

The Construction of Caste Identity: A Study of the Kolis of Gujarat during the Colonial Period

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Abstract

This study examines the significant social and historical changes that the Gujarati Koli group experienced while living under British domination. It makes the case that redefining what it meant to be "Koli" was largely influenced by British administrative procedures, particularly the census, ethnographic research, and legal labelling. Social isolation and institutionalized classification were two of the Kolis' burdens as the social structure shifted from the pre-colonial era's broad limits to the Raj's strict classifications. Through the creation of caste associations, formal requests for social advancement, and "Sanskritization" initiatives to reestablish their identity as Kshatriyas or Rajputs, the community showed considerable agency in spite of these pressures.

1. Introduction

Colonialism played a crucial role in giving us a contemporary perspective on the Indian caste system. Researchers like Dirks (2013), Jodhka (2012), and Cohn (2010) contend that caste and religion were identified as the essential components of Indian social structure by colonial discourse, which was influenced by Orientalists, missionaries, and administrators.

The British initially derived their comprehension of Indian civilization from ancient Sanskrit texts interpreted by Brahmins. This point of view focused on a "book view" or textual model of caste. But in the years after 1857, the British turned to empirical knowledge—such as the census—in an effort to collect organized data and regain control of India. A notable example of how these colonial administrative instruments converted "fuzzy" social identities into fixed, enumerable, and frequently stigmatized categories is the Kolis of Gujarat, the largest caste group in the area.

In the context of specific caste like Koli, it could also be seen that the colonial discourse of caste substantially engaged in classifying this caste group from time to time. Subsequently, the Kolis have also

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said to have attempted in contributing towards their own caste classifications. Studies on this particular caste Koli has brought these debates into light. Sociological and social anthropological writings on Kolis began with Mankad (1940) and Koppers (1943) and have grown with those of Punekar (1959), Ghurye (1963), A.M. Shah (1955, 1959, 1964, 1977, 1988, 2002, 2010), Pocock (1957, 1962, 1972, 1973), and Silverberg (1962, 1968, 1977), Lancy Lobo (1995, 2002, 2006).

There is prevalent opinion about the Kolis of Gujarat and their tribal origin. A.M Shah points out that the British imposed the Criminal Tribes Act on them. Jan Breman (2009) argues on the basis of colonial records that Kolis were originally Tribes. Lancy Lobo (2006) argues that Kolis have been considered as congeries of aboriginal tribes in the past, but in present days they are considered as a caste within the Hindu caste system. To substantiate his argument that Kolis might have a tribal origin Lancy Lobo (2006) draws from many colonial records and colonial census reports. He cites an instance from Kopper's writings, where he quotes from Bishop Herber, a religious head and traveller, who held that if the Bhils were aboriginals of the hills, the Kolis were the aboriginals of the plains. Similarly British ethnographer Wilson also described Kolis in similar ways. Often the works of British scholars like Risley, Hutton and Enthoven are cited to substantiate the argument of tribal origin of the Kolis.

Contrary to various scholars like A. M. Shah (2010), and Alfred Master (1939) argue that the colonial writings were notorious for using the words "caste", "tribe" and "race" indiscriminately. Hence the colonial claim of Kolis as tribes needs a critical examination. Alfred Master (1939), citing from Baroda volume of the Bombay Gazetteer points out that the striking difference in the numbers of Kolis between 1891 and 1931 Census in Gujarat is partly due to discrepancies in classification and also because of continual absorption of members of tribe into other tribes or classes principally Rajputs and the Kanbi-Kunbis and Marathas. According to Alfred Master, the distinction between Rajput and Koli is rather of order and rank than of race and tribe. Here it needs to be emphasised that this colonial record not only describes Kolis as tribes, but also describes Rajputs, Kunbis and Marathas also as tribes.

2. Pre-Colonial Fluidity and Social Overlap

Social identity in Gujarat before colonization was much more flexible than the rigid systems that followed. The term "Koli" included different groups in Sindh, Kutch, Saurashtra, and mainland Gujarat.

Historically, the Koli community showed a wide range of occupations because they did not fit into one specific group. Community members worked as farmers, fishers, seafarers, and cultivators. They also took



on military roles as village guards. This variety in roles reflected their complicated social status, which the scholar A.M. Shah (2002) noted was often based on where they lived. In pre-colonial Gujarat, villages were generally seen as either Rasti (peaceful) or Mewasi (turbulent). Koli chiefs in Mewasi areas were known for their strong independence in governance.

The social boundaries between the Kolis and higher-status groups were noticeably flexible, especially in the relationship between Kolis and Rajputs. Alfred Master (1939) suggests that the difference between these two groups was often about rank and social status, not a true racial or tribal divide. This connection was strengthened by historical marriage ties, as Kolis often married their daughters into Rajput families.

This ability allowed Kolis to shift through various social roles. Their identity was shaped more by local political power and land ownership instead of the strict, inherited categories that would later be set under British rule.

3. The Mechanics of Colonial Construction

A. The Decennial Census (1872–1931)

The colonial census was a tool of control that was employed to promote state surveillance and control. According to Bernard Cohn (2010), the census compelled people to belong to certain grouping; this enhanced collective action within the new identities of the administration.

This process of "ethnographic codification" was messy and often arbitrary. A prime example is the **Kolis**, whom administrators struggled to define, frequently swapping labels like "caste," "tribe," and "race" because the group didn't fit a singular definition. Under officials like H.H. Risley in the 1901 census, this obsession with classification turned toward "science," using anthropometric measurements to try and link caste to physical race. Eventually, the census had no room for the nuance of real life; it demanded mutually exclusive categories. This forced collapse of dual or fluid identities meant that people were squeezed into artificial silos that prioritized bureaucratic neatness over the messy reality of how they actually lived.

B. The Criminal Tribes Act (CTA)

A significant change in moving to marginalization was when the British imposed legal stigmas upon the Kolis. In reference to the Tolen (1991), Criminal Tribes Act was also extended to the Bombay Presidency in 1911 to exercise law control over those groups perceived to be born criminals.

This arrangement served as a direct gateway to intense state surveillance; once a group was registered, its members were stripped of their privacy and forced to submit fingerprints and report

their every movement to village authorities. It was a system that treated entire communities as inherent suspects, creating a cycle of monitoring that was nearly impossible to escape.

However, the "criminality" the British sought to suppress often had deep economic roots. David Hardiman (1981) highlights that what the colonial state saw as lawlessness was actually a desperate survival response to extreme poverty. The colonial administration's own aggressive revenue policies and economic exploitation pushed these groups to the brink. Through framing their struggle for survival as an innate "criminal" trait, the administration could justify harsh control measures while ignoring the systemic displacement and financial ruin their own policies had caused.

The legal and administrative tags imposed on the Koli effectively rendered their existence criminal, changing their socio-economic challenges into rigid identity markers that the state leveraged to justify continuous intervention and control.

4. Community Agency and Status Claims

The Kolis did not just take those labels as colonial; they took the colonial administrative system to struggle to improve their social status.

A. Formation of Caste Associations

In a fascinating turn of events, the British effort to rigidly classify Indian society actually sparked a wave of internal organization as communities learned to navigate the new system. Rather than simply accepting their assigned labels, different groups formed associations to reclaim their own narratives and improve their social standing. A perfect example of this was the Sri Koli Yuvak Mandal, established in 1916. This organization focused on education and moral reform, using these tools to uplift the community's status from within and challenge the restrictive definitions imposed by the colonial administration.

This spirit of collective action quickly crossed borders, proving that these new identities had a global reach. As Keshavbhai Patel (2010) notes, Koli migrants in South Africa founded the Transvaal Koli Hitwardhak Mandal to support their kin back home. By funneling resources from abroad to build student hostels in Gujarat, these migrants demonstrated how a community labeled as "marginal" by the census could leverage international networks to secure a better future. These associations turned the colonial census on its head: instead of just being a tool for state control, the categories became a rallying point for education, mutual aid, and social mobility.

B. The Sanskritization and the Petition Movement

One of the key reactions of the community toward census classification was the filing of formal petitions to alter their official classification.

Driven by the rigid hierarchies of the census, many communities began a process of "Rajputization" to climb the social ladder. As Lancy Lobo (2006) observes, the Kolis actively asserted Kshatriya (warrior) ancestry, attempting to rewrite their official standing by adopting the prestigious labels of the ruling classes. This wasn't just about a change of name; it involved deep-seated internal reforms. Leaders like Daduram Bhagat spearheaded campaigns against liquor and meat consumption, promoting a lifestyle of "orderly living" to prove their community's moral worth and earn the social respect traditionally reserved for the upper castes.

These aspirations often led to the creation of entirely new, strategic identities. In South Gujarat, for instance, Arjun Patel (1997) notes that certain socially mobile groups even attempted to adopt the name "Mandhata Patidar." By aligning themselves with the title of high-status landowners, they sought to bypass the limitations of their colonial classification and claim a place among the regional elite. These efforts show that while the census tried to fix identities in place, the people themselves were constantly reinventing who they were to secure better social and economic futures.

5. Conclusion

The colonial period didn't just record Koli identity; it effectively "fossilized" what had once been a fluid and adaptive social boundary. By forcing the Kolis into mutually exclusive categories—often oscillating between the extremes of "criminal tribes" and "agricultural castes"—the colonial administration stripped away the community's ability to navigate multiple social worlds. This rigid classification system created a high-stakes environment where social survival depended on authorized recognition. As a consequence, the Koli response—ranging from moral reform movements to the strategic adoption of Rajput and Kshatriya lineages—was a sophisticated attempt to hack a system designed to keep them subordinate.

These colonial-era struggles for status laid the direct groundwork for the community's role in the contemporary Indian state. The change from seeking "Kshatriya" (warrior) rank in the early 20th century to embracing the "Backward Class" label in the post-independence era represents a profound tactical shift in political mobilization. Today, the presence of the Koli community in the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category is the contemporary manifestation of those early census battles. It demonstrates how a legacy of state surveillance and arbitrary labeling was eventually changed by the community into a tool for



democratic bargaining, ensuring that the very administrative "boxes" once used to control them are now used to safe political representation and social justice.

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