

Notification No: 598/2025
Notification Date: 16-04-2026

Name: Priyanka Kaushik

Name of the Supervisor: Dr. Mridul Megha

Topic: An Undefined Community with a Defined Category: Barber Community – A Case Study of Uttar Pradesh (1881–1951)

Department / Faculty: Department of History and Culture, Faculty of Humanities and Languages, JMI

Abstract

This thesis, "*An Undefined Community with a Defined Category: Barber Community – A Case Study of Uttar Pradesh (1881–1951)*", examines the historical transformation of caste identity through the case of the Nai (barber) community in the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh. Challenging the conventional view of caste as a rigid and unchanging institution, the study argues that caste identities were dynamic, negotiated, and deeply influenced by colonial administrative practices, particularly the census and ethnographic classification.

The central concern of this research lies in understanding how the Nai caste historically a heterogeneous and occupationally flexible community was redefined under British colonial rule into a fixed and narrowly defined social category. Colonial census operations, initiated systematically from 1871 onward, played a pivotal role in this transformation. Rather than merely documenting existing social realities, the census actively produced and reinforced caste identities by assigning communities to rigid occupational and hierarchical categories. For the Nai caste, this meant a reduction of their diverse roles such as village messengers, ritual assistants, matchmakers, and mediators into a singular occupational identity as barbers. This process of classification not only simplified administrative governance but also contributed to the long-term rigidification of caste hierarchies.

The study situates this transformation within broader debates on colonial knowledge production and power. It engages critically with the argument that colonial ethnography and census practices imposed artificial fixity upon inherently fluid social structures. By examining the dialectic between external classification and internal self-definition, the thesis demonstrates how the Nai community navigated, resisted, and rearticulated its identity within the constraints imposed by colonial rule. The emergence of caste associations, such as the *Akhil Bharatiya Nai Mahasabha*, and the use of vernacular print culture highlight the agency of the community in negotiating status mobility and social recognition.



Methodologically, the research adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from history, anthropology, and gender studies. It relies on a wide range of sources, including colonial census reports (1881–1951), ethnographic accounts, district gazetteers, vernacular newspapers, caste association records, and oral traditions. These sources are analyzed not merely as repositories of information but as discursive sites where caste identities were constructed and contested. The study also employs discourse analysis to examine how language both colonial and vernacular shaped the representation and understanding of caste.

A significant contribution of this research is its focus on the gendered dimensions of caste. It highlights the marginalization and invisibility of Nai women in both colonial archives and nationalist discourse. Despite their crucial roles as midwives (dais), ritual participants, and contributors to household economies, Nai women were largely excluded from official records and caste narratives. By incorporating oral histories, folklore, and scattered archival references, the thesis seeks to recover these silenced voices and foreground the intersection of caste and gender in shaping social hierarchies.

The regional focus on the United Provinces provides a rich context for analyzing the localized impact of colonial policies. As a key administrative unit, the region witnessed intensive census operations and ethnographic documentation, making it an ideal site to explore the mechanisms through which colonial governance reshaped social identities. The study traces these processes from the late nineteenth century through the early postcolonial period, highlighting the enduring legacy of colonial classification in contemporary caste structures.

The research is guided by the hypothesis that British colonial policies did not merely record caste but actively transformed it into a rigid and hierarchical system. By institutionalizing caste through bureaucratic practices, the colonial state curtailed occupational mobility and reinforced social stratification. However, the study also acknowledges the partial reversals and adaptations that occurred in the postcolonial period, as members of the Nai community diversified their occupations and challenged traditional boundaries.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the historiography of caste by foregrounding the experiences of an often-overlooked occupational community. It challenges dominant narratives that focus primarily on elite or politically mobilized castes and instead emphasizes the complex interplay of colonial power, community agency, and socio-cultural practices in shaping caste identities. By situating the Nai caste within broader processes of colonial modernity, the thesis offers new insights into the historical construction of caste and its continuing implications in postcolonial India.

