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## Kol, Coolie, Colonial Subject

### A Hidden History of Caste and the Making of Modern Bengal

2 pts smaller

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**H**ISTORICAL ANTHROPOLOGISTS of modern India such as Bernard Cohn, Arjun Appadurai, and Nicholas Dirks have argued forcefully that caste, as a modern social institution, came to be revived and reproduced by the colonial state via its classificatory and enumerative policies.<sup>1</sup> Yet this colonialism-centred perspective, though useful in many senses, obscures the everyday socio-cultural and political-economic processes by which the colonised organised themselves under colonial overlordship. Insofar as caste is a system of organising labour on the basis of a hierarchical social logic, it is important to understand how distinctive “regional modernities” were built, quite literally, on the backs of labouring groups assigned the lowest ritual and socio-economic status in these new regions.<sup>2</sup>

This essay uncovers a “hidden” history of one such labouring group in nineteenth-century Bengal, who appear in the colonial archives as “Kols”, despised in caste terms by the Hindu *bhadralok* yet categorised subsequently via ethnological accounts as “tribes”. The

<sup>1</sup> Appadurai, “Number in the Colonial Imagination”, 314–40; Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*; Dirks, *Castes of Mind*.

<sup>2</sup> Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal, ed., *Regional Modernities*.

Kols, sometimes known as Dhangars, appear in the colonial record from the time they helped build the imperial capital of Calcutta from the neighbouring forest highlands of Chotanagpur in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Decried as dirty or impure but valued for their ability to perform hard physical labour, the Kols served as construction workers as well as sweepers and cleaners in Calcutta. By the middle of the century, colonial archives suggest that the Kols had turned coolies for the indigo and tea plantations of modern Bengal. In the plantation economy, the lowly Kols, men and women alike, performed hard agricultural labour that other caste groups were deemed incapable of. Subsequently, as land had to be reclaimed and forests cleared in the Sunderban delta, the Kols were called upon to alter the natural and human ecology of the area. Even as they were classified as “tribes” by anthropologist-administrators in Chotanagpur, therefore, the Kols became the labouring caste par excellence in modern Bengal. The socio-cultural and political-economic processes by which this occurred have, nonetheless, been hidden from the gaze of later historians raised on the venerable caste/tribe dichotomy in Indian sociology. This essay offers a preliminary sketch of this hidden history of labour, caste, and subjecthood on which Bengali regional modernity came to rest by the end of the nineteenth century and which continues to pervade the post-colonial present.

### “Dirty Swines” in the Imperial Capital

In *Die Gossnersche Mission Unter den Kols* (1874; *The Gossner Mission among the Kols*) the Lutheran pastor Dr Alfred Nottrott describes the Kols as “the wanderers of Calcutta”. These “mountainous black children” – he proceeded to describe how he first met them – “were engaged in mean works like sweeping the roads and carrying the goods etc. in this world town.” “In that age,” he added, “it [Kols] meant ‘Dirty Swines’.”<sup>3</sup> Some of these “Kols”, as they

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Mahto, *Hundred Years of Christian Missions*, 21.

were known throughout Bengal in the early-nineteenth century, appear with shovels as the “scavengers of Calcutta” in the lithographs of Colesworthy Grant or the many paintings by Company School artists depicting the construction of Fort William in colonial Calcutta.<sup>4</sup> Yet we know exceedingly little about these men and women from Chotanagpur: what they did in the city, their everyday pursuits, and their shifting position between rural and urban worlds.

Our earliest encounters with the “Kols” or “Coles” in the Bengal Presidency are in colonial records that view these labouring groups as different from other inhabitants of Bengal by virtue of their strength and temperment, shaped apparently by the rugged environs in which they were raised. In the words of Major J. Sutherland, the Kols were “one family”, “wild”, “savages”, but “as free and independent as any people on the Earth.”<sup>5</sup> The Kols were also, in his opinion, “an industrious people, possessing a beauty and mostly a highly cultivated country” in the highlands of Chotanagpur. Yet colonial officials were unsure how to situate the Kols in their sociological understanding of Indian society. One military officer described them as “A race distinct from the great Hindoo family both in manners, language, religion and appearance inferior in some respects to the common inhabitants of the hills in point of civilization, but superior to them in courage and industry, and possessing large and flourishing villages with extensive tracts of well cultivated land.”<sup>6</sup> A civilian official, however, saw the Kols as “the lowest kind of Hindoos.”<sup>7</sup> Without the caste/tribe dichotomy

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Grant, *Sketches of Oriental Heads*, British Library (BL), India Office Collections (IOC), APAC/P2553.

<sup>5</sup> “Note by Major J. Sutherland, Private Secretary to the Hon’ble the Vice President”, Fort William Judicial Consultations no. 44 of 17 April 1832; and Charles Metcalfe, “Vice President’s Minute”, Fort William Judicial Consultations, no. 16 of 17 April 1832, India Office Records (IOR), F/4/1363/54227.

<sup>6</sup> Extract Political Letter from Bengal, dated 9 May 1823, IOR/F/4/800/21438.

<sup>7</sup> S.T. Cuthbert, Magistrate of Ramghur, to Mr Secretary Shakespear, Bengal Judicial Consultations, no. 53 of 14 June 1827, letter dated 21 April 1827, BL/IOE/4/731.

that has dominated Indian sociology since the mid-nineteenth century, such confusion in the colonial records over the Kols is understandable, and, in fact, rather revealing.

Despite its confusion, British officialdom soldiered on and divided the Kols into two groups, “Lurka Coles” and “Dhanger Coles”, better known from later colonial ethnological works as Hos and Mundas respectively. The Lurka Kols, so called for their reputation as fearless fighters (*lurka* literally means “fighter”), resided on the southern edge of the Ranchi plateau in Singhbhum. Major Edward Roughsedge described them during his military expedition in Singhbhum in 1820:

Not having any of the feelings of veneration for Bramins Cows which pervade Hindoos of every description they make no scruple of putting to death any man of respectable caste who presumes to enter their Territory, nor is there . . . a single Bramin Rajpoot or Mussulman in any one of the numerous and well inhabited villages, they possess. A traveller would as soon think of visiting into a Tiger's den, as of traversing any part of Lurka Cole.

To compare the “Lurkas” to the “Dhangers”, Roughsedge wrote, “they [the Lurkas] are as much superior in size and form to the tame Dangers, if I may use the expression of Chota Nagpore, though of one common origin, as wild Buffaloes are to the village Herds.”<sup>8</sup> In Major Sutherland's view, the “Dhanger Coles” of the Chotanagpur plateau were “a remarkably industrious and peaceable people and who have a character for truth and honesty beyond that of many of the people of India.” The “Dhangers” were hitherto subjects of the Nagbanshi rajas of Chotangpur in “nearly 4000 inhabited villages” in the five *parganas* (“Paanch Pergunnah”) of Rai, Bundu, Silli, Tori, and Tamar.<sup>9</sup> As the Collector S.T. Cuthbert

<sup>8</sup> Extract Bengal Political Consultations, no. 38 of 3 June 1820, IOR/F/4/800/21438.

<sup>9</sup> “Note by Major J. Sutherland, Private Secretary to the Hon'ble the Vice President”, Fort William Judicial Consultations, no. 44 of 17 April 1832, IOR/F/4/1363/54227.

noted after his extensive tour of the Chotanagpur countryside in 1826–7, the “Dhangers” were seen to “emigrate in great number annually during the agricultural off-season in search of employment” to Calcutta as well as other districts in rural Bengal. “They are,” he wrote, “generally preferred to the labourers of other parts of the Country on account of their performing more work and at a lower rate.” That meant, typically, that “in a family consisting of four or five persons, two are left at home to take care of the family affairs and cultivation and the rest go abroad to seek service.”<sup>10</sup>

This is how the Kols came to be regarded in early colonial Bengal as labourers par excellence. Deemed to be a lowly caste by the British and their upper-caste collaborators, the Kols went about building Calcutta’s new “white town”, keeping its streets clean and drains unclogged, and digging the banks of canals. It is here that Christian missionaries “discovered” them. In November 1845, when the first batch of German Lutheran evangelists arrived in Calcutta, “strolling one morning in the narrow streets . . . by the bank of the river Hooghly . . . they saw some natives with dark skin.” Curious, they asked the wife of Anglican Bishop Hoerberlin, “Who are these people we saw, so low and so degraded?” Mrs Hoerberlin replied, “They are Cols from West Bengal.” From these Kols the missionaries learned that they were migrants from Chotanagpur, located in those days fifteen days west of Calcutta. Their home, the Kol migrants reported, “was full of green forests, high mountains and a large number of big and small rivers flowing under the clear blue sky.” They had come to “the din and bustle of a metropolitan city like Calcutta in order to earn some ‘Paise’ [cash] which could improve their material conditions at home.”<sup>11</sup> In similar vein, Eyre Chatterton, an Anglican priest who spent five decades in Chotanagpur, recalled in his memoirs how as “young missionaries” they “were at once struck by these dark-skinned, bright, merry-faced

<sup>10</sup> S.T. Cuthbert, Magistrate of Ramghur, to Mr Secretary Shakespear, Bengal Judicial Consultations, no. 53 of 14 June 1827, letter dated 21 April 1827, BL/IOR/E/4/731.

<sup>11</sup> Mahto, *Hundred Years of Christian Missions*, 19–22.

people” labouring on the streets of imperial Calcutta.<sup>12</sup> It was in the same circumstances that the Belgian Jesuit priest Constant Lievens, too, encountered “these people [who] are rather dark, but not negroes . . . [with] thick lips, a flat nose, a round face, long black hair and are almost beardless,” proceeding thereafter to the Chotanagpur “Mission in the West”.<sup>13</sup> It is at the margins of missionary narratives, therefore, that we learn of the common sight of Kol labourers on the streets of the imperial capital of Calcutta.

Anthropological theories of caste and tribe do not explain very well where the labouring Kols of Chotanagpur fit into the overall sociology of South Asia. If we follow the dominant wisdom since colonial times, the Kols are simply “tribes”, and hence the colonial and missionary records cited above merely misrecognise this fact by referring to them as a lowly labouring caste. The problem with this reading is that it relies on a colonial ideology of “primitivism”,<sup>14</sup> which ascribes a permanent ontological reality to a racialised notion of “tribe”.<sup>15</sup> Even today, when the colonial notion of “tribe” is under attack, even from many of those placed in the “savage slot”,<sup>16</sup> colonial ideas of the “primitive” Other continue to haunt the post-colonial present.<sup>17</sup> So, we turn then to the other side of the caste / tribe binary, namely, caste. Since it is no longer held that caste is entirely a ritual matter of purity and pollution in the Dumontian sense, it has become axiomatic among South Asianists that the modern caste order is a function of post-1858 colonial governmentality in British India.<sup>18</sup> But if caste is taken to be a by-product of colonial state-making processes, then it must be pointed out that

<sup>12</sup> Chatterton, *The Story of Fifty Years' Mission*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Clarysse, *Father Constant Lievens*, 68–72, 128.

<sup>14</sup> Chandra, “Liberalism and Its Other”, 135–68.

<sup>15</sup> Fried, *The Notion of Tribe*; Béteille, “The Concept of Tribe with Special Reference to India”, 296–318.

<sup>16</sup> Trouillot, *Global Transformations*; Chandra, “Beyond Subalternity”, 52–61.

<sup>17</sup> Kuper, *The Reinvention of Primitive Society*; Chatterjee, *Forgotten Friends*.

<sup>18</sup> Appadurai, “Number in the Colonial Imagination”, 314–40; Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*; Dirks, *Castes of Mind*.

colonial censuses, surveys, and ethnographic experiments did not produce the “Kols” out of thin air. We thus face a conundrum: the conventional academic wisdom on the much-vaunted caste/tribe dichotomy fails us here. The next section seeks to unravel this conundrum.

### Kols as Coolies

It would be wrong to conclude from the evidence presented so far that only the new British capital of Calcutta relied on Kol labour to function. The Bengal countryside relied on Kol labour too. Indeed, the Kols were treated by higher-caste landowners in the south-western frontier of Bengal as forest-clearers, above all. The zamindars on this *jungli* frontier, as in other forested regions in India, had typically enlarged their estates since at least the fifteenth century by sending out bands of forest-clearers deeper and deeper into the most deciduous forests of the subcontinent.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, the American anthropologist Richard Fox labelled these forest-clearing bands “professional primitives” to rescue them from the colonial discourses of primitivism in which they were enmeshed.<sup>20</sup> In exchange for their labour in clearing forests and expanding the arable frontier in Bengal and beyond, Kols and other “professional primitives” received either rent-free lands or lands at nominal quit rents. Early-modern state formation in South Asia, as Sumit Guha has shown so brilliantly, relied precisely on such forest-clearing labour.<sup>21</sup>

The onset of colonialism, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>22</sup> deepened and hastened early modern processes of regional state-making and the development of land markets in eastern India. The progressive

<sup>19</sup> For south-western Bengal, see Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests*; for examples from Bastar and the Nigiris, see Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*; and Hockings, *Ancient Hindu Refugees*.

<sup>20</sup> Fox, “Professional Primitives”, 139–60.

<sup>21</sup> Guha, “Forest Politics”, 133–53.

<sup>22</sup> See chapters 2 and 3 of my forthcoming book, *Resistance as Negotiation: Making States and Tribes in Modern India*.

breakdown of social order in jungle *zamindaris* from the 1780s onwards, owing to increasing subinfeudation and rent burdens on those previously paying little or no rents, released massive flows of labour into the rest of early-colonial Bengal, including Calcutta. As social structures were reorganised across Bengal, the Kols of Chotanagpur came to occupy their lowly status at the bottom of new hierarchies of life and labour. The term “Kol” was, as the opening quotation from Father Nottrott about “dirty swines” suggested earlier, a common “epithet of abuse, applied by the Brahminical race”<sup>23</sup> or those claiming superior caste status in early-nineteenth-century Bengal. This usage, steadily adopted by colonial officialdom too, referred to dark-skinned migrants from forest *zamindaris* on the western frontier of colonial Bengal who performed degrading and demanding physical labour in rural and urban settings. Without the later ethnological names given by anthropologist-administrators to newly discovered “tribes” such as Munda, Oraon, or Santal, the term “Kol” acted as a catch-all term for migrants from the forest highlands of Chotanagpur.

The Kols went to every corner of the Bengal Presidency: the indigo farms in the plains of Bihar and Bengal proper; the deltaic swamps of the Sunderbans; and the tea plantations in Assam and sub-Himalayan Bengal. Consider the indigo farms that came up from the 1830s. Charles Metcalfe wrote in a Minute in 1832 that the “quiet inoffensive Character” of the Kols “and their industrious habits cannot but be known to . . . the numerous European Gentlemen in the Lower Provinces, who have been accustomed annually to employ large bodies of these people in the manufacture of Indigo.”<sup>24</sup> These Kol labourers were recruited by men of higher-caste rank sent by the indigo plantation owners in the chief growing areas in colonial Bengal. For instance, we hear of a certain “Kumul Sing a Servant of an Indigo Planter who had been sent by his Master into the country to hire Dhangers” from the area that eventually became

<sup>23</sup> Dalton, “The ‘Kols’ of Chota-Nagpore”, 144.

<sup>24</sup> The Vice President’s Minute, Fort William Judicial Consultations, no. 46 of 17 April 1832, BL/IOR/F/4/1363/54227.



Ranchi district.<sup>25</sup> Upper-caste labour recruiters such as Kumul Sing were as important to the indigo set-up as the Kols themselves. They embodied, in a sense, the new hierarchy of labour that was emerging under colonial overlordship and capital. Jacques Pouchepedass has shown how the most arduous tasks in the indigo production process – for example, physically entering a tank full of water and indigo to stomp out impurities – were carried out by the so-called *jungli* Kols, because no one else would do it and the Kols were seen as ideally suited for such tasks.<sup>26</sup> So, in the caste hierarchy of the indigo plantation, Kols effectively stood below the *raiyats* or rent-paying peasants who were forced to cultivate indigo on their lands, the landless farm workers who were dependents of zamindars or indigo contractors, the upwardly mobile labour recruiters, the zamindars who leased out their lands to European contractors, and the contractors themselves. It is not surprising therefore that, when the famous Santal *hul* broke out in July 1855, district officials from Bhagalpur, Aurangabad, and Rajmahal regularly reported threats to and attacks on European contractors, their indigo factories, as well as their native subordinates in indigo-cultivating villages.<sup>27</sup> Equally unsurprising is the fact that the fierce mid-nineteenth-century debates over the rights of the indigo-cultivating *raiyat* in colonial Bengal completely sidestepped the Kols' circumstances at the bottom of the labour hierarchy.<sup>28</sup> Later historians, including those of a Subalternist persuasion, have followed suit.<sup>29</sup>

Sidestepping the Kols was not so easy, however, in the tea

<sup>25</sup> S.T. Cuthbert and T. Wilkinson, Joint Commissioners, to James Thomason, Deputy Secretary to Government in the Judicial Department, Fort William Judicial Consultations, no. 59, dated 12 February 1832, BL/ IOR/F/4/1363/54227.

<sup>26</sup> Pouchepedass, *Champaran and Gandhi*.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, G.J. Brown, Commissioner of Circuit for the Bhagalpore Division, to W. Grey, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, letter dated 11 July 1855; W. Grey to the Secretary, Government of India, Military Department, letter dated 21 July 1855, BL/ IOR/P/145/14.

<sup>28</sup> Sartori, "Indigo and Independence".

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Guha, "Neel Darpan".

plantations of Assam and northern Bengal, where they were the principal labour force as “coolies”.<sup>30</sup> Until the passage of the Transportation of Native Labourers Act (1863), which encouraged the so-called “free emigration” of coolies to Assam and Cachar, Kols from Chotanagpur were taken primarily to Mauritius and the East Indies.<sup>31</sup> Until then, the colonial government had “failed in inducing any of the Coles or Dangurs, to proceed to Assam, where their labour in the manipulation of tea [was] so required.”<sup>32</sup> The Kols in the tea plantations were in more or less the same circumstances as those in the indigo plantations. The only difference lay in the proximity of the latter to their rural homes in comparison with Assam, which the Kol coolies often took to be “the end of the world”.<sup>33</sup> As in the indigo plantations, there was in Assam an elaborate hierarchy of labour: headed by European planters, upper-caste Assamese or Bengali managers, upwardly mobile *arkattis* from

<sup>30</sup> Many etymological origins have been suggested for the word “coolie”, but Kol remains a strong contender.

<sup>31</sup> Lieutenant Colonel E.T. Dalton, Commissioner of Chotanagpur, to the Hon’ble Ashley Eden, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, no. 1171, letter dated 28 June 1865, General (Emigration) Proceedings B62, July 1865, WBSA. The historian Jagdish Chandra Jha gives us rare details of the first batch of 34 coolies from Chotanagpur shipped to Mauritius in the aftermath after the Kol Insurrection of 1831–32. Jha, “Early Indian Immigration”, 9–11. According to Marina Carter, roughly a third of the 7000 indentured coolies who arrived in Mauritius in 1837–38 were *dhangars* (“Kols”) from Chotanagpur. Carter, *Servants, Sirdars*, 104. Widespread condemnation of the awful living conditions of these early coolies en route to and in Mauritius briefly stopped emigration between 1838 and 1842, but it resumed thereafter under a more “managed” system of indentured labour. By the 1840s, however, coolies from Chotanagpur avoided Mauritius in favour of the emerging tea plantations in Assam and north Bengal.

<sup>32</sup> J.R. Ouseley, Governor-General’s Agent in the South West Frontier, to F.J. Halliday, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, letter dated 8 June 1839, Home (Revenue–Agriculture) Proceedings 21–22, 24 June 1839, WBSA. I am grateful to Andy Liu for pointing me to the contents of this file. A similar lament appears as late as 1857 in a letter that unsuccessfully seeks Kol coolies to help complete the highway connecting the Dhaka and Arakkan Divisions: See India Public Works (Bengal), letter dated 14 July 1857, BL/IOR/E/4/845.

<sup>33</sup> Sharma, *Empire’s Garden*, 73

central and eastern India who scouted for and recruited coolies, the local labourers who were characterised as lazy and averse to physical labour, and finally the Kol and other coolies imported into Assam. Later, garden *sirdars*, chosen from among the Kol coolies, were sent to recruit more coolies from rural Chotanagpur, independent of the *arkattis*.<sup>34</sup> In her study of the cultural worlds of the Assam tea plantations, Jayeeta Sharma writes: “By the end of the nineteenth century, Chotanagpur labourers acquired the highest rank among Assam coolies. They were known as “Class I *junglies*” in the planter’s lexicon. In the recruitment market, [they] were the most prized and the most expensive: planters ranked them high in terms of resilience, labouring ability, and resistance to disease.”<sup>35</sup> According to a newspaper report in *The Times*, between 700,000 and 750,000 “tea coolies” came to Assam, of which roughly a third, a quarter of a million coolies, were Kols from Chotanagpur.<sup>36</sup>

While post-colonial scholars of the Assam tea plantations have certainly not neglected Kol coolies from Chotanagpur, many have mistaken the cart for the horse in positing a “market for aboriginality” at work there.<sup>37</sup> Jayeeta Sharma, for instance, cites Brian Hodgson and George Campbell, the latter a prominent lieutenant governor of Bengal, to argue that the British “employed the tenets of race science” to justify the use of Kol coolies over local tribes from Cachar.<sup>38</sup> However, such an explanation presumes, without sufficient warrant, that racial notions associated with “tribes” caused plantation owners and colonial administrators to

<sup>34</sup> See detailed descriptions of the labour recruitment mechanisms in the following two files: V.T. Taylor, Commissioner of the Chota Nagpore Division, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Judicial Department, no. 1658, letter dated 28 June 1877, Emigration Department, Financial Branch Proceedings, no. 13-14, August 1877, WBSA; J. Ware Edgar, Officiating Commissioner of the Chota Nagpore Division, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Judicial Department, no. 479CR, letter dated 3 November 1882, General (Emigration) Proceedings, no. 11, December 1882, WBSA.

<sup>35</sup> Sharma, *Empire’s Garden*, 74.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Cotton, *Indian and Home Memories*, 264.

<sup>37</sup> Ghosh, “A Market for Aboriginality”.

<sup>38</sup> Sharma, *Empire’s Garden*, 72.

seek Kol coolies to perform certain difficult and degrading forms of labour. Cultural-historical explanations of this kind fail to see that the Kols were brought as coolies to Assam because of their prior reputation as low-cost, hard-working manual labourers in western Bengal, though, as pointed out earlier, it was not easy to induce more than a handful to undertake the arduous journey to Assam before the coercive indentured system took shape in the 1860s. Additionally, as Prabhu Mohapatra and Rana Behal argue, “there is no doubt that the high wages demanded by local labourers was an important consideration in the resort to long distance recruitment.”<sup>39</sup> George Campbell himself admitted to “cheapness of labour” being a significant factor in the long-distance recruitment of Kol coolies to Assam.<sup>40</sup> In the words of a memorandum from the Indian Tea Districts Association to London in 1880, the “future of the tea industry hinged on the maintenance of an adequate supply of coolie labour at a cost calculated to leave a fair margin of profit on the capital invested.”<sup>41</sup> Lastly, the Kol coolies, unlike local labourers, were subject to the provisions of the 1863 Act, by which plantation owners enjoyed special privileges that permitted them to catch and imprison any coolies who escaped. Racial stereotypes of Kols and, later, individual tribal groups such as Mundas and Oraons, did develop on the plantations,<sup>42</sup> but these were post-hoc constructions that situated the plantations into a wider all-India ideology of colonial primitivism. As such, we should be wary of reinscribing “primitivism” onto the past by privileging post-hoc justifications for recruiting Kol coolies over contemporaneous explanations rooted in a simple socio-economic logic.

### **A Labour Theory of Caste Domination?**

What was this socio-economic logic at work in Calcutta as well as the indigo and tea plantations in colonial Bengal? Having ruled

<sup>39</sup> Mohapatra and Behal, “Tea and Money”, 146.

<sup>40</sup> Campbell, “The Ethnology of India”, 34.

<sup>41</sup> Mohapatra and Behal, “Tea and Money”, 147.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Tea Districts Labour Association, *Hand-Book of Castes*; idem, *Language Hand-Book*.

out racialised notions of “tribal” or “primitive” labour and popular notions of caste animated by principles of ritual purity/pollution or colonial governmentality, I suggest we think in terms of caste as embodying the social relations of production in modern India. The evidence presented in this paper from nineteenth-century Bengal reinterprets the Kols’ situation at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. The Kols were not merely a subaltern class-in-itself, but the lowest of the low in the reworked caste order of modern Bengal. At this point, the sceptical reader may justly inquire whether I am not conflating “caste” with “class”. Indeed, I am: what I am proposing effectively is that, viewed from the bottom of the social ladder, caste in modern India is, in fact, “the specifically Indian form of material relations at the base, with its own historical dynamic.”<sup>43</sup>

This is not entirely a novel argument, of course. The likes of D.D. Kosambi, Dipankar Gupta, Gail Omvedt, Kumkum Roy, and Anand Teltumbde have all been here before. Indeed, as Teltumbde points out, Ambedkar himself “practised class politics, albeit not in the Marxian sense [insofar as] he always used ‘class’ even for describing the untouchables.”<sup>44</sup> Where I differ from these luminaries is in my singular focus on labour and its relationship to both the production of value and the social hierarchies that are built on the backs of the labouring multitudes. In sum, *a labour theory of caste domination*. The extraction of surplus value in capitalist production processes should be clear enough, but the specifically Indian character of class relations *qua* caste lies in its visible manifestations as “discrimination”, “ritual purity”, and/or “voting patterns”. However, to take these manifestations of caste to be the same as their underlying basis is the fundamental empiricist error that unites academic and lay commentators on caste.

<sup>43</sup> Chatterjee, “Caste and Subaltern Consciousness”, 175. Partha Chatterjee’s argument in this well-known essay on caste and subaltern consciousness is, of course, not the same as mine here. Indeed, Chatterjee is criticising the position that I am proposing here (or at least the versions of it that he had found a quarter century ago). Due to constraints of space, I am unable here to discuss Chatterjee’s argument and its relationship to mine.

<sup>44</sup> Teltumbde, “It’s Not Red vs Blue”.

If we take the suggestion of a labour theory of caste domination seriously, then labouring groups such as the Kols in colonial Bengal must be understood in terms of their position at the bottom of the caste pyramid, assigned the hardest and most degrading physical labour imaginable. Regional modernities in Bengal and elsewhere were built on the backs of labouring groups such as the Kols of Chotanagpur. Histories of such groups are, however, “hidden” by the colonial ideology of primitivism that has seeped into the postcolonial present. It is true that conditions of colonial capitalism produced these “hidden” histories of caste, but it would be wrong to see these as merely a function of colonial governmentality. After all, Kols cleared forests for jungle zamindars and rajas well before the onset of colonial modernity. The late-medieval *Chandimangala* of Mukundaram Chakrabarti, for instance, refers extensively to “Beruniyas”,<sup>45</sup> a Persian term for casual labour in *zamindari* estates, who cleared forests and built dams.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the lines between the everyday state and society are blurred in modern India and beyond,<sup>47</sup> and when writing about the colonial period it is useful to remember that “the raj was part of the same social field as its subjects.”<sup>48</sup> So if British administrators and capitalists were the “ruling caste”,<sup>49</sup> it is worth contemplating how “brown sahibs and white sahibs sought to escape their fears about the instability of social hierarchy . . . covering extant hierarchies [of caste] with the mantle of the natural and the primordial.”<sup>50</sup> And, when Ranajit Guha, the founding father of Subaltern Studies, turned to study the “elementary forms of peasant rebellion in colonial India”,<sup>51</sup> it is unsurprising that he put himself in a longer genealogy of *bhadralok*

<sup>45</sup> I am grateful to Professor Ralph Nicholas for directing me to the “Beruniyas” in the *Chandimangala*.

<sup>46</sup> Raychaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir*.

<sup>47</sup> Fuller and Bénéï, ed., *The Everyday State*.

<sup>48</sup> Washbrook, “Law, State and Agrarian Society in Colonial India”, 713.

<sup>49</sup> Gilmour, *The Ruling Caste*.

<sup>50</sup> Guha, “Lower Strata, Older Races”, 438.

<sup>51</sup> Guha, *Elementary Aspects*.

writers going back at least to Sanjeeb Chandra Chattopadhyay, who delighted in romanticising the misfortune of those whom they and their forefathers took great pains to keep at the bottom of the caste hierarchy.<sup>52</sup> Little wonder, then, that caste is almost completely absent from the early volumes of *Subaltern Studies*.<sup>53</sup>

Yet caste domination is an inescapable reality in post-colonial West Bengal, as it is in the rest of India. To understand why, we would do well to consider the sociologist Charles Tilly's classic work *Durable Inequality*, which outlined a set of social mechanisms that place productive resources in some hands at the expense of others.<sup>54</sup> Because haves and have-nots are subsequently locked in a variety of everyday transactions, categories that sustain socio-economic inequality and power differentials in society arise. Much like class, race, and gender, caste is also sustained in this manner as a principle of categorising different sections of society. David Mosse has expanded on Tilly's thesis to offer a multidimensional "relational" explanation of "durable poverty, inequality and power" among Dalits and Adivasis in modern India.<sup>55</sup> By "relational" Mosse means that those who are ranked at the bottom of Indian society today are poor not because they lack any intrinsic qualities that others possess, but because of the power others enjoy over them under conditions of modern capitalism. To the extent that caste embodies the social relations of production in India, a relational theory of durable poverty, inequality, and power leads us to appreciate how those occupying the lowest rungs of caste society are subject to the most exploitative labour regimes even as the *bhadralok* or "middle class" is defined by an aversion to physical labour. This state of affairs persists because economy and society are happily in sync with each other. Weber's perceptive analysis of how status groups harden into castes is worth remembering: "A

<sup>52</sup> Banerjee, *Politics of Time*.

<sup>53</sup> With the honourable exception of Chatterjee, "Caste and Subaltern Consciousness".

<sup>54</sup> Tilly, *Durable Inequality*.

<sup>55</sup> Mosse, "A Relational Approach", 1156–78.

status segregation grown into a 'caste' differs in its structure from a more 'ethnic' segregation: The caste structure transforms the horizontal and unconnected coexistences of ethnically segregated groups into a vertical social system of super- and subordination."<sup>56</sup> As Weber rightly recognised, caste is a matter of political economy, above and beyond the symbolic difference-markers that are most apparent to observers.<sup>57</sup> For our purposes, the social reproduction of vertically ordered strata of different kinds of labour holds the key to understanding how caste domination persists as well as the ways in which it is cunningly obscured in popular and academic discourses. This is why uncovering hidden histories of caste in colonial Bengal today is as much an exercise in reconstructing the past as it is about making sense of the present.

### Postscript

For the benefit of the reader, I want to recount my inspiration for this essay. One monsoon evening in 2010, after a day at the West Bengal State Archives on Bhawani Dutta Lane, I boarded a Kolkata taxi en route to Park Street. In the lengthy traffic jam that is typical during the monsoons in Kolkata, the taxi driver and I started chatting in Bengali about our respective places of origin. I learned then that Madan, as I shall call him here, hailed from a Dom family in a village in the Sunderbans. Soon, the conversation turned to my upcoming field trip to Khunti (Jharkhand). At hearing "Khunti", Madan gasped. "Do you know Longa *gram*?" he asked. "Of course, I do," I replied. I had been there several times as an NGO worker and was planning to do so again as a researcher. "Are there any Salupurti or Masapurti families there?" Indeed, I said, there are many. "Those are my brothers-sisters, aunts-uncles," he exclaimed with a smile of relief on his face. Over a hundred years ago, Madan's "grandfather's grandfather" (*thakurdadar thakurdada*) had gone to the Sunderbans to clear forests before eventually marrying a local

<sup>56</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 933–4.

<sup>57</sup> Guha, *Beyond Caste*, 9–11.



woman and settling there. Those were days of intense agrarian disputes in Chotanagpur, and Madan's great-great-grandfather was hardly alone in leaving the region in search of a better future. Apparently, census surveyors had declared one of Madan's ancestors a Dom, and he now, officially, belonged to a scheduled caste (SC) unlike his Munda (ST) extended family in Khunti. Caste histories of the kind that I discuss above are thus "hidden" in another sense too: beyond the grasp of census officials, tax collectors, and historians who rely so heavily on paper trails. I cannot say I have done more than to scratch the surface ever so slightly.

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ABBREVIATIONS SHOWN WITHIN THE PRIMARY SOURCES IN THE FOOTNOTES OF THIS ESSAY NEED TO BE LISTED HERE WITH THEIR EXPANDED FORMS; ALTERNATIVELY, FIRST USE OF EACH SUCH ABBREVIATION WITHIN THE FOOTNOTE NEEDS TO BE FOLLOWED BY THE EXPANDED FORM

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