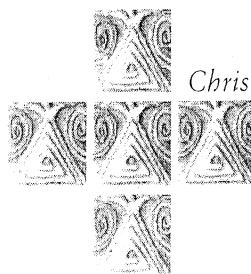


Caste



Christopher J. Fuller

The word *jati*, which exists in most Indian languages, literally means ‘kind’ or ‘species’ and can denote a range of social categories, although one of its primary referents is ‘caste’. Among Hindus, the vast majority take it for granted that every one of them belongs to a caste. Caste divisions are also found among Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and other religious minorities, although generally not among the tribal peoples. Castes also exist in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, as well as among South Asians overseas; this chapter, however, focuses on caste in India.

The hierarchical caste system is one of the most distinctive institutions of Indian society. In this system, every person is born into one and only one caste, of which he or she remains a member until death; in other words, castes are ascriptive status groups with no individual social mobility between them. Castes are normally endogamous, so that husband and wife belong to the same caste, which is also their children’s caste. If marriage does take place across caste boundaries, then it is usually but not invariably hypergamous, so that a woman marries into a caste higher than her own. Even today, despite the growing frequency of inter-caste marriages, the vast majority of unions are arranged according to endogamous (or hypergamous) rules, and arranged marriage is probably the firmest foundation for the continuing survival of the caste system.

The caste system is segmentary in so far as all larger castes are normally divided into sub-castes, and are sometimes further split into sub-sub-castes which are themselves often endogamous. These levels of segmentary differentiation, which are relatively enduring, tend to become more or less salient according to context. To avoid tedious repetition, this chapter will usually use the term ‘caste’ to refer to both castes and sub-castes.

In theory, the caste system defines a division of labour, and in practice many occupations are caste-specific, especially in the services and artisan sectors. For example, throughout India there are castes of washermen and carpenters who have a virtual monopoly on their work, so that almost all laundry or carpentry is actually done by members of the appropriate caste. It is fairly rare for members of one caste to take up the traditional occupation of another, but it has always been common for people of every caste not to pursue their own caste occupation. In particular, employment in the vast agricultural sector is not specifically assigned to particular castes, even though many landlords and peasant farmers belong to the traditional landholding castes, and many agricultural labourers belong to the lowest castes. Almost all occupations in modern sectors of the economy are also caste-free in the sense that members of any caste can take them up, although they often do recruit disproportionately from particular castes. Nevertheless, the extent to which castes actually are closed occupational groups, in the past or present, should not be exaggerated: the division of labour has never been fully determined by caste.

The caste system is predicated on social inequality and in principle all castes within a locality can be mutually ranked within a single hierarchy. At the top are the Brahmins and at the bottom are the various Untouchable castes, also known as Harijans, Dalits, or Scheduled Castes (their official designation). In between the Brahmins and Harijans are a large variety of other castes, whose mutual rank is in practice frequently disputed. In many but not all villages, one populous caste (or a small set of allied castes) is 'dominant' (Srinivas [1955] 1969: 18), because it exercises preponderant control over the agrarian economy and the local political system. Across much of India, the dominant castes are traditional landholding castes, like the Rajputs and Jats in the north, both of which normally occupy fairly high ranks in their local hierarchies. But in some places (as in much of the Kaveri delta in Tamil Nadu) the dominant castes are Brahmins, and in others (as in much of southern Tamil Nadu) they are low castes, such as Maravars or Nadars.

All these generalizations are subject to numerous qualifications because there is a great deal of regional and local variation in the structure of the caste system and its relationship with other social institutions. Moreover, in contemporary India the hierarchical structure of the caste system is plainly breaking down. This development is related to widespread, systematic criticism of caste inequality in modern India and it is nowadays rare to hear anybody defend the system, at least in public. In politics, the significance of caste has increased rather than declined; in most other respects, however, caste has clearly become a much less important feature of Indian social organization—and a much less critical determinant of people's life chances—

than it used to be, especially in urban areas and most particularly in large cities. Nowhere, though has the caste system become extinct and, particularly in the villages in which three-quarters of the country's population continues to live, caste remains a salient feature of ordinary people's daily lives. For example, in a village, the houses of people belonging to different castes often form clusters that are separated from each other, and public spaces are commonly identified as belonging to different castes or sets of castes. For example, in the past, the lowest castes were often prevented from using village wells or entering village temples, and even today such restrictions are not uncommon. More generally, in any one locality everybody knows the caste of everybody else, which reflects the fact that caste is still part of almost every person's social and individual identity in a very real sense, even in towns and cities where so much daily activity involves anonymous strangers. For most Indians most of the time, caste—as much as sex or age—is a taken-for-granted aspect of the human condition.

Caste in the Hindu Scriptures

The word 'caste' is sometimes used to translate *varna*, a term denoting the four 'classes' of Hindu society: Brahmins, whose duties are religious scholarship and priestcraft; Kshatriyas, the kings and soldiers who protect society and sponsor rituals; Vaishyas, the agriculturalists, cattle herders, and traders; and Sudras, who must serve the other three classes. The famous Rig Veda hymn, the *Purusha sukta*, describes how the world was created by sacrificing the primeval Man, Purusha, whose body was divided so that his mouth became the Brahmin, his arms the Kshatriya, his thighs the Vaishya, and his feet the Sudra. The hierarchy of the four classes is thus explicitly portrayed by passing downwards from the head to the feet. The first three varnas are called 'twice-born' because their male members undergo an initiatory rebirth; the Sudras remain 'once-born'. The Vedic verse's fourfold varna system represents a scripturally authoritative model of Hindu society as a complementary hierarchy: a unity constituted by ranked classes, each with the different functions necessary to sustain the whole. For understanding the caste (*jati*) system, the varna system is important mainly because it serves as an ideal religious model for the former.

In the vast corpus of Hindu religio-legal texts known as the Dharmashastra, the unequal rights and duties of the four varnas are set out in detail. So too are those of the untouchable Chandalas, who are outside the four-class system and are the object of extreme stigmatization. According to the famous Laws of Manu (*Manusmriti*), which attained its final form about two thousand years ago, untouchables were created from illicit (hypogamous) unions between Sudra men and women of the higher classes. Manu (10.1-73)

also lists all the other categories created by mixed unions between people of different varnas. From this text, it is reasonable to infer that in India two millennia ago there existed a large number of distinct castes, which the Brahmin lawgivers wished to fit into the varna scheme; on the other hand, since the Dharmashastra consistently describes a Brahmanical ideal society, it provides no firm evidence about the historical evolution of the caste system or its actual structure in the distant past. Indeed, on the origins and early development of the caste system there are hardly any sound data, so that most modern scholars have rightly abandoned speculation about them. In particular, there is absolutely no evidence to support the still common belief that the caste system has a racial origin stemming from an ancient confrontation between fair-skinned Aryan invaders and dark-skinned, autochthonous Dravidians of the subcontinent, as was argued most influentially by Risley ([1915] 1969) with the aid of copious, 'scientific' anthropometric data.

Caste in the Colonial Period

For understanding the caste system in modern India, and for evaluating sociological and anthropological analyses of it, the history of caste in the colonial period is particularly relevant, although this chapter can outline it only briefly. During the first century of British rule, between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, the caste system in most of India was, roughly speaking, less rigid, less hierarchical, and a less central feature of society than it was to become. By the middle of the nineteenth century, partly owing to the steady expansion of settled agriculture, the vast majority of the population had become sedentary villagers. The colonial state, especially through its land revenue policies and its elimination of regional and local centres of political power, gradually created throughout the plains of India a peasant society of relatively stable and autonomous villages, each with its own local caste hierarchy. The 'traditional' Indian village with its 'traditional' caste system was, in large part, a product of the British Raj.

Colonial rule also had a significant impact on caste at the level of ideas. For example, in developing a legal system for India, British administrators drew on the Dharmashastra as the principal source of rules for 'Hindu law', so that—to an unprecedented extent—the Hindu population as a whole became subject to a mainly Brahmanical legal code. More generally, in their search for an understanding of India which would enable them to govern it better, colonial officials expended enormous effort on classification and enumeration. Tenurial categories and religious distinctions were of course important. Nonetheless, by the latter half of the nineteenth century, the most crucial social subdivisions were widely identified as those

defined by caste (with the exception of tribal people), so that caste, in the official understanding, became the institutional keystone of Indian society.

Particularly vital in the formation of colonial knowledge about India as a caste society was the census, which assumed its national, decennial form in 1871. In that census and thereafter until 1931, the caste of every citizen was recorded; in some earlier censuses, attempts were made not only to measure the size of every caste and sub-caste, however small; but also to place them in a definite rank order. Newly formed caste associations, as discussed later in this chapter then began to use the census to claim higher status for their own castes. More generally, though, the census reinforced the idea, among Indians as well as their colonial masters, that a fixed hierarchy of clearly bounded castes formed the basic framework of society. At the top of the hierarchy were of course the Brahmins and at the bottom were the Untouchables, themselves members of a new, pan-Indian uniform category made by colonial classification. Plainly, British rule did not create the hierarchical caste system and the Brahmanical ideology that legitimated it, but it did give the system a centrality and inflexibility which it had not had before. In Bayly's phrase (1988: ch. 5), colonialism 'consolidated' 'traditional' caste society in India (cf. Cohn 1987: chs 8, 10, 22, and *passim*).

Caste Associations and Democratic Politics

One of the most striking aspects of caste in contemporary India is its role in politics. This topic has been very widely discussed in the writings of many Indian social scientists, from Ghurye before Independence to his successors today.

To understand the background to modern caste politics, it is necessary to return to the nineteenth century. From 1871 onwards, as noted earlier, the colonial censuses provided castes with the chance to claim a new, higher status, usually by renaming themselves and claiming affiliation to a higher-ranking varna. Thus, for example, the Commissioner for the 1911 Census of Bengal reported that Bengalis generally believed that the census was designed 'to fix the relative position of different castes and to deal with questions of social superiority', and 'hundreds of petitions were received from different castes...requesting that they might be known by a new name, be placed higher up in the order of precedence, be recognized as Kshatriya and Vaishya, etc.' (see Srinivas 1966: 95–6).

These petitions typically came from the leaders of caste associations, which began to be formed in significant numbers in the late nineteenth century, partly in response to the censuses. A caste association (*sabha*), usually founded and led by an upwardly mobile group within the caste, united (or tried to unite) all caste members within a quasi-formal organization. Each association's aim was, of course, to advance the caste's interests (by petitioning census commissioners, for instance), and this often involved a programme of internal reform intended to raise its status by emulating the customs of higher castes: for example a campaign to persuade caste members to give up alcohol or to wear the sacred thread of the 'twice-born' (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967: 29–64). Raising group status by emulation in this way was called 'Sanskritization' by Srinivas, who also drew attention to the increasing 'horizontal stretch' of castes directly promoted by the associations, which often united a host of previously localized castes and sub-castes into one large regional caste (Srinivas 1966: 89–100). As Ghurye had observed in the 1930s, the outcome of these developments was a hardening of 'caste-patriotism' or 'casteism' (Srinivas [1932] 1969: 300, 406–7), which he deplored as inimical to national unity and the creation of an egalitarian society.

From approximately the 1880s until the 1940s, numerous caste associations were formed all over India; particularly after the British began to develop limited Indian self-government from 1919, the associations played a major part in developing castes as organized political pressure groups at regional level. Since Independence, especially in southern India, caste associations have continued to play a significant political role, mainly by demanding reservation quotas (as discussed later in the chapter). Nevertheless, the introduction of universal adult suffrage and the development of a party political system at both national and state levels somewhat reduced the importance of regional pressure groups, so that caste associations lost some of their influence (Assayag 1995). Moreover, winning elections became the politicians' main aim; because, in any one area, even a

very large caste is normally only a minority of the population, a candidate can rarely win without the support of voters from many castes, whereas any candidate seen as a spokesperson only for her/his own caste has little hope of success.

Electoral party politics in independent India has never been solely determined by caste factors. Across the country, the members of any one caste have commonly supported different parties; divided party allegiances within castes, especially large and powerful ones, have frequently reflected this internal factionalism. Moreover, class interests—as well as divisions between religious communities, the urban and rural populations, or the educated and uneducated—have all been significant in the political process as well. The political power of peasants in many regions is primarily a function of their control over the land and their partial transformation into capitalist farmers since the 1960s. This power, however, is frequently reinforced by ‘horizontal’ solidarity within and between dominant landholding castes, even though it is also often weakened by inter-caste competition (Brass [1990] 1994: ch. 9). Yet, notwithstanding the importance of class in the modern political economy, it is clear that in India since the 1980s, a more polarized caste politics has emerged around the vexed issue of reservations.

The Politics of Caste Reservations and Mandalization

The Constitution of India, adopted in 1950, defines the nation as a democratic republic. Amongst the fundamental rights guaranteed for all citizens are equality before the law, freedom from discrimination on grounds of race, caste, sex or place of birth, and equality of opportunity in public appointments. The Constitution also specifically abolishes untouchability. Another section of the Constitution lays down ‘special provisions’ for the reservation of seats in parliament and state legislatures, and of posts in government services, for the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). The same section also mentions other ‘backward classes’, but neither defines them nor specifies provisions on their behalf. Since 1950, however, several state governments have adopted measures for these Other Backward Classes (OBCs), especially reservation of posts, which are comparable to those for the SCs and STs guaranteed by the central government.

The explicit purpose of the reservations policy was and is to promote social, economic, and political equality for Harijans, tribal peoples, and other low castes classified as OBCs through positive or compensatory discrimination. By this policy, the leaders of independent India declared their determination to eradicate old inequalities. The constitutional delegitimation of caste has had a significant impact at all levels of society. Nevertheless, the policy has also contributed to the progressive strengthening of caste as a

major political factor, so that fifty years after Independence it still plays a key role in the workings of Indian democracy.

In 1990, the issue of reservations took a dramatic turn which has markedly affected the role of caste in politics. The then Prime Minister, V.P. Singh, announced that the National Front government would implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission report issued ten years earlier, beginning with the reservation of 27 per cent of jobs in central government services and public undertakings for the OBCs. This new quota was in addition to the 22.5 per cent already reserved for SCs and STs, so that the total reserved quota amounted to just under 50 per cent, in compliance with the Supreme Court's rulings limiting reservations to this maximum level. The government's decision was challenged in the courts, but in 1991 the newly elected Congress government implemented the reservations quota for the OBCs with some minor modifications, and its policy was approved by the Supreme Court in 1992. V.P. Singh's announcement, which was defended in the name of social equality but was partly motivated by his need to attract electoral support from the populous and powerful OBCs in north India, provoked widespread and often violent protest from the higher castes in many areas of the country. More muted protest followed the Congress government's decision in 1991. The introduction of the new reservations for OBCs has profoundly affected political developments during the 1990s, and the term 'mandalization' has been coined to describe the way in which caste has become a more potent factor in the political process throughout much of India (Radhakrishnan 1996b).

Although the central and state governments have been operating a reservations policy in favour of the SCs and STs since the 1950s, even a partial implementation of the Mandal report was a fairly radical innovation. Employment and educational reservations for the OBCs have been extensive in the southern states, especially Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, but elsewhere they have been applied on a smaller scale or not at all, and the central government had previously never had reservations for the OBCs. Experience in the south has in fact supplied much of the evidence for both sides in the Mandal controversy. In Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, despite judicial attempts to limit reservations, around 70 per cent of all public sector posts and higher education places have been reserved for SCs, STs and OBCs together, and around 90 per cent of the population belongs to the castes entitled to benefit. Amongst the OBCs are castes whose considerable political weight has enabled them to demand this classification, even though they are not 'backward' by most criteria. Much evidence shows too that the benefits of compensatory discrimination have been very unevenly spread; some backward castes have gained nothing, whereas others (especially large and powerful OBCs) have

gained a lot, although even in these cases the advantages have largely accrued to elite minorities—the so-called ‘creamy layer’—within them (Radhakrishnan 1995, 1996a).

Evaluation of the reservations policy in south India since Independence is a controversial matter, but it is plain that politicians of all parties have continually exploited the policy for electoral gain, and that competition among castes for more favourable treatment in employment and educational reservations (as well as antagonism from ‘forward’ castes unable to benefit) has ensured that caste has always been and will continue to be a vital political issue. In effect, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu were thoroughly ‘Mandalized’ before the term was even coined, although prior to 1990 the worst crisis over reservations occurred in Gujarat in 1985 when serious riots erupted after the state government decided to expand the OBC reservation quota. In the 1990s, the deep-rooted political preoccupation with caste found in the south has spread across most of the country, so that politics has become much more focused on caste issues than it used to be. A primary cause of this development, which lies at the root of the Mandal controversy, has been the rising political power of the backward class low castes, notably in the populous northern states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (Jain 1996). The low castes’ growing power has, of course, fuelled their demand for an extension of reservations, as well as the high castes’ determination to resist it. To a significant extent, therefore, Mandalization reflects the political advances made by the low castes, albeit unevenly, as old patterns of high-caste dominance disintegrate.

Panini (1996) has argued that Mandalization is also a result of ‘bourgeoification’. The Indian middle class has expanded significantly since Independence and the proportion of it recruited from upwardly mobile sections to the lower castes has risen. Panini observes that a high proportion of middle-class jobs are in government and the public sector. Thus as more low-caste people enter the middle class, or aspire to do so, they increasingly press for OBC reservations in order to maximize their share of white-collar jobs, as well as their children’s share of places in higher education, which will give them qualifications for professional employment. Recent developments in the politics of caste reservation are therefore directly linked to the changing size and shape of the middle class. Yet this class also tends to favour economic liberalization, seen as a key to its growing material prosperity, whereas ‘liberalization in the long run is likely to weaken the hold of caste over the economy’ (Panini 1996: 60), so that, perhaps, caste reservations will eventually fade away as a major political issue.

Social Science and the Discourse of Caste.

Unlike the colonial officials who pioneered the scientific study of caste, the modern social scientists who have studied the topic have nearly all been academic scholars, although a growing minority of them are social and political activists as well. For several decades after Independence, academic writing about caste did not have much impact on India's politicians, decision makers, government advisors, policy experts, or intellectuals in general, because most of these people believed that 'development', seen in predominantly economic terms, was far and away the most critical issue for the country's future. Legal judgements and enquiry commission reports on the reservations policy have included some discussion of the caste system, but too often—like the Mandal report—with inadequate reference to modern research. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the Mandal furor, together with the Ayodhya crisis, changed the situation, so that specialized sociological and anthropological knowledge about caste (as well as religion) gained a salience ostensibly lacking before. On television and radio, in newspapers and magazines, as well as in other publications with a non-specialist readership, many Indian social scientists (and some foreigners) have been expressing their views, while academic research has also been increasingly shaped by the public and political debate.

A major aspect of this debate is the questioning the terms of the development paradigm itself: for example ethnocentric extrapolations from modern Western history about the supposedly inevitable dissolution of 'traditional' caste and religious solidarities. Such questioning is probably sharpest in the controversy over secularism, but it is also evident in the debate about caste. Particularly important is the growing recognition that the very notion of caste-free politics in India stems partially from misplaced assumptions about the inexorable emergence of class or individualism as the basis of politics, which in the light of resurgent ethnicity now seems implausible in the modern West as well.

Although the vast majority of contemporary social scientists, both

academics and activists, generally agree about the significance of caste in modern Mandalized politics, they do not agree about all its implications. In particular, they are divided about the merits of the reservations policy for both society and individual citizens. Much of the disagreement is articulated through rival interpretations of rather inadequate evidence about the policy's effects (especially over the long term in south India) and of the relevance of comparative data from elsewhere (especially on affirmative action in the relevance of comparative data from elsewhere (especially on affirmative action in the United States) (Galanter 1989: chs 8, 9). Undoubtedly, however, as Beteille (1991: ch. 8) shows, there has been a tendency to conflate two different concepts of equality: equality as a right, which attaches to individuals and is enforceable in law, and equality as a policy, which pertains to groups and is a policy objective of the state. One fundamental problem is that measures to promote equality among groups through compensatory discrimination under the reservations policy commonly contradict the principle of individual equality by negating the equality of opportunity in employment and education.

On the whole, social scientists (and other intellectuals) on the political left tend to accord greater priority to equality as a policy and support the extension of reservations through implementing the Mandal report, whereas those on the right favour equality as a right and oppose any extension. A compromise position, which has been repeatedly canvassed in political and academic circles, would be to combine caste and economic criteria in determining eligibility for job and educational reservations. The pro- and anti-Mandal debate has often been heated, but the issue is plainly too complicated to reduce to a left-right dichotomy and there are good and bad arguments on both sides. It is certainly misleading to claim, as some polemicists have done, that differences of view among social scientists about reservations primarily depend on their political affiliation, let alone on their own caste status.

Yet Mandalization has made it increasingly difficult to separate the study of caste from the institution itself, because the views of social scientists have become part of the public discourse on caste to a much greater extent than they used to be. This development, which owes something to the growth of activism within Indian academic circles, has dispelled lingering illusions—commonest among foreign scholars—that academic research on caste and Indian society more generally can be pursued in tranquil detachment. That at least is a positive gain. How far social scientists' views have actually influenced those of politicians or other people with power, let alone ordinary citizens, is, however, impossible to assess in the absence of any hard evidence. Clearly, though, at the end of the twentieth century, the caste

system is changing, at every level, within the context of a highly contentious political debate in which anthropologists and sociologists are more fully engaged than ever before.

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