

## **Caste System in North Bengal with special reference to SC & ST Population**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the nature and transformation of the caste system in North Bengal with particular emphasis on Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), who constitute a significant proportion of the population. Drawing upon secondary data such as Census reports, government documents, and scholarly studies, the analysis highlights the socio-economic conditions, cultural identities, and spatial distribution of SC and ST communities across districts like Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Cooch Behar, and the Dinajpurs. The study finds that while SC communities are largely engaged in agrarian occupations, ST populations are predominantly concentrated in tea plantations and forested regions, often facing economic vulnerability and limited access to basic services. The paper also explores the impact of colonial policies, particularly the plantation economy, in restructuring demographic patterns and reinforcing marginalization. Post-independence affirmative action and welfare measures have improved access to education and political representation; however, disparities in income, literacy, and health outcomes persist. The persistence of identity-based movements further reflects ongoing struggles for recognition and rights.

**Keywords:** Caste System, Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Tribal Communities etc.

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**Date of Submission:27.02.2026**

**Date of Acceptance: 02.03.2026**

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### **Introduction**

The caste system in India has long been regarded as a fundamental framework of social organization, traditionally characterized by hierarchical divisions based on occupation, ritual

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status, and birth. However, its structure and functioning vary significantly across regions. North Bengal presents a unique socio-cultural landscape where the conventional caste hierarchy intersects with diverse ethnic and tribal identities, resulting in a more complex and fluid system. This region, comprising districts such as Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Cooch Behar, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur, and Malda, is marked by a rich mosaic of communities, including a substantial proportion of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). Historically, the social structure of North Bengal has been shaped by multiple processes, including migration, the influence of regional kingdoms, and colonial economic policies. The expansion of the plantation economy under the British East India Company and later British administration led to the large-scale migration of tribal laborers from central and eastern India into the tea gardens of the Dooars and Darjeeling hills. This not only altered the demographic composition of the region but also contributed to the formation of new social hierarchies and economic dependencies. Unlike the rigid caste-based stratification observed in many other parts of India, North Bengal exhibits a relatively flexible system where caste and tribe often overlap. Many communities, such as the Rajbanshis, have historically negotiated their social status through processes of cultural assimilation and political mobilization. At the same time, tribal groups like the Santhal, Oraon, Lepcha, and Bhutia have maintained distinct cultural identities while adapting to changing socio-economic conditions.

Scheduled Castes in North Bengal are primarily engaged in agriculture and rural occupations, often facing issues of landlessness, poverty, and limited access to education. Scheduled Tribes, on the other hand, are concentrated in tea plantation areas, forest regions, and hilly terrains, where they encounter challenges related to labor exploitation, displacement, and inadequate access to healthcare and infrastructure. Despite various welfare measures and constitutional safeguards provided by the Constitution of India, these communities continue to experience socio-economic disadvantages.

## **Historical Background of the Caste System in North Bengal**

The historical evolution of the caste system in North Bengal differs significantly from the classical Brahmanical model of social hierarchy found in other parts of India. The region's social

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structure developed through a complex interaction of indigenous traditions, migration, political transformations, and colonial interventions. As a frontier zone bordering Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh, North Bengal has historically been a meeting ground of diverse ethnic groups, resulting in a more flexible and layered social order.

In the early historical period, much of North Bengal was inhabited by indigenous communities such as the Koch, Mech, and other Tibeto-Burman groups. These societies were primarily organized along tribal and clan-based lines rather than rigid caste hierarchies. Social differentiation existed, but it was based more on kinship, occupation, and local authority than on the strict notions of purity and pollution central to the caste system in the Indo-Gangetic plains. A significant transformation occurred with the rise of regional kingdoms, particularly the Koch dynasty in the 16th century. Under rulers like Biswa Singha and Nara Narayan, there was a gradual process of state formation and social stratification. The ruling elites sought legitimacy by adopting elements of Hindu Brahmanical culture, including the patronage of Brahmins and the introduction of caste-like divisions. This process led to the gradual incorporation of local communities into a hierarchical social framework, although it remained less rigid than in other regions. The process of “Hinduisation” or Sanskritization played a crucial role in shaping caste identities in North Bengal. Communities such as the Rajbanshis, who were originally part of the Koch ethnic group, began to claim Kshatriya status to elevate their social position. This upward mobility was achieved through the adoption of upper-caste customs, rituals, and social practices. However, these claims were often contested, reflecting the fluid and negotiable nature of caste in the region. The colonial period marked a turning point in the consolidation and categorization of caste and tribal identities. Under the administration of the British East India Company and later the British Crown, systematic efforts were made to classify and enumerate populations through censuses and ethnographic surveys. These colonial classifications rigidified previously fluid identities by labeling communities as “castes” or “tribes,” often ignoring their complex social realities. One of the most significant impacts of colonial rule was the introduction of the plantation economy, particularly the development of tea gardens in Darjeeling and the Dooars. This led to the large-scale migration of tribal laborers such as the Santhal, Oraon, and Munda from central India. These communities were incorporated into a new socio-economic hierarchy based on labor relations rather than traditional caste status. As a result, the region witnessed the

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coexistence of caste-based and class-based forms of stratification. Furthermore, colonial land revenue systems altered traditional patterns of land ownership and agrarian relations. Many lower-caste and tribal communities became tenants, laborers, or landless workers, reinforcing their marginalization. At the same time, upper-caste groups and local elites gained greater control over land and resources, consolidating their socio-economic dominance.

In summary, the caste system in North Bengal evolved through a gradual and layered process influenced by indigenous social structures, regional state formation, Sanskritization, and colonial intervention. Unlike the rigid caste hierarchies of other regions, it retained a degree of flexibility, with overlapping identities and significant interaction between caste and tribe. This historical background is essential for understanding the contemporary socio-economic conditions of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the region.

## **Scheduled Castes (SC) in North Bengal**

Scheduled Castes (SC) constitute a significant segment of the population in North Bengal and play a crucial role in shaping the region's socio-economic and cultural landscape. Their present condition is rooted in historical processes of marginalization, occupational stratification, and limited access to resources, although notable progress has been made in recent decades through state intervention and social mobility.

## **Major SC Communities**

North Bengal is home to several prominent SC communities, including:

- Rajbanshi (in specific administrative and socio-political contexts)
- Namasudra
- Poundra (Poundra Kshatriya)
- Bagdi
- Dom

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Among these, the Rajbanshi community is particularly significant in districts like Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri, where they form a dominant demographic group and have been central to regional identity movements.

## **Scheduled Tribes (ST) in North Bengal**

Scheduled Tribes (ST) form a vital component of the demographic and cultural fabric of North Bengal. The region is characterized by a high concentration of tribal populations, particularly in the districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, and Alipurduar. These communities possess distinct ethnic identities, languages, and cultural practices that set them apart from caste-based social groups. At the same time, they have historically faced socio-economic marginalization, which continues to shape their present conditions.

## **Major ST Communities**

North Bengal is home to a diverse range of tribal groups, including:

- Santhal
- Oraon
- Munda
- Lepcha
- Bhutia
- Toto (recognized as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group)

The Lepcha are considered the original inhabitants of the Darjeeling hills, while communities like Santhal, Oraon, and Munda were largely brought to the region during the colonial period as laborers.

## **Impact of Colonialism**

Colonial rule had a profound and lasting impact on the social structure of North Bengal, particularly in reshaping the dynamics of caste and tribe. The intervention of the British East

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India Company and later the British Crown introduced new economic systems, administrative practices, and social classifications that significantly altered pre-existing social relations.

One of the most significant changes brought about by colonialism was the introduction and expansion of the plantation economy, especially tea cultivation in the Darjeeling hills and the Dooars region. The British established large tea estates, which required a steady supply of cheap and disciplined labor. As a result, thousands of tribal people—such as the Santhal, Oraon, and Munda—were brought from central India and settled in plantation areas. This migration not only changed the demographic composition of North Bengal but also created a new labor-based social hierarchy, where tribal workers occupied the lowest economic positions with limited rights and mobility.

Colonial land revenue systems further transformed agrarian relations. Traditional systems of land use and community ownership were replaced by formalized land tenure arrangements that often favored landlords and intermediaries. Many Scheduled Castes and indigenous communities lost access to land and were reduced to tenants or agricultural laborers. This process deepened economic inequalities and reinforced patterns of marginalization. Another important impact was the colonial practice of classification and enumeration. Through censuses and ethnographic surveys, the British attempted to categorize the population into fixed groups such as “castes” and “tribes.” These classifications often ignored the fluid and overlapping identities that existed in North Bengal and instead imposed rigid boundaries. Communities that previously had flexible social positions were labeled and ranked, which contributed to the crystallization of caste identities over time. Colonial policies also influenced cultural and social change. The spread of Western education, missionary activities, and new administrative institutions introduced alternative forms of identity and social mobility. Some sections of SC and ST populations gained access to education and employment opportunities, though these benefits were limited and unevenly distributed. At the same time, the colonial economy created dependency and vulnerability. Tribal communities working in tea plantations were subjected to harsh working conditions, low wages, and restricted mobility. The plantation system functioned as a closed economic and social unit, isolating workers from mainstream society and limiting their opportunities for advancement.

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## Post-Independence Developments

The post-independence period marked a significant phase of transformation in the social, economic, and political conditions of North Bengal, particularly for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). With the adoption of the Constitution of India, the Indian state committed itself to the principles of equality, social justice, and affirmative action, aiming to address the historical disadvantages faced by marginalized communities.

One of the most important developments was the introduction of constitutional safeguards for SC and ST populations. These included provisions for reservation in education, government employment, and political representation. Such measures enabled greater participation of marginalized communities in public institutions and contributed to the emergence of a new educated middle class among SCs and STs in North Bengal. Land reforms in West Bengal, particularly during the late 20th century under Left Front governments, played a crucial role in altering agrarian relations. Programs like *Operation Barga* aimed to secure tenancy rights for sharecroppers, many of whom belonged to SC communities. As a result, some degree of land redistribution took place, improving the economic conditions of rural SC households. However, the impact was uneven, and many tribal communities, especially those in tea plantations and forest areas, remained outside the scope of these reforms. In the case of ST populations, the post-independence period saw the implementation of various tribal welfare programs focusing on education, healthcare, and rural development. Establishment of tribal hostels, scholarships, and special schools helped improve literacy rates, although gaps still persist. Government initiatives also attempted to enhance infrastructure in remote and forested regions, but access remains limited in many areas. Another significant development has been the gradual political mobilization of SC and ST communities. Increased awareness of rights and identity has led to the formation of various social and political movements. For example, the Rajbanshi community has been actively involved in demands for recognition and regional autonomy, while tribal groups in the Darjeeling hills have participated in broader movements such as Gorkhaland, seeking political and administrative reforms. Economic changes in the post-independence era have also influenced social structures. While agriculture continues to be an important occupation for SC communities, there has been a gradual shift toward non-farm

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activities, migration, and participation in the informal sector. For ST populations, however, dependence on the tea plantation economy remains high, and issues such as low wages, unemployment, and labor insecurity continue to affect their livelihoods. Despite these developments, several challenges persist. Educational attainment among SC and ST populations, although improved, still lags behind the general population. Health indicators, particularly in tribal areas, remain a concern due to malnutrition and inadequate healthcare facilities. Furthermore, socio-economic disparities and limited access to higher-level employment opportunities continue to restrict upward mobility.

The post-independence period has brought important changes in terms of legal protection, political participation, and socio-economic development for SC and ST communities in North Bengal. However, the benefits of these initiatives have been uneven, and structural inequalities continue to exist. A more targeted and region-specific approach is necessary to ensure inclusive and sustainable development for these historically marginalized groups.

Despite decades of policy intervention and developmental efforts, the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in North Bengal continue to face a range of persistent and interconnected challenges. These difficulties are not merely economic in nature but are deeply embedded in historical marginalization, regional disparities, and structural inequalities that continue to shape their everyday lives.

One of the most pressing concerns is economic insecurity. A large section of SC communities remains dependent on marginal agriculture and informal labor, where income is uncertain and often insufficient to meet basic needs. Seasonal unemployment further aggravates their vulnerability. In the case of ST populations, particularly those residing in the tea garden regions of the Dooars and Darjeeling, livelihoods are closely tied to plantation work. This dependence creates a fragile economic condition, as wages are low, employment is often irregular, and opportunities for alternative income sources are limited. The periodic closure of tea estates has intensified distress, pushing many families into deeper poverty.

Closely linked to economic hardship is the issue of land and resource access. While land reforms in West Bengal provided some benefits to SC communities, many still possess only small and fragmented plots that do not ensure sustainable agricultural productivity. For ST communities, the problem is even more acute, as many lack formal ownership of land and

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continue to depend on forest resources or plantation employment. The absence of secure land rights not only restricts economic independence but also exposes them to displacement and exploitation. Educational attainment, although improving, remains uneven and insufficient. Many children from SC and ST backgrounds face barriers such as poverty, lack of infrastructure, and limited access to quality schools. In tribal areas, language differences between home and school environments create additional obstacles, often leading to high dropout rates. As a result, access to higher education and skilled employment remains limited, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage. Health and nutrition present another critical area of concern. In several parts of North Bengal, especially in remote and plantation areas, access to healthcare facilities is inadequate. Malnutrition, poor sanitation, and lack of clean drinking water contribute to adverse health outcomes. Although government schemes aim to address these issues, gaps in implementation and awareness reduce their effectiveness on the ground. Social marginalization continues to exist in subtle yet impactful forms. While overt caste discrimination may not be as rigid as in some other regions, SC and ST communities often experience limited social mobility and exclusion from higher decision-making spaces. Tribal populations also face cultural marginalization, as their languages, traditions, and knowledge systems are often undervalued within mainstream society. The gap between policy and implementation remains a significant challenge. The safeguards and provisions under the Constitution of India are comprehensive, yet their benefits do not always reach the intended populations effectively. Administrative inefficiencies, lack of awareness, and uneven distribution of resources hinder the realization of these rights. Migration has emerged as a coping strategy for many individuals from SC and ST communities. In search of better employment opportunities, they often move to urban centers or other states, where they face new forms of vulnerability, including job insecurity, poor living conditions, and lack of social protection. This not only disrupts community life but also perpetuates a cycle of instability. Finally, issues of identity and political recognition continue to influence the region. Various movements demanding recognition, autonomy, and equitable development reflect underlying dissatisfaction with existing structures. These movements highlight the ongoing struggle of marginalized communities to assert their rights and secure a more dignified place within the broader socio-political framework.

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In essence, the challenges faced by SC and ST populations in North Bengal are complex and multidimensional, requiring a nuanced and inclusive approach that goes beyond policy formulation to ensure effective implementation and meaningful social transformation.

The caste system in North Bengal presents a distinctive pattern that cannot be fully explained through the traditional Brahmanical model of hierarchy. Instead, it reflects a dynamic interaction between caste, tribe, ethnicity, and economic structures. The coexistence of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) within the same regional framework has produced a social order that is both layered and fluid, yet marked by persistent inequalities. One of the key observations is that caste and tribe in North Bengal are not entirely separate categories but often overlap in terms of socio-economic conditions and lived experiences. While SC communities are historically integrated into the Hindu caste structure, and ST communities are recognized as distinct ethnic groups, both share similar challenges such as poverty, limited access to education, and dependence on low-income occupations. This suggests that economic marginalization, rather than ritual hierarchy alone, plays a central role in shaping social stratification in the region.

The historical processes discussed earlier—particularly the influence of regional kingdoms and colonial interventions—have contributed to this unique configuration. The imposition of rigid classifications during colonial rule under the British East India Company transformed flexible social identities into fixed administrative categories. However, at the ground level, these identities continue to remain negotiable, as seen in the case of communities like the Rajbanshis, who have actively engaged in identity assertion and social mobility. Another important dimension is the role of the plantation economy. The concentration of ST populations in tea gardens has created a form of class-based stratification that operates alongside caste distinctions. Tribal laborers in plantations often face conditions of economic dependency, low wages, and limited social mobility. In contrast, SC communities, though also economically disadvantaged, have relatively greater integration into the rural agrarian economy. This divergence highlights the need to understand social inequality in North Bengal through both caste and class perspectives. Post-independence policies, supported by the Constitution of India, have made significant contributions toward reducing social disparities. Reservation policies, land reforms, and welfare schemes have improved access to education and political participation for

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SC and ST populations. Nevertheless, the benefits have been unevenly distributed. While a section of these communities has achieved upward mobility, a large proportion continues to remain trapped in cycles of poverty and underdevelopment. Cultural identity also plays a crucial role in the discussion. ST communities, in particular, have maintained strong cultural traditions and community structures, which serve as sources of resilience but can also limit integration into mainstream socio-economic systems. Similarly, SC communities have preserved distinct cultural practices while simultaneously striving for social recognition and upward mobility. These dual processes of preservation and adaptation reflect the complex nature of identity in the region.

Furthermore, contemporary identity-based movements indicate that issues of recognition, autonomy, and resource distribution remain unresolved. Demands for regional identity, language recognition, and political representation reveal underlying tensions within the social structure. These movements are not merely cultural assertions but are deeply connected to questions of economic opportunity and social justice.

The caste system in North Bengal represents a distinctive and evolving social formation shaped by historical processes, regional diversity, and economic transformations. Unlike the rigid hierarchical structure observed in many other parts of India, the social order in this region is marked by a relatively fluid interaction between caste and tribe, where identity, occupation, and ethnicity intersect in complex ways. This uniqueness is particularly evident in the lived experiences of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), who constitute a substantial portion of the population and play a central role in the region's socio-cultural fabric.

The study reveals that while SC communities are more closely integrated into the agrarian economy, ST populations remain heavily concentrated in plantation and forest-based livelihoods, often under conditions of economic vulnerability. Historical factors such as the influence of regional kingdoms, processes of social mobility, and especially colonial interventions under the British East India Company have significantly shaped present-day inequalities. These legacies continue to manifest in patterns of land ownership, employment, and access to resources.

Post-independence developments, supported by the provisions of the Constitution of India, have brought about important changes, including increased access to education, political participation, and welfare schemes for marginalized communities. However, these gains have

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been uneven, and a large section of SC and ST populations still faces persistent challenges such as poverty, limited educational opportunities, inadequate healthcare, and restricted social mobility.

The discussion highlights that social inequality in North Bengal cannot be understood solely through the lens of caste hierarchy. Instead, it requires a broader perspective that incorporates class relations, regional disparities, and cultural identities. The overlapping nature of caste and tribal experiences calls for a more inclusive analytical framework and policy approach.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, achieving meaningful development in North Bengal requires a balanced strategy that addresses both economic and social dimensions. Strengthening education, ensuring land and livelihood security, improving healthcare access, and promoting cultural recognition are essential steps toward empowering SC and ST communities. Only through effective implementation of policies and a deeper understanding of regional realities can the vision of social justice and equality be fully realized.

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