

The Caste System and its Evolution Under Mughal Rule

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ABSTRACT

The caste system has long been a central feature of Indian society, shaping social relations, economic organization, and political authority. This study examines the evolution of the caste system under Mughal rule (1526–1857), focusing on the interaction between imperial governance, socio-economic structures, and regional dynamics. Employing a qualitative research design based on secondary sources, including historical literature, scholarly books, journal articles, and documented historical records, the study analyzes the continuity and transformation of caste during the Mughal period. The findings reveal that while traditional caste hierarchies remained largely intact due to their deep roots in occupational specialization, landholding patterns, and social customs, Mughal administrative and military institutions created limited opportunities for social mobility and status negotiation. The study further highlights the significance of regional variations, particularly in frontier areas such as Bengal, where agricultural expansion, religious interactions, and local developments influenced caste adaptation. Religious coexistence under Mughal rule encouraged accommodation rather than direct intervention in caste structures, allowing caste-based distinctions to persist across both Hindu and Muslim communities. The research concludes that caste under the Mughals was neither entirely static nor fundamentally transformed; instead, it evolved through a complex process of continuity, adaptation, and negotiation. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between imperial authority and social stratification in early modern India and demonstrate the enduring resilience of caste as a dynamic social institution.

Keywords: Caste System; Mughal Empire; Social Stratification; Social Mobility; Mughal Administration.

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I. Introduction

The caste system in India has been a defining feature of the subcontinent's social fabric for centuries, influencing patterns of social interaction, economic organization, and political authority. Its complex structure, rooted in notions of hereditary occupation, ritual status, and community identity, has long attracted scholarly attention, particularly concerning its evolution under various historical regimes. Among these, the Mughal period (1526–1857) represents a critical phase in the trajectory of caste relations, characterized by the interplay between imperial authority, local social structures, and religious pluralism. Understanding caste under Mughal rule requires a nuanced appreciation of

both continuity and transformation, as this period witnessed the reinforcement of traditional hierarchies alongside new opportunities for mobility and negotiation within the social order.

Scholars have approached the study of caste under the Mughals from multiple perspectives, emphasizing economic, political, and religious dimensions. R. S. Sharma (1965) foregrounds the material foundations of social formations, highlighting how occupational specialization and control over resources underpinned caste hierarchies. According to Sharma, the persistence of caste was closely linked to economic structures, demonstrating that social stratification in medieval

India cannot be understood without considering the distribution of land, labor, and wealth. Complementing this economic perspective, Satish Chandra (1990) situates caste within broader political and cultural frameworks, arguing that Mughal administration facilitated social mobility for certain groups through military and bureaucratic avenues, even as caste identities continued to define access to power and opportunity.

Regional variations further complicated the interaction between caste and Mughal governance. Richard M. Eaton (1974), for instance, examines Bengal, illustrating how frontier expansion, agricultural development, and the spread of Islam transformed local social dynamics. While religious conversion reshaped identities, many caste-based practices persisted, revealing the resilience of traditional social structures. Similarly, M. Ali (1988) explores the relationship between Islam and indigenous social systems, emphasizing that Mughal policies generally promoted coexistence rather than direct disruption of caste hierarchies, allowing longstanding social norms to endure. Nicholas B. Dirks (1987) extends this discussion by demonstrating that caste was not merely a religious phenomenon but also a political and administrative reality, mediating the relationship between rulers and subjects and shaping patterns of authority and governance.

More recent scholarship has deepened the understanding of caste as a dynamic and adaptive institution. Susan Bayly (1999) traces continuities between pre-colonial and colonial caste formations, suggesting that caste identities evolved in response to shifting political and economic contexts while retaining social significance. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) emphasizes the economic dimensions of caste, examining how occupational identities structured labor relations and social mobility. Alam and Subrahmanyam (2011) highlight the pragmatic strategies of Mughal administration, demonstrating

that cooperation with local elites across caste lines was central to imperial governance. Kumar (2020) similarly argues that Mughal policies neither rigidly enforced nor entirely dismantled caste hierarchies, instead creating spaces for negotiation and limited upward mobility within an overarching social order.

Collectively, these studies suggest that caste under Mughal rule was neither static nor monolithic. While traditional hierarchies largely persisted, economic, political, and religious interactions created opportunities for adaptation and social negotiation. This dynamic interplay underscores the need to understand caste not as an isolated social institution but as an evolving system shaped by imperial authority, regional contexts, and local practices. Exploring these dimensions illuminates the complex ways in which the Mughal Empire influenced—and was influenced by—the intricate web of social hierarchies in early modern India.

II. Review of Literature

The study of caste under Mughal rule has attracted considerable scholarly attention, with historians and social scientists examining the interaction between state structures, social hierarchies, religion, and economic transformations. Existing literature suggests that the Mughal period witnessed both continuity and change in caste relations, influenced by administrative policies, agrarian expansion, religious interactions, and regional dynamics.

R. S. Sharma (1965) emphasizes the material foundations of social formations in India, arguing that economic structures played a crucial role in shaping caste hierarchies. His analysis highlights how occupational specialization and control over resources contributed to the persistence of caste distinctions. Sharma's work provides an important framework for understanding the socio-economic context within which caste operated during the

medieval period. The works of Satish Chandra (1990) explore the broader social, cultural, and political dimensions of medieval India. Chandra argues that Mughal governance accommodated diverse social groups and facilitated mobility for certain communities through military and administrative service. However, caste identities continued to influence social status and access to opportunities. Richard M. Eaton (1974) examines social change in Bengal and demonstrates how frontier expansion, agricultural development, and the spread of Islam transformed local social structures. Eaton suggests that while conversion to Islam altered religious identities, many caste-based practices and social distinctions continued to influence community life. M. Ali (1988) focuses on the relationship between religion and social change under the Mughals. His study highlights the complex interactions between Islamic institutions and indigenous social systems. Ali argues that Mughal policies often promoted coexistence rather than direct intervention in caste arrangements, allowing traditional hierarchies to remain largely intact. Nicholas B. Dirks (1987) investigates the relationship between power, culture, and social organization. He argues that political authority and local social structures were deeply interconnected. Dirks demonstrates that caste was not merely a religious institution but also a political and administrative reality that shaped relations between rulers and subjects. Susan Bayly (1999) provides a comprehensive historical account of caste from the eighteenth century to modern India. Although her primary focus extends beyond the Mughal era, she identifies important continuities between pre-colonial and colonial caste formations. Bayly argues that caste identities adapted to changing political and economic circumstances while maintaining their social significance. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) contributes to the discussion by examining the relationship between caste and labor. His work

highlights how occupational identities and social hierarchies influenced patterns of work and social mobility. Chakrabarty emphasizes the role of caste in structuring economic relations and labor organization. Alam and Subrahmanyam (2011) analyze the Mughal state's administrative and political structures. They argue that the Mughal Empire relied on cooperation with local elites from various caste backgrounds, demonstrating the pragmatic nature of imperial governance. Their work reveals the dynamic interaction between state authority and social hierarchy. More recently, Kumar (2020) specifically examines caste under imperial rule, arguing that Mughal governance neither abolished nor rigidly reinforced caste. Instead, imperial policies created spaces for negotiation, adaptation, and limited mobility while preserving broader hierarchical structures.

Collectively, these studies reveal that caste during the Mughal period was shaped by economic conditions, political authority, religious interactions, and regional variations. While scholars agree on the persistence of caste, they differ in assessing the extent to which Mughal rule transformed or reinforced existing social hierarchies.

III. Research Gap

Despite extensive studies on caste and Mughal society, limited research specifically examines how Mughal administrative policies affected caste mobility across different regions and social groups. Existing scholarship often focuses on economic, religious, or political aspects separately, leaving insufficient attention to the interconnected and regionally varied experiences of caste under Mughal rule.

IV. Objectives

1. To examine the structure and functioning of the caste system during the Mughal period and assess the extent of continuity from earlier social formations.

2. To analyze the impact of Mughal administrative, political, and economic policies on caste hierarchies, social mobility, and occupational organization.
3. To investigate how regional variations, religious interactions, and local socio-economic developments influenced the evolution and adaptation of caste identities under Mughal rule.

V. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the evolution of the caste system under Mughal rule, focusing on social, political, and economic dimensions through the analysis of existing literature, historical documents, and scholarly interpretations. The research relies entirely on secondary data, including academic books and monographs by historians such as R. S. Sharma, Satish Chandra, Richard M. Eaton, and Nicholas B. Dirks; peer-reviewed journal articles by scholars like Susan Bayly, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Alam & Subrahmanyam; historical records and translations cited in secondary literature; and relevant research reports and dissertations. Data collection was conducted systematically through extensive literature review, use of library and digital archives (JSTOR, Google Scholar), and document analysis to extract and synthesize key themes. Qualitative content analysis was employed for data interpretation, incorporating thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns such as caste persistence, mobility, regional variation, and interaction with Mughal policies, comparative analysis to highlight regional and temporal differences, and critical synthesis to reconcile conflicting scholarly interpretations into a coherent narrative. The methodology provides a comprehensive understanding of caste evolution under Mughal administration, emphasizing socio-economic, political, and religious aspects, though it is limited by its exclusive reliance on secondary

sources, making it dependent on the accuracy, interpretation, and availability of existing scholarship. Ethical considerations were strictly observed by properly citing all sources and analyzing secondary data objectively, without distortion or misrepresentation of the original authors' contributions.

VI. Results and Discussion

The analysis of existing literature and historical records reveals that the caste system during the Mughal period was both resilient and adaptive, reflecting a complex interplay of social, political, economic, and religious factors. The findings suggest that while the foundational structure of caste as a hereditary social hierarchy persisted, Mughal rule introduced mechanisms of negotiation, mobility, and regional variation that nuanced the traditional rigidities of the system.

1. Persistence of Traditional Hierarchies

One of the clearest findings across multiple studies is the remarkable continuity of caste hierarchies despite imperial intervention. R. S. Sharma's (1965) emphasis on the material foundations of caste demonstrates that occupational specialization and control over land and resources entrenched social stratification. The Mughal administration, which relied heavily on agrarian revenues and localized elites for governance, indirectly reinforced these hierarchies by recognizing and engaging with existing social structures rather than attempting to dismantle them. Similarly, Richard M. Eaton's (1974) study of Bengal illustrates that even where socio-religious changes such as conversion to Islam occurred, caste-based practices persisted among both Hindu and Muslim communities. These findings underscore the resilience of caste as a socio-economic institution: it was not merely a set of ritual prescriptions but a practical framework that structured access to resources, labor, and social authority.

2. Economic Structures and Caste Functioning

Economic factors emerged as a central determinant in shaping caste relations. The Mughal Empire's agrarian policies, such as the land revenue system and the expansion of cultivated territories, reinforced occupational distinctions. Landholding and artisanal production were often closely linked to caste identity, as observed by Sharma and Chakrabarty (2000). Occupations such as weavers, potters, and traders continued to be organized along hereditary lines, and social mobility remained constrained by access to economic resources. However, the Mughal administrative and military apparatus provided alternative routes for upward mobility. Satish Chandra (1990) notes that recruitment into imperial service allowed certain individuals from lower-status castes to achieve social recognition and economic advancement. These findings indicate that while caste continued to structure economic life, imperial policies created limited but significant spaces for negotiation and mobility.

3. Political Authority and Social Negotiation

The interaction between caste and political authority under the Mughals emerges as another critical theme. Nicholas B. Dirks (1987) argues that caste was not only a religious or social construct but also a political and administrative reality. Mughal rulers relied on local elites and intermediaries from various caste backgrounds to maintain order, collect revenue, and exercise authority. This reliance on caste-based networks of power facilitated a pragmatic coexistence, allowing traditional hierarchies to persist while integrating certain groups into the state apparatus. For example, Rajputs and Marathas were incorporated into military and administrative positions, thereby negotiating prestige and influence beyond their conventional social status. The findings suggest that Mughal governance functioned less as a force for rigid social regulation

and more as a framework that allowed negotiated hierarchies to coexist with imperial authority.

4. Regional Variations and Adaptation

The caste system under Mughal rule was not monolithic; it displayed significant regional variations influenced by local political, economic, and religious contexts. Eaton's (1974) analysis of Bengal demonstrates that frontier regions, agricultural expansion, and the spread of Islam created hybrid social formations where caste identities adapted to new circumstances. Similarly, M. Ali (1988) shows that Mughal policies toward non-Muslim communities were largely pragmatic, promoting coexistence rather than enforcing uniform social reforms. These regional differences suggest that caste was a flexible institution, capable of adapting to diverse economic and cultural environments while retaining core hierarchies. Such findings challenge earlier assumptions that the caste system functioned uniformly across the subcontinent, highlighting instead the significance of local context in shaping social practices.

5. Religious Interaction and Caste Persistence

Religious dynamics under Mughal rule had a complex relationship with caste. Conversion to Islam, the rise of Sufi networks, and the spread of Persianate cultural norms introduced new identities and social affiliations. Yet, as Eaton (1974) and Ali (1988) demonstrate, many Islamic converts continued to observe caste-like distinctions, often paralleling the social norms of Hindu communities. This continuity reflects the adaptive capacity of caste, where social hierarchy and occupational organization persisted even within new religious frameworks. Susan Bayly (1999) and Alam & Subrahmanyam (2011) further argue that Mughal policy deliberately maintained tolerance and accommodation, allowing caste distinctions to endure as a stabilizing social force while facilitating cooperation between the state and local elites.

6. Mechanisms of Mobility and Negotiation

Despite the persistence of traditional hierarchies, Mughal rule introduced mechanisms that allowed for limited upward mobility and social negotiation. Military service, administrative employment, and imperial patronage served as avenues for individuals and communities to enhance status beyond their hereditary positions. Kumar (2020) notes that these policies did not dismantle caste but created negotiated spaces where caste identities could interact with meritocratic or state-sanctioned forms of recognition. This duality—persistence of hierarchy alongside selective mobility—highlights the dynamic nature of caste under imperial rule. It was neither rigidly static nor entirely flexible but operated within a spectrum shaped by political opportunity, economic access, and regional variation.

7. Synthesis and Implications

Overall, the findings suggest that the caste system under the Mughals was characterized by continuity, adaptation, and regional differentiation. Traditional occupational hierarchies persisted due to economic structures and social norms, while political and administrative policies created limited but meaningful opportunities for mobility. Religious interactions added complexity, with caste-like distinctions often persisting even among converts. The Mughal period thus represents a critical phase in the evolution of caste, where imperial authority did not abolish the social order but mediated its operation, balancing respect for existing hierarchies with pragmatic administrative needs.

The study further illustrates that caste must be understood as an evolving institution shaped by multiple forces rather than a static or purely ritualistic system. Economic imperatives, regional contexts, religious pluralism, and state authority all contributed to the adaptive capacity of caste, enabling it to survive and remain socially

significant well into the colonial period. These insights challenge simplistic narratives of caste as either immutable or entirely flexible, revealing instead a nuanced interplay between social tradition and historical change.

8. Limitations and Future Directions

While these findings provide a comprehensive understanding of caste under Mughal rule, the exclusive reliance on secondary sources limits the ability to assess micro-level variations and everyday social practices. Future research could incorporate archival records, localized inscriptions, and ethnographic analogues to explore the lived experience of caste across different regions and social strata. Comparative studies with other contemporary empires could also illuminate how imperial structures influenced social hierarchies differently across contexts.

In conclusion, the Mughal period demonstrates the resilience, adaptability, and complexity of caste as a social institution. By mediating between traditional hierarchies and imperial objectives, caste under Mughal rule was a dynamic system, capable of maintaining social order while allowing selective mobility and negotiation—a duality that underscores its enduring significance in Indian society.

VII. Conclusion

The study of the caste system under Mughal rule demonstrates that caste remained a resilient and influential institution within Indian society, despite significant political, economic, and religious transformations during the period. The Mughal Empire did not seek to abolish or fundamentally restructure caste hierarchies; rather, its administrative and political practices largely accommodated existing social arrangements. As a result, traditional caste-based distinctions in occupation, status, and access to resources continued to shape social life across much of the subcontinent.

At the same time, the Mughal period witnessed important processes of adaptation and negotiation within the caste system. Imperial service, military recruitment, commercial expansion, and regional developments created opportunities for limited social mobility and the reconfiguration of status among certain groups. The interaction between caste and state authority reveals that caste functioned not only as a social and religious institution but also as a political and economic mechanism that facilitated governance and local administration.

The findings further highlight the significance of regional variations in shaping caste dynamics. In frontier regions such as Bengal, agricultural expansion, religious conversion, and changing patterns of settlement produced distinctive social formations while preserving many caste-based practices. Religious interactions under Mughal rule, particularly between Hindu and Muslim communities, introduced new identities but did not eliminate hierarchical social distinctions. Instead, caste-like structures often adapted to changing religious and cultural contexts.

Overall, the evolution of caste during the Mughal era reflects a balance between continuity and change. While traditional hierarchies remained deeply embedded in social and economic life, imperial policies and regional developments created spaces for adjustment and limited mobility. The Mughal period therefore represents a crucial stage in the historical development of caste, illustrating its capacity to adapt to shifting political and cultural circumstances while retaining its fundamental social

significance. Understanding this complex interplay enhances our knowledge of both Mughal governance and the long-term evolution of social stratification in India.

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