

Social Stratification and Class Formation Under British Colonial Rule in India: Historical Transformations, Economic Policies, and the Legacy of Inequality in Modern Society
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17959887>

ABSTRACT:

The study explores the evolution of social stratification and class formation during British colonial rule in India, analyzing how economic policies, land reforms, and administrative structures reshaped traditional caste hierarchies. It examines how colonial capitalism and the introduction of Western education altered occupational divisions and social mobility. The paper also discusses the theoretical perspectives of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Louis Dumont to interpret the interplay between caste, class, and colonial modernity. Finally, it evaluates the enduring legacy of these transformations in shaping modern India’s inequalities and class-based social order.

KEYWORDS:

Colonial Stratification, Caste-Class Overlap, Land Revenue Systems, Colonial Modernity, Economic Inequality.



1. Introduction

Social stratification refers to the hierarchical arrangement of individuals and groups in a society based on economic, social, and cultural factors. In India, the caste system was the traditional basis of this hierarchy, deeply rooted in religious and occupational distinctions. However, British colonial rule (1757–1947) introduced new dimensions to this structure by transforming economic relations, land ownership, and administrative systems.

Colonialism not only exploited India’s resources but also restructured society by merging traditional caste hierarchies with emerging capitalist classes. This paper examines these processes and how they created new social classes — landlords, peasants, industrial workers, and the emerging middle class — that continue to influence Indian society today.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Karl Marx's Theory of Class

Karl Marx defined class based on the relationship to the means of production — bourgeoisie (owners) and proletariat (workers). Under colonial rule, India witnessed the emergence of a colonial bourgeoisie composed of zamindars, merchants, and officials who benefited from British economic policies, while peasants and laborers formed a colonial proletariat.

2.2 Max Weber's Perspective

Max Weber emphasized that class, status, and power shape stratification. In colonial India, caste (status) overlapped with class and power structures, creating a unique form of social inequality where traditional status groups adapted to modern capitalist relations.

2.3 Louis Dumont's Caste Hierarchy

Louis Dumont interpreted Indian society as status-based, governed by purity and pollution concepts. British rule attempted to “rationalize” this system through census and law, but inadvertently reinforced caste boundaries by codifying them.

3. Pre-Colonial Stratification in India

Before colonialism, Indian society was organized primarily through the varna and jati system. Occupational groups were hereditary, and mobility between castes was limited. However, local economies and regional powers (Mughal, Maratha, Vijayanagara) provided some flexibility, with merchant and artisan castes gaining influence in trade networks.

4. Colonial Economic Policies and Class Restructuring

4.1 Land Revenue Systems

The Permanent Settlement (1793), Ryotwari, and Mahalwari systems redefined land ownership. The British replaced communal landholding with private property, creating a new class of zamindars and landless peasants. This deepened rural inequality.

4.2 Deindustrialization and Emergence of Labor Class

British industrial imports led to the decline of indigenous handicrafts, forcing artisans into agrarian or industrial labor. Cities like Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras became industrial centers with new

working-class populations.

4.3 Commercialization of Agriculture

The shift toward cash crops (indigo, cotton, opium) linked India to global capitalist markets. Peasants became dependent on moneylenders and traders, leading to cycles of debt and social subjugation.

5. Education, Bureaucracy, and the Middle Class

The introduction of Western education (through Macaulay's Minute, 1835) created a new English-educated middle class—clerks, teachers, lawyers, and reformers. This group occupied a contradictory position: they were agents of colonial administration yet also the pioneers of Indian nationalism (e.g., Dadabhai Naoroji, R.C. Dutt, M.G. Ranade).

6. Colonial Census and Reinforcement of Caste

The British census (from 1871 onward) categorized Indian society into rigid caste hierarchies. This bureaucratic codification froze social mobility and institutionalized caste identities, which had earlier been more fluid.

7. Industrialization and Urban Class Formation

Urban centers saw new classes:

- Capitalist industrialists (e.g., Tata, Birla) emerging under colonial capitalism.
- Industrial working class—drawn from lower castes and rural migrants.
- Clerical and professional class—educated elites working in British offices.

This created a modern class structure parallel to the traditional caste system.

8. Gender and Social Stratification

Colonial reforms affected gender roles. English education and social reform movements (like those by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar) challenged some patriarchal norms but often benefited upper-caste women more than those from lower classes, reinforcing social inequalities.

9. Nationalism and Class Consciousness

The Indian National Congress emerged as a platform of the middle class but gradually incorporated peasants and workers. Anti-colonial

movements like the Non-Cooperation Movement and Quit India Movement reflected growing class awareness alongside nationalist consciousness.

10. The Legacy of Inequality in Modern India

Post-independence India inherited colonial structures of inequality:

- Land inequality persisted despite reforms.
- Caste-class overlap continues to influence access to education and employment.
- Urban-rural divide reflects colonial economic geography.

Modern policies like reservations and poverty alleviation programs aim to correct these historical imbalances, yet disparities remain evident in income, education, and political representation.

11. Theoretical Interpretation of Legacy

- Marxist view: Colonialism implanted capitalist relations that deepened class exploitation.
- Weberian view: Social mobility improved for some groups but remained constrained by caste-based status.
- Postcolonial theory: Colonial knowledge systems redefined Indian identity and hierarchy under Western categories.

12. Conclusion

British colonial rule transformed India's traditional caste-based stratification into a complex class-caste hierarchy rooted in capitalist relations. The colonial state restructured land, labor, and education systems, giving rise to new economic classes while reinforcing old social divisions. The enduring impact of these transformations is visible in the persistent inequalities of contemporary Indian society. Understanding these historical processes is essential for addressing current issues of development, justice, and social equity.

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Funding:

This study was not funded by any grant.

Conflict of interest:

The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

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