
“The Social Fabric and Class Division of Colonial Karimganj under Assam”

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Abstract

Caste remains an undeniable aspect of Indian social life, existing since ancient times. It refers to a social classification that groups people based on their traditional status or rank. In India, the term for caste is jāti, which typically denotes a community that can range from a small group to thousands of members. There are countless jātis, each with its own customs and regulations. These communities are usually organized into a hierarchical structure and are often classified under one of the four primary varnas—a Sanskrit term meaning "colors."

Interestingly, although the caste system is portrayed as a uniquely Indian social construct that sets Indian society apart from Western societies, the term ‘caste’ itself is not of Indian origin. It is derived from the Spanish word ‘casta,’ meaning ‘race.’ Portuguese traders, who arrived on India’s west coast in the 15th century, were the first to use this term in the context of Indian social groups.

Before colonial rule, the social structure in the Karimganj Sub-Division was mainly rooted in an agrarian economy, where land ownership and land tenure largely dictated wealth distribution and social hierarchy. Accordingly, society and governance were shaped by land tenure arrangements. The upper social classes comprised hereditary or semi-hereditary landowners and revenue officials, while the majority consisted of productive laborers, including the lower classes.

During the colonial era, the societal framework of Karimganj Sub-Division in Sylhet district—now part of Assam—exhibited a semi-feudal character, a distinctive feature within colonial Sylhet. The introduction of new land revenue systems by the British brought about profound changes in Sylhet’s agrarian structure and rural life. Over time, the traditional agrarian order gradually disintegrated under these administrative reforms. Immediately following the implementation of the Permanent Settlement in Sylhet, cultivators lost their ownership rights over their lands. The new system established various forms of landholding—namely *Zamindars*, *Mirashdars*, *Tapadars*, and *Talukdars*—who

were required to pay fixed rents to the government. This transformation turned land into a tradable commodity, and in Zamindari and Mirashdari regions, peasants found themselves at the mercy of landholders. Consequently, *Zamindars*, *Mirashdars*, *Tapadars*, and Talukdars often exploited peasants through rack-renting and compelled them to pay illegal dues, including services known as Beger. A notable aspect of Sylhet's land system was the practice of *Hod Begery*, wherein peasants were obliged to render free services to their landholders' households. During colonial rule, many tenants engaged in Hod Begery, effectively rendering them landless laborers or *Nankar*—forced laborers—due to the oppressive land administration. Sylhet also has a long history of resistance against feudal exploitation. Girban Ranjan Biswas, in his work “Peasant Movement in North East India,” notes that in various parts of Sylhet district, *Nankar Proja*—considered by Zamindars as semi-serfs—were prevalent, underscoring the deeply rooted nature of feudal oppression in the region.

The 1793 Permanent Settlement of Sylhet established the Choudhuries as the principal landholders, although smaller landholders such as *Tapadars* and Talukdars also existed. The British colonial administration implemented a distinctive land classification system: landholders who paid an annual revenue exceeding five hundred rupees (*pancha-satta*) were designated as Zamindars. Those paying between fifty and five hundred rupees were classified as *Mirashdars*, while landholders paying less than fifty rupees were known as *Tapadars* and *Talukdars*.

Regarding the social hierarchy and status of Nankar tenants (who were essentially rent-free bonded laborers), in 1947, approximately four lakh Nankars resided in Sylhet. This population made up about one-tenth of the total population of the area. Nankar tenants occupied the lowest rung of the social ladder in Sylhet. According to the renowned anthropologist Mr. Risley, the original inhabitants of Bengal were the Kaibarta community, also known locally as Jalik Das. Their primary occupations included fishing in lakes (*bil*) and engaging in agriculture.

The Kaibarta community was divided into two groups:

- A) General Kaibarta
- B) Nankar Kaibarta

The Kaibarta who paid revenue to *Mirashdars* and *Zamindars* were classified as General Kaibarta. Meanwhile, those who provided free service during special occasions in the households of *Mirashdars* and *Zamindars*—referred to locally as ‘hod’—were known as Nankar Kaibarta. Although Nankar Kaibartas were required to deliver fish to landholders, they were exempt from paying taxes. The Kaibarta community migrated from the Sunamganj area of Sylhet district and settled in the regions of Sonbil and Ratabil, which are part of present-day Karimganj district. During that period, these areas were under the jurisdiction of *Mirashdar* Kalisaday Bhattacharjee and three other *Mirashdars*. According to the 1901 Census Report, the total population of Kaibarta was 44,701, comprising 23,126 males and 21,610 females.

The primary occupation of the Buimali community involved carrying palanquins and excavating clay. In Sylhet, most Buimali served as Nankar tenants under *Mirashdars* and *Zamindars*. During the colonial era, the practice of riding in palanquins was predominantly associated with the affluent classes of Sylhet and British officials. Over time, it became a status symbol among the aristocracy to travel in palanquins. *Mirashdars* and *Zamindars*, regarded as aristocrats, established the Buimali community as Nankar tenants primarily to serve their interests—specifically, Besides, *Buimali* there was another community called *Mahara* whose social status same as *Buimali*. It is stated that Subid Narayan the *Zamindar* of Itta created this section for carrying Palanquin of royal family. In Sylhet, their number was very small. According to Census Reports of 1901, the males’ population was 1,448 and females 2,023.

The *Dupa* or *Dubi* means laundrymen and their profession was cloth washing. In Sylhet, every *Mirashdars* and *Zamindars* family had their own traditional laundrymen, who in free, washes the cloths of land holders and their family members. In returned this section of people always exempted from paying tax to *Mirashdars* or *Zamindars*. So, the said *Dupa* were called Nankar. Those who did not washes the cloths of *Mirashdars* or *Zamindars*, they had to pay taxes. The total population of *Dupa* in Sylhet, to 1901 Census Reports was 23,508 persons and among these males 11,869, females 11,639.

Napit belongs to Hindu barber community and the occupation was to cutting the hair, nail etc. of the society. *Napits*, who had served the family members of *Mirashdars* or *Zamindars* in form of cutting the hair and nail regularly, they termed as Nankar *Napit* and always exempted from tax. The rest who were not served the landholders family, paid tax to

Mirashdars or *Zamindars*. The Census Reports of 1901 the total population of *Napit* was 21,224 among which 10,775 males and 10,449 females.

Duli or *Baddiyakar* means Hindu musician and the works was to presenting entertainment through their musical instrument at the time of functions of the house of land holders without wage. This group also considered as Nankar due to their exemption of rent from *Mirashdars* or *Zamindars*. The Census Report of 1901 the total population of *Duli* was 10,255 among which 4,981 males and 5,274 females.

Muchi or *Chamar* means cobbler and their main occupation was to making shoes for the society. They had to make the special shoes of *Mirashdars* or *Zamindars* and their family members. This section also termed as Nankar and had not paid tax to the *Mirashdars* or *Zamindars*. According to the Census of 1901, their population was 500 in Sylhet.

Generally, the Muslim community of Sylhet divided in two classes i.e. *Ashraf* belongs to higher class and *Ajlaf* from lower class. However, in Sylhet, the Muslims belonging to *Ashraf* (higher class) were divided in to familiar distinction of categories based on their supposed origin. The name of the categories and its population belonged to *Ashraf* class, mention, on the basis of Census Reports of 1901, in form of table:

Table No - 11

Name of the group	Male	Female	Population	Census Reports of 1872
Sayyid	3315	3283	6598	1287
Mughal	249	244	493	10
Pathan	3436	2984	6420	636
Saikhs	573615	553034	1126649	371

Sources from Census reports of 1872 and 1901

The *Sayyid*, a term meaning 'lords' claimed their descent from Fatima, daughter of the Prophet married to Ali, and flocked into India with the Muslim invaders as religious teachers, soldiers and adventurers.

The term '*Mughal*' is a form of the name 'Mongal' the race which invaded India after the campaigns of Chengiz Khan and it is now generally applied to the followers of Babur or those who were attracted to India by his successors. They were generally divided into two groups i.e. Persians and Chagtai, the Turkish tribe to which Babur belonged.

The name *Pathan*, a complicated form of Pashtana or Pakhtana, speakers of phosto language. This term had been erroneously and loosely applied to all Turko-Afgan rulers and their flowers. In fact, the Lodies and Sher Shah was Pathan in origin.

The *Saikhs* meaning 'Venerable leaders' claimed to be Arabs in origin, but not belonging to the direct line of descendants of Ali and Fatima.

It is important to note that the Census Reports of 1872 recorded only 371 individuals identified as *Saikhs*, whereas by 1901, the total number had increased dramatically to 11,26,649. This raises a natural question: how could the population have grown from just a few hundred to over a million in just twenty-eight years, especially considering that no significant migration of Saikhs took place during this period?

The explanation lies in the process of conversion and name changes. When members of lower castes of Hindus converted to Islam, they often changed their Hindu names along with their titles. In the 1872 Census, these converted individuals were generally classified as "unspecified," with a recorded population of 8,54,131. Over time, many of these converted individuals began to adopt the title "*Saikh*." By the end of the 19th century, some of these groups hesitated to use the title publicly, but in the 1901 Census, many still used "*Saikh*" alongside their names.

Typically, descendants of Hindu converts from lower castes used the Bengali letter 'ঈ' when writing the title Saikh, while descendants of foreigners often used 'ঈ'. In the voter lists from the latter half of the 20th century, the Kiran community within the Muslim society commonly used the title Saikh before their names. According to Achyutcharan Choudhury, many individuals from the Mahimol community also adopted the Saikh title by the 1901 Census. Some Talukdars of Sylhet, who occupied a middle-tier social position, also took on the surname Saikh, though they used the Bengali letter 'ঈ' in writing. Conversely, the Kiran and Mahimal communities typically used 'ঈ' in their titles.

Despite adopting the title *Saikh*, these communities generally remained within the lower social strata, often classified as *Ajlafs*. Both Hindu and Muslim lower classes in Sylhet sought to elevate their social status towards the end of the 19th century. For instance, the Hindu Saha community began selecting Brahmans from their own caste to challenge the dominance of traditional Brahmanical authority.

In Sylhet the *Atraf* (lower class) has divided into many groups and the Census Report of 1901 mentioned the name of groups along with their population in form of table:

Table No – 12

Name of the group	Male	Female	Total population
Mahimol	17556	17639	35195
Kiran	Not found	Not found	Not found
Gain	105	115	220
Zola	215	176	491
Nagarosi	252	242	494
Mir Shikari	171	224	395
Baz	111	112	223

Source from Achyutcharan Choudhury, “Sreehatter itibritta – purbangsho

The term *Mahimol* is derived from Persian word, which *Mahi* means Fish and *Mol* means Hunter. So, the occupation of the *Mahimol* was to keep fish and sale it to markets. The word *Mahimol* was first used by the Mughals and in Sylhet, this group had converted from the Hindu lower caste Kaibartta and Patni community. After conversion to Islam their social status in society remained same as earlier and during the colonial rule their condition became miserable due to impose high revenue to them by the *Mirashdars* and *Zamindars*. In Sylhet the *Mahimol* were divided in to two parts, i.e.

- A) General *Mahimol*, and
- B) Nankar *Mahimol*

The Nankar tenants who paid only revenue to the *Mirashdars* or *Zamindars* were called General *Mahimol*. The second part was Nankar *Mahimol* who had to render free services in occasions of *Mirashdars* or *Zamindars* house and caught fish in the *Kash* low land and *Bil* (lake) of the land holders. As for example, at present there is a *Bil* in Suterkandi village of Karimganj district still bearing the name Nankar *Bil*. This Nankar *Mahimol* had to give major portion of their hunting fish to the *Mirashdars* or *Zamindars* and in returned they always exempted from the paying revenue. In Sylhet, they settled in the low-lying area and always kept distance from the house of *Mirashdars* or *Zamindars*.

In Sylhet, a large section of people belongs to *Kiran* community. These peoples are original inhabitants of Bengal and converted from Hindu lower caste to Muslim. This section has not been enumerated in Census as a separate class up to 1931. In Sylhet Major Portion of *Kiran* people used title Saikh before their name.

However, the term *Kiran* derived from the Arabic word 'Karron' which means mixture. According to some scholars the term *Kiran* has come from 'Kissan' means peasant. One section of people believed that *Kiran* derived from the Persian word 'Karon' means person service provider.

Within the *Kiran* community, there existed a subgroup known as the *Koshai*, whose ancestors were converted from the Hindu lower caste of Chamar. Their primary occupation was animal slaughtering. The *Koshai* were often required to serve at the houses of Muslim *Mirashdar* or *Zamindar* families during various functions. This subgroup was also exempt from paying taxes to the *Mirashdar* or *Zamindar*. However, they were not individually distinguished in the Census Reports, making detailed information about them scarce.

Hazam represented the Muslim barber community, responsible for cutting hair and trimming nails for the *Mirashdar*, *Zamindar*, and their family members. This community did not pay taxes to the *Mirashdar* or *Zamindar*. According to the 1901 Census Reports, their population was recorded to be only around 200.

Although India gained independence on August 15, 1947, these communities remain socially, educationally, and economically more backward compared to the upper castes in present-day Karimganj District of Assam. Notably, Brahmans from within their own caste have sometimes disregarded traditional Brahman authority, especially in matters of grooming and barbering.

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