

Stigma of Caste in Colonial Bengal and Efforts for Emancipation during Census Operations

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Abstract: *Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the traditional economy of Bengal was ruined to a great extent. A section of the peasants, artisans, craftsmen, and traders could not carry on their ancestral occupations under the East India Company's oppressive administration. Some of these uprooted groups became economically prosperous by adopting alternative callings; some got Western education; and some were employed under the colonial government irrespective of their caste pedigrees. With their adoption of higher professions, they could not shake off their lower position on the caste hierarchy because caste was the key determinant of an individual's position in society. So they became active in raising their castes on the social ladder. The census operations conducted by the British government opened up new avenues for them. It was recorded in the census reports that almost all the members of the major castes of Bengal were unhappy with their relatively low position in society and exerted their efforts to get a higher social status. Thousands of petitions were submitted to the census authorities by them in this connection. Some of their claims for new names for their castes were approved, while those of many others were rejected.*

Keywords: Caste, Stigma, Census, Petition, Dignity.

Brahmanical Hinduism approves of the institution of caste. This system codifies the social norms and behaviours of the Hindus and determines their social status in the caste hierarchy on the basis of their birth, placing the Brahmins at the top and the Sudras and Untouchables at the bottom. The social position of a caste was dependent upon the perception of the Brahmins about that particular caste. Social equality among Muslims was only a matter of word of mouth. In real life, the Muslims of Bengal were also divided into many castes, like the Hindus. The caste system evolved and survived through hereditary occupations and the economic exploitation of the wealth-producing lower classes. The peasants of Bengal yielded abundant crops. The artisans and craftsmen got their excellent hereditary skills from their families and produced high-quality articles in cottage industries. Nevertheless, the peasants, artisans, and craftsmen were

deprived of getting their just price for their labour, were not recognized for their contribution to economic activity, and were held in indignity. The term '*chasa*' became a word for abuse. All these lower classes were unhappy about their indignant social position, but no remedy was known to them for its removal. In society, the Brahmins were held in high regard, irrespective of their level of knowledge of religious texts or virtuous activities. The foundation of the caste system was solid, as the working classes would stick to their caste-centric occupations, which provided them with economic security. There was no alternative social force that could challenge the existing social divisions sanctioned by Brahmanical religious scriptures until the mid-eighteenth century. People with a low social position lived in a caste-dominated society for hundreds of years with their own people, priests, and traditions. The present paper explores how a segment of the lower caste people of Bengal became wealthy by adopting new callings under colonial rule, turned into leaders of their own castes, and exerted their vehement efforts to gain higher social status for their castes during census operations.

The hierarchy of caste in Bengal, acknowledging 'high' and 'low,' can be traced to the ancient period. Composed in Bengal in the thirteenth or fourteenth century, the *Brihad-dharma Purana* has classified all the castes of Bengal, except the Brahmins, but including the Kayasthas (Karans) and Baidyas (Ambashthas), as mixed-caste Sudras and subdivided them into three classes: high, intermediate, and low. Under these three broad divisions, the following were the castes of Bengal mentioned in the *Brihad-Dharma Purana*:

Table -I

Hindu castes and their social status according to the *riad-dharma Purana*¹

Social Status	Caste
High (Uttam Sankaras)	Karana (sat-sudra), Ambashtha (physician), Ugra, Magadha, Gandhika-vanik, Samkhika, Kamsakara, Kumbhakara, Tantravaya, Karmakara, Gopa, Dasa (cultivator), Rajaputra, Napita, Modaka, Varajivi, Suta (Sutradhara), Malakara, Tambuli and Taulika.
Intermediate (Madhyama Sankaras)	Takshan, Rajaka, Svarnakara, Svarna-vanik, Abhira, Tailakaraka, Dhivara, Saundika, Nata, Savaka (Savara), Sekhara and Jalika.
Low (Antyajas or Adhama Sankaras)	Malegrahi, Kudava, Chandala, Varuda, Charmakara, Ghantajivi or Ghattajivi, Dolavahi, Malla and Taksha.

In the sixteenth century, Mukundarama Chakraborty depicted an excellent illustration of the different classes of the Hindu population in Bengal, with their social positions as high, middling, and low.² Raigunakar

Bharatchandra, the court poet of Raja Krishna Chandra Raya of Nadia, mentioned the names of thirty-six castes with their respective ranks in society, including Chasi Kaibartta, Dhoba, Chandal, Bagdi, Pod, and Kapali, in the mid-eighteenth century.³ In society, the castes placed in higher positions denigrated all the castes below them. Renowned scholar Dr John Wilson has observed the caste system of India: "Indian Caste is the condensation of all the pride, jealousy, and tyranny ... without sympathies of a recognized common humanity."⁴ Wealth was not a parameter for determining the social status of an individual. At the end of the eighteenth century, an illiterate Brahmin was highly respected in society compared to a wealthy Subarnabanik. The Kaibarttas were mainly a cultivating caste in Bengal. Rani Rasmani was a great *zamindar* among them. She built the famous Dakshineswar Kali temple in 1853-54.⁵ The aversion of the Brahmins to the Kaibarttas was so strong that when Rani Rasmani wanted to enthrone the goddess Kali in the shrine and offer an oblation made of boiled rice to the deity, no Brahmin of Bengal, not even her family priest, gave his consent to the initiative of Rasmani since she was a Sudra by caste.⁶ The Jugis, whose traditional occupation was weaving, were treated as an untouchable community. If a member of this caste just entered the room of a 'clean' caste, the cooked food and drinking water kept in the room were considered polluted and immediately thrown away.⁷ The Suvarnabaniks, or Sonar Bunyas, of Bengal, were an intelligent and well-to-do caste but were treated as degraded. The upper-class Brahmins would not accept water from their hands.⁸ The Telis (Tili) were a trading community and ordinarily affluent. In spite of their financial power, they were sarcastically designated in society as '*Punte Teli*'.⁹ The Chandals (Namasudras) were the most severely despised community among the Hindus. They have been held in contempt by the upper caste Hindus from time immemorial, and even treading on the shadow cast by a Chandal has been considered an act of pollution.¹⁰ In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the term 'Chandal' was used only in abuse throughout India.¹¹ The hatred of the Brahmins for some of the low castes was so severe that seventeen castes, including the Sunris, Chandals (Namasudras), Bagdis, Jugis, Kahar-Bauris, Rajbansis, Chamars, Doms, Bhuinmalis, and Haris, were prohibited from entering the Jagannath Temple at Puri under Section 7 of Regulation IV of 1809.¹² In the eighteenth century, only the Baidyas and the Kayasthas of Bengal were considered '*bhadralok*' castes besides the Brahmins.¹³ The inherent contempt cherished by the castes placed in higher positions towards the castes below them would produce an environment of repercussion in the mental world of the despised castes. This is why the return of castes was the portion of the census reports from 1891 to 1931 that attracted much attention and created much excitement for the leaders of the low castes. The census operations of the British government in Bengal produced for them an opportunity for the elevation of their castes on the social ladder.

Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, many changes have taken place in the economic life of Bengal. In the post-Plassey era, the pace of this

change gained new momentum. On account of the persecution of the East India Company servants and their associates, the cottage industries of Bengal were ruined, and a section of the peasants, artisans, and craftsmen were compelled to relinquish their caste-centric occupations and adopt alternative callings to earn their livelihood. Some of the non-Brahmin Bengali Hindus, based mainly in Calcutta, accumulated enormous wealth by adopting the professions of the *diwans*, *banians*, or *mutsuddis* under their European masters.¹⁴ They soon placed themselves among the new urban aristocracy by using their money power, irrespective of their humble birth. In the countryside, too, a small segment of the low-caste Hindus became affluent and turned leaders of their own castes. With the change in their economic position, a change also developed in the thoughts and perceptions of these low-caste Hindus. In the upper classes, Brahmoism and, among the lower classes, many religious sects like Balarami, Kartabhja, Sahebhdhani, Baul, Khushibiswasi, and Matua evolved. The money power of the *nouveau riches* of Calcutta and the affluent countryside low-caste Hindus shattered and diluted the longstanding caste hierarchy of Bengal. In society, the leaders of Brahmoism and other minor religious sects began to challenge social discrimination in the name of religion and caste. The monopoly of the Brahmins over their birth pride was decaying, and the affluent Sudra castes overshadowed the unbridled hegemony of the Brahmins in society with their accumulated wealth and modern education.¹⁵

After the foundation of Calcutta in 1690, the town gradually became the economic, political, and intellectual centre of India. In search of fortune, many people came to Calcutta in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some of them became economically towering; some received higher education from missionary institutions; and some became closer to the servants of the East India Company or European merchants. The biggest attraction to Calcutta was the desire to earn liquid money. Many of the non-Brahmin Bengali Hindus came to Calcutta and became millionaires. Krishnakanta Nandi, a close associate of Hastings and a Teli (Tili) by caste, was one of them. At one time, the Pandas of Puri refused his offer of a large gift for Lord Jagannath on the grounds of his low status in the caste hierarchy.¹⁶ Later, Warren Hastings appointed him president of the *Jatimala Kachahri*, or *Caste Cutcherry* of Calcutta.¹⁷ Other Teli (Tili) families who raised themselves in a higher economic position were the Rays of Bhagyakul (Dacca), the Pal Chowdhuris of Ranaghat (Nadia), and the Dey family of Srirampur (Hooghly).¹⁸ Among the Subarnabaniks, Nakur Dhar, Baboo Mutty Lall Seal, Nemychurn Mullick, and Rajah Rajendro Mullick Bahadur amassed huge money.¹⁹ Preetiram Das (Marh), a Kaibartta (Mahishya) and a successful trader of the Beliaghata region of Calcutta, earned a large sum of money towards the end of the eighteenth century. Later, he purchased the estate of Pargana Makimpur and became a *zamindar*. His youngest son, Rajchandra Das (March), married Rasmani Devi, who became famous as Rani Rasmani.²⁰ The economic rise of all these families produced a background for the upliftment of their respective communities in the caste

hierarchy. In nineteenth-century Bengal, accumulated wealth was becoming a ladder for climbing the social ladder. Babu Ramdulul Dey, a Kayastha and the millionaire of an early nineteenth-century Bengali business tycoon of Calcutta, emphatically said that 'the caste was in his iron chest.'²¹ With the exception of the trading communities, the vast majority of the lower castes could not raise their castes upward in the social hierarchy since they were poor, uneducated, unemployed in government services, and unpatronized by the rulers of the land.

The early nineteenth century witnessed many changes in the economic and social lives of the Bengalis. In society, printed books replaced handwritten *punthis*. Newspapers in the vernacular with news from all quarters of society began to circulate. Transport and communication systems were revamped. Christian missionaries began to teach even the untouchable communities. In a letter written by a resident of Chinsura to the editor of *Samachar Chandrika* dated March 3, 1832, it can be learned that the Christian Missionaries were spreading education to the sons of the porters, labourers, Pods, and Bagdis.²² During the rule of the Bengal Nawabs, the male children of the peasants and other low castes ordinarily had no room in the village *pathsalas*.²³ English was made the official language instead of Persian. In the *tols*, the number of students had been decreasing day by day.²⁴ New opportunities, such as education, book-reading, sending letters through post offices, travelling by steamer and railway, and choosing a career, were open to all. In this changed social space, the rigid caste hierarchy with fixed occupations sanctioned by Brahmanical scriptures became fragile.

The movement of the followers of Brahmoism began in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Many Brahmo leaders, like Raja Rammohan Roy, Keshab Chandra Sen, and Akshay Kumar Dutta, raised questions about the legitimacy of the caste system among Hindus through their speeches and writings. They kept themselves aloof from the orthodox Hindus and began questioning Brahmanical customs like child marriage, *Sati*, and perpetual widowhood. They spotted the loopholes in Hindu religious beliefs and practices and proclaimed their uselessness through open debates. For an in-depth study of the institution of caste, Raja Rammohan Roy republished in 1827 a Sanskrit treatise entitled 'Bajra Suchi' together with its Bengali translation, which refuted all arguments in favour of the caste system.²⁵ Keshab Chandra Sen was the non-Brahmin *Acharya* of the Brahmo Samaj. He was a severe critic of the caste system. He considered untouchability a man-made social evil. He mobilised public opinion in favour of inter-caste marriage. The Brahmo Marriage Act was passed through his initiatives.²⁶ Though the expansion of Brahmoism was mainly limited to the Brahmins, Baidyas, and Kayasthas, we cannot deny their contribution to the dilution of the rigidity of the caste system in Bengal. Those who enjoyed their social influence solely on the strength of their genealogy felt a challenge from the Brahmos.

The lower castes have not consumed the hatred cherished against them

without any repercussion. The manner and intensity of the protests made by different low-caste intellectuals were different. Sula Gayen, a celebrated composer-turned-singer, was born in a Chandal family around 1776 at Thakurkona village in the Netrakona-Mymensingh region of eastern Bengal. From the following verses composed by her, the mental world of the upper caste Hindus towards the Chandals can be perceived:

*Chandalini bole prabhu na koroho ghrina,
Sreechorone dio sthan, Sula-r prarthona.*²⁷

[O Lord, do not hate me since I am a Chandal girl. Sula prays before You to have a place at Your feet.]

As an alternative ideology of religious beliefs and practices, the minor religious sects of Bengal had their origins in the fifties of the seventeenth century. The minor religions of Bengal took their final shape between the years 1700 and 1850. The protest against hatred that emerged from the hierarchical caste system can be perceived in the verses composed by the preachers of the minor religious sects and their followers. Almost all the leaders of these sects came from the families of the wealth-producing lower classes. Ramsharan Pal, the main disciple of Aulechand and the founder of the Kartabhaja Sect, was a Sadgop by caste. Charan Pal, the main leader of the Sahebhdhani sect, was a Gope. Lalan Snai was an outcaste from the Hindu Kayastha community; Balaram Hari was an untouchable Hindu of the lowest order; and Harichand Thakur was a Chandal, an untouchable Hindu caste, a large body who were compelled to migrate from their original habitat in the province and settle in the dreary and unwholesome swamps of the southern wastes of Faridpur, Jessore, and Bakarganj in the past on account of Brahmanical aversion to them.²⁸ The preachers of the minor religious sects and their intellectual disciples vehemently criticized the institution of caste and the hegemony of the Brahmins in Hindu society. Ram Dulal, or Dulal Chand, the Kartabhaja theologian, died in 1840. He threw an open challenge to the Brahmins, saying that he would make both males and females worship the *Karta* and vindicate them (the Brahmins) before the Kartabhajas as stupid in the following song composed by him:

*Ami apto khode meye morode
Karta bhojabo
Kartabhajar kachhe todike
Murkho banabo.*²⁹

Fakir Lalan Snai was one of the most astonishing humans in the religious history of India. He was born in 1774. He had thousands of disciples, mostly from low-caste peasant families. He sharply criticized the hollowness of the caste system sanctioned by Brahmanical Hinduism. In his following song, he expressed his disappointment to see the 'high' and 'low' in society and reminded those who brought up hatred for the untouchables.

Brahman, Chandal, Chamar, Moochi
Ek jole sokolei shuchi
Dehhe shune hoi na ruchi
*Jome to kakeo thobe na.*³⁰

In the nineteenth century, leaders of some of the low-caste Hindus lodged protest movements against the low position of their caste in society. It is noted here that there has been an old tradition in the country that the rulers of the land can raise or lower the status of any caste in society. In the twelfth century, King Vallala Sena downgraded the social status of the Subarnabaniks and upgraded the Chasi Kaibarttas to a clean caste.³¹ In protest against the Chandal stigma labelled on them and their low social position, the Chandals (Namasudras) made a general strike in the district of Faridpur in the early part of 1873 with the resolution that they would not serve anybody of the upper castes unless a better social position was given to them.³² The strike called by the Chandals produced a tremendous civil disturbance and economic deadlock in the districts of Faridpur, Bakarganj, and Jessore. The impact of this boycott movement was so grave that the Magistrate of Faridpur 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' in the course of his official enquiry at the affected areas even after four months of its inception.³³ The wave of the Chandal movement for dignity spread as far as Assam. The colonial government could not turn a deaf ear to their agitation. In recognition of their demand, W.C. Macpherson, the Assistant Commissioner of Sylhet, issued an order on September 9, 1883, with the direction that 'Namasudra must always be written and not Chang or Chandal for all persons of the said caste ... any one who does not write Namasudra shall be removed from employ.' He also directed that a notice regarding this order be distributed to all stamp vendors and hung in the Tahsil, Court Office, English Office, Nazarat, Criminal Office, and Municipal Outpost.³⁴

With the change in economic patterns, a change also developed in the society of Bengal at the beginning of the nineteenth century. New thoughts and ideas evolved in the minds of a group of people. The infallibility of the old social institutions and traditions lost its significance. A sense of self-dignity arose in the minds of a section of people with low social positions. They accepted the caste system and exerted their efforts to get an honourable and higher place in the caste hierarchy. They kept their faith in the British government in this regard. On some occasions, the government acknowledged their grievances and fulfilled their demands. The policy of the British rulers in India was not to discriminate against the indigenous people merely on account of their descent. On April 22, 1873, W.S. Wells, the Magistrate of Faridpur, wrote in a letter to the Inspector-General of Jails, Lower Province, 'Under our law men are equal.'³⁵ The census operations produced new aspirations among those who felt that they were degraded in

society on account of the low rank of their caste on the social ladder.

The Mutiny of 1857 prompted the colonial government to collect information about the social institutions, cultures, customs, and religious thoughts of the Indians. The view of the government was that the census would have to be made in British India, and the report obtained from census operations would be a useful source of information for adopting administrative policies. Before the conduct of the first organised census in India in 1871, house censuses were conducted in India by the police through the Chaukidars. In such a house census by the Chaukidars, it was found and reported in the *Samachar Darpan* dated May 7, 1831, that the number of houses in Dacca in 1814 was 21,361, which decreased to 10,708 in 1830 because of the ruin of its cotton textile industry.³⁶ Due to financial insufficiency and the inadequacy of administrative machinery, the first organized census of Bengal was conducted in 1872 instead of 1871.

Since the first census of Bengal, the numerical strengths and descriptions of different castes have been recorded. The features of castes were described according to their occupations and positions in society. The portrayal of castes included the cultivating caste, the weaving caste, the boating and fishing caste, the labouring caste, the outcaste, etc. The Census of 1872 recorded castes like the Bagdis, Bauris, Bhuiyas, Chains, Muchis, Chandals, Haris, and Kaoras as 'Semi-Hinduized aborigines.'³⁷ The Baidyas have been described as a 'physician caste' and the Kayasthas as Sudras, though they claimed almost equal rank with the Brahmins.³⁸ The 1872 Census also recorded the district-wise strengths of different castes in Bengal.

In the census report of 1881, all the castes of Bengal were classified into five principal divisions: (1) Brahmins, (2) Rajputs, (3) Other Hindu Castes, (4) Aboriginal Castes, and (5) Hindus not recognizing caste. In this report, only the Brahmins, Deswalis, Ghatwals, Khandaits, Khandwals, and Rajputs were recognised as 'Superior Castes.' The Baidyas and the Kayasthas were recorded as 'Intermediate Castes.' Some of the affluent castes were classified against their expectations. For instance, the Telis, including Kolus and Tillis, had been described as 'oilmen.'³⁹ The Census Report of 1891 broadly discussed the ethnic entities and physical features, including the cephalic and nasal indices of different castes. In the report of the 1891 Census, the Baidyas and the Kayasthas of the Lower Bengal have been grouped as proper Vaisya or plebeian middle class. The report also classified the Chasas, Goalas, Kamars, Kumhars, Napits, Sadgops, Sonars, Tantis, and Tilis as Sudras or lower classes under the 'Nabasakh' category, while the Chamars, Dhopas, Haris, Jugis, Kapalis, and Sunris were categorized as 'Unclean Castes.' The Bagdis, Bauris, Doms, and Kaibarttas were classified under the same group, Hinduized 'Dravidian'. On the other hand, the Chains, Chandals, Koches, Pods, and Tiyars were placed under the same group of Hinduized 'Mongoloid.'⁴⁰

In the former half of the nineteenth century, Christian missionaries like J.A. Dubois and W. Ward raised their questions against the social discrimination in India in the name of caste. Many British civilians wrote books on issues related to caste in the latter half of this century. Among them, the names of J. Wilson, E.T. Dalton, M.A. Sherring, Dr. James Wise, W.W. Hunter, and H.H. Risley may be mentioned. The Bengalis, like J. N. Bhattacharya and S. C. Bose, also wrote about the institution of caste and issues related to it in India. The vernacular newspapers and periodicals began to print news about different castes in Calcutta in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Some of the intellectuals of Bengal, educated in English, had been attacking the legitimacy of the caste system. People became aware of the caste hierarchy and the position of their castes in society. An environment of caste rivalry evolved and intensified in Bengal when a British civilian like Hunter recorded the district-wise precedence of castes in black and blue.

The 1901 census report elaborately discussed caste matters, including its various definitions, origins, and features. It has also been noted in this report that the traditional occupations of a portion of the castes have changed. The ancestral profession of the Brahmins was the priesthood. But some of them were engaged in the occupations of cook, soldier, lawyer, shopkeeper, and even day labourer.⁴¹ The report rejected the purity of blood in different castes and disclosed that many castes in Bengal accommodated members from other castes in their communities. For example, it was noted that the well-to-do Sudras (a separate caste) of East Bengal, by obtaining Kayastha brides, eventually gained recognition as pure Kayasthas. It was further reported that some of the Baruis and even the Maghs of Arakan had been merged with the Kayastha caste of Bengal. The Tantis admitted women from other castes into their community. The lower castes, like the Muchis, Baruis, Bagdis, Koras, and Dhobis, accepted men from the higher castes as members of their own.⁴² The report noted the origins of some of the castes in Bengal. It was mentioned in this census report that the Sadgops were descended from the Goala caste, whereas the relations between the Chasa Dhoba and the common Dhoba were very similar. The Madhunapit was an offshoot of the Napit, the Berua from the Chandal, the Patni from the Dom, and the Puro from the Pod. It was recorded as the general opinion that the Chasi Kaibarttas and the Jaliyas were one and the same caste, though the Chasi Kaibarttas vehemently denied all connection with the Jaliyas and claimed to be a separate caste.⁴³

In Bengal, the Kayasthas claimed to be Khattriyas and the Chasi Kaibarttas to be Vaishyas.⁴⁴ However, Brahmanical religious texts such as the *Brihad-dharma Purana* and the *Brahma-vaivartta Purana* did not acknowledge their claims because, according to those holy books, Bengal only had the Brahmin and Sudra *varnas*. The census report of 1901 recorded the following precedence of different castes in Bengal:

Table -II
Caste Precedence in Bengal Proper⁴⁵

Precedence	Castes		
Group I.	Brahmin		
Group II.	Baidya, Kayastha, Aguri		
Group III.	Barui, Gandhabanik, Kalita, Kamar, Kansari, Kashta, Kumhar	Kuri, Madhu Napit, Malakar, Mayra, Napit, Sadgop, Patial	Raju, Sankhari, Sudra, Tamli, Tanti, Teli and Tili
Group IV.	Chasi Kaibartta, Goala		
Group V.	Baishtam, Bhuiya, Jugi, Kaobaru,	Lohit-Kuri, Nat, Nuri, Sarak, Swarnakar	Sunri (Shaha), Subarnabanik, Surajbansi, Sutradhar
Group VI	Bagdi, Baiti, Berua, Bhaskar, Chain, Chasa Dhoba, Chasati, Daoyai, Dhoba, Ganrar, Ghorai	Hajang, Jaliya Kaibartta, Kalu, Kau, Karni, Kapali, Kawali, Kotal, Malo (Jhalo), Mech, Morangia	Naik, Namasudra (Chandal), Paliya, Patni, Pod, Puro, Rajbansi and Koch, Sukli, Tipara, Tiyar
Group VII	Bauri, Chamar, Dom, Garo	Hariand Bhuinmali, Kaora, Konai, Kora	Lodha, Mal, Muchi, Siyalgir

The census of 1901 wrote down the social precedence of castes on the basis of 'Hindu public opinion at the present day.'⁴⁶ The Census Commissioner prepared the hierarchy of the castes without the approval of the pedantry of the pandits. The legal authority of the Brahmin pandits of Nabadwip had already been diluted in this respect. The spread of Western education disseminated a sense of self-respect among the Bengali Hindus. They were no longer ready to admit the superiority of others merely because they were born into a family of a caste that was supposed to stand on a higher level.

From the second quarter of the nineteenth century on, the pace of change in the rural economy of Bengal became faster. At first, by cultivating indigo and working at indigo factories, a segment of the rural population became well-off. Later, through the cultivation and trading of jute, some of the peasants and petty traders of Bengal turned rich. The Chasi Kaibarttas (Mahishyas) of Nadia were good cultivators. A section of them took employment with the indigo planters and grew rich. It has been reported, "In each case service under the planters was the foundation of their prosperity."⁴⁷ A portion of the eastern Bengal Chandals (Namasudras) became prosperous through their employment in the boats hired by the Europeans.⁴⁸ Some of them accumulated wealth through the cultivation and trading of jute in northern Bakarganj and southern Faridpur, as well as in the Narail and Magura subdivisions of Jessore and the northern lowlands of

Khulna. Some others became rich by means of river-borne trade, salt trade, and as dealers of crops.⁴⁹ Very soon, a portion of the Chandals established themselves as shopkeepers, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, carpenters, and oilmen, as well as successful traders.⁵⁰ In southern Bengal, the clever Chasi Kaibarttas became prosperous by adopting land-centred occupations or petty trading. In northern Bengal, the Rajbansis became wealthy peasants like Jotdars or Chukanidars, while a few raised themselves to the position of big *zamindars* like the Raikat family of Jalpaiguri.⁵¹ The members of the economically affluent segments of these castes became leaders of their own castes and demanded an elevated social position for their castes.

In the early nineteenth century, the Brahmins, Baidyas, and Kayasthas occupied their hegemony in the proprietorship of landed estates and in government jobs and noble professions. But from the census report of 1901, it is found that a section of different low caste members, including the Bagdis, Chandals (Namasudra), Chasi Kaibarttas, Jaliya Kaibarttas, Pods, Rajbansis (Koch), Sadgops, Subarnabaniks, Sunris (Shaha), Tantis, and Telis (Tili), raised themselves to the position of rent-receivers. Under the colonial administration, the Chasi Kaibarttas, Jugis, Sadgops, Subarnabaniks, Sunris, Tantis, and Telis had already been appointed as officers of the government. In addition to that, some of the members belonging to the castes, like the Chandal, Chasi Kaibartta, Jugi, Rajbansi, Subarnabanik, and Sunri, relinquished their traditional occupations and engaged in the professions of clerks, teachers, lawyers, and medical practitioners.⁵² It is to be noted here that the majority of these low-caste people got their education under the British regime. Their accumulated wealth, education, engagement in independent professions, and employment under the British government drove them to occupy a higher social status for their castes. In order to get better status, the influential members of a caste approached the Brahmin pandits, who were authorized to prescribe the *vyavastha* for them. The pandits provided them with favourable *vyavastha* so that they could pursue the government for their higher social status. When the Namasudra leaders of eastern Bengal were struggling to wipe out the 'Chandal' epithet ascribed to them, they got a favourable *vyavastha* from Mahamohopadhyaya Rashmohan Sarbabhoum and others so that they could get a better position in the Hindu caste hierarchy. In this *vyavastha*, the celebrated pandits of Bengal, including those of the Burdwan, Guptipara, Shantipur, and Kotalipara, gave their opinions with the remarks, 'Namasudra is Brahmin by origin being descended from the great Brahmin Kashyapa.'⁵³

The excitement and tension among the Bengalis due to caste consciousness rose to their highest pitch before the 1911 census operations. The reason behind this was that the leaders of almost all castes, including the Baidyas and the Kayasthas, discovered the census as an opportunity for formal public recognition of their claims for a higher social position, which was not acknowledged by their caste superiors. A general idea was developed among the people of Bengal that the objective of the census was not only to enumerate the number of persons belonging to different castes

but also to recognise their relative status and deal with questions of social superiority.⁵⁴

They got their assumption from the report of the 1901 census, where the colonial government recorded the precedence of castes under seven groups. The order of precedence given in this report gave rise to considerable agitation during the census and proved to be a legacy of trouble. The agitation from different castes was renewed when the 1911 census began. 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 lower status than them. 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 would resort to various taunts and reproaches.⁵⁵ The caste rivalry went to an extreme extent when the wealthy outfits of many low castes got favourable *vyavashthas* for the higher position of their castes from the Brahmin pandits by giving them bribes. In some of these cases, the Samaj Raksha Sabha of Benares took disciplinary measures against certain pandits.⁵⁶ In many cases, the aspiring castes approached the Christian missionaries, sought their recommendations, and persuaded the authorities more effectively to secure higher social status. Thus, the principal of the London Missionary College agreed to the prayer of the Bratya Kshatriya Samiti and personally wrote to the Chief Secretary of Bengal, supporting the petition of the Pod community. In another case, the petition of the Namasudras was recommended by Dr. C.S. Mead, the Australian Baptist Missionary of Orakandi in Faridpur district, in 1911.⁵⁷ The census authorities of Bengal received thousands of petitions from different castes on hundreds of matters related to caste issues, as well as requests for new names for their castes, a higher place in the caste hierarchy, or the recognition of their castes as Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, etc. The mass of these petitions during the census operations of 1911 weighed one and a half *maunds*.⁵⁸ The following table shows how different castes were desirous of new names for their castes:

Table-III
Claim for new caste names to the census authorities in 1911⁵⁹

Caste	Locality	Name Claimed by some of the castes
Namasudra	Bengal	Namasudra-Brahman
Koch	Mymensingh	Koch Kshatriya
Malo (Jhalo and Malo)	Bengal	Jhalo Bratya Kshatriya and Malo Bratya Kshatriya
Napit	East Bengal	Kshatriya, Paramanik or Sila Das, Kayasth or Parashab
Pod	Bengal	Bratya Kshatriya, Pundra Kshatriya
Rajbansi	Cooch-Bihar	Kshatriya Rajbansi, Rajbansi Kshatriya

Goala	Bengal	Vaisya Ballabh Gop
Karmakar	Bengal	Karmakar Vaisya or Karmakriti
Sadgop	Bengal	Vaisya Sadgop
Shaha	Bengal	Vaisya, Vaisya Shaha, Sadhubanikor Shahabanik
Subarnabanik	Bengal	Vaisya
Sutradhar	Bengal	Vaisya Sutradhar
Tili	East Bengal	Vaisya
Bhunmali	East Bengal	BhumiDas
Jogi orJugi	Bengal	Yogi
Jolahas	Bengal	Sheikh
Kalu	Bengal	Taili
Kumhar (Kumbhakar)	Mymensingh	Rudra Pal
Shagridpesha	Midnapore	Madhyasreni Kayasth

There was a common desire among the low castes of Bengal to merge the modern castes with the ancient classes by calling themselves Kshatriyas or Vaisyas. In the 1911 census, the castes that aspired to be recognized as Kshatriyas or Vaisyas obtained a certain amount of support from the pandits. The census report noted:

'Instead of recognizing that a caste which used to be of poor repute has risen in the social scale, the Pandits overcome the difficulty by the, pleasing fiction that they never were that, humble caste. They overlook questions of origin and descent, as well as the views of their predecessors and of the main body of Hindus, and consider avocation only. They compare, for instance, the present occupation of the caste and that of the old *varna*, and if it, is the same, identify the caste with the *varna*.'⁶⁰

In the census of 1921, the Tantis claimed to be renamed Vaisya Basak, the Mayras as Kayastha or Kayastha Kuri, the Baruis as Lata Baidya, the Muchis as Baidya Rishi, the Chasi Kaibarttas as Mahisya, the Jalia Kaibarttas as Mahisya or Rajbansi, the Tiyars as Mahisya or Rajbansi, the Patnis as Mahisya or Lupta Mahisya, and the Chasadhobas as Sadgop.⁶¹ During the census of 1931, the Aguris claimed that their caste should be renamed Ugrakshatriya or Kshatriya. In this census, the Bagdis petitioned for the renaming of their caste to be Byagrakshatriya or Kshatriya, whereas the Hadis, Kapalis, and Swarnakars lodged their claims for the recording of their castes as Haihaiya Kshatriya, Baisyakapali, and Viswakarma Brahmin, respectively.⁶²

It was not that the aspiration for a higher position in the caste hierarchy was only among the castes that held low ritual rank in society. The *Bhadralok* castes, like the Baidyas and the Kayasthas, also submitted their petitions to the census authorities for the lifting of their castes. They were wealthy,

advanced in education, and occupied government employment in the highest proportion. But in the Brahmanical caste system, they were Sudras. The Kayasthas expressed their resentment in many ways in the past for the deletion of their Sudra designation but could not succeed. The High Court of Calcutta, while delivering its judgement in the case of Asita Mohan Ghose Moulik vs. Nerode Mohan Ghose Moulik on May 8, 1916, ruled that the Bengali Kayasthas were Sudras.⁶³ Being aggrieved by this decision, the Kayasthas moved to the Privy Council against this Calcutta High Court judgement but could not get any relief. The Brahmins also held the Baidyas, a Sudra community. Raja Krishnachandra Raya of Nadia would never allow any Baidya to visit his court wearing the sacred thread.⁶⁴ The Baidyas submitted their prayer to the census authorities in 1931 to be renamed Brahman or Baidya Brahman. On the other hand, the Kayasthas appealed to raise their caste to the rank of the Khattriya both in 1921 and 1931.⁶⁵ The census authorities turned down the claims of the Baidyas and the Kayasthas, like most of the claims raised by other castes.

From the census reports of 1911, 1921, and 1931, it is understood that almost all the numerically significant castes of Bengal were desirous of an elevated social position and a new designation of their castes. Even the Jolahas, a weaving caste among the Muslims with low social status, petitioned the census authority to approve their demand for a new designation of their community as Sheikh. In a hierarchical society, it was not possible to promote one caste without downgrading others. This is why leaders of all communities not only desired to obtain a higher status on the social ladder but remained equally cautious so that those who stood below them in the caste hierarchy should not be permitted to achieve the same position. We can observe this particular attitude among the Chasi Kaibarttas. They petitioned the census commissioner for their caste name, Mahishya. When the claim of the Chasi Kaibarttas for the Mahishya caste name was approved, they applied their energies in this direction and were devoted to ensuring that other castes 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.⁶⁶

Significant changes took place in the economy and society of Bengal in the nineteenth century. Many people relinquished their ancestral occupations and took up new ones that evolved in the colonial period. Under the rule of the Bengal Nawabs, society was a combination of many castes. The official caste hierarchy was unknown to people, and they did not think about their position on the social ladder. Instead, they lived in their village homes together with their fellow caste men and their own culture and customs. But in the latter half of the nineteenth century, many of the Hindu Bengalis became influential in society on the strength of their money power generated mainly from trade, proximity to East India Company servants, practice in medicine and law, government employment, and western education in the English language, irrespective of their humble birth. Since caste-based occupations got diluted, a segment of the low castes

residing in rural areas also became better off adopting alternative occupations in society. When the government conducted census operations in British India and began to record in detail the particulars about different castes, including their social precedence, these economically and educationally elevated groups discovered that their position in the caste hierarchy was low compared to others whom they considered inferior to them. They sent numerous petitions to the census commissioners for new names for their castes or the re-designation of them as Brahmins, Khattriyas, or Vaishyas during the census operations of 1911, 1921, and 1931. Among the aspirants to higher social positions were the low-caste Hindus like the Bagdi, Chasi Kaibartta, Dhoba, Jugi, Kapali, Malo, Muchi, Namasudra, Pod, Rajbansi, Subarnabanik, Sunri, and Tili. At the same time, the higher castes, like the Baidyas and the Kayasthas, were no exception.

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