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CASTE AND TEXTILE PRODUCTION IN BENGAL: AN ANALYSIS OF EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURY DYNAMICS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intersection of caste and the textile industry in Bengal during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, focusing on how caste-based societal structures influenced occupational specialization and production dynamics. The division of labor in textile production was deeply intertwined with caste hierarchies, with specific endogamous groups specializing in tasks such as spinning, weaving, embroidery, and finishing. Drawing on census records, ethnographic accounts, and historical surveys by scholars like H.H. Risley and Dr. James Wise, this study examines how geographical positioning and economic incentives shaped the localization and adaptability of caste-based professions. It also investigates the migration of weaving communities and the social consequences of occupational changes within caste hierarchies. By analyzing the persistence and evolution of caste-based roles in the textile industry, this paper contributes to understanding the socio-economic fabric of early modern Bengal. It offers insights into the broader implications of caste in South Asian occupational histories.

KEYWORDS: Caste Hierarchy, Bengal Textile Industry, Occupational Division, Economic Adaptation, Eighteenth And Nineteenth Centuries, South Asia.

1. INTRODUCTION

The caste system in India historically functioned as a social and occupational framework shaping the division of labour across generations. In his pioneering work Nesfield (1885) emphasised that caste was not merely a community of creed or kinship but fundamentally a community of function. Another authority Risley (1891) argued that occupational roles and functions were the primary unifying factors in the formation of castes within the Bengali social structure. Added with strict endogamous generational continuity there was distinct social units that were not only ethnographically but also anthropometrically distinct.

The article broadly based on the works of Dr. James Wise, a civil surgeon in Dhaka between 1884 and 1886, who collected extensive ethnographic details during his travels across rural Bengal (Wise, 1883). In this journey he often took assistance of local employees who were well versed with local accent. His observations highlighted how caste hierarchies dictated occupational specialization in rural Bengali society. The entire society was operational on works done by different endogamous groups of people assigned as different castes and sub-castes. In textile industry tasks such as spinning, weaving or embroidery were assigned to specific castes and sub-castes which over the time became deeply ingrained as hereditary professions. The geographical localization of certain caste groups further solidified their roles in specialized production while economic incentives attracted higher castes to these jobs despite the associated social stigma.

This article explores the intersection of caste and occupational specialization in Bengal's textile industry during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It examines how caste-based jobs shaped production dynamics, contributed to the localization of skills and responded to economic pressures. By analysing these historical patterns, the study offers insights into the enduring impact of caste on labour practises, contributing to contemporary discussions on the socio-economic structures of South-Asia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding the interplay between caste and occupational divisions in Bengal's textile industry during the early modern period requires a comprehensive review of historical works, ethnographic accounts, and census data. This section examines key contributions that illuminate the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of Bengal's weaving communities.

2.1. Early Research on Caste and Occupation

In the eighteenth century, studies on the social and economic implications of caste hierarchies in occupational roles were scarce. Scholars during this period focused more on agricultural and economic activities rather than caste-specific roles. However, with the advent of British administrative efforts, caste divisions and their impact on labor began to attract scholarly attention.

Buchanan Hamilton's early nineteenth-century surveys offered valuable insights into various occupational groups in Bengal (Hamilton, 1833). Although his research primarily emphasized economic and agricultural aspects, it laid the groundwork for later studies by providing a broad understanding of Bengal's socio-economic fabric. Hamilton's work, however, offered limited focus on caste-specific roles within the textile industry.

2.2. Historical Surveys and Census Data

The 1872 Census marked a pivotal moment in documenting caste-based occupational divisions. This comprehensive effort not only quantified caste demographics but also highlighted their roles in Bengal's textile production. The Bengal Census of 1869, under the supervision of Henry Walter, provided additional data on the distribution of weaving castes, particularly in regions such as Dacca.

Dr. James Wise, a civil surgeon stationed in Dhaka from 1884 to 1886, conducted extensive ethnographic surveys during this period. His seminal work, *Notes on Race, Caste, and Trade in East Bengal* (1883), detailed the customs, rituals, and occupations of endogamous caste groups. Wise's observations revealed the rigidity of caste hierarchies and their defining role in occupational specialization, especially in the textile industry.

H.H. Risley's *the Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (1891) expanded upon these earlier efforts by emphasizing the anthropometric and ethnographic distinctiveness of caste groups. Risley's analysis underscored how caste hierarchies structured labor practices and contributed to economic and social stratification in Bengal. His work remains a cornerstone for understanding the intersection of caste and occupation in the region.

2.3. Ethnographic Contributions

Ethnographic studies further enriched the understanding of caste and occupational roles in Bengal. Wise's observations highlighted how castes like the tantis and jugis maintained hereditary professions within the textile industry, often adhering to rigid customs that dictated their roles

and interactions.

The narratives of caste dynamics in weaving communities, particularly their resistance to external pressures and their adaptation to economic challenges, were further explored in ethnographic accounts. These studies revealed the nuanced ways in which social hierarchies shaped not only the economic activities but also the cultural identities of weaving castes.

2.4. Synthesis and Focus of Current Study

This article synthesizes data from historical surveys, census records, and ethnographic studies to examine the castes and sub-castes associated with textile production in Bengal during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It explores how economic considerations influenced the movement of higher and lower castes within the workforce and the resulting social consequences.

By building on the foundational works of Hamilton, Wise, and Risley, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how caste, geography, and economic pressures shaped Bengal's textile industry. The findings contribute to a broader discourse on the socio-economic dynamics of caste in South Asia's occupational histories.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a multidisciplinary approach, integrating historical and ethnographic perspectives to analyze the role of caste in shaping Bengal's textile industry during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By combining primary sources, secondary literature, and qualitative analysis, the research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of weaving communities in Bengal.

3.1. Primary Sources

The foundation of this study relies on a range of primary sources that document the socio-economic and occupational divisions within Bengal's textile industry:

- **Census Data:** The 1872 Census and the Bengal Census of 1869 provide quantitative insights into the demographic distribution of weaving castes, their occupational roles, and regional variations.
- **Ethnographic Accounts:** The work of Dr. James Wise (*Notes on Race, Caste, and Trade in East Bengal*, 1883) offers detailed observations of the customs, rituals, and socio-economic conditions of weaving communities in Bengal.
- **Historical Surveys:** Buchanan Hamilton's

Geographical, Statistical, and Historical Descriptions of the District of Dinajpur (1833) presents early nineteenth-century insights into the economic and occupational landscape, particularly focusing on the intersection of agriculture and weaving.

These sources form the basis for analyzing caste-based occupational specialization, regional practices, and socio-economic adaptations.

3.2. Secondary Sources

To contextualize the primary data, this study incorporates secondary literature from prominent scholars, including:

- **H.H. Risley:** *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (1891), which emphasizes the anthropometric and ethnographic distinctiveness of caste groups and their roles in labor organization.
- **W.W. Hunter:** His works provide insights into the rural economy and its interaction with artisanal industries.
- **D.B. Mitra and Hamida Hossain:** These scholars offer perspectives on the historical evolution of Bengal's textile industry and the socio-economic challenges faced by weaving communities.

The secondary sources enrich the analysis by providing historical context and interpretations of caste-based practices in the textile industry.

3.3. Analytical Framework

A qualitative historical analysis is employed to explore:

- **Caste-Based Occupational Roles:** The study categorizes and examines the roles of specific weaving castes, such as tantis, jugis, and julahas, and how their labor practices were shaped by regional and economic factors.
- **Socio-Economic Dynamics:** The research investigates how geographical localization, economic pressures, and social hierarchies influenced caste-based labor organization and migration.
- **Colonial Industrial Policies:** The impact of British colonial policies, particularly the introduction of machine-made textiles, is analyzed to understand the economic disruptions and occupational shifts within the weaving community.

3.4. Limitations and Bias Mitigation

Recognizing the potential biases in colonial-era records, such as census data and ethnographic accounts, the study triangulates findings from

multiple sources to ensure a balanced perspective. Efforts are made to contextualize historical accounts, avoiding overgeneralization or misrepresentation of caste practices.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The research adheres to ethical standards by:

- Accurately crediting primary and secondary sources.
- Avoiding derogatory language or stereotypes when discussing caste-based practices.
- Ensuring that historical findings are contextualized to respect the cultural and social sensitivities of the weaving communities under study.

This methodological framework provides a comprehensive approach to understanding the intersection of caste, labor, and economic history in Bengal's textile industry. By combining quantitative data, qualitative insights, and historical context, the study captures the complexities of caste-based occupational specialization and its evolution in response to socio-economic pressures.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Division of Labor in Textile Production

The labor structure in Bengal's textile industry during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was profoundly shaped by age, gender, and caste. Women primarily performed the preliminary tasks such as carding, cleaning, drying, and spinning

cotton within their households. A Commercial Resident of Malda observed, "There is no class of people who depend upon it as a profession; it is generally performed as a subsidiary employment by the female."

Buchanan Hamilton noted that Brahmin women and the wives of judges and farmers also participated in spinning, reflecting a more flexible caste approach compared to South India's rigid restrictions. Tools like the **Jalan Kathi**, an iron pin, were used for separating cotton seeds to produce finer threads, while **charkhas** were employed for faster but coarser yarn production. Thread preparation often transcended caste lines, becoming a leisure activity for women across communities. Specialized castes such as **dhuneras** teased cotton for pillows, while finer yarns were spun using a **takwa spindle**. The exceptional craftsmanship of **katanis** in Dhamrai near Dhaka, spinning threads as fine as 88 yards per rati, disappeared by the late nineteenth century due to industrial changes.

4.2. Caste-Based Distribution of Textile Workers

The caste structure was a significant determinant in the specialization and regional distribution of weaving communities. The 1872 and 1881 census data, as presented in **Table 1**, illustrate the demographic spread of *tantis* (weavers) across Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa.

Table 1: Distribution Of Tantis Across Regions (1872-1881 Census).

District	1872 Census	1881 Census	District	1872 Census	1881 Census
Burdwan	46,647	20,913	Chittagong	2,799	4,894
Bankura	16,510	29,304	Noakhali	1,273	1,326
Birbhum	16,761	15,962	Patna	12,958	18,802
Midnapore	106,317	97,720	Gaya	6,894	5,744
Hooghly & Howrah	39,079	29,647	Shahabad	8,156	10,388
24 Parganas	19,576	14,250	Tirhut	82,496	147,569
Nadiya	9,418	8,129	Saran	4,806	10,826
Khulna	2,594	6,806	Champanan	11,496	21,186
Jessore	10,760	10,349	Monghyr	86,202	87,268
Murshidabad	17,409	19,814	Bhagalpur	63,037	59,884
Dinajpur	12,800	9,093	Purnia	35,307	29,273
Rajshahi	822	1,515	Maldah	16,360	6,503
Rangpur	3,235	4,553	Santal Paraganas	4,656	10,949
Bogra	1,801	1,660	Cuttack	37,822	38,790
Pabna	4,059	4,110	Puri	14,154	14,215
Darjeeling	644	428	Balasore	38,460	40,046
Jalpaiguri	4,034	5,453			
Kuch Behar	3,410	1,437			
Dacca	8,906	10,587			
Faridpur	3,410	3,304			
Bakarganj	1,875	1,327			
Mymensingh	7,392	8,430			
Tipperah	1,792	1,540			

Source: Risley, H.H. (1891). *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vol. 2, p. 304.

4.3. Occupational Specialization and Sub-Castes

The **Tanti**, **Jugi**, and **Julaha** castes were central to Bengal's textile industry, each contributing uniquely to the region's production capabilities and socio-economic fabric.

4.3.1. Tanti Castes

The Tantis dominated Bengal's weaving industry, with their sub-castes specializing in different aspects of textile production:

- **Aswini or Asan Tantis:** Focused on both cotton and silk weaving, these sub-castes demonstrated versatility in producing high-quality textiles.
- **Banga Tantis:** Renowned for their fine cloth production, they supplied premium fabrics to local and Mughal markets.
- **Baro-Bhagya Tantis:** Specialized in ceremonial and high-value textiles, reflecting their elevated status in the weaving

community.

4.3.2. Jugi Castes

The Jugis primarily specialized in coarser textiles, catering to domestic needs and export markets. Their products included **malmal** and **guzzy**, which were widely traded. However, with the influx of machine-made goods during the colonial period, Jugis were forced to transition to agriculture, lime-burning, or other trades, showcasing their resilience amidst economic disruptions.

4.3.3. Julaha Castes

The Julahas, Muslim weavers of Bengal and Bihar, occupied a lower social status despite their contributions to textile production. Known for producing coarse textiles, they were integral to meeting the everyday needs of the local population. Julahas often faced social marginalization and prejudice, even as they adapted to changing economic circumstances.

Annexure I: Classification Of Tanti and Related Weaving Sub-Castes.

Region	Titles/Sub-Castes
Titles in Bengal	Barash, Basak, Bhadya-bau, Bit, Chand, Chhagri, Dalal, Das, Datta, De, Gui, Hansi, Jachandar, Kar, Lu, Mandal, Mesha, Muhkim, Nandi, Pal, Pramanik, Sadhu, Sardar, Sarkar, Sil.
Titles in Bihar	Das, Mahato, Manjhi, Marar, Marik.
Sub-Castes in Bengal	Aswini or Asan Tanti (including Bardwana, Barna-kul, Madhya-kul, Mandarona, and Uttar-kul), Balarami, Banga, Baro-bhagya or Jhampaniya, Barendra, Chhoto-bhagya or Kayath-tanti, Kature, Kora, Kshir, Madhukari, Magi, Mariali, Nir, Pattar, Purandari, Purba-kul, Rarhi, Uddhabi.
Sub-Castes in Bihar	Baiswara, Banaudhia, Chamar, Jaiswar, Kahar, Kanaujia, Tirhutia, Uttarha.
Sub-Castes in Orissa	Matiban-Tanti, Gala-Tanti, Hansi-Tanti.

Source: After *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* by H.H. Risley (1891).

Caste-Based Specialization and Regional Diversity

The intricate caste system within Bengal's weaving communities is evident in the variety of titles and sub-castes across Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa.

- **Bengal:** The Tanti caste, with sub-castes like Aswini, Balarami, and Baro-Bhagya, highlighted occupational specialization and social dynamics within the region.
- **Bihar:** Sub-castes such as Baiswara, Banaudhia, and Tirhutia reflected geographic origins and local customs that influenced caste identities and roles in textile production.
- **Orissa:** Sub-castes like Matiban-Tanti and Hansi-Tanti underscored the region's distinct contributions, including vibrantly colored fabrics and fine textiles.

Annexure I provides a comprehensive classification of these sub-castes, shedding light on

the socio-cultural and occupational structures within weaving communities. This classification emphasizes how caste and geography shaped labor organization, professional hierarchies, and cultural traditions. The diversity and adaptability of these communities reflect the dynamic interplay between caste, craft, and economic factors in Bengal's textile history, highlighting their integral role in the socio-economic narrative of the region.

4.4. Role of Nabasudra Group in Weaving Communities

The **Nabasudra group**, a critical element of Bengal's caste system, was formally introduced during the twelfth century under King Ballal Sen's social hierarchy reforms. These reforms were designed to reorganize and expand the socio-economic framework by incorporating diverse occupational groups into the **Sudra or Patit** category (Risley, 1891). This reclassification facilitated the

establishment of nine new endogamous castes, each specializing in trades essential to the economic and cultural fabric of Bengal.

4.4.1. Expansion of the Sudra Category

The creation of the Nabasudra group allowed for greater occupational specialization within Bengal's caste structure. This restructuring aimed to integrate diverse communities into a cohesive economic framework.

The Nabasudra group included:

- **Sankhari:** Artisans specializing in crafting shell bangles, vital for traditional ceremonies.
- **Kamar:** Blacksmiths responsible for making tools and equipment essential for agriculture and craftsmanship.
- **Kumar:** Potters producing clay wares for domestic, religious, and economic use.
- **Malakar:** Specialists in creating garlands and floral decorations, often used in religious and festive settings.
- **Napit:** Barbers who also performed ceremonial and priestly duties.
- **Gop-Goala:** Cowherds managing livestock and milk production, key to Bengal's agrarian economy.
- **Madhu-Napit:** Collectors of honey and experts in apiculture.
- **Barai:** Betel leaf cultivators, whose produce was integral to Bengal's social rituals (Wise, 1883).

This division of labor not only provided economic stability but also reinforced the caste system's role in maintaining a self-sustaining social order.

4.4.2. The Tanti Caste: Pillars of Bengal's Textile Industry

Among the Nabasudra group, the **Tanti caste** (alternatively referred to as Tantabaya, Tantubaya, or Tatwa) emerged as the most influential due to its crucial role in Bengal's textile production. As key contributors to Bengal's renowned weaving tradition, the Tantis exemplified occupational expertise and economic significance.

- a. **Occupational Specialization:** The Tantis were celebrated for their expertise in producing fine cotton and silk textiles, including the famed muslins of Dhaka. Their skills in dyeing and weaving were unparalleled, earning them patronage from Mughal rulers and European traders (Hamilton, 1833).
- b. **Economic Importance:** Bengal's textile exports during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were central to its economy. The Tantis' ability

to produce high-quality textiles sustained the region's dominance in global trade, particularly in markets across Europe and the Middle East (Hossain, 1988).

- c. **Cultural Significance:** The Tantis' textiles played an essential role in religious ceremonies and social customs, symbolizing Bengal's rich cultural heritage (Dutta, 1968).

4.4.3. Interdependence Within the Nabasudra Group

The Tantis' success was interlinked with the contributions of other Nabasudra castes, highlighting an integrated economic structure:

- **Kamar blacksmiths** crafted tools, including looms and spindles, used by the Tantis in textile production.
- **Kumar potters** supplied clay weights and spindles essential for spinning threads.
- **Malakar florists** provided decorative elements for embroidered textiles.

This synergy ensured that the Nabasudra group functioned as a cohesive economic unit, with each caste complementing the others in sustaining Bengal's economy.

Social and Economic Mobility

Although classified within the Sudra hierarchy, some Nabasudra castes, particularly the Tantis, displayed upward social mobility through economic success. Wealthier Tanti families transitioned into roles such as merchants and agents for textile trade, often adopting titles like Basak to signify their elevated status (Wise, 1883). In certain cases, economic prosperity allowed them to negotiate improved social positions within the rigid caste hierarchy (Hossain, 1988).

The Nabasudra group, particularly the Tantis, played an indispensable role in shaping Bengal's economic and cultural history. The intricate interplay between occupational specialization, inter-caste collaboration, and social mobility underscores the significance of the Nabasudra group in maintaining the socio-economic fabric of Bengal's weaving communities. By integrating diverse trades under a unified caste category, the Nabasudra group exemplifies how caste systems in pre-modern Bengal evolved to accommodate the complexities of economic and social life.

4.5. Folklore and Mythology Surrounding the Tantis

The folklore and mythology surrounding the **Tanti caste** offer profound insights into their origins,

cultural identity, and the sacred nature of their craft. These narratives, deeply rooted in Hindu mythology and regional traditions, highlight the divine connections attributed to the Tantis, elevating their occupational role within Bengal's socio-economic and cultural framework.

4.5.1. Mythical Origins of the Tantis

One prominent legend traces the origin of the Tantis to the **sweat of Lord Shiva**, shed during his performance of the **Tandava dance**, symbolizing creation, destruction, and cosmic balance. This narrative associates the Tantis with creativity and labor, imbuing their craft with divine significance. Simultaneously, Shiva's consort, **Kusbati**, is said to have been created from a blade of **kusha grass**, emphasizing the purity and sanctity of the Tanti lineage. This myth reflects the perceived spiritual importance of weaving, a profession intertwined with religious and ceremonial life in Bengal (Risley, 1891).

4.5.2. Connection to Viswakarma

Another widely cited tradition links the Tantis to **Viswakarma**, the celestial engineer and divine craftsman in Hindu mythology. According to this account, the Tantis descended from a union between Viswakarma and a **Sudra woman**, symbolizing their intermediary role between divine creativity and earthly labor. This legend reinforced the cultural pride of the Tantis, elevating their occupational identity within the caste system and emphasizing their indispensable contribution to Bengal's cultural and economic landscape (Wise, 1883).

4.5.3. Cultural and Occupational Significance of Folklore

The folklore surrounding the Tantis served as a powerful tool to legitimize their social standing and professional identity. These myths carried the following implications:

- a. **Spiritual Elevation of Weaving:** The divine origins emphasized the sanctity of their craft, portraying weaving as a sacred duty rather than a mundane occupation.
- b. **Strengthening of Social Unity:** Shared myths fostered communal pride and solidarity among the Tantis, creating a collective identity rooted in cultural heritage.
- c. **Enhancement of Cultural Prestige:** By attributing their lineage to revered deities, the Tantis gained a status that transcended their position as artisans, reinforcing their role as cultural custodians of Bengal's textile

traditions (Hamilton, 1833; Mitra, 1978).

4.5.4. Symbolism in Weaving

Weaving was often metaphorically linked to the act of cosmic creation in Hindu mythology, mirroring the process of bringing order from chaos. This symbolism further reinforced the divine and cultural importance of the Tantis' profession, aligning their craft with broader spiritual and philosophical themes (Hunter, 1868).

The myths and folklore surrounding the Tantis are more than mere stories; they reflect the social, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of their identity. By portraying the Tantis as descendants of divine figures like Shiva and Viswakarma, these narratives elevated their status and emphasized the sacred nature of their craft. Such traditions, documented in historical and ethnographic accounts, provide a window into the interplay of religion, caste, and occupation in pre-modern Bengal, underscoring the enduring legacy of the Tantis in the region's cultural and economic history.

4.6. Socio-Economic Structure and Leadership in Tanti Communities

The socio-economic structure of the Tanti communities was marked by their religious affiliations, informal leadership, and unique organizational frameworks that enabled them to navigate socio-economic challenges. These structures reflect the adaptability and resilience of the Tantis in preserving their cultural identity and professional coherence amidst changing socio-political landscapes.

4.6.1. Religious Affiliation and Cultural Identity

The Tantis predominantly practiced **Vaishnavism**, a devotional tradition focused on worshipping **Vishnu** and his avatars, especially **Krishna**. Their association with the **Khardah Gosains**, a prominent Vaishnava sect, reinforced their religious identity and provided spiritual cohesion within the community. Vaishnavism's emphasis on humility, service, and collective welfare resonated with the Tantis' artisanal and community-oriented way of life (Hunter, 1868). Religious festivals, such as **Janmastami**, became central to their cultural practices, fostering unity and continuity of tradition.

4.6.2. Absence of Formal Panchayats

Unlike many caste-based communities in Bengal, the Tantis lacked formal panchayats or caste

councils. Instead, their social and economic interests were managed through informal mechanisms of leadership:

- a. **Role of Wealthier Members:** The wealthier and more influential Tantis served as informal leaders, offering guidance and financial support to poorer members. Their leadership was rooted in community respect rather than institutional authority, which allowed for a flexible and adaptive approach to decision-making (Risley, 1891).
- b. **Collective Organization through Dals:** The Tantis organized themselves into **dals** (guilds), with each guild led by a **Dalapati** (guild leader). These guilds acted as cooperative units, addressing the community's collective needs, such as negotiating prices, managing disputes, and maintaining professional standards in weaving practices. The Dalapati, chosen based on experience and reputation, played a key role in upholding the guild's interests (Mitra, 1978).

4.6.3. Informal Leadership and Social Cohesion

The absence of rigid institutional structures in the Tanti communities fostered a horizontal social framework wherein collective interests took precedence over hierarchical control. This informal yet effective organizational system provided several advantages:

1. **Community Resilience:** The guild structure allowed Tantis to pool resources and collectively address economic fluctuations, such as those caused by the influx of machine-made textiles during the colonial period (Hossain, 1988).
2. **Flexibility in Leadership:** Informal leadership enabled the community to adapt to changing circumstances, ensuring that decisions were pragmatic and reflective of the collective will.
3. **Professional Identity:** The guild system reinforced the Tantis' identity as master weavers, safeguarding their craft and cultural practices against external pressures (Hamilton, 1833).

4.6.4. Challenges and Adaptations

The Tantis faced significant socio-economic challenges despite their cohesion, particularly during the colonial era. The decline in demand for handwoven textiles and the imposition of exploitative colonial policies disrupted their traditional livelihoods. However, the informal structure of leadership and collective action through

guilds enabled the Tantis to adapt by diversifying their professions or returning to agriculture (Wise, 1883).

The socio-economic structure and leadership within the Tanti communities exemplify the interplay between tradition and adaptability. Their reliance on informal leadership, supported by collective organization through guilds, highlights their resilience in preserving cultural and professional identity. This model of decentralized leadership not only enabled the Tantis to maintain social cohesion but also served as a mechanism for collective survival amidst socio-economic challenges.

4.7. The Jugi Caste and Their Role in Textile Production

The Jugi caste, an essential component of Bengal's weaving community, contributed significantly to the production of textiles, particularly coarser varieties such as **malmal** and **guzzy**, which catered to both domestic and export markets. Their history, practices, and adaptations highlight the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of Bengal's textile industry.

4.7.1. Specialization in Coarser Textiles

The Jugis specialized in weaving coarser textiles, distinguishing themselves from the Tantis, who focused on finer cloth. Products such as malmal and guzzy were integral to Bengal's economy, serving both local needs and the demands of international trade during the pre-industrial period (Hamilton, 1833). Despite their lower status in the caste hierarchy, the Jugis played a vital role in sustaining Bengal's position as a hub of textile production.

4.7.2. Economic Disruptions and Transition to Other Trades

The advent of **machine-made goods** during the colonial era disrupted the traditional handloom industry, causing economic hardships for artisanal groups, including the Jugis.

The influx of cheaper British textiles led to a decline in demand for labor-intensive handwoven fabrics, forcing many Jugis to transition to alternative trades, such as:

- **Agriculture:** Many Jugis returned to farming to sustain their livelihoods.
- **Lime-Burning:** This trade became a prominent secondary occupation for Jugis, particularly in regions like Tipperah.
- **Goldsmithing:** A section of the Jugis took up goldsmithing, reflecting their adaptability to changing economic conditions (Wise, 1883).

These transitions highlight the Jugis' resilience in adapting to economic challenges while maintaining their socio-economic relevance.

4.7.3. Sub-Castes and Ritual Practices

The Jugi caste was divided into two primary sub-castes: Masya and Ekadasi. Their unique rituals and practices differentiated these sub-castes:

1. **Masya Jugis:** Guided by the religious text *Vrihad Jogini Tantra*, they were concentrated in southern regions like Bikrampur, Tipperah, and Noakhali.
2. **Ekadasi Jugis:** Following the Sanskrit text *Vrihad Satapathi*, they were more prevalent in northern areas, such as northern Bikrampur and Dhaka (Risley, 1891).

The sub-castes also exhibited differences in weaving practices and death rituals:

- The **Masya Jugis** and **Ekadasi Jugis** differed in how they processed rice for weaving. Masya Jugis used boiled rice (*mar*), while the Ekadasi Jugis preferred parched rice (*khai*).
- While cremation was standard among most weaving castes, the Jugis uniquely buried their dead, a practice that set them apart from the Tantis and other groups (Mitra, 1978).

4.7.4. Challenges and Social Ostracism

As many Jugis shifted to other professions, they faced social ostracism, particularly when they moved into occupations considered impure by traditional caste standards. For instance:

- **Lime-Burning Jugis** of Tipperah were excluded from mainstream Jugi society.
- Some groups, such as the Halwa-Jugis of eastern Bengal, were outcasted due to their professional transitions.

Despite these challenges, the Jugis' occupational flexibility demonstrates their ability to adapt to evolving socio-economic contexts while retaining aspects of their cultural identity (Hunter, 1868).

4.7.5. Legacy and Cultural Contributions

The Jugi caste's adaptability and resilience were instrumental in preserving their weaving traditions while contributing to Bengal's economic and cultural tapestry. Their role in producing coarser textiles and their subsequent diversification underscore the complex interplay of caste, craft, and economic forces in Bengal's history.

4.8. The Julaha and Jamdani Tanti Castes

The Muslim weaving castes of Bengal, particularly the **Jamdani Tantis** and **Julahas**, played

significant roles in the region's textile industry. These groups contributed to both the production of fine luxury textiles and more utilitarian fabrics, highlighting the diversity and specialization within Bengal's weaving traditions.

4.8.1. Jamdani Tantis: Artisans of Fine Textiles

The Jamdani Tantis were regarded as a higher caste among Muslim weavers due to their specialization in crafting Jamdani textiles. Known for their intricate patterns, these textiles were comparable to embroidery in their craftsmanship and design precision. Key aspects of their role include:

- **Centers of Production:** The Jamdani Tantis were primarily concentrated in areas like **Demra, Nabiganj**, and regions along the Sitalakha River near Dhaka, which became hubs of Jamdani production.
- **Artistic Excellence:** The weaving process involved creating floral and geometric motifs with supplementary weft threads, resulting in lightweight, sheer fabrics highly valued by Mughal elites and European traders (Mitra, 1978).
- **Social Status:** Their craftsmanship elevated their status among Muslim weavers, distinguishing them from other castes, such as the Julahas (Hunter, 1868).

Despite their superior craftsmanship, the Jamdani Tantis faced challenges during the colonial era as British-manufactured textiles disrupted traditional weaving industries. However, the legacy of their art remains significant, with Jamdani textiles recognized as a UNESCO intangible cultural heritage.

4.8.2. Julahas: Producers of Coarse Textiles

The Julahas, a lower-status Muslim caste, primarily focused on producing coarser textiles for domestic and export markets. Their role and challenges include:

- **Economic Contributions:** Despite their lower status, Julahas supplied essential fabrics such as coarse cotton and jute-based materials, supporting both local economies and trade networks (Risley, 1891).
- **Social Marginalization:** The Julahas were subjected to widespread social ostracism, often portrayed in folklore and societal narratives as incompetent or foolish. Mr. Grierson documented numerous stories and poems ridiculing the Julahas, reflecting the entrenched prejudices they faced (Grierson, 1886).
- **Religious Identity:** While most Julahas

adhered to **Shia Islam**, their religious practices set them apart from other Muslim communities in Bengal, further contributing to their marginalization.

The fluidity of occupational roles within the caste system allowed some Julahas to transition to other trades. However, this adaptability often blurred distinctions between sub-castes and made it difficult to trace their precise historical identities.

4.8.3. *Contrasting Roles and Challenges*

The stark contrast between the Jamdani Tantis and Julahas illustrates the layered socio-economic hierarchies within Bengal's Muslim weaving communities:

- The **Jamdani Tantis** enjoyed relative prestige due to their artistry, serving elite markets and maintaining a reputation for excellence.
- The **Julahas**, despite their economic contributions, were relegated to lower social ranks and faced significant discrimination.

This divergence underscores the complexities of caste, craft, and social dynamics in Bengal's textile industry during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

4.9. *Migration and Diversification of Weaving Castes*

The migration and diversification of weaving castes into Bengal between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries underscore the dynamic socio-economic factors that shaped the region's textile industry. These movements brought both seasonal and permanent workers, contributing to the richness of Bengal's weaving traditions.

4.9.1. *Seasonal Workers: Dhuneras from Bihar*

- **Specialized Role:** The **Dhuneras**, a caste from Bihar, engaged in the specialized trade of cotton teasing, particularly during the harvest season. Their work primarily involved preparing cotton for use in pillows and mattresses rather than weaving yarn for textiles (Buchanan, 1833).
- **Economic Patterns:** These seasonal workers traveled to Bengal, often returning to Bihar once their tasks were complete, showcasing the inter-regional labor exchanges that supported Bengal's textile production.

4.9.2. *Permanent Settlers: Tirhutia and Mungirya Weavers*

- **Integration into Bengal's Economy:** The **Tirhutia** and **Mungirya** weavers, named

after their ancestral places in Bihar (Tirhut and Mungiyar), migrated permanently to eastern Bengal. The Mungirya weavers were often regarded more highly than their Tirhutia counterparts due to their skill in weaving coarser yet durable cloth (Wise, 1883).

- **Urban and Rural Contributions:** While engaging in urban labor as coolies, jute packers, and porters during the day, these groups-maintained weaving as a home-based activity, balancing multiple economic roles to sustain their livelihoods.

4.9.3. *Contributions from Orissa: Matiban-Tanti and Gala-Tanti Sub-Castes*

- **Distinct Skills:** Migrant weaving groups from Orissa, such as the **Matiban-Tanti** and **Gala-Tanti**, brought their regional expertise in crafting vibrant and fine textiles (Risley, 1891).
- **Economic Necessity:** Many of these sub-castes transitioned to weaving from other trades for economic reasons, highlighting the adaptability of these communities to shifting market demands.

4.9.4. *Impact of Migration and Diversification*

- **Social Challenges:** Migrant weaving communities often faced social exclusion and were confined to interactions within their own sub-castes. For example, Dhaka folklore ridiculed migrant weavers, reflecting upper-caste disdain and entrenched social prejudices (Wise, 1883).
- **Economic Integration:** Despite these challenges, migrant castes integrated into Bengal's textile economy, enriching its diversity. Groups like the **Baiswara** and **Uttarha**, whose names referenced their geographic origins, adopted weaving as a primary profession. Similarly, sub-castes like the **Banaudhia** transitioned from the bania caste to weaving, albeit with some social degradation (Buchanan, 1833).

The migration and diversification of weaving castes illustrate the fluid yet stratified nature of Bengal's labor economy. Seasonal workers like the Dhuneras, permanent settlers such as the Tirhutia and Mungirya, and skilled weavers from Orissa collectively contributed to Bengal's reputation as a center of textile excellence. These movements underscore how geographic and economic factors reshaped caste identities and roles within the region's

dynamic textile industry.

4.10. Resilience and Occupational Adaptations of the Tantis

The Tantis of Bengal faced significant economic disruptions during the late nineteenth century due to the influx of inexpensive machine-made textiles from Europe. Despite these challenges, the community demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability, preserving their cultural and professional identity.

4.10.1. Adaptation and Diversification

- **Aswini Tantis:** Some sub-castes, such as the **Aswini Tantis**, adapted to the changing market by diversifying their craft. They engaged in both cotton and silk weaving, showcasing their ability to adjust to economic pressures and shifting consumer demands (Buchanan, 1833; Wise, 1883).
- **Economic Strategies:** By branching into multiple types of textiles, these sub-castes retained a foothold in the weaving industry, leveraging their skills to maintain economic relevance.

4.10.2. Persistence Amidst Adversity

- **Uttarkul Tantis:** Sub-castes like the **Uttarkul Tantis** steadfastly continued their craft, even in the face of extreme poverty. Unlike others who transitioned back to agriculture or left weaving altogether, the Uttarkul Tantis demonstrated unwavering dedication to their traditional profession (Risley, 1891).
- **Cultural Identity:** This persistence highlights the deep cultural and professional pride within the Tanti caste, as weaving was not merely a livelihood but an intrinsic part of their identity.

4.10.3. Impact of Economic Disruptions

- **Decline in Demand:** The proliferation of machine-made textiles disrupted the traditional handloom sector, significantly reducing the demand for labor-intensive Tanti-made fabrics. Many Tantis were compelled to abandon weaving and return to agriculture or other trades for survival (Hunter, 1876).
- **Occupational Migration:** While some sub-castes diversified or persisted, others, such as the Mariali Tantis, experienced occupational migration. Approximately one-third of these weavers shifted entirely to agriculture, reflecting the varied responses to economic pressures (Wise, 1883).

4.10.4. Cultural and Professional Identity

The resilience of the Tantis underscores the strong cultural and professional identity tied to their craft. For many, weaving was more than an economic activity; it was a marker of social pride and a symbol of their heritage. The adaptability of sub-castes like the Aswini Tantis and the determination of groups such as the Uttarkul Tantis illustrate how the Tantis navigated the challenges of industrialization while preserving their traditions.

The Tantis' responses to the economic challenges of the nineteenth century reveal their ability to adapt while remaining rooted in their cultural identity. Their persistence and flexibility reflect not only their professional commitment but also their enduring contribution to Bengal's socio-economic and cultural fabric.

4.11. The Religious and Social Life of Tanti

The **religious and social life** of the tanti caste was deeply interwoven with their occupational identity and regional practices, reflecting both their cultural distinctiveness and their integration within broader Hindu traditions. The exogamous sections of the tanti caste were few, particularly in Bengal, where **Brahmin gotras** were commonly followed. In Bihar, however, only three such sections existed, and they were not exogamous. Marriage customs varied between Bengal and Bihar. In Bihar, even the poorest sections arranged marriages before the girl reached puberty, with dowries provided according to the family's capacity. While polygamy was uncommon due to the caste's general economic constraints, **widow remarriage** was allowed in Bihar but strictly prohibited in Bengal. Divorce (*talak*) was also unknown among the tantis in both regions.

Social practices governing caste inclusion and exclusion were notably rigid. For instance, while women from lower castes, such as **teli**, **turha**, and **gonrhi**, occasionally became mistresses of tanti men, this often led to temporary disrepute for the individuals involved. However, the **local panchayat** would sometimes accept these relationships upon the fulfillment of symbolic restitution, such as organizing a feast for the cast members. In contrast, male outsiders could never be assimilated into the tanti caste under similar circumstances.

Religiously, the tantis of Bengal were predominantly **Vaishnavas**, closely associated with the **Khardah Gosains**, though their connection was often distant. Leadership within the community was informal; there was no formal **dalapati** (headman), and the wealthier members of the caste provided guidance and resolved disputes. Festivals played a

significant role in their social and cultural lives. The **Janmastami festival**, commemorating the birth of Lord Krishna, was celebrated with grandeur, particularly in Dhaka, where *tantis* organized a grand procession along the city's central roads. This event was especially prominent during the era of the Nawabs, who resided in Dhaka, making the procession one of the city's most celebrated annual events.

The residential areas of the *tantis* in Dhaka, namely **Tanti Bazar** and **Nawabpur**, were central to their community life and cultural activities. By the late nineteenth century, two separate processions for Janmastami originated from these areas, converging to circle the city. Interestingly, the deities worshipped in these localities differed: **Murali Manohar Krishna** was revered in Tanti Bazar, while **Shalgram Narayan** or **Lakshmi-Narayana** was venerated in Nawabpur. This variation underscores the localized expressions of Vaishnavism within the *tanti* community, reflecting the cultural diversity within their religious practices.

These insights into the religious and social life of the *tantis* provide a nuanced understanding of how their cultural and spiritual traditions were closely tied to their socio-economic roles and regional identities. By blending broader Hindu customs with local practices, the *tantis* sustained a vibrant cultural identity amidst the challenges of economic and social change.

The **Banga Tantis** had distinct cultural and religious practices that set them apart from other *tanti* sub-castes. One of their unique traditions was the celebration of **Kamdeva Puja** on **Madana Chaturdasi**, the fourteenth day of the month of Chaitra. This festival, rooted in ancient traditions, was not observed by other *tantis*, especially the **Jhampaniya Tantis**, who notably avoided the day. By the nineteenth century, the originally week-long festival was condensed into a single-day celebration, reflecting the changing social and economic conditions of the time.

The Banga Tantis also celebrated **Janmastami**, but their observance differed from that of the **Basaks**. In their unique tradition, two boys were dressed elaborately as **Krishna** and his foster father **Nanda** and paraded in a **rath (chariot)** throughout the community. This celebration highlighted the localized expressions of shared Vaishnava faith within the *tanti* groups.

Another significant festival for the Banga Tantis was **Vishwakarma Puja**, celebrated in line with other artisanal communities in Bengal. During this festival, tools of their trade—including shuttles, looms, and

other implements—were worshipped and adorned, symbolizing their reverence for craftsmanship and the divine architect Vishwakarma.

The convergence of weaving communities from diverse geographic and cultural backgrounds in Bengal's business hubs led to the blending of distinct traditions, customs, and festivals. Over time, these groups, while retaining elements of their original cultural identities, were cast into a single occupational category as *tantis*. This amalgamation created a rich tapestry of traditions that not only preserved their individual cultural signatures but also enriched their collective identity as master weavers in Bengal's textile industry. Their unique festivals and rituals reflect a dynamic interplay of regional influences and occupational pride, which were integral to their social fabric and professional legacy.

In Bengal, **Vaishnavism** was the predominant belief system of the *tanti* caste. Deities such as **Lakshmi-Narayana** and **Radha-Krishna** were revered as household gods (**grihadebata**) and were central to their religious practices. In addition to these primary deities, other Hindu gods were also respected. In specific regions, such as the **Santhal Paraganas**, minor deities like **Rangadhari** and **Jaikha** were worshipped within *tanti* families, reflecting localized traditions that complemented their broader Vaishnavite faith.

In contrast, among the **Tatwas** of Bihar, Vaishnavism held little sway. Instead, the worship of female deities, such as **Kali** and **Durga**, was more prevalent. The **Kanujia sub-caste** demonstrated this devotion by offering sacrifices, including fresh goats, to **Madhu Kunwar**, a legendary figure within the *tanti* caste believed to act as an intermediary to Kali. The **Tirhutia sub-caste** worshipped Durga, Kali, and Mahadeva, while also adhering to the teachings of **Buddh-Ram**, a mochi saint whose philosophies bore similarities to those of **Nanak Shah**.

Certain Tatwa sub-castes in Bihar also engaged in animalistic rites, worshipping minor gods such as **Saisyar** and **Karuchar**. These practices involved the sacrifice of domestic animals on specific days each month. Such rites, however, were considered taboo by the *tantis* in Bengal, where they were viewed as impure and disdained by the community. The **Brahmin purohits** in Bengal typically refrained from participating in or endorsing such rituals, further emphasizing the cultural and religious divide between the *Tantwa* traditions of Bengal and Bihar.

These regional differences in religious beliefs and practices highlight the diversity within the *tanti* caste across Bengal and Bihar. While the Bengali *tantis*

leaned towards Vaishnavism and maintained rituals aligned with Brahminical traditions, the Tatwas of Bihar exhibited a syncretic blend of local, tribal, and Hindu customs. This divergence underscores the adaptability of the tanti caste in integrating local beliefs while maintaining distinct religious identities tied to their regional and cultural contexts.

In Bengal, **Brahmins** were the primary religious and ceremonial supervisors for the **nabasudra groups**, including the tantis. The Brahmins played an essential role in maintaining the caste hierarchy by officiating rituals and ensuring adherence to Brahminical traditions. In contrast, in **Bihar**, the **Tatwas** occupied a significantly lower social position. They selected their **purohits** from within their own caste, typically from lower-ranking **Kannujas** or **Mithilas** who had joined some form of priestly order. These caste-based priests lacked formal religious texts or established customs, resulting in the Tatwas following a more **primitive religious order** compared to their counterparts in Bengal.

The tantis in Bengal, as part of the nabasudra group, were elevated to an **undisputed rank** within

5. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

5.1. Intersection of Caste and Occupation

The socio-economic dynamics of Bengal's textile industry reveal a deep interconnection between caste and occupational specialization. The Tantis, Jugis, and Julahas, among other weaving castes, developed distinct niches within the handloom sector, each defined by its unique cultural and regional characteristics. Sub-castes such as the Aswini Tantis, Banga Tantis, and Jamdani Tantis exemplify the division of labor based on geographic and occupational factors (Risley, 1892; Buchanan, 1833). This specialization was not static; economic opportunities and resource availability often prompted shifts in roles, such as Jugis transitioning to agriculture or lime-burning as machine-made goods displaced traditional weaving (Wise, 1883).

Caste served as both a means of preserving specialized knowledge and a mechanism for maintaining hierarchical labor organization. The localization of skills, as observed in regions like Dhaka and Rangpur, further reinforced the interplay between caste, geography, and occupation (Hunter, 1868). However, this rigidity often limited upward mobility, even as the weaving communities displayed adaptability in response to economic pressures.

5.2. Role of Religion in Shaping Social Cohesion

the caste hierarchy, although their perceived **purity** was tied to specific practices in their craft. One such measure of purity was the type of **starch** used in weaving. Tantis who prepared starch from **parched rice boiled in water (khai)** were considered part of the "pure" caste, while those using starch made from **boiled rice (mar)** were deemed impure. The latter practice, associated with the **jugi caste**, was considered abominable in Bengal. Despite its negative perception, the use of mar by the jugis was functional, often enhancing the **aesthetic value** of the finished cloth.

This stark contrast between the structured religious oversight of the tantis in Bengal and the loosely organized practices of the Tatwas in Bihar underscores the diversity within the broader weaving community. While the tantis in Bengal adhered to a more orthodox framework influenced by Brahminical traditions, the Tatwas in Bihar exhibited a localized and less formalized approach to religious and ceremonial life. These distinctions further highlight how geography and social hierarchies shaped the cultural and religious identities of weaving castes across the region.

Religion played a dual role in uniting and fragmenting weaving communities in Bengal. Among the Tantis, Vaishnavism served as a unifying force, with shared rituals such as Janmastami and Vishwakarma Puja fostering cultural identity and social cohesion (Bentley, 1921; Wise, 1883). In contrast, the Tatwas of Bihar exhibited a syncretic blend of Hindu, tribal, and animalistic rites, reflecting localized religious influences and a broader cultural diversity (Dutta, 1968).

The observance of festivals and rituals not only reinforced the spiritual identity of these communities but also acted as mechanisms for social integration. For instance, Kamdeva Puja celebrated by the Banga Tantis highlighted their distinct traditions while maintaining connections to the broader Vaishnava faith (Bentley, 1921). The divergence in religious practices between Bengal and Bihar underscores the adaptability of weaving castes in incorporating regional beliefs into their socio-religious framework.

5.3. Economic Pressures and Social Mobility

The advent of cheap, machine-made textiles during the colonial period significantly disrupted Bengal's handloom industry, placing immense economic pressure on weaving castes. The East India Company's agency system, coupled with declining support for artisanal crafts, exacerbated the vulnerabilities of traditional weavers (Hossain, 1988). As a result, many sub-castes such as the Mariali and

Tirhutia Tantis transitioned to agriculture or alternative trades, often at the cost of social status (Hunter, 1875–1877; Mitra, 1978).

Despite these challenges, some groups demonstrated remarkable resilience. The Uttarkul Tantis, for example, persisted in their craft despite severe poverty, underscoring the cultural and professional pride embedded within their identity (Risley, 1892). This dual narrative of vulnerability and resilience reflects the complex interplay of economic forces and caste hierarchies in shaping the socio-economic mobility of weaving communities.

5.4. Broader Implications for South Asian Socio-Economic Structures

The findings from Bengal's textile industry offer critical insights into the broader socio-economic structures of South Asia. The rigid caste-based division of labor, while fostering specialized knowledge, also perpetuated socio-economic inequalities and limited opportunities for mobility (Dutta, 1968). However, the adaptability and resilience displayed by weaving castes highlight the potential for marginalized groups to navigate structural constraints.

Religion emerged as both a cohesive force and a marker of diversity, illustrating the importance of cultural and spiritual identity in sustaining traditional industries. Festivals and rituals served not only as expressions of faith but also as mechanisms for fostering solidarity and cultural continuity (Bentley, 1921; Buchanan, 1833).

The decline of Bengal's handloom industry under colonial rule underscores the vulnerabilities of traditional crafts in the face of globalization and industrialization. Nevertheless, the persistence of weaving communities offers valuable lessons for contemporary policies aimed at preserving artisanal traditions, promoting equitable labor practices, and addressing structural inequalities in South Asia.

By examining the intersection of caste, religion, and economic forces, this analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the historical dynamics that continue to influence labor and social hierarchies in South Asia. The integration of these findings into modern development frameworks can help empower marginalized communities while fostering sustainable socio-economic progress.

6. CONCLUSION

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This study reveals the relationship between culture and work within different castes and sub-castes in Bengal textile industry. The findings also show the significant role played by the weaving castes, i.e., tanti and jugi in shaping the socio-economic landscape of the industry. The influential role of caste headman or elders within a community often overshadowed by the economic incentives reflecting the absence of formal guild with definitive structures in Bengali society. The study also emphasises historical fluidity of jobs related to a particular caste or sub-caste in front of economic opportunities and geographic migrations. Often even higher caste people indulged to weaving if the economic remuneration was better. It also underscores the pragmatism employed by the marginalised groups to sustain their livelihood.

Bengali tanti despite having high position within the **nabasudra** group, was generally poor and were exploited by merchants and their **pykers**. Under the colonial system after 1764, their plight was further exacerbated by the adoption of different policies by the ruling power. The assured flow of bullions into the textile industry was replaced by a system that prioritized British industrial goods over local production. Weavers who earlier had left part time agriculture for economic incentives increasingly returned to farming by the late nineteenth century. This transition underscores economic vulnerabilities of the weaving castes, whose livelihoods were undermined by the external economic pressures and shifting global trade dynamics. In front of these external economic challenges this caste of people showed remarkable cultural resilience in form of religious and social practices, such as **Janmastami**, **Kamdeva Puja** etc., served as unifying forces that reinforced their collective identity.

In conclusion, the weaving castes of Bengal serve as a powerful example of how tradition, fluidity and resilience intersected within a rigid community. The decline of the handloom industry under colonial rule highlights the vulnerabilities of traditional crafts in the face of global economic shifts. However, the cultural legacy and adaptabilities of the weaving castes offer valuable insights in the study of contemporary South-Asia. Recognising their historical contributions in the face of the structural inequalities they confronted, can shape the modern policies at preserving traditional crafts and promoting equitable social groups.

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