CHAPTER-I

Castes in 24-Parganas

It was the year 1872, when for the first time Indian population was counted, however, this enumeration was not complete. In true sense a proper census was carried out in the year 1881, since then every ten years we, the Indian population are undergoing Census study. This Census study enlightens and enriches us with different aspect of our population.

It is seen from the census study-1 that following castes do exist in the district of 24-Parganas (both south and north 24-Parganas) of West Bengal :-

(a) Radhi, Varendra and Vaidik Brahman

(b) Vaidyas and Kayasthas.

c) All Scheduled Caste (Scheduled castes are grouped on the basis of alphabetical order of their name) :-

i) Bagdi, Bahelia, Balti, Bauri, Bediya, Belder, Bhumali, Bhuiya, Bhumij, Bind

ii) Chamar

iii) Dhoba, Doai, Dom, Dosadh

iv) Ghasi, Gourhi

v) Hari

vi) Jalia, Jhalemato or Mato

vii) Kadar, Kandra, Kaora, Karenga Kasthe, Kaur, Khair, Khatik, Koch, Konai Konwar, Kora, Kotal.

viii) Lalbegi, Lodha, Lohar

ix) Mahar, Mahdi, Mal, Mallah, Maopahariya, Methor, Munchi, Musahar

x) Nagesia, Namosudra, Nuniya

xi) Pan, Paliya, Pasi, Patni, Pod

xii) Rabha, Rajbanshi, Rajews

xiii) Sunri

xiv) Tiyar, Turi

All these castes as mentioned here are grouped as the Upper Middle & Lower caste according to the status in the society. The Brahman are categorised as the Upper castes, the Vaidyas and the Kayastha are merged together to place them as middle caste. All other castes are kept as lower castes. The upper and the middle castes are designated as the 'Uchu jati' (higher castes) and the

lower castes as the 'Nichu jati' (lower castes). The nichu jati are further classified into Jal-Chal (water accepted) and Jal-achal (water not accepted). Jal-achal are further divided into sprisya (touchable) and asprisya (untouchable) or in other word clean and unclean castes on the basis of occupation involved. Refer figure 11.

In the district 24-Parganas of West Bengal a special category of castes are seen, they are known as 'Navasakh'2 who are Jal-chal (clean caste). They include the following groups: -

Tanti (weavers); Gondho banik (seller of perfumes and spices); Napit (barbers); Karnakar (black smiths); Teli or Kolu (oil pressurer or dealers of oil); Kumbhakar or Kumar (earthen pot makers); Kangsar (makers of bell metal utensils); Samkhar (makers of conch shell bangles); Das (agriculturists); Modok or Moira (confectioners); Malakar (Garland makers); and the Tamali (dealers in betel leaf).

The unclean caste (Jal-achal) but sprisya(touchable) of 24-Parganas include: -

Bagal (cattle tender); Dhihar or Jaley (fisherman); Souri (wine distillers); Suvarna banik (gold smith); Rajak or Dhoba (washer man).

The lowest group in the caste ladder, another (Jal-achal) asprisya (untouchable) comprise the following castes: -

Badgis, Bauris, Munchi, Dons and Haris.

However, the Brahman accept water from Navasakhs. But this varies from village to village and in different region.

The Navasakhs accept water from the sprisya castes. But the Brahman, Vaidyas and Kayasthas do not take water from them. From the asprisya to other caste accept water but the Brahman are seen to serve them in ritual ceremonies.

However, those Brahmans are considered degraded.

---

Figure No. 1: Flow chart showing the caste ladder as prevalent in 24 Parganas (North & South)
Since I have worked among the Brahman (upper castes) and Bagdi (lower caste) some of their nature and tradition has been mentioned. This is to see the acquisition of their positional change in the society.

The Brahman are divided into Radlni, Barendra, Vaidik, Sautriya and Agradani (refer chapter-II). All these are endogamous. The Rahri are considered to be superior among the others and Agradani the lowest. However, the Rahri and Agradani Brahman of East Bengal were under study. These Brahman accept water from Navasakhs castes. Some of these Navasakhs castes were found in Jaynagar which is a multi-caste village. The Brahman are engaged in priestly occupation, service and teaching jobs.

The Brahman claim their descent from purely Aryan stock. The lower untouchable caste Bagdi on the other hand is a Hindu scheduled caste distributed over a vast area in the district of Burdwan, Hooghly, Midnapore, Bankura, Birbhum and 24-Parganas. They are mostly agricultural labourers, share croppers, and some are engaged in Van and Rickshaw pulling, service and basket making (with cane). They appear from their feature and complexion to be of Dravidian descent. In Risley's (1908 : 115-121) castes hierarchy in Bengal contain seven ranked categories and the Bagdi are included in the sixth position along with the Jaliya Kabi bartta, Nasasdras, Pods and Rajbanshis.³ They refuse beef, pork and fowls. The Bagdis are divided into the following sub-castes as Tentule, Dule shutule or Kusputra, Kusmete, Mote and Moule (refer chapter II). However, the Bagdi of south 24-Pargas. have been found to be comprised of the following sub-castes:

i) Tentule : Bearing the titles as Bag, Sentra, Rai, Khan, Pulia.
iii) Shutule : Baidya.

A Bagdi can not marry outside the sub-caste. All the different sub-caste of Bagdi except the Tentule accept members of any other sub-caste into their circle, no regular ceremony is ear-marked for such occasion. The new members sometime pay to the caste panchayat a token money to the tune of rupees ten to twenty to be spent on a feast, when for the first time he openly eats with his adopted caste members or fellows.

But when admitted into Dule sub-caste he is made to take the palanquin on his shoulder as a mark of acceptance of the members to which he has joined himself.

It has been observed that the caste consciousness has weakened and ceased to be a substantial factor in public life in West Bengal and specially in 24-Parganas. But it has been by no means disappeared completely. Endogamy in a liberalised form still persists. The upper castes are categorised as bhodro lok or the upgraded mass of the population and the lower castes as the chotolok i.e. the degraded, mass of the population. The lower caste may become educated, seek better job avoiding the caste occupation, or collect good wealth but their position in the society remains the same. But on the other hand it has been observed that although the Brahman observe and maintain their ritual purity and marriages within their group even than they participate in social occasion of the other higher castes as Vaidyas and Kayasthas. Formal relation amongst these groups is observed barring few incidence. As for example the Brahman accept the mark of respect i.e. touching of the feet of the elder known as pranam from the other higher castes as Vaidyas and Kayasthas. On the contrary the Brahman do not touch the feet of elders belonging to Vaidyas and Kayasthas.

Nowadays with the advent of modernization and free mixing there seems to be a distinctive change in this behavioural pattern. In urban areas the Brahman are seen to touch the feet of the elders of Vaidyas and Kayasthas on special occasion like Bijaya Dasani (Deshara). The second reason to support this may be that they become one of their own people due to constant visit, help rendered more than the attiya, jutai and jutai in crisis moments of life like in marriage, birth and death and above all development of faith and respect to each other. But in rural area this custom still does not exist. Even marriage of the Brahman with the other higher caste is occurring both in rural as well as urban areas. Moreover, the lower Bagdi castes are now seen to work as maid servant in the houses of the higher castes.

Therefore, the barriers between the castes tend to be weakened easily and effectively which was not possible in the past. The Brahman understudy often now interdine with clean castes who belong to the same social class of the former, but not with the members of his own caste whose economic and social status is very low. Therefore, the process of modernization has helped the different caste group come closer and the social distance is minimized than the past.
The kinship norms follow the category of status of the castes. Again among the upper castes the ritual norms associated to kinship are not the same. Here by ritual norms of kinship the different Samaskars associated with rites of passage is meant (Refer chapte-IV).

The Brahman attribute all other higher caste as Sudra among whom the Vaishyas are placed in the higher order. The Vaishyas the trading caste designated as bani and not seen in Bengal, so also the Khatriyas. Very recently some lower castes as Bagdi and Bauri claimed themselves as Khatriya but this claim is not accepted by the other Bengali people; wealth and education bring the lower caste in higher position among the members of their own caste group but not in the hierarchical ladder. They are, however, changed in position of hierarchical system but not in the category to which they belong. Mendelbaum refers it as positional change.

Moreover, with the advent of modernization and urbanization the new occupational pattern brought the Brahman and the lower caste to come close to each other. They work hand in hand in the same set up and this help them to meet and mix more frequently and freely than before. Many Brahmans are now working in Defence Administrative Service, Civil Service, Navy which was not even thought of few decades back. The political liberalisation in the country has forced all to come out of their shell and cast their right to vote in election. As a consequence the previous interpersonal relationship has changed to a great extent. Added to it the different groups in search of livelihood have poured into the city and adopted the changed culture. This has also affected the behavioural pattern, of both the upper as well as the lower caste.

Thus to conclude, the different castes as seen in caste hierarchy do exist in the part of urban and rural areas of North and South 24-Parganas under study. During the study it has been observed that there has been a marked change in interpersonal behavioural pattern of both the upper and lower caste which was existing in the earlier days due to the influence of rapid urbanization and modernization and economic instability of current era.

---X---


---X---