

**Social Structure and Community Life In Dinajpur District:A
Historical Study in Colonial Period**

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Abstract:*The paper contributes to regional historiography by reconstructing the lived experiences and social realities of Dinajpur's people during the Colonial Period, offering a nuanced understanding of continuity and change in community life. Also, overall the paper argues that while Colonial policies introduced significant transformations in the social and community life of Dinajpur, local traditions and cultural practices continued to shape everyday experiences and social interactions throughout the colonial period. Under British rule, administrative organisation, the introduction of new land revenue policies, and economic restructuring significantly reshaped local society. The paper further highlights forms of resistance such as Peasant movement, local protests, and the spread of Nationalist ideas, which contributed to new social and political consciousness within the district. It also explores the transformation of rural community life, including family structures, social customs.*

Keywords: Colonial, Dinajpur, Peasant, Religious, Social, Structure, etc.

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Introduction

Dinajpur district has its own historical importance. Before, the British rule, the whole of North Bengal consisted of 3 district (i.e. Rajshahi, Rangpur and Dinajpur). During the time of Mughal Emperor Akbar, Tajpur Sarkar, Pinjara Sarkar and Ghoraghat Sarkar were included in Dinajpur territory. Colonial rule brought significant transformations to the social structure and community life of various regions of India, and Dinajpur district was no exception. British administrative policies, the restructuring of the zamindari and land revenue systems, and the introduction of new economic frameworks reshaped patterns of social hierarchy, occupational life, and community relations. Historically an agrarian region, Dinajpur experienced notable changes in social

Social Structure and Community Life In Dinajpur District:A Historical Study in Colonial Period

stratification, the relationship between zamindars and Peasants, the emergence of a new middle class, and the interaction among diverse religious and social communities during the colonial period. The journey of Dinajpur City as the district headquarters of Dinajpur began since the arrival of the English collector Judge Haze in 1786 AD.

Early History of Dinajpur District

In local folklore, many stories are described about Dinajpur district in myths and legends, which have been passed down through generations. To understand the culture and traditions of this region, it is essential to know the many stories described about Dinajpur district in myths and legends. The early history of this district is associated with the era of myths and legends. Dhananjay Roy in his book 'Dinajpur Jelar Itihas' described various myths and legends of this district. Also, F.W. Strong mentioned in his gazetteer various myths and legends of this district. The Dinajpur region was under the rule of the powerful Parshuram, sixth incarnation of lord Vishnu. It is said that during the Ramayana period, Lord Rama sent Devi Sita to exile in the Dinajpur region. During the area of Mahabharata, there are many stories associated with the king Virat of this region. King Virat's equestrian facility was in Ghoraghat area.¹ Also during the mythological period the ruler of this district was Raja Bali. Subsequently, his son Ban ruled this region and established a powerful Empire. King Ban's capital Bannagar, now known as Bangarh.²

History states that this region was ruled by various ancient Indian rulers at different times. The administrative history of this district shows the influence of various powerful rulers of ancient India. During the rule of the Pala and Sena Kings, a special influence was seen in the culture and architecture of this region. The existence of Pala and Sena kings can be observed in various regions of this district. F.W. Strong mentioned in his gazetteer that- "A large tank or dighi in the Bansihari thana bears the name of Raja Mahipal, who, according to an inscription found at Nalanda, reigned about A.D. 856. The village of Mahipur and pargana Mahinagar in the vicinity are apparently connected with the same monarch. The sites of the palaces of a number of other princes of this dynasty are to be seen in Bogram, and there is reason to believe that the province of Gaur under their rule extended from Rangpur to Monghyr, and was famous throughout India."³ Also, F.W. Strong mentioned in his gazetteer about Sena Kingdom that - "Notwithstanding the statement made in the Badal pillar inscription that the Pala Kingdom was bounded on the north by the Himalayas, it is improbable that the rule of the Palas or their successors the Senas extended to the northern portion of the Dinajpur district."⁴

This event marked a significant turning point in the history of Bengal, when Muslim invasions occurred during the reign of Lakshman Sen, the ruler of the Sena Dynasty, and Muslim rule was established. Bakhtiyar Khilji appeared in this district with the victory Flag of Islam. In panic from the attackers, staunch Hindus left their homes and took refuge eastward. As a result,

Social Structure and Community Life In Dinajpur District:A Historical Study in Colonial Period

this area easily fell under the Muslim rulers. In this context Dhananjay Roy in his book 'Dinajpur Jelar Itihas' described that -"On May 10, 1205 AD, Ikhtiyaruddin Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji planted the flag of Islam's victory on the soil of Dinajpur. Devikot is known as Deokot, Devkot, Diokot with a changed form on the map of Bengal from that day on the pronunciation of the Turks. There was no shortage of people to welcome Bakhtiyar in Devikot. Because Yavanas were coming, the hardling Hindutva followers and Buddhist philosopher-Scholars of Devikot had already packed up their establishments and taken safe refuge in East Bengal."⁵ As a result, the basis of Muslim rule in Dinajpur or Bengal was strengthened. The social conditions of Dinajpur i.e. Bengal underwent a great change. As a result of these changes, new trends emerged in society. There are various opinions prevalent among different historians and researchers regarding the naming of Dinajpur. However, it is believed that during the medieval period, Alauddin Firoz Shah, the last king of the Ilias Shah dynasty of Bengal, was dethroned and a powerful Hindu Amir declared himself the independent king of Gaur, whose name was Raja Ganesh. He ascended on the throne under the name 'Danujmardan Dev' and at that time Raja Ganesh issued coins in this name. To pronounce the person word 'Danuj' as 'Dinwaj' this later came to be known as Dinajpur.⁶

This event in 1765 marked the beginning of a crucial chapter in the expansion of the British Empire in the Indian subcontinent. Following the acquisition of Diwani, the company gained control over land revenue collection and the Civil justice system, which increased their financial and political power. The journey started in 1786 AD as the 'District headquarters' of Dinajpur City. Dhananjay Roy mentioned in his book that -"Dinajpur was identified as a district in 1772 AD. In 1769, the East India Company assigned Mr. H. Cottrell the power to govern Dinajpur. From this year it can be said that the first beginnings of English rule began in the city and district of Dinajpur. Dinajpur City began its journey as the district headquarters of Dinajpur in 1786 after the arrival of English collector George Hatch."⁷ When British rule was well established in the district, they began to record various aspects of the district through writing. Their records later served as important sources for the administrative and social history of the district.

Colonial Administration in Dinajpur District

During the colonial period, Dinajpur district emerged as an important administrative and revenue centre. After the East India Company obtained the Diwani rights in 1765, a new administrative structure was introduced. The permanent settlement of 1793 brought significant changes to the administrative system of Dinajpur. Zamindars acted as intermediaries in revenue collection and gained greater influence in rural society. Colonial administration had a lasting impact on the social economic and political structure of Dinajpur, combining administrative modernisation with the realities of colonial exploitation. Apart from these Rajas, Zamindars,

Social Structure and Community Life In Dinajpur District:A Historical Study in Colonial Period

Jotdars and later intermediaries act as a significant role. After the passing of Bengal Patni Taluk regulation of 1819, intermediaries got their law recognition.⁸ During Colonial rule, the British often divided regions for administrative convenience, as was done with this Dinajpur district. As part of administrative restructuring, the British altered the Sub District divisions of Dinajpur district for their own needs. In 1773 AD Bengal presidency was divided into 5 provinces. During this time the number of District was increased by 9 to a total of 28. A province was formed in that year with a few districts. Among those 5 provinces, Dinajpur was one. The headquarters of Dinajpur Province was Dinajpur City. Dinajpur province had five districts. Such as - Dinajpur, Shilbarsa(Bagura), Rangpur, Idrakpur and Coochbehar.⁹ Also, around 1793, Dinajpur district had a total of 22 police stations. In 1872, the earlier 22 police stations were converted into 17 police stations for administrative convenience. After 1872 AD, through administrative reorganisation, 17 police stations were upgraded to 30 police stations. Dinajpur Sadar Subdivision was formed with 12 police stations, Balurghat Subdivision with 8 police stations and Thakurgaon Subdivision with 10 police stations were established.¹⁰ According to historical records, the entire Dinajpur district was home to many influential landlord families during colonial period. But the permanent settlement abolished the Zamindari of many Zamindars. At the same time many new princely classes were formed, with the help of whom the British conducted their administrative work. The implementation of this new policy by the British caused huge, damage to the peasant society and disrupted their lives. Historians believe that as a result, Peasants revolts broke out in various parts of the district, which was a reaction to the excessive taxes imposed on local farmers.

Social Stratification in Dinajpur District

During the colonial period, the social structure of Dinajpur district was complex and hierarchical. British rule strengthened the Zamindari system, which increased the power and influence of landlords, money lenders, and the upper classes. Zamindars occupied to the highest social position due to their control over land and administrative authority. At the lower levels of society were Peasants, sharecroppers and labourers who faced heavy taxation, debt, and economic exploitation. Social divisions were also shaped by religion, caste and occupation. The British started the census in 1872 AD for their own convenience. Through this census, the British gained detailed knowledge about India's demography, caste, religion and occupation, which helped them formulate their governance strategies. F.W. Strong said of the 1872 census that -"The first census was taken in 1872 and showed a population of 1,501,924 souls. The area of the district was then 4,126 square miles. This area has since been reduced to 3,946 square miles, and the population of the present district in 1872 is ascertained to have been 1,430,096 persons. At the census of 1881 it was found that the population was practically stationery, having advanced only to 1,514,346 or taking the present District area, to 1,442,518 an increase of 0.86 per cent. The rate of increase in population became still more rapid and the census of 1901 showed a

Social Structure and Community Life In Dinajpur District:A Historical Study in Colonial Period

population of 1,567,080 or an increase of 5.3 per cent. While in 1911 the population rose to 1,687,863 or a future increase of 7.72 per cent."¹¹ W.W. Hunter's research is important for understanding the demographic evolution and social structure of Dinajpur. W W. Hunter provided a deep analysis of the lifestyle of the people of Dinajpur that -"Eight castes rank highest-Brahman, Kshatriya, Rajput, Ghatwal, Baidya, Kayastha, Agarwala, Oswal. Thirteenth pure sudra castes- Napit, Kamar or Karmakar, Kumar or Kumbhakar, Sadgop, Tambuli or Tamli, Barui, Teli or Tili, Mali, Gandhabanik, Baisbania, Sankhari, Kansai, Aguri. Eighteenth Intermediate Sudra castes- Goala, Kaibartta, Ganrar, Halwai, Vashnav, Gosain, Sanyasi, Chasa Dhopa, Hakar, Tanti, Basia, Ganesh, Kocri, Kurmi, Sonar or Swarnakar, Subarnabanik, Sutradhar or Chhutar, Rajmistri. Thirty low caste- Pali, Jogi, Kapali, Dhuniya, Kalu, Suri or Sunri, Dhanuk, Kahar, Dhoba, Behara, Laheri, Beldar, Chunari, Matiyal, Kandari, Khyen, Chandal, Baiti, Talia, Mala, Manjhi, Gonrhi, Pod, Tior, Patni, Muriyari, Surahiya, Machhua, Bathua, Mirasi. Semi Aboriginal castes- Bagdi, Bahelia, Bauri, Buna, Bind, Chain, Chamar and Muchi, Kuril, Dom, Turi, Dosadh, Pasi, Mahili, Mal, Musahar, Karunga, Bediya, Hari, Mihtar, Bhuimali. Aboriginal Tribes- Kol, Santal, Dhangar, Nat, Bakho, Telenga, Pahariya, Bhar."¹² W.W. Hunter's social stratification, though based on work, had similar professions across most classes. It highlights the structural aspect of society. W.W. Hunter has described the work of the people of these four strata of society as follows-"The eight castes that were prevalent in the upper echelons of society had the following professionals- members of the priesthood, landholders, traders, and also employed in government or private service. The second or warrior caste in the ancient Hindu Social organisation. Employed in military Service, and as guards, police men, and door keepers, ordinary police service, physicians, writer, merchants, clerks. Professions of pure sudra castes- Barber, on occasions of sacrifice, it is the Kamar who slays the offering, Kumars were potters and makers of earthenware idols, sadgop- the highest of the cultivating castes, oil-pressers, gardeners, dealers in spices and drugs. Professions of intermediate sudra castes- Milkmen, Cowherds, Cultivators, fishermen, boatmen, sweetmeat makers, priests, weavers, bankers, brick-mason. Professions of low caste- Agriculture, Cotton spinners, oil pressers, palanquin bearers, washermen, labourers, musicians. Occupations of semi aboriginal caste - cultivators, labourers, leather dealers, mat-makers, fishermen, village watchman, snake charmers, sweepers. Occupations of aboriginal tribes- They also had almost the same kind of work."¹³ Although people are engaged in various occupations, 91% of the people of these district were engaged in agriculture.F.W. Strong mentioned in his gazetteer that-"The district is almost entirely agricultural. In the census of 1911 it was found that no less than 1.538,033 or 91 per cent. of the total population were dependent on agriculture."¹⁴ Also, F.W. Strong mentioned about the labourers of Dinajpur that-"With such a large agricultural population there are only 173565 field labourers."¹⁵ W.W. Hunter discussed the religious divisions in Dinajpur in his book. Considering religion, the majority of the population in this region were Hindus and Muslims. "The great bulk of the population are Muhammadans and Hindus, the remainder consisting of a very few Brahma Samaj followers, Jains, Buddhists, Christians, and a

Social Structure and Community Life In Dinajpur District:A Historical Study in Colonial Period

handful of aboriginal tribes still professing their primitive forms of faith. The mass of the Muhammadan population are the descendants of converts from Hinduism."¹⁶

Community Life and Folk Culture of Dinajpur District

A significant portion of Dinajpur district's population is composed a people from Hindu and Muslim communities. The cultural diversity of Dinajpur district is enriched by the traditions of both Hindu and Muslim communities. F.W. Strong mentioned that - "In the Dinajpur district 824345 persons, or 48.8 per cent. of the total population, are followers of Islam, 759,309 or 449 per cent, including Hinduised and Semi-Hinduised aboriginal tribes, profess Hinduism, and 102,031, or 6.0 per cent. are animists. Besides these there are 1,964 Christians, and a few Jains."¹⁷ Among the Muslims of Dinajpur district, most of them were converted Muslim. During the Muslim rule in Bengal, many people converted out of fear of ruler and many people changed their religion by falling into the trap of the pir's conspiracies. Many among the Rajbanshi and other Hindu communities became converted Muslims. Regarding this conversion F.W. Strong mentioned in his gazetteer that- "The Muhammadans of Dinajpur are chiefly the descendants of Rajbansis converted by force to Islam or who adapted that religion during the days of Muhammadan rule from motives of policy. Tradition says that Jalal-ud-din, ruler of Gaur about A.D. 1420, who was himself a converted Hindu, forcibly proselytised all the inhabitants of the district, there is no doubt that throughout the Muhammadan period the pirs, or religious devotees, who exercised such influence with their rulers, made it their business to bring over to their own religious as many as possible of the people amongst whom the lived."¹⁸ From long ago, besides the worship of gods and goddesses, various folk festivals and ceremonies were observed in the society of Dinajpur. These folk festivals are an integral part of the local culture. Sixteen Sanskara were prevalent among the Hindus of this district. This custom prevailed from before birth until after death. The converted Muslims could not completely detach themselves from their former local customs. The unreformed Muhammadans of the lower and uneducated classes are deeply infected with Hindu superstition and their knowledge of the faith they profess seldom extends beyond the tree cardinal doctrines of the unity of God, the mission of Muhammad, and the truth of the Koran, and they have a very faint idea of the differences between their religion and that of the Hindus..... Before the recent crusade against idolatry it was the regular practice of low class Muhammadans to join in the Durga Puja and other Hindus religious festivals, and although they have been purged of many superstitions many still remain. In particular they are very careful about omens and auspicious days. Dates for wedding s are often fixed after consulting a Hindu astrologer, bamboos are not cut, not the building of new houses commenced, on certain days of the week, and journeys are often Undertaken only after referring to the Hindu almanao to see if

Social Structure and Community Life In Dinajpur District:A Historical Study in Colonial Period

the proposed day is auspicious. When disease is prevalent Sitala and Rakshya Kali are worshipped.... Apart from Hindu superstitions there are certain forms of worship common amongst Muhammadans which are not based on the Koran "¹⁹ The diverse qualities of the people of this district have been highlighted in English writings. The people of this area are very friendly and cooperative. There was always a peaceful coexistence among them. No kind of mischief or trouble was seen in their society. Historically, there have always been some people who wanted to create division. F.W. Strong mentioned in his gazetteer about the character of the people of this district that- "Any one who has had much experience of them will give the people of the Dinajpur district a good character. They are a simple and contented race, neither insolent and ostentatious in prosperity nor yielding readily to despair in adversity. They cannot be described as quarrelsome, serious rioting being almost unknown, and if they indulge unduly in litigation it is largely at the instigation of the touts or lawyers' jackals, to be found in every village, and who go by the name of diwanias. Their relations with each other and with their superiors are generally friendly and amongst the lower orders sullenn and discourtesy to strangers are rarely met with. The same placid and friendly spirit prevails amongst the landholding classes, who seldom think it necessary to quarrel with each other or oppress their tenants. The district is an old fashioned one. In it the spirit of unrest, with which certain other districts of the province have recently become infected, had made little headway. The people generally are too prosperous and contented to have any use for the agitator and the damagague, and persist in regarding their rulers rather as friendly powers than as tyrants and oppressors."²⁰ From the time of the partition of Bengal, the people of Dinajpur became rebellious and built strong public opinion against the British. Not only did they oppose the British, but they also spoke out against the oppression of local landlords. The firm stand of the people of Dinajpur against oppression and injustice is commendable.

Movement and Protest of the People of Dinajpur District

From the time of the partition of Bengal in 1905, the people of Dinajpur became strongly entrenched in Nationalist ideology. This event United the people of Dinajpur in Nationalist thought, which awakened patriotism among them. Even before the partition of Bengal came into effect, the people of Dinajpur had raised public opinion against this partition. Jatindra Chandra Sengupta described in his gazetteer about it. "This move was strongly opposed by the people of the district in meetings held on the 21st July, 1905. Lal Mohan Ghosh suggested that all honorary magistrates and all members of district boards, municipal commissioners and Panchayats should resign in a body and national mourning should be observed for twelve months during which the people should not participate in any public rejoicing. This meeting was presided over by the Maharaja of Dinajpur. The partition was, however, proclaimed in September, 1905. The reaction in the district, to the proclamation, was sharp and a number of meeting were held. Maharaja

Social Structure and Community Life In Dinajpur District:A Historical Study in Colonial Period

Girija Nath Roy took the leading part in the agitation against the partition."²¹ On October 16, 1905 'Arandhan Diwas'(Non cooking day) was observed in Dinajpur. Arandhan Diwas was celebrated in Raiganj under the leadership of Kuloda Kanta Ghosh and a large movement was organised on the ground of Raiganj."²² The people of Balurghat. Strongly protested against the British decision of the partition of Bengal. A meeting was held at Balurghat against the partition of Bengal under the initiative of Jadunath Roy, Nalini Kanta Adhikari and presided over by Dr. Chandra Kanta Chattopadhyay. There, a proposal was made to annual the partition of Bengal and boycott foreign goods. Arrangement was made to open 'Swadeshi Bhandar' under the initiative of Nalini Kanta Chakraborty and Debendragati Roy, Rakhali Chandra Sen was at the forefront of the Anti-Partition Movement in Dinajpur City.²³

In 1921 when Chittaranjan Das come to Dinajpur district and held a meeting, the movement took a strong shape. Anti-British Movement was strong in Balurghat at the time. In 1921, Congress committee was formed in Balurghat with Suresh Ranjan Chatterjee, Amir Uddin Chaudhary, Kali Narayan Sanyal, Abinash Bose, Nalini Kanta Adhikari, Suresh Chandra Bagchi, Nagendranath Adhikari, Surendra Bala Roy and others. The first temporary branch office of the Congress was set up at Balurghat in the house of Prafulla Kumar Niyogi. In 1930, Rasik Lal Guha, Kali Narayan Sanyal, Kalipada Bose, Moharaja Bose, Dr Dhiren Banerjee, Prabhas Laha, Bholanath Das, Abhinash Bose, Anath Bose, Ramakanta Samajdar, and Aadarsh freedom fighters were arrested in Balurghat during Civil Disobedience Movement.²⁴ During this movement, the members of Dinajpur Anushilan Samiti and the freedom fighters looted the Darjeeling Mail at Hili railway station. "On the 28th October, 1933, the railway station of Hili was raided by a group of young men dressed in military uniform. The station staff offered strong resistance, and there was an exchange of fire as a result of which the night guard of the railway station sustained serious injury and died in the hospital. The raiders who belonged to the Anushilan Samiti hoisted the National Flag on the station building and decamped with a large amount of money."²⁵ The Quit India Movement of 1942 was a significant chapter in India's freedom struggle. During this movement, strong resistance against British rule emerged in the Dinajpur district. Dhananjay Roy mentioned in his book that - In Bengal, the Quit India Movement of 42 took a fierce form in Balurghat, in the districts of Midnapore and Dinajpur. This adventure at Balurghat in Dinajpur district was no less important than the looting of the Chittagong Arsenal. Many revolutionaries and members of various political parties in Dinajpur City were arrested without trial as political decoits, muderers, and security prisoners even before the British Quit India Movement. Saroj Ranjan Chatterjee was one of the prominent leaders of the Quit India Movement in Balurghat.²⁶ Also, Jatindra Chandra Sengupta described in his gazetteer about this movement that-"During the 1942 Quit India Movement, the people of Balurghat Subdivision acted in a noteworthy manner. On the 13th September night, about eight thousand people from the rural areas assembled at Dangighat town. Under the leadership of the local Congress leaders, Saroj Ranjan Chatterjee, they formed a procession in the next morning and proceeded to Balurghat and besieged the town. The Sub-Registrar's office was completely

Social Structure and Community Life In Dinajpur District:A Historical Study in Colonial Period

burnt down. The Civil Court building and the co-operative bank building were also burnt. Telegraphic wires were cut and telegraphic apparatus were dismantled. The post office, the out agency office of the B & A Railway, the Jute Inspector's office, the Agricultural Demonstrator's office and Godown, the Assistant Jute Inspector's office, the union board office etc., were raided, and office papers and furniture damaged. Ganja and Liquar shops were also raided."²⁷

A major Peasants movement emerged in Dinajpur during the pre-independence era. This movement played a crucial role in establishing farmers' rights. This Peasants movement of 1946 AD was known as Tebhaga Movement. During the 1943 famine, many farmers lost everything they had. Selling plowing cattle to survive was a common sight during that time. Prices of all goods multiplied many times because of world war II, which brought hardship to people's lives. The demand of the Peasants were that two-thirds of the crop should be given to them. Peasants raised various slogans during these movement. Such as-

*Aadhi Nai Tebhaga Chai
Nij Kholane Dhaan Tolo
Jaan Dibo To Dhaan Dibo Na
Duniyar Krishak Ek Hou
Krishak Samiti Jindabad
Inqlaab Jindabad."*²⁸

At that time, many Peasants cultivated most of the landlords' land as sharecroppers. The Floud Commission was compelled to acknowledge the Tebhaga demand. In Thakurgaon, Balurghat and Raiganj Subdivisions, most of the land owned by the large Jotdars was cultivated by those Bargadars (sharecroppers).²⁹

Conclusion

The colonial experience in Dinajpur did not merely alter administrative systems, it redefined social relationships and community dynamics. A historical perspective reveals that the colonial period laid the foundation for long term structural changes whose effects continued to influence the region's social fabric even after the end of British rule. This reinforced existing hierarchies based on caste, religion, and occupation, further shaping the district's social stratification.

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Social Structure and Community Life In Dinajpur District:A Historical Study in Colonial Period

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