

Caste, Custom, And Social Control in Rural Bengal During the Colonial Period

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Abstract—This research article explores the intricate relationship between caste hierarchy, customary practices, and mechanisms of social control in rural Bengal during the colonial period. While colonial historiography has traditionally emphasized political authority, economic exploitation, and administrative transformation, the everyday social processes through which power was exercised at the village level have often remained underexamined. This study argues that caste and custom were not merely survivals of a pre-colonial social order but dynamic institutions that actively structured rural life and mediated colonial authority. Through the regulation of labor, gender relations, ritual practices, and access to resources, caste-based norms and customary rules functioned as effective instruments of social discipline. Colonial administrators, far from dismantling these indigenous institutions, selectively recognized and codified them to facilitate governance with minimal coercion. Drawing upon colonial census reports, district gazetteers, ethnographic writings, and modern historical scholarship, this article examines how caste and custom reinforced social hierarchy while simultaneously becoming sites of negotiation and resistance. By foregrounding social control as a key analytical category, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the social history of colonial Bengal and highlights the complex interaction between indigenous society and colonial power.

Index Terms—Caste; Custom; Social Control; Rural Bengal; Colonial India; Social History

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of colonial Bengal has predominantly been written through macro-level analyses of political domination, revenue administration, and nationalist resistance. From the establishment of British authority in the late eighteenth century to the growth of mass movements in the twentieth century, historians have focused on the structural transformations introduced by colonial rule. While such approaches have been

indispensable in understanding the broader contours of colonial governance, they often obscure the everyday social mechanisms through which power operated within rural society. In a region where the overwhelming majority of the population lived in villages, colonial authority was not experienced solely through laws, courts, or revenue demands; it was mediated through deeply entrenched social norms rooted in caste and custom.

Caste constituted one of the most significant organizing principles of rural Bengal. It structured social hierarchy, regulated patterns of interaction, and defined access to material as well as symbolic resources. Customary practices, closely intertwined with caste, governed marriage, inheritance, labor obligations, ritual behavior, and dispute resolution. Together, caste and custom formed a dense network of informal controls that shaped everyday life and ensured social order. These mechanisms of control did not rely primarily on physical coercion; rather, they operated through moral regulation, community pressure, and the internalization of norms. Fear of social ostracism, loss of honor, or ritual pollution often proved more effective than formal punishment.

Colonial administrators were acutely aware of the regulatory power of indigenous social institutions. Rather than attempting to dismantle caste hierarchies or customary norms, the colonial state often sought to understand, classify, and utilize them for administrative convenience. Through ethnographic surveys, censuses, and legal codification, British officials produced a vast body of knowledge about Indian society. This knowledge, however, was not neutral. By fixing caste identities and recognizing certain customs as “traditional,” colonial rule transformed fluid social practices into rigid categories. In doing so, it reinforced existing hierarchies while

simultaneously integrating them into the framework of colonial governance.

In rural Bengal, this process had profound implications. Upper-caste elites and dominant peasant groups often benefited from colonial recognition of customary authority, using it to consolidate their control over land, labor, and local institutions. At the same time, marginalized communities—particularly lower castes and tribal groups—found their social subordination intensified. Yet caste and custom were not uncontested or static. They were continually negotiated, challenged, and reshaped through everyday practices, legal interventions, and collective action.

This article seeks to examine caste and custom as mechanisms of social control in rural Bengal during the colonial period. It argues that these institutions functioned both as instruments of domination and as arenas of resistance. By focusing on the micro-level of village society, the study moves beyond economic determinism and highlights the cultural and normative dimensions of power. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of colonial rule as a complex interaction between state authority and indigenous social structures.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The historiography of caste in colonial India has undergone significant transformation over time. Early colonial writings treated caste as an ancient and immutable system, deeply rooted in religious tradition. Colonial ethnographers such as H. H. Risley played a crucial role in shaping this perception. In works like *The People of India* (1908), Risley attempted to classify Indian society into discrete caste categories based on racial and physical characteristics. Such classifications were not merely academic exercises; they directly informed colonial administrative practices, including census operations and recruitment policies. Later scholars have criticized this approach for essentializing caste and ignoring its historical variability.

A major historiographical shift occurred with the emergence of postcolonial and critical scholarship. Nicholas Dirks (2001) argues that colonialism fundamentally reconfigured caste by making it the primary axis of social organization. According to Dirks, pre-colonial social identities were more fluid

and situational, whereas colonial rule institutionalized caste through law, bureaucracy, and knowledge production. Susan Bayly (1999) similarly emphasizes the dynamic nature of caste, highlighting how colonial interventions, missionary activities, and social reform movements reshaped caste identities in complex ways. In Bengal, however, the study of caste has often been overshadowed by analyses of class and agrarian relations. The region's distinctive social structure, characterized by the prominence of landholding elites and rich peasantry, led many historians to prioritize class-based explanations. Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983) and other works associated with Subaltern Studies focused on peasant consciousness and resistance, offering valuable insights into rural politics. Yet caste remained a relatively marginal concern in much of this literature.

Recent scholarship has begun to address this gap by examining the intersections of caste, class, and community in Bengal's rural society. Studies drawing on district gazetteers, settlement reports, and ethnographic accounts have highlighted how caste shaped access to land, labor relations, and social authority at the village level. Bernard Cohn's (1987) work on colonial knowledge and customary law provides an important framework for understanding how British administrators relied on indigenous norms to govern rural society. Cohn argues that colonial rule was sustained not only through coercive power but also through the selective recognition and codification of custom.

Despite these contributions, there remains a need for an integrated analysis that foregrounds caste and custom as mechanisms of social control in rural Bengal. Much of the existing literature treats caste either as a cultural backdrop or as a secondary variable to class. This article seeks to bridge that gap by placing caste and custom at the center of analysis and examining their role in mediating power relations under colonial rule.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

This research is guided by a set of clearly defined objectives that aim to examine the social dynamics of rural Bengal during the colonial period through the lens of caste, custom, and social control. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1.To analyze the structure and functioning of caste hierarchy in rural Bengal during the colonial period.This objective seeks to understand how caste divisions were organized at the village level and how they structured everyday social relations, occupational roles, and access to resources.

2.To examine the role of customary practices in regulating social behavior and maintaining order.Customs related to marriage, inheritance, labor, ritual practices, and dispute resolution are analyzed as informal mechanisms that governed rural life.

3.To explore caste and custom as mechanisms of social control.This involves examining how social discipline was enforced through community pressure, moral sanctions, and the threat of exclusion rather than through formal coercion.

4.To assess the interaction between colonial administration and indigenous social institutions.The study investigates how colonial authorities engaged with caste-based customs and how such engagement reinforced existing hierarchies.

5.To identify forms of resistance, negotiation, and adaptation within caste-based rural society.The objective here is to move beyond a deterministic view of domination and highlight the agency of marginalized groups.

IV. METHODOLOGY:

This study adopts a qualitative historical methodology, drawing upon a wide range of primary and secondary sources to analyze caste, custom, and social control in rural Bengal during the colonial period. Given the nature of the subject, which focuses on social practices and everyday forms of power, a qualitative and interpretative approach is particularly suitable.

Primary Sources

Primary sources for this study include colonial administrative records such as census reports, district gazetteers, settlement reports, and official correspondence produced by British officials. These sources provide detailed descriptions of caste composition, customary practices, occupational patterns, and village institutions. Although such records were shaped by colonial biases and

administrative priorities, they remain invaluable for reconstructing the social structure of rural Bengal.

Ethnographic accounts and reports written by colonial anthropologists and administrators are also utilized. These writings offer insights into ritual practices, marriage customs, kinship patterns, and systems of social regulation. However, the study critically engages with these sources, recognizing that colonial representations often essentialized caste and exaggerated social rigidity.

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources include scholarly works on caste, colonial governance, agrarian relations, and social history. Works by historians such as Ranajit Guha, Bernard Cohn, Nicholas Dirks, and Susan Bayly are particularly important in framing the theoretical and historiographical context of the study.

V. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK:

The study draws upon concepts from social history and subaltern studies to analyze caste and custom as historically contingent and contested institutions. Rather than treating caste as a static system, the article emphasizes its dynamic nature and its interaction with colonial power. The concept of social control is used as a key analytical category to understand how norms and practices regulated behavior at the village level.

VI. CASTE STRUCTURE IN RURAL BENGAL:

The caste structure of rural Bengal exhibited distinctive features that set it apart from other regions of India. Unlike areas where the varna hierarchy was rigidly institutionalized, Bengal's caste system was marked by regional variations, occupational diversity, and relative fluidity in certain contexts. Nevertheless, caste hierarchy remained a powerful organizing principle that shaped social relations and access to resources.

At the top of the social hierarchy were Brahmins and Kayasthas, who enjoyed ritual prestige and administrative authority. Brahmins exercised influence as religious specialists, while Kayasthas often served as scribes, officials, and intermediaries between the colonial state and rural society. Their proximity to colonial administration enabled them to consolidate their social and economic power.

Below them were cultivating castes such as Sadgops, Mahishyas, and Aguris, who formed the backbone of agrarian production. These groups often occupied a dominant position within village society, controlling land and local institutions. Their status blurred the boundary between class and caste, as economic power reinforced social hierarchy.

At the lower end of the caste spectrum were service and laboring castes such as Bagdis, Doms, Chandals (later known as Namasudras), and other marginalized groups. These communities were subjected to social exclusion and discrimination, including restrictions on temple entry, access to water sources, and participation in village rituals. Their labor was essential to rural economy, yet their social status remained severely subordinated.

Colonial rule did not dismantle this hierarchy. On the contrary, land settlements and legal recognition of property rights often strengthened the dominance of upper and intermediate castes. Census operations further classified and fixed caste identities, reducing social mobility and reinforcing stratification. By treating caste as a stable and measurable category, colonial administration contributed to the rigidification of social boundaries.

VII. CUSTOMARY PRACTICES AND VILLAGE LIFE:

Customary practices played a central role in regulating everyday life in rural Bengal. These customs governed key aspects of social organization, including marriage, inheritance, labor relations, and conflict resolution. Custom was not merely a set of traditions; it functioned as a normative framework that defined acceptable behavior and sanctioned deviations.

VIII. MARRIAGE AND KINSHIP CUSTOMS:

Marriage customs reinforced caste endogamy and patriarchal authority. Inter-caste marriages were generally prohibited, and violations often resulted in social ostracism. Practices such as early marriage, dowry, and restrictions on widow remarriage were justified through custom and religious sanction. These norms served as mechanisms of control over women's sexuality, labor, and mobility, reinforcing male dominance within the household and community.

IX. INHERITANCE AND PROPERTY RIGHTS:

Customary inheritance practices regulated the transmission of property within families and castes. These practices often privileged male heirs and excluded women from land ownership. Colonial courts frequently recognized customary law in matters of inheritance, thereby legitimizing patriarchal and caste-based inequalities.

X. LABOUR OBLIGATIONS AND OCCUPATIONAL ROLES:

Labor relations in rural Bengal were deeply shaped by custom. Certain castes were traditionally associated with specific occupations, and deviation from these roles was discouraged through social sanctions. Bonded labor arrangements, customary service obligations, and informal contracts ensured a steady supply of labor while maintaining hierarchy. Custom thus functioned as an economic as well as a social regulator.

XI. VILLAGE INSTITUTIONS AND INFORMAL JUSTICE:

Village councils, often dominated by upper-caste men, acted as informal judicial bodies. They resolved disputes, enforced norms, and imposed punishments such as fines, public humiliation, or social boycott. These institutions operated alongside colonial courts, handling everyday conflicts and maintaining order at the local level.

XII. CASTE, CUSTOM, AND SOCIAL CONTROL IN RURAL BENGAL:

Caste and custom together constituted a deeply embedded system of social control in rural Bengal during the colonial period. Unlike formal mechanisms of control exercised through police, courts, or revenue officials, caste-based regulation operated through informal yet powerful means. Social discipline was maintained not by constant coercion but by internalized norms, collective pressure, and the fear of exclusion from the community. These mechanisms shaped individual behavior from birth to death, determining one's occupation, marriage prospects, ritual status, and access to resources.

Social control functioned through everyday practices such as rules of commensality, spatial segregation, and ritual purity. Lower-caste groups were often prohibited from entering temples, drawing water from common wells, or participating in village festivals on equal terms. Such exclusions reinforced their subordinate status and normalized inequality as a social fact. The threat of social boycott denial of labor opportunities, refusal of services, or exclusion from collective rituals served as a powerful deterrent against defiance. In this sense, caste and custom acted as instruments of governance that required minimal enforcement.

Colonial administrators recognized the effectiveness of these indigenous mechanisms. Rather than replacing them with modern institutions, the colonial state often sought to work through them. By acknowledging customary authority and collaborating with village elites, British officials ensured social stability at minimal administrative cost. This strategy of indirect rule allowed colonial power to penetrate rural society while appearing non-intrusive. Caste-based social control thus became intertwined with colonial governance, creating a hybrid system in which indigenous norms reinforced imperial authority.

XIII. COLONIAL CODIFICATION OF CUSTOM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES:

One of the most significant interventions of colonial rule was the codification of custom. Through legal procedures, settlement operations, and ethnographic surveys, customs that were previously flexible and context-dependent were transformed into rigid rules. Colonial courts frequently relied on “customary law” to adjudicate disputes related to marriage, inheritance, and property. While this approach was presented as respect for indigenous tradition, it often froze social practices in ways that benefited dominant groups.

In rural Bengal, codification strengthened patriarchal and caste hierarchies. Customs that disadvantaged women and lower castes were legitimized through legal recognition, reducing the scope for negotiation. For instance, customary inheritance practices that excluded women from land ownership were upheld by colonial courts, reinforcing gender inequality. Similarly, caste-based occupational roles were treated as traditional norms, limiting social mobility.

This process also altered the nature of social control. By giving official sanction to certain customs, colonial rule transformed informal norms into enforceable standards. Village elites could now invoke both tradition and law to discipline subordinates. Thus, the codification of custom intensified the regulatory power of caste while embedding it within the colonial legal framework.

XIV. RESISTANCE AND NEGOTIATION:

Despite the pervasive power of caste and custom, rural society was not characterized by passive acceptance. Marginalized groups engaged in various forms of resistance and negotiation that challenged social control, often in subtle and everyday ways. These acts rarely took the form of open rebellion; instead, they involved small but significant transgressions of social norms.

Lower-caste communities sometimes violated rules of commensality by sharing food or water with higher castes, thereby challenging notions of ritual pollution. Others asserted their right to access common resources such as village ponds or grazing land. While such acts often provoked backlash, they also revealed the contested nature of caste-based authority.

Colonial legal institutions provided new avenues for resistance. Some marginalized groups approached colonial courts to challenge discriminatory practices, particularly in matters of access to public spaces or protection from violence. Although colonial justice was far from egalitarian, the existence of an alternative authority weakened the absolute power of village elites.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also witnessed the emergence of social reform movements and caste associations. In Bengal, movements among the Namasudras and other marginalized communities sought to assert dignity and challenge social exclusion. Religious reform movements offered alternative identities that undermined caste hierarchy, emphasizing moral equality and collective solidarity. While these movements had uneven success, they signaled a growing challenge to traditional mechanisms of social control.

XV. DISCUSSION

The analysis presented in this article highlights the need to reconsider caste and custom as central components of colonial governance rather than as peripheral cultural features. Caste-based social control operated in ways that complemented colonial rule, reducing the need for direct coercion and enabling the state to govern vast rural populations with limited resources. At the same time, colonial interventions transformed these indigenous institutions, making them more rigid and hierarchical.

This perspective challenges simplistic narratives that portray colonial rule as an external force imposed upon a passive society. Instead, it reveals a complex interaction between state power and indigenous social structures. Caste and custom were neither purely traditional nor entirely colonial creations; they were historically produced through continuous negotiation between local society and imperial authority.

Moreover, the focus on social control allows for a more nuanced understanding of resistance. Rather than viewing resistance solely in terms of organized movements or violent uprisings, this study highlights the significance of everyday acts of defiance and negotiation. These acts, though often small in scale, gradually eroded the legitimacy of caste-based domination and contributed to social change.

XVI. CONCLUSION

Caste, custom, and social control were fundamental to the organization of rural Bengal during the colonial period. Through informal norms, ritual practices, and community sanctions, these institutions regulated everyday life and maintained social hierarchy. Colonial rule did not dismantle these mechanisms; instead, it selectively recognized and codified them, integrating indigenous social control into the framework of governance.

At the same time, caste and custom were not static or uncontested. Marginalized groups resisted and negotiated social control through everyday practices, legal challenges, and collective movements. These dynamics reveal the complexity of rural society and underscore the importance of social history in understanding colonial rule.

By foregrounding caste and custom as mechanisms of social control, this article contributes to a deeper

understanding of colonial Bengal's social structure. It demonstrates that power operated not only through laws and institutions but also through norms, beliefs, and everyday practices. Such an approach enriches our understanding of colonialism as a social process and highlights the agency of those who lived under its rule.

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