
A Sociological Study on Colonialism and The Transformation of Social Stratification in India

Chikkaraju C.

Associate Professor, Government First Grade College, Kengeri.

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ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the transformation of social stratification and class formation in India under British colonial rule. Colonial policies, including land revenue settlements, Western education reforms, census classification, and industrialization, profoundly reshaped traditional caste hierarchies and introduced new class divisions. The Permanent Settlement and other revenue systems created landlord and tenant classes, often reinforcing caste-based inequalities in rural areas. Simultaneously, Western education fostered a colonial middle class that negotiated both caste status and economic mobility. Census operations codified caste identities into rigid administrative categories, while industrialization gave rise to an urban working class marked by complex intersections of caste and class. These colonial interventions not only restructured India's social order but also laid the groundwork for ongoing caste-class dynamics in postcolonial society. Understanding these processes provides critical insight into the enduring legacy of colonialism on India's social inequalities.

KEYWORDS:

Colonial India, Social stratification, Caste system, Class formation, Land revenue policies, Agrarian society, British colonialism.

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Introduction

Social stratification—the hierarchical arrangement of individuals into different social groups based on criteria such as caste, class, and occupation—has been a defining feature of Indian society for centuries. Prior to British colonial rule, stratification was primarily governed by the varna-jati system, where caste determined an individual's social status, occupation, and access to resources. While rigid in theory, in practice, caste hierarchies often displayed a degree of regional and occupational fluidity.

The advent of British colonial rule in the 18th century marked a profound transformation in India's traditional social structures. Colonial administrators, in their attempts to govern an unfamiliar and diverse

society, reclassified and institutionalized caste, introduced new legal and revenue systems, and encouraged the growth of English education and capitalist industry. These policies disrupted older systems of social mobility and created new class formations, such as absentee landlords, a Western-educated middle class, and an industrial working class. At the same time, the colonial state presented itself as neutral or reformist, even as its interventions often hardened social divisions and introduced new forms of inequality.

This paper examines how colonial policies—such as land revenue settlements, census classifications, legal codifications, and educational reforms—reshaped India’s social stratification. It explores the emergence of new social classes alongside the persistence and modification of older caste-based hierarchies. By analyzing key examples from both rural and urban contexts, this study aims to uncover the complex interplay between caste and class under colonial rule and its enduring legacy in contemporary India.

Theoretical Framework

To understand how colonialism reshaped social stratification in India, it is essential to draw on theoretical perspectives that address both caste and class as systems of inequality. While caste is rooted in notions of ritual purity, heredity, and hierarchy, class is primarily an economic and relational concept, based on access to resources, production, and labor. In the colonial Indian context, these systems often intersected—making it necessary to adopt multi-dimensional analytical tools.

To analyze the transformation of social stratification and class formation under colonial rule, it is important to draw upon key sociological theories that differentiate between caste and class while recognizing their intersections in the Indian context. Max Weber’s concept of social status and class provides insight into how caste operated as a status group based on hereditary social honor, while class emerged through economic relationships and access to resources introduced by colonial capitalism. Meanwhile, Karl Marx’s theory of class struggle highlights how colonial land policies and industrialization fostered economic exploitation and a distinct division between landlords, peasants, and wage laborers. Additionally, Indian sociologists like M. N. Srinivas emphasize processes such as Sanskritization, where lower castes adopt upper-caste practices

to improve social standing, a phenomenon influenced and complicated by colonial modernity. Furthermore, scholars like Nicholas Dirks illustrate how colonial administrative practices codified and rigidified caste identities, intertwining governance with social classification. This theoretical foundation enables a nuanced understanding of how caste and class evolved and interacted under British colonialism.

Colonial Land Reforms and Agrarian Class Formation:

One of the most profound ways in which British colonialism transformed India's social structure was through its land revenue policies, which disrupted traditional landholding patterns and created new forms of class-based stratification in rural society. While caste remained an important organizing principle, colonial economic policies introduced new layers of agrarian class differentiation, separating landlords, tenants, and landless laborers.

Under British colonial rule, traditional rural structures in India were fundamentally transformed by the introduction of new land revenue systems, which laid the groundwork for a stratified agrarian class structure. The most notable of these systems—the Permanent Settlement in Bengal, the Ryotwari system in southern and western India, and the Mahalwari system in the north—disrupted existing patterns of landholding and communal ownership. These policies privileged certain landholding groups, often upper castes, and converted them into landlords or zamindars, legally empowered to extract rent from tenants and sharecroppers. At the same time, small cultivators and lower-caste peasants were burdened by high taxes, leading to widespread indebtedness, land alienation, and the rise of a landless labor class. As a result, rural society became increasingly polarized: a wealthy, often absentee landlord elite on one side, and a growing mass of impoverished tenants and landless laborers on the other. This economic restructuring intersected with the caste system, reinforcing the dominance of upper castes while deepening the marginalization of lower-caste and tribal communities. Thus, colonial land policies not only commodified land but also institutionalized new class-based inequalities that reshaped the traditional social fabric of Indian villages.

Education and the Rise of the Colonial Middle Class:

The introduction of Western-style education under British colonial rule played a crucial role in transforming India's social stratification by

fostering the emergence of a new middle class. Prior to colonial intervention, educational opportunities were largely restricted to upper-caste groups and centred around traditional religious institutions such as gurukuls and madrasas. However, colonial policies, beginning with Macaulay's Minute of 1835, promoted English-language education as a means to create a class of Indians "Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." This created a Western-educated elite, predominantly drawn from upper-caste communities, who gained access to government jobs, legal professions, and clerical positions within the colonial administration. This emergent class occupied an ambiguous social position—both intermediaries of colonial power and agents of social reform. Simultaneously, access to education gradually expanded to some lower-caste groups, enabling limited upward mobility and fostering early political consciousness among marginalized communities. Consequently, education under colonialism not only introduced new avenues for social mobility but also reconfigured traditional caste hierarchies, giving rise to a class-based elite that would later play a pivotal role in India's nationalist movements and post-colonial society.

Census and Caste Codification under Colonial Rule:

The British colonial administration's systematic use of census operations and ethnographic surveys significantly altered the fluidity of India's caste system by rigidly codifying social identities. Prior to colonial intervention, caste was often regionally specific, with overlapping roles and some degree of social mobility based on occupation and local customs. However, beginning with the first comprehensive census in 1871, British officials sought to classify and enumerate India's population into fixed caste categories, often relying on anthropometric methods and textual sources like the Manusmriti. Scholars such as Herbert Risley linked caste to racial theories, further entrenching hierarchical assumptions. This administrative endeavour to "freeze" caste identities served both governance and political purposes, enabling the colonial state to implement divide-and-rule strategies and control social groups more effectively. The census thus institutionalized caste as a rigid and hierarchical structure, limiting traditional flexibility and interaction between castes. It also inadvertently facilitated caste-based political mobilization by providing marginalized groups with formal recognition, laying the groundwork for modern caste politics in India. This colonial reification of caste as a

bureaucratic category continues to influence social relations and identity politics in contemporary India.

Industrialization and Working Class Formation under Colonial Rule:

The process of industrialization under British colonial rule introduced a new dimension to India's social stratification by creating an emerging working class distinct from traditional caste and agrarian identities. The establishment of railways, textile mills, plantations, and mining industries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries led to the migration of large numbers of rural laborers to urban centers in search of wage employment. This industrial proletariat often comprised individuals from lower-caste and tribal backgrounds, who faced harsh working conditions, low wages, and limited social mobility. Unlike the relatively stable caste-based occupations in villages, factory work was characterized by economic exploitation and insecurity, fostering new class-based solidarities but also tensions marked by caste and ethnic divisions. The colonial industrial economy thus contributed to the fragmentation of traditional social bonds, while simultaneously laying the foundation for early labor movements and collective action. Despite these developments, caste identities persisted and often influenced workplace relations, highlighting the complex interplay between caste and class in colonial India's evolving social structure.

Conclusion

British colonial rule fundamentally reshaped India's social stratification by intertwining traditional caste hierarchies with emerging class divisions rooted in economic and administrative changes. Colonial land revenue policies dismantled communal land ownership and established landlord-tenant relations that entrenched rural class inequalities, often reinforcing upper-caste dominance. Simultaneously, the introduction of Western education and the colonial bureaucracy gave rise to a new middle class that navigated both caste status and class mobility, while census operations and legal codifications rigidified caste identities into fixed administrative categories. Industrialization created an urban working class, further complicating the social fabric by introducing new forms of economic exploitation alongside persistent caste-based discrimination. These overlapping transformations not only reconfigured India's social order during colonial times but also laid the foundation for enduring caste-class dynamics that continue to influence the country's socio-

political landscape today. Understanding these colonial legacies is crucial to comprehending the complex nature of inequality and social change in modern India.

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