

Theorizing Caste: Critical Literature Review

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The caste system (Indian social stratification system) has been viewed by foreigners for nearly two centuries as an essence and main characteristic of Indian culture. Since the 1950s, Indian and Western scholars have created a rich and diverse literature on the caste system questioning essentialist colonialist views. This article sets to explore the changing theorization of caste highlighting the main research tendencies: how caste has been analyzed in terms of religion, social consensus, colonialism, class, social conflict, politics, identity, ethnicity, culture, and performativity. These diverse theoretical approaches reveal that caste has undergone a significant change in the last century and instead of disappearing adapts to the post-colonial modernity. Moreover, caste lends itself to different theoretical interpretations and therefore has served as a focus for the major debates in sociology and anthropology.

Keywords: Indian society, Caste, Anthropology, Theory.

Introduction

It is rather difficult to generalize what is the role and meaning of caste in today's India. One can encounter conflicting notions that caste has disappeared, while other Indians would state that caste shapes their identities and everyday lives. Addressing the question, Indian sociologist A. Béteille has noted that "caste has been used to mean different things by different people in a variety of situations" and "this ambiguity in the use of the term reflects one of the basic features of the caste structure" (Béteille, 2012, p. 44–45). Meanwhile, American anthropologist C. J. Fuller has argued that "[w]hat caste is and what it means are now in a patent state of flux....

modern India often does look like 'a thing of shreds and patches,' without clearly discernible structural principles, and...nowhere is this apparent patchery plainer than in the domain of caste" (Fuller, 2000, p. 3).

This article aims to explore the changing character of caste through the overview of the anthropological, sociological and to a lesser extent political science literature on caste. The analysis should serve a double purpose. Firstly, it explains the development of complex theoretical conceptualization of caste as social phenomenon. The conceptualization of caste has taken an interesting journey from the early notions of caste as a timeless unchanging essence of Indian culture; the system structured by religious values

and social consensus, to the notions of caste as a constructed and constantly changing political identity. With caste undergoing significant transformations, authors tried to explain caste in terms of class, identity, culture, ethnicity and performativity. Caste was interpreted not only as a model of social consensus, but also as a model of social conflict. The more we move to the present day, the more the latter perspective gains relevance.

Secondly, the discussion on the literature of caste might also serve as a historical account not only on the change of meaning of caste, but also on the development of knowledge about caste. The question is about “the connection between scholarship and the contemporary situation” (Fuller, 2000, p. 2) – how different caste theorizations are related to the specific historical political circumstances and how diverse caste conceptualizations find their way into the social and political practice. Recent approaches to caste are the result of the era of the colonial and post-colonial Indian state’s social engineering reaching its climax at the Mandal reforms of the 1980s–1990s¹, during which castes have be-

come highly political as hardly ever before. Today nobody can afford looking to castes as merely cultural phenomenon and have to take into account various political forces, institutional state engagements and people’s response to it as being constitutive to the present day caste identities. The overview of caste theorization will show how traditional social stratification system survives in modern democratic neo-liberal India and what forms it takes.

Defining caste

The content of the concept of caste is rather confusing and tends to fuse at least two different Indian terms – *varṇa* and *jāti*. The concept of *varṇa* (in Sanskrit “color”) is found in traditional Vedic (1500–500 B.C.) and later Sanskrit texts (such as *Manusmṛiti*) and denotes the form of the fourfold social stratification into Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra layers, which were associated with specific occupations, namely priesthood, war art, merchandise and servitude. Vedic and Sanskrit texts represent the pyramid-like *varṇa* system as an ideal model of the then Aryan society. Interestingly, untouchables were not mentioned in the earliest texts and until today a settled agreement has not been reached about the contexts of the

1 The most eloquent example of the social engineering in India is an affirmative action policy, known otherwise as a reservation policy or quota system. It was legitimized in The Constitution of India intending to solve social and economic inequality and vulnerability of certain groups of the Indian population, namely the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. The Scheduled Castes (SC) category encompasses various low caste groups previously known as “untouchables,” characterized by economic, social and political marginalization and, most importantly, caste discrimination based on the practice of untouchability. The Scheduled Tribes (ST) are various groups of indigenous populations marked by economic, cultural and political

marginalization due to their spacial isolation. The Constitution of India foresaw the reservation of seats in state educational institutions, civil services and political bodies – 15 % for the SCs and 7.5 % for the STs. With the Mandal reforms of the 1990s, the reservation policy was expanded also for the Other Backward Classes (OBC), assigning them 27% of seats. For more about the affirmative action policy in India, see Hasan (2009), Deshpande (2013), Shah & Shneiderman (2013).

emergence of the concept and phenomenon of untouchability.²

Indian anthropologist M. N. Srinivas characteristically summarized main ideas surrounding the notion of *varṇa* as it is employed today:

- (1) There is a single all-Indian hierarchy without any variations between one region and another; (2) there are only four *varṇas* or, if Harijans [author's comment: untouchables], who are literally 'beyond the pale' of caste, are included, five; (3) the hierarchy is clear; and (4) it is immutable. (2013, p. 3)

The *varṇa* model indicates singularity, uniformity and stability of the Indian social system. Meanwhile, *jāti* (in Sanskrit "birth") represents a "purely local system of ranked, hereditary and mainly endogamous, groups, each associated with one or more traditional occupations, and all interdependent" (Srinivas, 1984, p. 153). Importantly, "caste mainly exists and functions as a regional system" with "hundreds of *jātis* or endogamous groups in each of the linguistic areas of modern India" (Srinivas, 2013, p. 3). *Jāti* groups internally further elaborate into local hierarchical systems that closely, however not absolutely, correspond to the *varṇa* model. Most importantly, as Béteille has highlighted, caste does not function as a uniform social stratification system, but rather is "characterized by segmentation of several orders" (2012, p. 45).

Hence, *varṇa* could be seen as an ideal static Brahmanical textual model, while *jātis* are real dynamic social identities existing on

the ground level. In the present day Indian context, various social groups mainly use their *jāti* names to identify their identity, social status and to determine social interaction. However, *varṇa* terminology since colonial times has been widely used in Indian public discourse, and most of the educated people despite the fact that they use the term or not, are aware of where they land on the *varṇa* model with their *jāti* identities. Adding more to the complexity, Indians and foreigners alike also use the English term "caste" (which is interestingly also used by the Indian government and scholars) by which they can mean both, *varṇa* and *jāti*, stratification models (Béteille, 2012, p. 45).

Social categorization gets even fuzzier if we take into account governmental categories and mushrooming political terms denoting caste identities, which especially pertains to political identities of the lower-caste. As some scholars (Cohn, 2004; Dirks, 2001) have shown, colonial and post-colonial academic discourses and governmental policies have made concepts denoting the Indian social stratification system, especially *varṇa* and *jāti* terms, increasingly overlap.³

Caste, social structure and consensus

In this part I discuss the most prominent and influential works on caste, mostly informed

2 For more about the notion of untouchability in ancient Indian texts, see Aktor (2010) and Olivelle (1998).

3 For example, Nicolas Dirks argued that the idea of *varṇa* as a fundamental unifying pan-Indian phenomenon "was only developed under the peculiar circumstances of British colonial rule. Hierarchy, in the sense of rank or ordered difference, might have been a pervasive feature of Indian history, but hierarchy in the sense used by Louis Dumont and others became a systematic value only under the sign of the colonial modern" (2001, p. 14).

by the structuralist tradition that attempted to understand the underlying logic of the caste system. In their interpretations (partial exception is M. N. Srinivas) caste appears as a hierarchical, pyramid-like social structure constituted by ascribed social statuses and complementary social roles. The authors discussed below tend to agree on the point that caste structure is being reproduced by social consensus. To put it in other words, individuals, even though at times contesting their own position in the hierarchy, essentially accept the underlying hierarchical logic governing the caste system.

Addressing hierarchy (Dumont)

French anthropologist Louis Dumont has been named the most influential writer on caste. In *Homo Hierarchicus* (1980 [1966]), his major work about caste, he claims that hierarchy is the main characteristic of Indian society that constitutes its main difference from the individualist Western societies. Before Dumont, there already existed a number of ethnographic accounts on the caste system in different Indian villages, each attempting to explain the local social stratification systems.⁴ Dumont sought to provide not yet another empirical case study of caste, but a holistic and universalistic account on Indian social stratification system. According to Dumont, two essential principals govern

4 Early anthropological accounts on the Indian caste system were published in two edited volumes of articles: *Village India: Studies in the little community* (1955) and *India's villages* (1955). Many of the contributors to the volumes became “founding fathers and mothers of different theoretical strands in the anthropology of India, exerting great influence on future generations of anthropologists” (Berger, 2012, p. 328).

caste hierarchy: dichotomy between purity and pollution, and the distinction between status and power. The first idea places Brahmins at the top of the ritual hierarchy and untouchables at the bottom of it, with occupations, food, gods and other spheres of Hindu life falling into the same hierarchical purity vs. pollution dichotomy.

The second idea asserts that in Hindu caste hierarchy power is subordinated to social status, as exemplified by Brahmins’ (priests) superior position to Kshatriyas (warriors). Brahmins are at the top of caste hierarchy, even above the power holding Kshatriyas, because namely they represent the highest level of ritual purity. As Peter Berger notes, for Dumont caste is not a particular form of social structure, but primarily represents ideas and values. Putting in Dumont’s words, caste system is a “state of mind” (as cited in Berger, 2012, p. 333).⁵

Dumont’s work was criticized from a variety of perspectives. He was blamed for providing an essentially Brahmanical textual view of caste in terms of the *varṇa* model, trying to fit diverse *jātis* into the fourfold *varṇa* model (so-called “book view”) (Béteille, 1991). He was contested for essentializing caste and its consensus aspect as if all Indians

5 A similar approach was developed earlier by Max Weber (2007 [1916]). He defined castes as “status groups” and marked their essential difference from classes, as castes, in his view, were structured by social prestige rather than by economic position in the social hierarchy. In Weberian sense, caste emerged not from material conditions, as Marxists would argue, but rather from value and belief systems (Subedi, 2013, p. 55). Weber claimed that caste system was a fundamental institution of Hinduism, stating that “without caste there is no Hindu” (as cited in Béteille, 2000, pp. 156, 187).

accept and live unanimously according to the hierarchical purity/pollution ideology (Gupta, 2000), and also for exaggerating holism (Appadurai, 1986). Further, Dumont's notion of caste was rather timeless and static, which prevented him seeing the play of individual interests, conflict and social change in the caste system. Scholars have argued that in his theory caste appears as a pure ideology without its material base (Mencher, 1974; Singh, 2014). Others have criticized Dumont for turning a blind eye on the power aspect and the institution of kingship and its role in structuring caste relations (Raheja, 1988; Quigley, 1994). Despite this diverse criticism, Dumont's theory is still influential, as almost any academic engagement with caste, irrespective of its degree of criticism, cannot completely ignore the ideological dimension of the caste system that makes it essentially different from other forms of social stratification.

Addressing consensus (Moffatt)

The Dumontian structuralist approach was further elaborated by an American anthropologist Michael Moffatt, who in 1979 published a book called *An untouchable community in South India: structure and consensus*. The work was strongly influenced by Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* and was informed by the structuralist perspective. Though Moffatt's research findings do not lie in an absolute accordance with Dumont,⁶ what is common for both is the focus on caste structure as

a governing principle of people's behavior. While Dumont's work derived from a mixed methodology – anthropological and textual, Moffatt indulged in ethnographic work. He conducted his fieldwork among an untouchable community in the village of Endavur, located in the South Indian Tamil Nadu state. His major research findings were intended to contradict the critics of Dumont (Berreman, 1971; Gough, 1981; Mencher, 1974), who stressed that the untouchables due to their social exclusion form sub-cultures or “little traditions”⁷ of sorts, which are marked by distinct values and life-styles. Instead Moffatt claims that:

They do not possess a separate subculture. They are not detached or alienated from the ‘rationalizations’ of the system....The ‘view from the bottom’ is based on the same principles and evaluations as ‘the view from the middle’ or ‘the view from the top.’ The cultural system of Indian Untouchables does not distinctively question or revalue the dominant social order. Rather, it continuously recreates among Untouchables a microcosm of the larger system. (1979, p. 3)

Through the analysis of untouchables' social organization, religion and their participation in village social life, Moffatt founded that Endavur's untouchables' approach to the caste system is marked by underlying consensus – they do not question the caste

6 For example, Moffatt's study shows that the dominant caste in the village is Reddiyars (intermediate caste), which contradicts Dumont's vision of caste system with Brahmin on top of it.

7 In Indian studies, the “great” tradition stands for the Brahmanical Sanskrit textual Hinduism and indicates uniformity, while “little” traditions are various rural folk beliefs and practices and denote plurality. For more about “great” and “little” traditions in the Indian context, see Fuller (2004, pp. 24–28).

system and rather reproduce it. The anthropologist argued that untouchables are both excluded and included into the village society. They live in a separate colony (*cheri*) and perform the designated polluting functions. However, in their untouchable colony, which can be seen as a site of exclusion, they “replicate” the caste system and upper-caste practices “complementing” the caste system. Untouchables have their own social hierarchy, which is a direct replication of caste hierarchy of the village, thus dividing untouchables into hierarchical occupational and in some cases even endogamous sub-caste groups (untouchable priests, untouchable washer men, untouchable leatherworkers, untouchable bird catchers). Untouchables’ religion is also a replication of upper-caste religion of the village. Their gods form hierarchy similar to the hierarchy found in the upper-caste religion. Thus, Moffatt claims that

The Untouchables of Endavur replicate among themselves...almost every relationship from which they have been excluded by the *uur*⁸ castes. And this replicatory order is constructed in the same cultural code that marks highness and lowness, purity and impurity, superordination and subordination, among the higher castes. It thus implies among the lower castes of Endavur a deep cultural consensus on the cognitive and evaluative assumptions of the system as a whole. (p. 98)

Untouchable’s consensus towards the caste system indicates that untouchables

“participate willingly in what might be called their own oppression” (p. 303). To put it differently, they themselves contribute and reproduce the caste system which oppresses them.

Belgian anthropologist Robert Deliège (1992) questioned Moffatt’s consensus theory. Based on his fieldwork in Tamil Nadu, Deliège argued that there is no absolute link between replication and consensus, to put it in other words, replication does not necessarily show consensus. According to the anthropologist, untouchables frequently count on Hindu purity and pollution ideology. However, they tend to employ it to explain others’ subordination than their-own. Moreover, Deliège argued that untouchable communities are marked not so much by the hierarchy, as by simple separation, as there is little interaction and interdependence between different untouchable groups. Finally, he suggested that “Moffatt often fails to distinguish between the norm and the act, between an ideal and the actual practice” (1992, p. 167). Deliège noticed himself that untouchables in their verbal utterances tend to employ the notions of Hindu discourse “to show their respectability” (p. 167) and thus to represent themselves as members of society, thinking and acting according to common sense, which in a given context is Hindu purity vs. pollution ideology. However, in their daily behavior untouchables tend to transcend their ideologically correct verbal articulations by performing actions that contradict their claims.⁹

8 *Uur* is an upper-caste settlement in the South Indian town or village.

9 For example, Deliège claims that untouchables in public deny beef consumption, but practice it widely in their private lives (1992, p. 167).

Addressing social change (Srinivas)

Indian anthropologist M. N. Srinivas was one of the earliest and most influential caste theorists who started conceptualizing caste system in terms of social change. Though some of his works date earlier than that of Dumont's and Moffatt's, they represent a sort of transitory approach towards the subject matter. His ideas, on the one hand, significantly depart from the structuralist theorization of caste; yet on the other hand, accept its basic premises. This especially pertains to his notion of Sanskritization.

Srinivas dismantled essentialist view of caste and revealed its inherently complex and dynamic nature. Drawing on the fieldwork in South Indian villages and elaborating on the complexity of caste system, he noted that there is no pan-Indian caste system, because each village "constitutes a unique hierarchy" (Srinivas, 1959, p. 4). Taking examples from different periods of Indian history,¹⁰ Srinivas argued that caste never existed as a fixed hierarchy, but was rather marked by "vagueness" and "doubt" regarding different caste status in the hierarchy:

Two castes each of which claims superiority to the other should not be regarded as exceptional in their behavior but as the typical product of a dynamic system in which there is some pushing and jostling in the attempt to get ahead. (2013, p. 4)

He brings forth two ideas that there is no single overreaching pan-Indian caste hierarchy as proposed by Dumont, and

¹⁰ Srinivas mentioned that in pre-British India there were disputes among different castes about their ranks (2013, p. 4).

that caste system, in contrast to Dumont and Moffatt, instead of being reproduced by social consensus is rather fueled by conflict between different castes. Srinivas captured the dynamic aspect of caste in his two interrelated concepts of Sanskritization and dominant caste that have become no less popular in Indian social sciences than Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* idea. However, though Srinivas described these two concepts as complementing each other, I find them to represent two distinct theoretical positions towards Indian society. His notion of Sanskritization essentially stands in accord with Dumont's and Moffatt's vision of caste as consensual social structure. Meanwhile, his notion of dominant caste is much closer to the perception of caste in terms of social conflict, and therefore, I discuss it in the second part of the article.

Srinivas described Sanskritization as a process by which

a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, rituals, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, 'twice born' caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community. (2013, p. 6)

Srinivas' formulation indicates two important things: that caste customs and way of life are not merely determined by caste status in the hierarchy but rather are negotiated; and, secondly, one's position in the caste hierarchy is not fixed but changeable. Such an assumption significantly departs from essentialist and structuralist accounts

on caste that were largely pre-occupied in explaining the structural principles upon which caste system was built, resulting in a stable and fixed caste image. The Sanskritization concept, contrary to the previous claims, shows that low caste groups seek to improve their status in the caste hierarchy:

Sanskritization is generally accompanied by, and often results in, upward mobility for the caste in question. ... However, the mobility associated with Sanskritization results only in *positional changes* in the system and does not lead to any *structural change*. That is, a caste moves up above its neighbours and another comes down, but all this takes place in an essentially stable hierarchical order. The system itself does not change. (2013, p. 6)

Srinivas brings some fresh air to the discussion on caste by showing that the caste system has been a site of power struggle and contestation between different castes. However, following his formulation, it is clear that the Sanskritization concept stands in accord with structuralist position. Even though people contest their own status in the caste hierarchy, there is a fundamental hierarchical structure ordering people's social interaction, upon which Srinivas seems to agree with Dumont and Moffatt.

A question that poses itself is why Srinivas chose to name Indian social change as Sanskritization?¹¹ This concept in a way agrees with the notion of the authority of

the "Great" Brahmanical tradition in which Brahmins have a "legitimizing role" (2013, p. 27).¹² This creates an impression that all Hindus, irrespective of their caste status, accept the authority of Brahmins and perceive them as role models for imitation. In doing so, Srinivas again agrees with the Dumontian caste hierarchy and Moffattian social consensus putting Brahmanical culture at the top of the pyramid of Indian social structure and representing lower-castes as mere imitators of the dominant cultural model.

Sanskritization helps us understand how the Brahmanical Sanskrit culture managed to spread across Indian territory, resulting in relative cultural uniformity. It also rightly indicates the churning of aspiration between different castes to improve their status which has been demonstrated by a number of empirical works describing how low caste groups attempt to Sanskritize their lifestyles (Lamb, 2002; Savaala, 2001). However, looking from today's perspective, I find the concept limited in its focus on Brahmanical Sanskrit culture as a model for cultural imitation. Srinivas has touched upon this point by analyzing Indian social change in terms of Westernization. He in a way suggested that Sanskritization pertains more to the pre-modern times, while Westernization – to post-colonial Indian society (Srinivas, 2013). Arguing in a similar vein, other scholars have stressed that in today's India Brahmanical Sanskrit culture is losing its attractiveness (Natrajan, 2012; Sheth, 1999) and that upper-caste status

11 Sanskrit in ancient times was an elite language used by Brahmin priests and intellectuals. Ordinary people in India used different local vernaculars known as prakrits (*prākṛita*).

12 Srinivas indicated that in some geographical areas Brahmins "are regarded as ritually low" (2013, p. 8). Despite that, until today Brahmins managed to maintain their authority and elite status by performing ritual functions (p. 27).

is being asserted through other cultural symbols that relate to consumeristic modernity.¹³

Caste and colonialism

There are two ways of thinking about the role of colonialism in Indian society. A number of scholars (Béteille, 2000; Srinivas, 1957, 2013; Gupta, 2004) have focused on the actual social, political and economic changes that had been instigated by the colonial rule. Colonial and postcolonial Indian government implemented various political reforms that actually changed Indian economy, which in turn instigated change in social relations. Land reforms and the abolition of the *zamindari* system¹⁴ contributed to the disappearance of rich landlords and the softening of social relations in agricultural settings. With the decline of rich landlords, lower-caste groups started taking control of land. Educational reforms, namely introduction of the reservation system, gradually opened the door for the lower-castes to enter a middle class. The appearance of new modern occupations reduced the stigma of earlier degrading professions. Finally, the introduction of adult franchise imbued lower-caste groups with political power.

Other groups of scholars, mostly historical anthropologists and Indologists (Cohn, 2004; Dirks, 2001; Inden, 1986, 1990) looked into the ways Western intellectuals and colo-

onial officials contributed to the construction and consolidation of caste identities. Namely their work suggests that caste was not an inherent structure of Indian society, but rather a recently constructed phenomenon.

Indologist Ronald Inden has shown how intellectuals of the Western world imagined, represented and eventually constructed the image and actual reality of India focusing on the role that caste played in their “imagination.” Western intellectuals, whom Inden groups into positivists and romanticists/idealists, have perceived India as the opposite “other” to the rational, scientific, modern, democratic Western world. Despite differing approaches towards India, both groups had “interest in sustaining the Otherness of India” (Inden, 1986, p. 442). Caste, with its positive and negative features, for both of the groups, represented the essential characteristic of Indian culture and society and its major difference from the Occident. For positivists, caste, being an external objective social reality, came to stand for India’s irrationality, backwardness and its inability to stand on its own. In the meantime, romanticists/idealists, who were critical towards Western civilization, valorized archaic Indian past, praised its culture, religion, mythology and treated caste as an internal inherent constitutive defining the nature of Indian people. As Inden states:

Caste, then, is assumed to be the ‘essence’ of Indian civilization. People in India are not even partially autonomous agents. They do not shape and reshape their world. Rather they are the patients of that which makes them Indians – the social, material reality of caste. The people of India

¹³ I will return to this point in the discussion of caste relation to class.

¹⁴ *Zamindari* system was a tax collection system prevalent in North India in the pre-colonial and colonial times. Zamindars, as tax collectors in Mughal times and as rich landlords in the British times, were the main intermediaries between the state and the peasant population and gradually grew into the powerful strata of Indian society.

are not the makers of their own history. A hidden, substantialized Agent, Caste, is the maker of it. (p. 428)

According to Inden, Western Orientalists viewed caste as a cultural and social phenomenon. Namely the denial to take into account Indian political institutions allowed them to produce an essentialized perception of caste (pp. 403, 429).

While Inden mainly looked to the Westerners and their imaginations, American anthropologist Bernard Cohn explored through what actual practices caste had been constructed during colonial times. He has analyzed colonial decennial censuses and how decade after decade colonial officials had been searching for a credible criteria to know and govern the colonized population, finally “discovering” caste as a major “sociological key” suitable to open Indian society (Cohn, 2004, p. 242). The British needed concrete sociological data for various reasons: the revenue collection, administration, recruitment to the army and the general sake of knowledge. During the censuses of the period 1871–1901, caste was one of the major criteria asked by the enumerators besides of name, religion, sect, sex, age, marital status, language, birthplace, education, infirmities and means of subsistence (p. 243). Census procedure included a number of actors: at least minimally educated local enumerators, higher social status local supervisors and, finally, British census commissioners. While classifying the data, high level British officials, such as H. H. Risley, used local consultants who were experts of ancient Sanskrit texts and who helped British to develop pan-Indian caste classificatory system which was based on “‘Hindu ideas’ of classification”

(p. 245). As Cohn notes, “[t]he principle of organization was to try to place castes (*jatis*) in the four *varnas* or in categories of Outcastes and Aborigines” (p. 243). In this way, the ancient textual Sanskrit *varṇa* model was resurrected and brought into the social practice in the colonial setting.

After having gone through the factual historical data, Cohn arrives to his major argument. Through these censuses Indians “were confronted with the question of who they were and what their social and cultural systems were” (Cohn, 2004, p. 248). Cohn argued that by participating in colonial censuses Indians were made to “objectify” their own culture:

Not only have the colonial peoples begun to think of themselves in different terms, not only are they changing the content of their culture, but the way they think about their culture has changed as well.... They in some sense have made it into a ‘thing’; they can stand back and look at themselves, their ideas, their symbols and culture and see it as an entity. What had previously been embedded in a whole matrix of custom, ritual, religious symbol, a textually transmitted tradition, has now become something different. What had been unconscious now to some extent becomes conscious. (p. 228–229)

Cohn has also revealed how the colonial practice of censuses began modifying Indian social reality. Members of different caste groups formed into caste councils (*sabhas*) and actively tried to negotiate and modify their caste names, not only seeking to change their social status, but also to obtain practical

benefits from the state (p. 249). Cohn thus depicted Indians not as victims of colonial epistemic violence, but showed their active engagement in the colonial system and mindset.

The argument of the role of colonial powers in the construction of caste identities reached its culmination in Nicolas Dirks' writings. He has shown how during the colonial period the idea of caste as a "uniform, all-encompassing, ideologically consistent...system," a "principal modality of Indian society," and "the most important emblem of tradition" has been developed and naturalized by multiple actors – "British Orientalists, administrators, and missionaries...Indian reformers, social thinkers, and political actors" (Dirks, 2001, p. 8). Dirks focused on the role of political institutions, their role in defining caste identities and envisaged a paradoxical development of caste under British colonialism:

Under colonialism, caste was thus made out to be far more – far more pervasive, far more totalizing, and far more uniform – than it had ever been before, at the same time that it was defined as a fundamentally religious social order....[C]aste had always been political – it had been shaped in fundamental ways by political struggles and processes; even so, it was not a designation that exhausted the totality of Indian social forms, let alone described their essence.... [T]he units of social identity had been multiple, and their respective relations and trajectories were part of a complex, conjunctural, constantly changing, political world. (p. 13)

In pre-colonial times, caste did not constitute a fundamental social identity of individuals as it had been widely assumed, but stood aside of other identities – territorial, familial, religious, occupational and others. All these identities depended on the relation to power exercised by the king, who was the chief in defining social order. Dirks looked to the institution of kingship and its role in the formation of social identities. He thus challenged the Dumontian caste theorization, by demonstrating that not Brahmins and religious ideology, but kings or colonial institutions and their exercised power were the key structuring principles of caste relations.¹⁵ According to him, with British colonialism and its political reforms, the Indian institution of kingship turned into a "hollow crown,"¹⁶ depriving it of its prior-held powers:

[U]ntil the emergence of British colonial rule in southern India, the crown was not so hollow as it has generally been made out to be in Indian history, anthropology, and comparative sociology. Kings were not inferior to Brahmins; the political domain was not encompassed by the religious domain. State forms, while not fully assimilable to Western categories of the state, were powerful components in Indian civilization. (1992, p. 59)

¹⁵ Before him, Inden argued that instead of caste, kingship or state should be seen as "the constitutive of Indian civilization." Similarly to Dirks he claimed that "the collapse of Hindu kingship...led to the formation of 'castes' in something resembling their modern form....[C]astes are not the *cause* of the weakness and collapse of Hindu kingship, but the *effect* of it" (Inden, 1986, p. 440).

¹⁶ Dirks has developed this argument in *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (1993).

Dirks did not contend that caste was a pure British invention. What he claimed instead is that the “hollow crown” in the colonial state was replaced by the institution of caste, which gained yet unprecedented importance in defining people’s status and relations. The united efforts of Orientalists, colonial anthropologists (knowledge producers), colonial officials (power holders) and the response from Indian society (grass-root activists) resulted in the creation of caste as an all-pervading social phenomenon. For Dirks caste, therefore, is a specifically “colonial form of power” that was imbued with the “pre-colonial authority,” or as he puts differently, caste is a “specifically colonial form of civil society” (pp. 59, 61).

Inden has mainly focused on the way Westerners imagined and constructed the image of caste, sort of depriving Indians of their agency. Though Inden took caste as the main focus, his major interest was introspective – he was interested in what role caste had played in the development of Western intellectual thought and the Westerners’ self-perception. Meanwhile, Cohn and Dirks

were preoccupied not so much with the colonizers, as with the colonizer’s effect on the Indian society. They revealed that caste construction was a common adventure of the colonizers and the colonized.

The works on caste and colonialism expands our understanding about caste in a number of ways. First of all, they show the constructed nature of caste and the role of political institutions, colonial or local kingship, in defining caste and social relations. Secondly, these works dismantle the essentialist view of caste as a core, pan-Indian religious institution revealing the perplexing multiplicity of various identities that were at play in the pre-colonial period and demonstrates that caste as a core institution of Indian society has come into fruition only during colonial period. The role of politics and power relations in the construction of caste identities has been even more significant in the post-colonial and present day India. Today caste tends to mask or accommodate other social identifications, which will become evident in the following discussion of caste relation to the political, class, cultural and ethnic identities.

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