social position, and petitions were submitted before British authorities for approval of higher precedence of their castes on the social ladder. As a result, intensified caste conflict was produced in the society of nineteenth century Bengal.*

***Keywords:** Caste, Sub-caste, Untouchability, Hierarchy, Conflict.*

### **Introduction**

As an institution, caste has its unique place among the Hindus to access the fundamental feature of their social relations in daily life. Caste has been defined by Nesfield as “A class of the community which disowns connection with any other class, and can neither intermarry nor eat and drink with any but persons of their own community.” It is a divisive apparatus which rigidly divides people on the concept of purity and pollution. The system prescribes rules restricting norms and behaviours of the Hindus and determines the place of an individual on the social ladder depending upon his birth. Under caste hierarchy, the Brahmins are placed at the top and the Sudras and untouchables at the bottom on the strength of religious scriptures. Over hundreds of years, the society of Bengal was transformed almost into a culturally isolated domain where different communities like the Brahmins,

Baidyas, Kayasthas, Telis, Kaibarttas, Chandals, Rajbansis, Kamars, Kumars, Goalas, Kalus and others, remained disjunct from one another in self-sufficient villages. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, the structure of the self-sufficient village economy of Bengal was destroyed to a great extent. The caste system, which survived upon the hereditary occupations of the artisans and craftsmen, received a tremendous shock. By the fifties of the nineteenth century, many individuals belonging to non-Bhadralok castes raised themselves on an economic scale. Because of their increased economic status, these individuals began to claim a comparatively higher position for their caste in the social hierarchy. The British Government conducted the first organised census in India in 1871 and elaborately recorded caste matters. The Government Census produced a general idea among members of different castes that the objective of the census was to fix the relative social status of different castes as well as “to deal with questions of social superiority”. They began to submit prayers before the British authorities of Bengal to approve their demands for higher status in the caste hierarchy. Thousands of petitions were presented before the census authorities on behalf of different castes requesting that their castes might be renamed, raised in a higher position, and be known as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, etc. But no one could climb upward on the social ladder without superseding some other caste. This research highlights the social conflict produced in the nineteenth century among different castes of Bengal as a result of their claim to higher social status.

The caste system is an integral part of Hindu life and culture. This system has continued in Bengal since the ancient past. The Brihad-Dharma Purana, composed in Bengal in the thirteenth-fourteenth century, has categorised all the castes of Bengal, except the Brahmins, but including the Kayasthas (Karans) and Baidyas (Ambashthas) as Sudras and sub-divided them in three classes as high, intermediate and low.<sup>1</sup> Mukundarama Chakraborty, in his Chandikabya, composed during the latter half of the sixteenth century, has depicted an excellent illustration of the different classes of Hindu people of Bengal with their respective position on a social scale. The following table shows a description of Bengali Hindu society when Mukundarama composed Chandikabya:

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<sup>1</sup>. Tarkaratna (ed) 1420 (B.S.), 339-0.

**Table-1: Hindu Castes and their social status in the sixteenth century<sup>2</sup>**

Social Status	Caste
High	Brahman, Baidya, Kayastha.
Middling	Gopa, Teli, Kamar, Tambuli, Kumbhakar, Tantubay, Mali, Barui, Napit, Agrori, Modak, Gandhabanik, Sankhabaik, Kansari, Subarnabanik.
Low	Das, Baiti, Bagdi, Koch, Dhoba, Dorgee, Siuli, Chhutar, Patni, Rajbhat, Chandal, Goala, Pulinda, Kirat, Kol, Hadi, Shunri, Chamar, Dom.

In the nineteenth century, the Hindu society was divided into different castes and sub-castes. Only the Brahmins, Baidyas and Kayasthas were considered as higher castes (Bhadralok classes) on the social scale.<sup>3</sup> The social position of a caste was determined by the perception of the Brahmins about that particular caste. The majority of the principal Hindu castes like the *Kaibarttas (Mahishyas)*, *Chandals (Namasudras)*, *Rajbanshis*, *Bagdis*, *Pods (Poundras)*, and *Bauris*, were despised by upper castes. Even the trading castes like the *Subarnbaniks*, *Telis (Tilis)* and *Sunris* were not respected by the upper castes. The social equality among the Muslims was nothing but word of mouth. There were tremendous differences between the *Shiahs* and the *Sunnis*. The ‘*Aharaf*’ classes of Muslims looked down upon the ‘*Ajlaf*’ classes cultivating Shekhs, and other functional groups like the *Jolahas*, *Dhunias*, *Kulus*, *Kunjras*, *Hajjams*, and *Darzis*. The *Ashrafs*, like the high caste Hindus, considered menial service or to handle the plough as degrading work.<sup>4</sup> The ‘*Sharif*’ Muslims despised the ‘*Ajlaf*’ Muslims in the same way as the Hindu Brahmins would despise the low caste Hindus. Social status was determined by a person's caste, not by wealth. A poor and illiterate Brahmin was highly respected in society compared to an affluent *Subarnabanik*. Renowned scholar Dr John Wilson has observed:

“Indian Caste is the condensation of all the pride, jealousy, and tyranny ... without sympathies of a recognized common humanity.”<sup>5</sup>

Under colonial rule, a smaller segment of the lower castes became prosperous and wealthy, taking advantage of the newly developed economic opportunities. This

<sup>2</sup>. Mukundarama (1332 B.S.), 86-0.

<sup>3</sup>. Thompson 1923, 351.

<sup>4</sup>. Gait 1902, 439.

<sup>5</sup>. Wilson 1877, 11.

comparatively affluent segment could not distinguish themselves from their poor fellow caste-men since they were very small in number compared to their upper caste counterparts. Their common low social position in the caste hierarchy generated caste consciousness among them, which cut across the divisions between the rich and the poor. All these low castes claimed superior status for themselves, which the upper-castes would not acknowledge. This contention produced severe social conflict in the nineteenth century Bengal.

### **Conflict between Money Power and Brahmanism**

After the foundation of the town Calcutta in 1690, people were attracted to Calcutta for several reasons. One of the reasons was the desire to earn liquid money. There were several instances where ordinary people from villages came to Calcutta and became millionaires. These nouveau riches, irrespective of their humble birth, soon placed themselves among the new urban aristocracy by using money power. The money power of the non-Brahmin millionaires of Calcutta overshadowed the age-old special dignity of the Brahmins of Bengal to a great extent. It was observed that the Brahmins were no longer so highly honoured in the mid-nineteenth century. The clever Sudras thrust them aside from their place and power without scruple because a “greater increase of wealth and wisdom has been diffused” among the former.<sup>6</sup>

Money power endeavoured to break the traditional social institutions. As a result, social conflict became intense. A social conflict prevailed in Calcutta between the financial power of the urban millionaires and the birth dignity of the Bhadrakol castes. When any caste-related contention was discussed, Babu Ramdulul Dey, the millionaire and early nineteenth century Bengalee business tycoon of Calcutta, emphatically said that “the caste was in his iron chest.”<sup>7</sup> The caste rivalry went to such an extreme extent that the wealthy outfit of many low castes had been approaching the Brahmin Pandits for higher position of their castes and the Pandits issuing favourable *vyavashthas* on accepting bribes from them. In some of such cases, the Samaj Raksha Sabha of Benares took disciplinary measures against certain Pandits.<sup>8</sup> The majority of the affluent persons of Calcutta belonged to the Subarnabanik community who, though intelligent and well-to-do, were a degraded

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<sup>6</sup>. Kaye 1853, 654.

<sup>7</sup>. Bose 1883, 179.

<sup>8</sup>. O'Malley 1913. 440-1.

caste.<sup>9</sup> The higher order of the Brahmins did not accept a drink of water from their hands. Baboo Mutty Lall Seal was one of the renowned Subarnabanik millionaires of Calcutta. He was an orthodox Hindu with the knowledge of Vaishnavism.<sup>10</sup> In this backdrop of social contention, Mutty Lall asked the secretary of the *Dharma Sabha* of Calcutta three questions by sending a letter regarding the comparative social status between a Brahmin and a Sudra Vaishnav in 1832. In reply to the questions, the Pandits of the *Dharma Sabha* proclaimed their dictum that: (a) A Sudra Vaishnav is not vulnerable to a Brahmin. (b) If a Sudra Vaishnav pays respect to a Brahmin by touching his feet, the Brahmin will not pay respect to the Sudra Vaishnav in the same way by touching his feet. (c) A Brahmin cannot consume leaves of meals (*prasada*) of a Sudra Vaishnav.<sup>11</sup> The non-Brahmin wealthy classes claimed a higher social status, which the orthodox Brahmins denied. This claim and denial produced a social conflict in Bengal.

### **Conflict between Brahmins and other ‘Bhadralok’ Castes**

Under the rule of Murshid Quli Khan and the succeeding Nawabs, the *Vaidyas* and *Kayasthas* along with the Brahmins, with their talents and mastery over Persian, occupied the highest civil posts under the Bengal *subahdar* and many of the military posts under the *faujdar*s. Because of their royal employment and economic prosperity, the *Vaidyas* and *Kayasthas* further raised their social position in the Hindu society during the former half of the eighteenth century.<sup>12</sup> This social recognition continued until the mid-twentieth century, and only these three castes – the Brahmins, Baidyas and Kayasthas – would make up the bulk of the “Hindu Bhadrlok classes of Bengal.”<sup>13</sup> The Baidyas were chiefly employed as ministerial officers. They engaged themselves in the occupation of physicians and were also landed proprietors. The Baidyas of Bengal were classified by the Brahmins as Sudras.<sup>14</sup> The orthodox Brahmins did not admit that the Baidyas were authorised to wear the sacred thread in accordance with the religious dictums. Raja Krishnachandra Rai of Nadia would never allow any person from the Baidya caste

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<sup>9</sup>. Bhattacharya 1896, 199.

<sup>10</sup>. Mitter 1993, 25.

<sup>11</sup>. Laha 1940, 51.

<sup>12</sup>. Sarkar 2003, 410.

<sup>13</sup>. Thompson, *op. cit.*, 351.

<sup>14</sup>. Hunter (V.) 1875, 47.

to visit his court wearing a sacred thread.<sup>15</sup> This attitude of the orthodox Brahmins to the Baidyas was unchanged in the nineteenth century.

In the former half of the nineteenth century, the Kayasthas were employed as pleaders, accountants, writers and treasurers by large landholders in their estates or in Government Departments. But the Kayasthas were also considered as Sudras, though they claimed a higher status for themselves.<sup>16</sup> Rajnarayan Ray, the Kayastha *zamindar* of Andul (born in 1809), during his pilgrimage to Vrindavan, was forbidden by the Brahmin priests when he attempted to decorate the deity with a garland made of jewellery, on the ground that the Bengali Kayasthas were ineligible to wear the sacred thread, and, therefore, not authorised to touch the deity.<sup>17</sup> The Baidyas and the Kayasthas were not satisfied with their Sudra status. The Baidyas claimed to the census authorities to place them next to the Brahmins on the ground that they acted as spiritual guides to the Brahmins. The Kayasthas claimed to be renamed as Kshatriyas.<sup>18</sup> The census authorities turned down the claim of the Baidyas and the Kayasthas due to the opposition of the Brahmins. For this reason, the Baidyas and the Kayasthas became strong critics of the Brahmins, resulting in acute caste conflict between the Brahmins on one hand and the Baidyas and the Kayasthas on the other hand.

### **Conflict between Brahmins and other Hindu Castes**

The Hindu religious scriptures authorised the Brahmins to promulgate religious opinion on issues relating to caste matters. Because of their monopoly in sole authority to interpret religious scriptures, they treated the other castes of the society inferior to them. Krishnakanta Nandi was the great *zamindar* of Cossimbazar estate. He was a Teli (Tili) by caste. During the eighteenth century, he amassed enormous wealth in his possession under the patronage of Warren Hastings. Other families belonging to Teli caste who amassed huge wealth under the East India Company's rule, and rose into eminence, were the Ray (Kundu) family of Bhagyakul (Dacca), Pal Chowdhuri family of Ranaghat (Nadia), and Dey family of Srirampur (Hooghly).<sup>19</sup> Once Kantababu offered a large gift for Lord Jagannath at Puri. The status of Kanta Babu's caste was so low on the social scale of Brahmanical

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<sup>15</sup>. Ray 2011, 76.

<sup>16</sup>. Hunter (V.), *op. cit.*, 47.

<sup>17</sup>. Sinha 1398 (B.S.), 117.

<sup>18</sup>. Gait, *op. cit.*, 379, 381.

<sup>19</sup>. Sanyal 1981, 100.

Hinduism that the pandas of Lord Jagannath temple at Puri refused to accept the presents sent by him.<sup>20</sup> Later, Kanta Babu was appointed the president of the Jatimala Kachahri or Caste Cutcherry in Calcutta, a tribunal which dealt with cases relating to caste matters by Warren Hastings.<sup>21</sup> The orthodox Brahmins did not recognise the appointment of Kanta Babu. They sarcastically designated his caste as “*Punte Teli*”.<sup>22</sup> The non-Brahmin wealthy castes did not consume this indignity without any repercussion.

Preetiram Das (Marh), a successful Kaibartta (Mahishya) trader of the Beliaghata region of Calcutta, amassed a huge wealth towards the end of the eighteenth century. Later he purchased the estate of Pargana Makimpur and became a *zamindar*. Rajchandra Das (Marh) was his youngest son who was married to Rasmani Devi.<sup>23</sup> After the death of Rajchandra Das in the year 1836, Rani Rasmani inherited his huge assets. She built the famous Kali temple at Dakshineswar in 1853-54.<sup>24</sup> After the construction of the Dakshineswar temple, Rani Rasmani exerted her endeavour to enthrone the goddess Kali in the shrine and offer oblation made of boiled rice to the deity. No Brahmin of Bengal, not even her family priest, gave his consent towards the initiative of Rasmani in this connection since she was a Sudra by caste. Rani Rasmani, then, sought the opinion from different *chatuspathis* of the country. All the Pandits of the *chatuspathis* expressed the same opinion. Only Ramkumar Chattyopadhyay, the Pandit of Jhamapukur *chatuspathi* of Calcutta, brought out a tricky opinion for the Rani. He prescribed that the temple be donated to a Brahmin before enthronement of the deity. If that Brahmin installed the idol and offered oblation made of boiled rice to the deity, it would not be an act of breach of religious scriptures. In the absence of any other alternative, Rani Rasmani appointed Ramkumar to accomplish the rituals which he completed with great courage.<sup>25</sup> The refusal of the Brahmins to enthrone the goddess Kali in the Dakshineswar temple and to offer oblations to the deity on behalf of the Sudra Rani reflect that the Brahmins possessed a strong aversion to the *Kaibarttas* (*Mahishyas*). Encouraged by Brahmanical apathy towards them, the upper-caste

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<sup>20</sup>. Gait, *op. cit.*, 366.

<sup>21</sup>. O'Malley 1914, 193-4; Mullick 1935, 45.

<sup>22</sup>. Sinha, *op. cit.*, 75, 235.

<sup>23</sup>. Roy 2003, 28-34; Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, 281.

<sup>24</sup>. Roy, *op. cit.*, 54, 79, 126-7; O'Malley & Chakravarti 1909, 48.

<sup>25</sup>. Roy, *op. cit.*, 80-1.

Hindus taunted them as Keots.<sup>26</sup> The Kaibarttas strongly objected to this indignant epithet.

The *Chandals* (Namasudras) were the largest Hindu community in Eastern Bengal. They were known as a humble cultivating caste and believed to have been autochthones of the Bengal delta.<sup>27</sup> The Brahmins and upper caste Hindus have despised them from time immemorial. Among the Hindus, the Brahmins are considered at the top of the caste hierarchy and the *Chandals* at the bottom of it. That's why the term "*Chandal*" is often used to denote the antonym of a Brahmin. The Brahmanical contempt towards the *Chandals* was so deeply rooted that a Brahmin considered himself polluted not only by touching the body of a *Chandal* but also by treading on the shadow produced by the body of a *Chandal*.<sup>28</sup> The *Chandals* were compelled to leave their original habitation and settle themselves in the dreary and unwholesome swamps to the southern wastes of Faridpur, Jessore, and Bakarganj due to the strong aversion of the Brahmins to them.<sup>29</sup> They were banned from entering the temple of Jagannath at Puri under Section 7 of Regulation IV of 1809, acting on the recommendation of the Brahmins.<sup>30</sup> The caste Hindus of Bengal also denied temple entry to the *Chandals* due to restrictions imposed on them by Brahmanical *shastras*. They had been battling for temple entry for quite some time. The restriction on them entering the Hindu temples produced in them a feeling of hostility against the Brahmins. Later, in 1929-30, their attempt to get entry into Munshiganj Kali Temple created significant social tension.<sup>31</sup>

The *Jugis* (Jogis) were designated as a degraded untouchable caste. If a member of this caste happened to enter the room of a good Hindu caste, the cooked food and drinking water in the room were regarded as polluted and immediately thrown away.<sup>32</sup> The attitude of the Brahmins towards the *Jugis* was much prejudiced. The Brahmin census enumerators would enrol the social profile of the poor, illiterate and low caste people according to their own perception; not in accordance with the

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<sup>26</sup> . Pringle & Kemm 1928, 22.

<sup>27</sup> . Allen 1912, 68.

<sup>28</sup> . Hunter (V.), *op. cit.*, 285.

<sup>29</sup> . Beverley 1872, Appendix B, vi.

<sup>30</sup> . O'Malley, *op. cit.*, 229.

<sup>31</sup> . Bhattacharyya 1977, 160-171.

<sup>32</sup> . Risley 1891, 360.



declared identity of the enumerated. When a conservative Brahmin enumerator declared emphatically that “he would rather cut off his hand than write down a Jugi as Jogi and his wife with the title of Debya like a Brahman woman,” their feelings (to the Jugis) were easily discernible.<sup>33</sup>

### **Conflict between *Baidyas* and *Kayasthas***

There were tremendous differences between the Kayasthas and the Baidyas on the matter of their comparative position in the Hindu social ladder. The jealousy between the Baidyas and the Kayasthas became more severe since their social rank was disputed.<sup>34</sup> The Kayasthas would not admit the superiority of the Baidyas, nor would any Baidya recognise the place of the Kayasthas above their own caste. But, both the Kayasthas and the Baidyas invariably agreed that the Brahmins stood on top of the caste hierarchy.<sup>35</sup> The Baidyas claimed that they were identical with the Ambasthas of the *Shastras* and were descended from *Dhanvantari*, the son of a Brahmin father and a Vaisya mother. They also claimed their precedence over the Kayasthas citing that the High Court ruling upheld the *Kayasthas* as a Sudra caste and the *Kayasthas* were originally servants of the Brahmins and *Baidyas*.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, the Kayasthas claimed themselves as Kshatriyas and designated the Baidyas as a mixed caste (*Barna Sankar* caste) having much lower position. The Kayasthas contended that the Baidyas had abandoned their Sudra rituals only hundred years ago when Raja Raj Ballabh of Dacca bribed the Brahmins to assume the sacred thread for the Baidyas. The Kayasthas also advertised their excellence over the Baidyas by referring to the *Vallalacharita* where the Kayasthas have been declared to be the best among the *Sat Sudras*.<sup>37</sup> The contention of caste supremacy between the Kayasthas and the Baidyas became a special phenomenon in nineteenth century Bengal.

### **Conflict between *Mihtars* and *Murdafarashes***

Much antagonism and envy were found among the castes whose relative positions in the society were not settled. Even the lowest of the lower castes were not free from this quarrel. We get ample testimony of caste disputes from the literature of

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<sup>33</sup>. Thompson, *op. cit.*, 349.

<sup>34</sup>. Gait, *op. cit.*, 366, 369.

<sup>35</sup>. *Ibid*, 366.

<sup>36</sup>. *Ibid*, 379.

<sup>37</sup>. *Ibid*, 381.

the nineteenth century. Kaliprasanna Sinha, in his sensational work, *Hutom Penchar Naksha*, has depicted a real picture of this kind where hot words were being exchanged in an altercation between a *Mihtar* and a *Murdafarash*, both trying to establish the excellence of occupation of their own caste.<sup>38</sup>

### **Conflict among different other Hindu Castes**

The essence of the caste system of the Hindus of Bengal in the nineteenth century was a fixed relative rank of all castes, from Brahmins to *Chandals*. Except for the Brahmins, all other castes were either lower or higher in rank than one another. This concept of “high” and “low” generated social animosity among different non-Brahmin castes.

The *Kaibarttas* (*Mahishyas*) of Bengal were good cultivators, hard-working, abstemious in their habits, quiet and peaceful in their avocations.<sup>39</sup> A segment of the *Chasi Kaibarttas* of Nadia took employment under the indigo planters and grew rich. In all cases, the Nadia Kaibarttas’ prosperity was built on their service to the indigo planters.<sup>40</sup> But their social position was fixed at a much lower tier in the Brahmanical social ladder. In the nineteenth century, all the communities were desirous of obtaining a higher status for their castes. At the same time, they wanted that the same status not be permitted to other castes. This attitude was particularly observed among the *Chasi Kaibarttas*. When the new designation for their caste was approved as *Mahishya* by census authorities, they applied their energies on this occasion and were devoted to ensuring that other cases like the *Jalia Kaibarttas*, *Patnis*, and others, who claimed to use the same term or a variant of it, should not be permitted to do so.<sup>41</sup>

The *Chandals* (Namasudras) were the second largest Hindu caste in Bengal after the Kaibarttas, as per the census report of 1872. They were “characterized by an unusual amount of independence and self-reliance.”<sup>42</sup> The *Chandals* were competent to do all kinds of works though they formed the large proportion of the peasantry. Because of their bravery and superior knowledge in river transport, they

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<sup>38</sup>. Gait, *op. cit.*, 369; Sinha, *op. cit.*, 268; Hunter (I.) 1875, 71.

<sup>39</sup>. Mukharji 1938, 44.

<sup>40</sup>. Pringle & Kemm 1928, 22.

<sup>41</sup>. Thompson, *op. cit.*, 346.

<sup>42</sup>. Risley, *op. cit.*, 184, 189.

were the only Hindus who were employed in the boats (*bajra*) hired by the Europeans.<sup>43</sup> A portion of the East Bengal *Chandals* earned money through their employment with the Europeans. Wealth was accumulated by some of them through cultivation and trading of jute in northern Bakarganj and Southern Faridpur, as well as Narail and Magura subdivisions of Jessore and the northern low lands of Khulna. Some of them became rich by means of river borne trade, salt trade and as dealers of crops.<sup>44</sup> Very soon a portion of the *Chandals* established themselves as shopkeepers, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, carpenters, oilmen, as well as successful traders.<sup>45</sup> In 1872, one Choron Sapah, a rich *Chandal* of village Amgram in Bakarganj District, arranged a feast and invited all castes including the Brahmins and Kayasthas. The Kayasthas instigated all the caste Hindu invitees not to accept the invitation with taunts and reproaches: “Eat with men who permit their women to go to market and ... are employed as mehters in jails ... What next?” The refusal of the upper caste Hindus to participate in the feast produced an intense caste rivalry between the *Chandals* and upper caste Hindus. The *Chandal* headmen of all the villages in this part of the country held a meeting and resolved that the *Chandals* would not accept food cooked by upper caste Hindus except the Brahmins.<sup>46</sup> In the latter half of the nineteenth century, they were not in a position to bear with their abusive caste name (*Chandal*) and the brunt of untouchability. As a protest the *Chandals* of Bengal made a general strike in the district of Faridpur in the early part of the year 1873, “resolving not to serve any body of the upper class, in whatever capacity, unless a better position among the Hindu castes than what they at present occupy was given to them”.<sup>47</sup> The strike was led by better off *Chandals*. Ray Chand Mundle, Nilmoni Biswas of Dout Koorra and Sibudhali, Ramchand Bugsha, Bhojan Bala of Poorsoor, the leaders of the *Chandal* Movement of 1872-73, were fairly rich men.<sup>48</sup> The general strike called by the *Chandals* produced a tremendous economic impact and civil disturbance not only in Faridpur but also in the adjoining districts of Bakarganj and Jessore. The strike was so complete that the Magistrate

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<sup>43</sup>. *Ibid*, 188-9.

<sup>44</sup>. Bandyopadhyay 1989, 179-0.

<sup>45</sup>. Risley, *op. cit.*, 188.

<sup>46</sup>. W.L. Owen, *Dist Superintendent of Police* vide Letter No.66 Dated Camp Bhanga, the 18th March 1873, para.5-6.

<sup>47</sup>. *Magistrate of Furreedpore* vide Letter No.340, dated Khalia Khal, the 8<sup>th</sup> April 1873; Hunter (V.), *op. cit.*, 285.

<sup>48</sup>. W.L. Owen, *op. cit.*, para.12.

of Faridpur, in the course of his official enquiry into the affected areas, even after four months of its inception, found “the fields ... untilled, the houses unthatched, and not a Chandal in the service of Hindu or Mahomedan, or a Chandal woman in any market.”<sup>49</sup> The areas under Muxoodpore and Gopalgunge police stations became the epicentre of the movement. The situation in these areas was so tense that additional police reinforcements were dispatched from Dacca and deployed there to maintain law and order.<sup>50</sup> In the jails, the *Chandals* were compelled to remove filth. They were not allowed to appear before the *Bhadralok* castes wearing shoes. To protest this, they organised a joint movement in the Pirozpur thana of Bakarganj district.<sup>51</sup> The hostile movement of the *Chandals* for dignity, on one hand, and its rejection by upper-caste Hindus, on the other hand, produced an intense social conflict between these two camps. The *Chandals* wanted a higher social position for them but were plunged into caste prejudices and were not ready to allow a fair social status to other degraded castes. If a European inadvertently stood or walked over their cooking place on board a boat, they threw away their cooked food at once. They considered themselves polluted if they touched the stool on which a *Sunri* was sitting.<sup>52</sup>

Hunter classified the Rajbansis as a “semi-aboriginal caste” along with the *Palis*, *Koches* and other castes.<sup>53</sup> The Rajbansis grabbed the advantage of land reclamation in jungle areas of North Bengal in the nineteenth century. In 1911, around 89 per cent of the Rajbansis were ‘cultivators’ of whom many were sharecroppers or *adhiars*. But a segment of them had also become wealthy peasants like *Jotdars* or *Chukanidars*, while a few had raised themselves to the position of big *zamindars* like the *Raikat* family of Jalpaiguri.<sup>54</sup> The Rajbansis were a “versatile race” and engaged not only in the occupation of cultivation, but also were blacksmiths, goldsmiths, carpenters, fishermen, and moneylenders in the nineteenth century.<sup>55</sup> Yet their social status was extremely low. All the clean castes refused to consume food from their hands or smoke from the same hookahs. In Darjeeling

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<sup>49</sup> . *Magistrate of Furreedpore, op. cit.*, Para.15; Hunter (V.), *op. cit.*, 285.

<sup>50</sup> . *Magistrate of Furreedpore, op. cit.*, para.32.

<sup>51</sup> . Risley. *op. cit.*, 188.

<sup>52</sup> . *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> . Hunter (VII.) 1876, 219-0.

<sup>54</sup> . Bandyopadhyay 1990, 108.

<sup>55</sup> . Risley, *op. cit.*, 499; Vas 1911, 47.

Terai region, though, where the topography was unfavourable for human life and the number of this caste was numerous, the upper caste Hindus accepted water from them.<sup>56</sup> The aversion of the pure Brahmins and clean Sudra castes towards the Rajbansis produced among them an acute resentment.

### **Conflict among the Vaishnavas**

In the sixteenth century, Sri Chaitanyadeva of Navadweep and his followers launched a serious challenge to the social supremacy of the orthodox Brahmins and the hegemony of *Varnashram dharma* in Bengal. Both Brahmins and lower castes were among Sri Chaitanyadeva's followers. After his death, the hegemony of the Brahmin gurus was established among the Vaishnavas, and the lower caste Vaishnava devotees were branded as Jat Vaishnavas, acquiring the pejorative meaning of outcast Vaishnavas.<sup>57</sup> Though the movement of Chaitanya was intended to bring equality among individuals, the Vaishnava sect was being regarded as a caste, and caste prejudices were creeping among them.<sup>58</sup> The practice of untouchability also began to surface among different grades of the Vaishnavas. Many of them retained their old social distinctions and a Baishtam of Kayasth descent would not ordinarily accept water from the hands of a Vaishnava whose ancestors were Chandals.<sup>59</sup> Inter-caste conflict was existent among the Vaishnavas in full swing.

### **Conflict among the Muslims**

Islamism disapproves of the caste system. However, the majority of the converted Muslims of Bengal who were Hindus before conversion retained the caste system.<sup>60</sup> In the nineteenth century, the following classes, strongly demarcated by occupation, existed among them in the districts of Bakarganj and Nadia. These classes of Muhammadans were categorised separately from the rest of the Muslim community. Bitter social conflict existed among the Muslims. Not only the Ashraf classes but also the Ajlaf classes of Muslim cultivators despised all these Muhammadan groups.

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<sup>56</sup>. Risley, *op. cit.*, 499.

<sup>57</sup>. Chakravarti 1985, 321-2, 333.

<sup>58</sup>. Hunter (II.) 1875, 52.

<sup>59</sup>. Gait, *op. cit.*, 371.

<sup>60</sup>. Beverley 1872, 186.

**Table-2: Low caste Muslims of Bakarganj and Nadiya District<sup>61</sup>**

Serial No	Muhammadan Caste	Occupation
1	Nikari	Fishermen, boatmen, and fruit-sellers
2	Naiya	Fish sellers
3	Jola	Cloth manufacturers, weavers
4	Lahuri	Ornament makers
5	Osta	Circumcisers
6	Nagarchi	Musicians
7	Mir Shikari	Fowlers
8	Garali	Harpooners of crocodiles
9	Matial	Makers of oil-pots
10	Nalua	Makers of reed mats
11	Kalu	Oilmen

Besides the functional groups mentioned above, the Dacca Muhammadans were divided into a long list of functional castes like the *Khasyes*, *Mallees*, *Challenhas* (persons who catch mullet), *Bildars*, *Dooreahs* (dog keepers, sweepers, match-makers, applicers of leeches, &c.), *Daees*, *Hajjams*, *Dhoobees*, *Myeferosh* (sellers of fish), Bearers (carriers of dhoolees), *Sampooriahs*, and *Bazighurs*.<sup>62</sup> The Keyots and Badyakars were two untouchable Muslim communities of Rangpur District. Muhammadans of good caste would not dine together or smoke from the same hookah. They were compelled to bury their dead bodies in separate burial grounds.<sup>63</sup> The *Halalkhors*, *Lalbegis*, *Abdals*, and *Bediyas* were the lowest classes of Muslims (Arzal). Their social position was similar to that of the Hindu untouchables. No other Muhammadan would associate with them. They were forbidden to enter the mosque or to use the public burial ground.<sup>64</sup> However, unlike the Hindus, the wealthy low caste Muslims could raise themselves in social scale more easily in comparison to the Hindu castes since Islam did not recognise caste system. As a result, caste mobility among them was not a rare phenomenon. That's why there has been a proverb in Bengal, "Last year I was a Jolaha, this year I am a

<sup>61</sup>. Hunter (V.), *op. cit.*, 195; Hunter (II.), *op. cit.*, 50.

<sup>62</sup>. Taylor 1840, 244-6.

<sup>63</sup>. Vas, *op. cit.*, 42.

<sup>64</sup>. Gait, *op. cit.*, 439.

Shekh; next year if prices rise I shall be a Saiad.”<sup>65</sup> Notwithstanding, we observe a significant social conflict among Muslims in the nineteenth century.

### **Conflict among the Christians**

A section of Bengalis converted to Christianity, pulled by their humanitarian ideas. Notable converted Christians from the western educated class were Mahesh Chandra Ghose, Krishna Mohan Banerjee, Lal Behari Dey, and Michael Madhusudan Dutt. The missionaries also extended their influence among the lower castes. In 1838, some five hundred members of the KartaBhaja sect of Nadia embraced Christianity under the inspiration of the Church Missionary Society.<sup>66</sup> The converted Christians of Nadia would introduce themselves as Hindu Christians and Musalman Christians and could never intermarry. The two sects of the Muslim Christians of Nadia were ‘Satgeya’ and ‘Soterapera’ who kept up separate traditions of their Muslim ancestors and inter sect marriage among them was also forbidden. The caste prejudice among the converted Christians was to such an extent that the converts from the shoe maker caste were classified as ‘Moochie Christians.’<sup>67</sup>

### **Intra Caste Conflict**

Ordinarily it is supposed that the caste conflict existed in the society of Bengal only among different castes. But the real picture was something different. Severe caste rivalry can also be observed among different sub-groups of all castes in Bengal during the period of our review. All classes of the Brahmins were not equally treated in the Hindu society. Some of the Brahmins had also become degraded because of their service to despised classes. Though they were priestly classes, the pure Brahmins would not accept water from their hands. They were designated as “lapsed Brahmins” and were not admitted to intercourse with the pure Brahmins. These classes were called by the name of the caste whom they served, such as *Shaha* Brahmin, *Kaibartta* Brahmin, *Subarna Banik* Brahmin, etc.<sup>68</sup> The *Barna* Brahmins and the *Kamrupi* Brahmins, though not actually degraded, could not stand on equal position with the Brahmins who officiated in the ceremonies of the *Navasakhas*.<sup>69</sup> The *Ugradanee* Brahmins and *Maraipora* Brahmins were the classes who had

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<sup>65</sup>. *Ibid*, 441.

<sup>66</sup>. Stock 1899, 314.

<sup>67</sup>. Garrett 1910, 140.

<sup>68</sup>. Hunter (V.), *op. cit.*, 190.

<sup>69</sup>. Gait, *op. cit.*, 369.

fallen in rank of the Hindu priests. They could visit and marry only among their respective castes. The *Doivanga* Brahmins would practice astrology, prepare horoscopes, discover stolen goods, and were able to compose almanacs. They were frequently seen in the streets with the almanacs in their hands. The *Doivanga* Brahmins were also sunk in status.<sup>70</sup> The pure Brahmins despised them and would not maintain any social relation with this class.

The *Pir Ali* Brahmins were another group of degraded Brahmins. The Tagores of Calcutta belonged to this class of the Brahmins.<sup>71</sup> They were the original residents of Narendrapur, near Rajahat in the District of Jessore. Their ancestors were declared to have lost their caste on the ground of smelling of forbidden meat in the house of Pir Ali Khan, a Mahomedan.<sup>72</sup> Social differences among different categories of Brahmins were very high. The *Pir Ali* Brahmins were despised by other Brahmins, and were prohibited from visiting the temple of Lord Jagannath at Puri or offering puja to the deity by the legislation provided under Section 7 of Regulation IV of 1809.<sup>73</sup> Around the first decade of the nineteenth century, two Brahmins of Calcutta belonging to the *Pir Ali* group tried to wipe out the stain of *Piralism* by expanding a large sum of money. But they were disappointed.<sup>74</sup> No respectable Hindu family of Calcutta or around Calcutta would agree to tie up matrimonial relations with the Tagores of Calcutta. The pure Brahmins even refused to visit their houses. A man named Shibu Ghosh, a Kayastha, married a *Pir Ali* girl in 1803. He had to suffer heavily because of this marriage. Ultimately he restored his caste after a period of seven years by expending seven thousand rupees for the atonement of his transgression.<sup>75</sup> The *Pir Ali* Tagores of Calcutta were famous for their huge wealth and liberality. Notwithstanding, they could not regain their caste or their original status in the Hindu society.<sup>76</sup> The hatred of the orthodox Brahmins to the *Pir Ali* Brahmins was a unique feature of social conflict in nineteenth century Bengal.

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<sup>70</sup>. Ward 1818, 63.

<sup>71</sup>. Hunter (I.), *op. cit.*, 57-8; Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, 119.

<sup>72</sup>. Westland 1871, 185.

<sup>73</sup>. O'Malley 1913, 229.

<sup>74</sup>. Bose 1883, 165.

<sup>75</sup>. *Ibid*, 166.

<sup>76</sup>. *Ibid*, 170.



The *Chandals* of Bengal were not a homogeneous community. There were sharp differences among different sub-groups of the *Chandals*. Dr. James Wise has categorised the *Chandals* of Eastern Bengal into eight classes with different occupations, the members of which would never eat together and would rarely engage in inter-class matrimonial relations.<sup>77</sup> The *Chandals* of Pabna District were a numerically strong community. They were divided into eight functional sub-castes, viz., *Halia*, *Chasi*, *Jalia*, *Karal*, *Karati*, *Nalo*, *Kora*, and *Kahar*. The *Halia*, *Chasi*, and *Karati* were superior to and claimed to be entirely separate from the others. These three classes would intermarry among themselves but decline to marry or eat with the other classes. Upon breach of caste rules, especially in the matter of forbidden marriages or degrading occupations, prompt punishment was awarded to the violators through an organised panchayat system.<sup>78</sup> Intra-caste contentions among different sub-sections of the *Chandals* were prominent in the nineteenth century.

There were many internal differences among the *Rajbansis* as well in the matter of caste questions. They would not accept food from any other sub-caste of them other than their own. Their caste prejudice was extended to such an extent that they refused to consume rice cooked by any person of their own sub-caste unless they were their close relatives.<sup>79</sup> The *Goalas* of Bengal were a *jalacharaniya* caste through their social status in the caste hierarchy was low. They were served by degraded Brahmins though their Brahmins in a few other districts of Bengal took a higher rank. *Daga Goalas* were one of the sub-castes of them. The occupation of the *Daga Goalas* was branding of bullocks. They were degraded in the society and water was not taken from their hands even by other sub-castes of the *Goalas*.<sup>80</sup> Internal conflict among the *Goala* sub-castes was high.

### **Census Operations and Social Conflict**

People tried to promote the superiority of their own castes and dismissed the claims of others. If some members of a particular caste claimed superior status for themselves due to financial advancement, higher education, political patronage, or any other similar reason, members of other castes would not acknowledge them and

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<sup>77</sup> . Wise in Risley, *op. cit.*, 185-6.

<sup>78</sup> . O'Malley 1923, 32-3.

<sup>79</sup> . Gait, *op. cit.*, 367.

<sup>80</sup> . *Ibid*, 371.

would resort to various taunts and reproaches. For these reasons, social contention evolved in society in severe forms.<sup>81</sup> The census operations in the last quarter of the nineteenth century opened up new avenues for the caste leaders to lodge their claim for higher status on the caste ladder. The following table shows how different castes were desirous for new names for their castes:-

**Table-3: Claim for new caste names to the Census Authorities in 1911<sup>82</sup>**

Caste	Locality	Name Claimed
Koch	Mymensingh	Koch Kshattriya
Pod	Bengal	Bratya Kshattriya, Pundra Kshattriya
Rajbansi	Cooch-Behar	Kshattriya Rajbansi, Rajbansi Kshattriya
Goala	Bengal	Vaisya Ballabh Gop
Sadgop	Bengal	Vaisya Sadgop
Shaha	Bengal	Vaisya, Vaisya Shaha, Sadhubanik or Shahabanik
Subarnabanik	Bengal	Vaisya
Tili	East Bengal	Vaisya
Bhunmali	East Bengal	Bhumi Das
Jogi or Jugi	Bengal	Yogi
Jolahas	Bengal	Sheikh
Kalu	Bengal	Taili
Shagridpesha	Midnapore	Madhyasreni Kayasth

The census authorities of Bengal received hundreds of petitions from different castes asking for new names for their castes. The weight of these petitions during the census operations of 1911 amounted to one and half maunds.<sup>83</sup> The large numbers of such petitions suggest the existence of an intense social conflict among different castes in the society.

<sup>81</sup> . *Taka bangshagourab chhapie uthlen. Rama Muddafaras, Keshta Bagdi, Pencho Mullick o Chhuncho Sheel Kolketar Kayet Bamuner murubbi o saharer pradhan hoe uthlo. Sinha, op. cit., 76.*

<sup>82</sup> . O'Malley, *op. cit.*, 441-2.

<sup>83</sup> . *Ibid*, 440.

## **Conclusion**

The caste system and untouchability survived in Indian society for the past hundreds of years. Inter caste rivalry was there in the society just like small waves. When the East India Company captured political power in Bengal, its servants resorted to ruthless exploitation of the wealth-producing communities. Under their rule, millions of artisans and craftsmen had to abandon their traditional occupations and leave their rural abodes. Many individuals belonging to humble caste backgrounds adopted alternative occupations and raised themselves in economic status. Due to their increased economic position, they began to demand a higher rank for their respective castes in the social hierarchy. But, their demands could only be fulfilled by breaking the existing hierarchy of the caste system in Bengal. None of the members of any caste was ready to go down from their original social place. On the contrary, all were claiming for a higher position on the social ladder. As a result, social conflict between different castes in society was unavoidable. When the British Government initiated to conduct organised census in Bengal, leaders of different castes began to register claims for better status for their castes on the social ladder and opposed offering the same position to other castes that held a lower status than them. Their demands resulted in further inter-caste conflict in the society. The aspirant lower caste people who were the victims of the caste system and the worst sufferers of untouchability rarely raised their voice to abolish the caste system. They accepted the caste system while demanding only better precedence for their castes in society. There were both inter-caste and intra-caste contentions among the higher castes and the lower castes in the same form. The untouchable groups were not free from this caste rivalry. Assertion of a higher position in the traditional caste hierarchy produced severe social conflict in nineteenth-century Bengal.

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