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Nicholas B. Dirks: Castes of Mind

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One

Introduction: The Modernity of Caste

In that Country the laws of religion, the laws of the land, and the laws of honour, are all united and consolidated in one, and bind a man eternally to the rules of what is called his *caste*.

—Edmund Burke¹

Caste as India

When thinking of India it is hard not to think of caste. In comparative sociology and in common parlance alike, caste has become a central symbol for India, indexing it as fundamentally different from other places as well as expressing its essence. A long history of writing—from the grand treatise of the Abbé Dubois to the general anthropology of Louis Dumont; from the piles of statistical and descriptive volumes of British colonial censuses starting in 1872 to the eye-catching headlines of the *New York Times*—has identified caste as the basic form of Indian society. Caste has been seen as omnipresent in Indian history and as one of the major reasons why India has no history, or at least no sense of history. Caste defines the core of Indian tradition, and it is seen today as the major threat to Indian modernity. If we are to understand India properly, and by implication if we are to understand India's other core symbol—Hinduism—we must understand caste, whether we admire or revile it.

In *The Discovery of India*, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote that “Almost everyone who knows anything at all about India has heard of the caste system; almost every outsider and many people in India condemn it or criticize it as a whole.” Nehru did not like the caste system any more than he admired the widely heralded “spiritual” foundations of Indian civilization, but even he felt ambivalence about it. Although he noted that caste had resisted “not only the powerful impact of Buddhism and many centuries of Afghan and Mughal rule and the spread of Islam,” as also “the strenuous efforts of innumerable Hindu reformers who raised their voices against it,” he felt that caste was finally beginning to come undone through the force of basic economic changes. And yet Nehru was not sure what all this change would unleash. “The conflict is between two approaches to the problem of social organisation, which are diametrically opposed to each other: the old Hindu conception of the group being the basic unit of organisation, and the excessive individualism of the west,

emphasizing the individual above the group.”² In making this observation, Nehru neatly captured the conceptual contours of most recent debates over caste: he evaluated it in relation to its place as fundamental to Hinduism, as well as in terms of a basic opposition between the individual and the community, an opposition that has provided the bounds of most modern social theory and political imagining. This opposition constitutes the basic limit to most understandings of caste, both in the West and within India itself.

Louis Dumont, the author of the most influential scholarly treatise on caste in the last half of the twentieth century, believed that the West’s excessive individualism was the single greatest impediment to the understanding of caste. Dumont began his book, *Homo Hierarchicus*, with a critique of individualism, claiming Marx and Durkheim as his sociological ancestors. For Dumont, “the true function of sociology is . . . to make good the lacuna introduced by the individualistic mentality when it confuses the ideal with the actual. . . . To the self-sufficient individual it [sociology] opposes man as a social being; it considers each man no longer as a particular incarnation of abstract humanity, but as a more or less autonomous point of emergence of a particular collective humanity, of a *society*.”³ Dumont based his suspicion of modern individualism on Tocqueville’s analysis of American democracy, in which he noted that “individualism . . . disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow-creatures; and to draw apart with his family and his friends; so that, after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself . . . not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendents, and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back for ever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.” Dumont thus began his study of caste in India by placing it at the center of the sociological endeavor, and aligning himself with Tocqueville’s critical lament about the rise of the “novel idea” of individualism.⁴

For Dumont it is this same commitment to individualism, even within the sociological space of theorizing the social, that rejects the possibility that hierarchy, the core value behind the caste system, has not only been foundational for most societies but is naturally so. Dumont wrote that “To adopt a value is to introduce hierarchy, and a certain consensus of values, a certain hierarchy of ideas, things and people, is indispensable to social life. . . . No doubt, in the majority of cases, hierarchy will be identified in some way with power, but there is no necessity for this, as the case of India will show. . . . In relation to these more or less necessary requirements of social life, the ideal of equality, even if it is thought superior, is artificial.”⁵ Dumont made this point here in the service of a straightforward epistemological assertion, namely, that a Western audience (and as his prose makes clear, he could imagine no other) will misunderstand caste, and hierarchy, because of the modern denial of principles that seem opposed to individualism and equality. But his claims about the ideolog-

ical foundations of hierarchical values in India—that India has always been mired in spiritual and otherworldly concerns—are not only deeply problematic, they are as old as Orientalism itself. For Dumont, caste is seen to express a commitment to social values that the modern world has lost, and it is hard not to read Dumont’s scholarship as a peculiar form of modern Western nostalgia, if with a long colonial pedigree. Dumont’s faith in a communitarian ideal may have little in common with Nehru’s anxiety about the demise of caste, but it asserts the view, largely shared in India as well as in the West, that caste is the sign of India’s fundamental religiosity, a marker of India’s essential difference from the West and from modernity at large.

This book will ask why it is that caste has become for so many the core symbol of community in India, whereas for others, even in serious critique, caste is still the defining feature of Indian social organization. As we shall see, views of caste differ markedly: from those who see it as a religious system to those who view it as merely social or economic; from those who admire the spiritual foundations of a sacerdotal hierarchy to those who look from below and see the tyranny of Brahmins (all the more insidious because of the ritual mystifications that attend domination); from those who view it as the Indian equivalent of community to those who see it as the primary impediment to community. But an extraordinary range of commentators, from James Mill to Herbert Risley, from Hegel to Weber, from G. S. Ghurye to M. N. Srinivas, from Louis Dumont to McKim Marriott, from E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker to B. R. Ambedkar, from Gandhi to Nehru, among many others who will populate the text that follows, accept that caste—and specifically caste forms of hierarchy, whether valorized or despised—is somehow fundamental to Indian civilization, Indian culture, and Indian tradition.

This book will address this question by suggesting that caste, as we know it today, is not in fact some unchanged survival of ancient India, not some single system that reflects a core civilizational value, not a basic expression of Indian tradition. Rather, I will argue that caste (again, as we know it today) is a modern phenomenon, that it is, specifically, the product of an historical encounter between India and Western colonial rule. By this I do not mean to imply that it was simply invented by the too clever British, now credited with so many imperial patents that what began as colonial critique has turned into another form of imperial adulation. But I *am* suggesting that it was under the British that “caste” became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all “systematizing” India’s diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization. This was achieved through an identifiable (if contested) ideological canon as the result of a concrete encounter with colonial modernity during two hundred years of British domination. In short, colonialism made caste what it is today. It produced the conditions that made possible the opening lines of this book, by making caste the central symbol of Indian society. And it did its work well; as Nehru was powerfully aware, there is now no simple

way of wishing it away, no easy way to imagine social forms that would transcend the languages of caste that have become so inscribed in ritual, familial, communal, socioeconomic, political, and public theaters of quotidian life.

In the pages that follow I will trace the career of caste from the medieval kingdoms of southern India to the textual traces of early colonial archives; from the commentaries of an eighteenth-century Jesuit missionary to the enumerative obsessions of the late nineteenth-century census; from the ethnographic writings of colonial administrators and missionaries to those of twentieth-century Indian scholars. I will focus on early colonial efforts to know India well enough to rule it and profit by it, as they brought together the many strands of scientific curiosity, missionary frustration, Orientalist fascination, and administrative concerns with property and taxation in the service of, among other things, colonial governmentality.⁶ I will follow these conjunctural imperatives as they increasingly substituted statistical and ethnographical techniques for historical and textual knowledge, as they drew from an ample inheritance of Orientalist generalization to articulate the justifications for permanent colonial rule, and as they took on the racialized languages and conceits of late nineteenth-century imperial world systems. And I will illustrate some of the ways in which this history provided the frame for an alternative history of social reform and nationalist resistance which worked to throw out colonialism while absorbing from colonial encounters many of the terms and arguments of self-determination and self-government. I will also survey the rise of caste politics in the twentieth century, focusing in particular on the emergence of movements that threatened to fracture nationalist consensus even as they revealed the problematic charters, and entailments, of anticolonial nationalism. For the purposes of this book, this history will attain its apotheosis in the debates over the use of caste for social welfare in the postindependence contexts of “reservations,” quotas, and affirmative action.

Specters of Caste

It is impossible to write about India today, particularly when addressing issues concerning community, without referring to the current crisis over secularism and religious nationalism. The rise of Hindu fundamentalism has made it necessary to engage explicitly with the ways that Hinduism, as a set of ritual practices, a “world religion,” and an ethnic identity, has increasingly claimed India as its own. The uses of *Hindutva* as a political call to arms, and the demise of secularism as a legitimate national ideology, have led to a crisis that might make a book on caste seem beside the point. But it is in part because of the crisis around communalism that it is well worth directing some attention to the ways in which caste haunts discourses of community and nation in India today. This study will perforce address a range of concerns relevant to the

current crisis. First, there is now general acceptance of the fact that the bitter debates over caste reservations were triggered by the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report by V. P. Singh in 1990. Once caste started to be used as the basis for denying rather than conferring social privilege, Hindu nationalists captured ground by calling for a notion of religious community to replace one of caste. Second, one of my arguments in this book will be that caste was configured as an encompassing Indian social system in direct relationship to the constitution of “Hinduism” as a systematic, confessional, all-embracing religious identity. Indeed, caste has generally been seen as fundamental to Hinduism—a curious irony in a context in which the problems of caste are today being used to justify the necessity of Hinduism as a noncontestatory form of community to cushion the turmoil of political modernity in India. My examination into the colonial history of caste will complement any investigation of the affiliation of religious identities with political communities in the current geopolitics of South Asia, even as it builds on the important suggestions of Gyanendra Pandey that religious *communalism* was also in large part a colonial construction.⁷

It is not as if the Hindu nationalists, any more than either fundamentalist or secularist reformers in days past, have managed to wish caste away. Caste continues to dominate Indian social worlds, even if in some larger political contexts it has been effaced by the conflict between Hindus and Muslims. In regions of India that witnessed particularly significant anti-Brahman (and by implication anticaste) political movements, as for example in what are today Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, as well as in regions where caste provided the basis for “lower-caste” political mobilization, as for example in parts of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, caste seems to be as prominent a fact of social life as ever. Increasingly, all-India forms of Dalit (“untouchable”) politics carry on B. R. Ambedkar’s insistent identification of caste as the most powerful vehicle of dominance—ritual as well as political and economic—in India. At the same time, the process of what has been called the ethnicization, or substantialization, of caste, heralded by many social scientists as the necessary death of the old caste system (based as they thought it was on interdependency rather than conflict) has provided new mechanisms for the strengthening of caste identity. Caste may no longer convey a sense of community that confers civilizational identity to the Indian subcontinent, but it is still the primary form of local identity and, in certain contexts, from Dalits to Brahmans, translates the local into recognizably subcontinental idioms of association far more powerful than any other single category of community.

Caste thus continues, even as it continues to trouble. But despite the tone here—and I will be critical of the British role in the reification of caste even as I am critical of those, Indian or Western, who advocate the values of the *caste system*—I do not seek to join the chorus of those who view caste as either emblematic of Indian civilization or as opposed to modernity. Although my

principal concern will be to unravel the historical process that has worked to naturalize the idea of a (uniform, all-encompassing, ideologically consistent, Indologically conceived) caste system, I am particularly concerned to register my conviction that caste has at times been the necessary vehicle of social and political mobilization, even as it carries as many traces of the modern as the institutions it is said to inhibit or oppose. When figures such as Ambedkar in western India or Periyar in the south organized political movements around caste, they worked to transform both the cultural meanings and the political uses of caste in ways that went well beyond the colonial mandate. On occasion, caste has indeed been a worthy synonym of community in the best of senses, even if political movements have all too often failed to transcend in any way the problematic relationship of caste to exclusion. Nehru observed that “In the constructive schemes that we may make, we have to pay attention to the human material we have to deal with, to the background of its thought and urges, and to the environment in which we have to function. To ignore all this and to fashion some idealistic scheme in the air, or merely to think in terms of imitating what others have done elsewhere, would be folly. It becomes desirable therefore to examine and understand the old Indian social structure which has so powerfully influenced our people.”⁸ More to my point, since I can share neither Nehru’s precise pronouns nor his own political project, leave alone his understanding of caste, I would argue that caste endures and is so significant today because it has been the precipitate of a powerful history, in which it has been constituted as the very condition of the Indian social. This book is principally about the historicity of caste, the ways caste has come into being, and as such been conditioned by history to condition (and make conditional) any possibility of a future beyond, or without, caste.

What follows is principally about the colonial role in the historical construction of caste. I argue that the history in which caste has been constituted as the principal modality of Indian society draws as much from the role of British Orientalists, administrators, and missionaries as it does from Indian reformers, social thinkers, and political actors. Indeed, my argument is about the power of the colonial leviathan to produce caste as the measure of all social things, a feat that could not have been accomplished had caste not become one of the most important emblems of tradition (the not-so-obscure object of desire for many Westerners and Indians alike, across the full course of India’s modern history) at the same time as it was a core feature of colonial power/knowledge. And yet this is not a simple story of either epistemic domination or of elite collaboration. This book not only culminates in the heroic attempts by Ambedkar and Periyar to change the terms of caste; it builds on the work of critics of colonial modernity such as Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee, who have been as concerned to chart new historical patterns of influence as they have been to find new ways to chart alternative futures. Guha, whose work has ranged from his brilliant intellectual history of the Bengal Permanent Settle-

ment to his more recent studies of anticolonial insurgency and the manifold historical entailments of colonial domination, has both demonstrated the power of colonial rule and the need to write not just against but beyond colonialism.⁹ And Chatterjee has always insisted on the need to chart the history of colonized negotiations with both the brutality of foreign domination and the spectral hail of the modern. Drawing inspiration from these and many other scholars, I hope to weave an argument far more complicated than that the British invented caste, though in one sense this is precisely what happened. But when I assert the power of colonial history I do so in the wake of the now canonic demonstrations by Bernard Cohn and Edward Said of the hegemonic character of colonial rule on the history of the colonized.¹⁰

We now know that colonial conquest was not just the result of the power of superior arms, military organization, political power, or economic wealth—as important as these things were. Colonialism was made possible, and then sustained and strengthened, as much by cultural technologies of rule as it was by the more obvious and brutal modes of conquest that first established power on foreign shores. The cultural effects of colonialism have until recently been too often ignored or displaced into the inevitable logics of modernization and world capitalism; and this only because it has not been sufficiently recognized that colonialism was itself a cultural project of control. Colonial knowledge both enabled conquest and was produced by it; in certain important ways, knowledge was what colonialism was all about. Cultural forms in societies newly classified as “traditional” were reconstructed and transformed by this knowledge, which created new categories and oppositions between colonizers and colonized, European and Asian, modern and traditional, West and East. Through the delineation and reconstitution of systematic grammars for vernacular languages, the control of Indian territory through cartographic technologies and picturesque techniques of rule, the representation of India through the mastery and display of archaeological mementos and ritual texts, the taxing of India through the reclassification and assessment of land use, property form, and agrarian structure, and the enumeration of India through the statistical technology of the census, Britain set in motion transformations every bit as powerful as the better-known consequences of military and economic imperialism.¹¹

Most saliently for the argument here, British colonialism played a critical role in both the identification and the production of Indian “tradition.” Current debates about modernity and tradition fail to appreciate the extent to which the congeries of beliefs, customs, practices, and convictions that have been designated as traditional are in fact the complicated byproduct of colonial history. Bernard Cohn has argued that the British simultaneously misrecognized and simplified things Indian, imprisoning the Indian subject into the typecast role it assigned under the name of tradition: “In the conceptual scheme which the British created to understand and to act in India, they constantly followed the

same logic; they reduced vastly complex codes and their associated meanings to a few metonyms. . . . India was redefined by the British to be a place of rules and orders; once the British had defined to their own satisfaction what they construed as Indian rules and customs, then the Indians had to conform to these constructions."¹² Edward Said has illuminated the process through which the Orient was "Orientalized" precisely because of the byzantine reinforcements of colonial power and knowledge.¹³ Partha Chatterjee has called this general process the "colonial rule of difference": referring thereby to the historical fact that colonialism could only justify itself if under the regime of universal history it encountered the limit of alterity, the social fact that India must always be ruled because it could never be folded into a universal narrative of progress, modernity, and, ultimately, Europe. "To the extent this complex of power and knowledge was colonial," he tells us, "the forms of objectification and normalization of the colonized had to reproduce, within the framework of a universal knowledge, the truth of colonial difference."¹⁴

It is here that we come up against the special perversity of colonial modernity, for the traditional was produced precisely within the historical relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The colonizer held out modernity as a promise but at the same time made it the limiting condition of coloniality: the promise that would never be kept. The colonized could be seduced by the siren of the modern but never quite get there, mired necessarily (if colonialism was to continue to legitimate itself) in a "traditional" world.¹⁵ On the other side of the colonial divide, the colonized, sometimes in direct reaction to the colonial lie of universality, would appropriate tradition as resistance and as refuge, but under conditions of colonial modernity tradition was simultaneously devalued and transformed. As a result, tradition too suffered from loss, even as it was tainted by its evident historicity. In the case of caste, many Indian social reformers and critics mistook this history as linear decline, the degradation of a noble system into a corrupt structure of power and dominant interests. Only a few, most notably the extraordinary sociologist G. S. Ghurye, blamed colonialism.¹⁶ But whatever the argument, attempts at historical recuperation typically took the form of finding an Orientalist golden age, a time when caste was an ideal system of mutual responsibility, reasoned interdependence, and genuine spiritual authority. Only a few non-Brahman and Dalit voices rejected this kind of Orientalist nostalgia, all the while feeling increasingly trapped by the demands of anticolonial nationalism to downplay, and defer, all critiques of Indian culture and civilization.

The Indian Political

Perhaps the most troubling legacy of the colonial idea of a golden age is the disavowal (shared in large part by nationalist thought) of the political forms

and affiliations that were an important part of India's precolonial history. It is this last concern that was the subject of my previous study, *The Hollow Crown*, which took as its focus the social and political fortunes of a small kingdom in southern India from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century. I argued that "until the emergence of British colonial rule in southern India [and by implication India at large] the crown was not so hollow as it has generally been made out to be. Kings were not inferior to Brahmans; the political domain was not encompassed by a religious domain. State forms, while not fully assimilated to western categories of the state, were powerful components in Indian Civilization. Indian society, indeed caste itself, was shaped by political struggles and processes."¹⁷ The vital world of political action and community was, in fact, overtaken by colonial rule, and public life became increasingly defined as Western at the same time that the promise of universal modernity became more and more marked in national and racial terms. Meanwhile, public life was emptied of all "traditional" components—as old forms of politics were condemned as feudal and old forms of association rendered atavistic. The permanent Zamindari settlements of Bengal and Madras, and the intractable histories leading to indirect rule of one form or another in one-third of India (leaving princely states "intact"), produced a hollow simulacrum of India's ancient politics. The British maintained in style these kingdoms, which had facilitated colonial conquest, as lavish museums of old India. At the same time, these states were constant reminders of the justifications of British rule: India had been unable to rule itself because its political system was commanded by grand but quarrelling kings who would shamelessly exploit their subjects in order to accumulate unlimited wealth and prestige, and had neither attended to basic principles of justice nor concerned themselves with the formation of organized administration and stable, centralized power. Thus Britain sustained the fiction that it had walked into a vacuum and had conquered India, as the Cambridge imperial historian John Seeley said, "in a fit of absence of mind," after which the British ruled India for the sake of its own subjects, rather than for any gain of their own.¹⁸ This astonishing failure of historical consciousness was, of course, justified through the attribution of a lack of history, and caste was taken as a sign thereof.

These colonial narratives seemed justified by case after case in which landlords and princes would fail to exploit the economic opportunities afforded by permanent settlement and indirect rule; "theater states" grew up all over India in which issues of ceremonial and prestige, hierarchy and protocol, accumulation and expenditure seemed of far greater moment than either sound management or popular representation. A kind of embarrassment set in, I would suggest, in which it became difficult to point to recent history, and the vast estates and quasi-autonomous tracts under royal control, as arguments for national self-confidence—let alone self-rule. In cities like Calcutta, the elite was in large part supported by the profits that came from landlord rights to these same

rural estates; in this environment, recognition of the power of the West became the basis both for what has been called colonial mimicry in areas ranging from political theory to cultural production and for the development of forms of resistance that were justified by the glorious past record of India's civilizational achievement. A new vision, following what by now was an authoritative Orientalist script coauthored in many cases by those who accorded no particular prestige to political authority, celebrated the civilizational and spiritual achievements of old India. This vision did not address the political history of recent times; a conspicuous silence was maintained around the material basis of the vision's own conditions of possibility. In thinking about the efflorescence of current debate around the subject of tradition, it is accordingly necessary to call again for the recuperation of that part of Indian tradition, or history, that had been compromised by the vain pomp, circumstance, and exploitation of colonial feudalism—not to argue return but rather to counter the otherworldliness of colonial fictions about history. It is time again to “tell sad stories of the death of kings: how some have been deposed, some slain in war, some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed. . . . All murdered.”¹⁹

In subsequent chapters I shall say more about kings, and about the Indian political. The point here is to suggest that the death of kings cleared the way for the transformation of caste under colonial rule. Caste was refigured as a distinctly religious system, and the transformation had immense implications for everyday social life. The confinement of caste to the realm of religion enabled colonial procedures of rule through the characterization of India as essentially a place of spiritual harmony and liberation; when the state existed in India, so the argument went, it was despotic and epiphenomenal, extractive but fundamentally irrelevant. British rule could thus be characterized as enlightened when it denied Indian subjects even the minimal rights that constituted the basis for the development of civil society in Europe. Caste itself was seen as a form of colonial civil society in India, which provided an ironic, and inferior, anthropological analogue for the colonized world. In Europe, the rise of new nation-states in the eighteenth century went hand in hand with the construction of a new form of civil society. Civil society was to free individuals in new and progressive societies from “traditional” modes of social organization and from the myriad constraints of premodern and/or feudal polities. Civil society had been constituted by and institutionalized in a range of bodies—the church, educational institutions, civic organizations—that represented the interests of a private domain, interests construed to be autonomous from the state even as they were simultaneously protected by it. The modern state, more powerful than ever before, had legitimated itself in part through its claim to free the social realm from the politics of the past. In India, however, caste was understood always to have resisted political intrusion; it was already a kind of civil society in that it regulated and mediated the private domain,

such as it was. But a society based on caste could not be more different from modern Western society, for caste was opposed to the basic premises of individualism, and it neither permitted the development of voluntarist or politically malleable social institutions nor worked to reinforce the modern state. Further, caste conferred citizenship only in social and ritual rather than in political contexts, and opposed the ideas of both individual action and social mobilization. According to some, caste actively resisted the modern state even more than it did the old, for the modern state opposed rather than supported the dharmic order of things. At the same time, many British officials were convinced that caste would stand in the way of nationalist mobilization, claiming as it did primordial loyalty from its members.

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. In fact, however, caste 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. What we take now as caste is, in fact, the precipitate of a history that selected caste as the single and systematic category to name, and thereby contain, the Indian social order. In precolonial India, the units of social identity had been multiple, and their respective relations and trajectories were part of a complex, conjunctural, constantly changing, political world. The referents of social identity were not only heterogeneous; they were also determined by context. Temple communities, territorial groups, lineage segments, family units, royal retinues, warrior subcastes, “little” kingdoms, occupational reference groups, agricultural or trading associations, devotionally conceived networks and sectarian communities, even priestly cabals, were just some of the significant units of identification, all of them at various times far more significant than any uniform metonymy of endogamous “caste” groupings. Caste, or rather some of the things that seem most easily to come under the name of caste, was just one category among many others, one way of organizing and representing identity. Moreover, caste was not a single category or even a single logic of categorization, even for Brahmans, who were the primary beneficiaries of the caste idea. Regional, village, or residential communities, kinship groups, factional parties, chiefly contingents, political affiliations, and so on could both supersede caste as a rubric for identity and reconstitute the ways caste was organized. Within localities, or kingdoms, groups could rise or fall (and in the process become more or less castelike), depending on the fortunes of particular kings, chiefs, warriors, or headmen, even as kings could routinely readjust the social order by royal decree.²⁰

Social identity was importantly political, as too were the contexts in which different units became formed, represented, and mobilized. And politics took on its shape and meaning in relation to local and regional systems of power in

which headmen (of lineages, temples, villages), religious leaders (gurus, leaders of sects and monasteries, saints, priests, muftis, and imams), warriors, chiefs, and kings were figures of central importance, with authority over constituencies that from certain perspectives could look and act like caste groups. To read and organize social difference and deference—pervasive features of Indian society—solely in terms of caste thus required a striking act of history and studied disregard for ethnographic specificity, as well as a systematic denial of the political mechanisms that selected different kinds of social units as most significant, and as most highly valorized, at different times. Brahmanic texts, both Vedic origin stories for caste and the much later dharma texts of “Manu,” provided transregional and metahistorical modes of understanding Indian society that clearly appealed to British colonial interests and attitudes; they also secured for Indians pride of place in a civilizational lexicon of cultural reconstitution, reaffirmation, and resistance. The idea that *varna*—the classification of all castes into four hierarchical orders with the Brahman on top—could conceivably organize the social identities and relations of all Indians across the civilizational expanse of the subcontinent 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 Dumont and others became a systematic value only under the sign of the colonial modern.

Caste and the Colonial Modern

The transformations associated with modernity in India were overdetermined by the colonial situation. On the one hand, what was useful for British rule also became available for the uses of many Indians who were recruited to participate in one way or another in the construction of colonial knowledge. On the other hand, new forms of and claims about knowledge, products as they were in large part of early colonial Orientalism and late colonial state practices, could take root only because colonial interventions actively obliterated the political dynamic of colonial society. Ironically, it was the very permeability and dynamism of Indian society that allowed caste to become modern India’s apparition of its traditional being. Under colonial rule caste—now systematic, and systematically disembodied—lived on. In this new form it was appropriated and reconstructed by colonial power. What Orientalist knowledge did most successfully in the Indian context was to assert the precolonial authority of a specifically colonial form of power and representation.

When caste became political again (if, necessarily, in a different sense), whether in response to census classifications at the beginning of the twentieth century or in reaction to the implementation of the Mandal Report at the end, no one should have been surprised. Caste had been political all along, but under colonialism was anchored to the service of a colonial interest in main-

taining social order, justifying colonial power, and sustaining a very particular form of indirect rule. By indirect rule in this context I mean the mechanisms that were used both to buttress and to displace colonial authority. In the early years of colonial rule, these mechanisms were organized principally through “land systems” that were linked to modes of property, agrarian relations, and revenue collection. Zamindars, individual cultivators, and village communities were variably constituted—after long debates over Indian history and colonial policy—as the authentic heirs of precolonial local authority and as primary agents of revenue collection and local order. This was the period when Charles Cornwallis and Philip Francis took their cues from the physiocrats and argued in favor of the resurrection of local lords as a loyal and newly gentrified elite, indebted to British rule and dedicated to improvement; when Thomas Munro made his career by arguing against landlords both because he saw these survivals of older political systems as dangerous and because he was convinced they, unlike the ryots or cultivators whose role he championed, had no actual involvement in agricultural cultivation; and when Charles Metcalfe and Mountstuart Elphinstone established their reputations by identifying and advocating the resilience of the ancient village republic or community, writing histories to justify their position and drafting land policies to demonstrate the wisdom of their views.

As agrarian revenue issues were provisionally resolved, they were at the same time increasingly taken over by other kinds of revenue concerns tied into the diversification of the colonial economy, ranging from changes in international trade, the success and transformation of industrial development in Britain, and the rise of major investments in railways and other infrastructures, to new kinds of world strategic concerns. Thus the crises of early conquest and rule began to give way to other issues of control. This was so particularly in the wake of the Great Rebellion of 1857, after which the Company’s ambitions of complete conquest were necessarily curtailed, and the British state assumed “direct” rule. At the very time that Awadhi talukdars were being bought off and other princes and zamindars feted as the ceremonial center of old India, British interest in the institution of caste intensified in very new ways. District-level manuals and gazetteers began to devote whole chapters to the ethnography of caste and custom; imperial surveys made caste into a central object of investigation; and by the time of the first decennial census of 1872, caste had become the primary subject of social classification and knowledge. Although the village continued to be seen as the dominant site of Indian social life, it became understood as more a setting for caste relations than the primary building block of Indian society. By 1901, when the census commissioner H. H. Risley announced his ambition for an ethnographic survey of India, it was clear that caste had attained its colonial apotheosis.

And yet caste was never easily contained, either by spiritual otherworldliness or by Risley’s racial empiricism. If caste, like the women’s question, became an increasing embarrassment to the nationalist project in the twentieth

century, it never disappeared from the politics of the day. An avalanche of petitions to census commissioners over caste status led to the dropping of caste as a census category after 1931, even as caste politics vied significantly with certain forms of nationalism in places such as Bombay and Madras presidencies. Even as temple entry, under Gandhi and many regional leaders, continued to occupy pride of place in certain political agendas, Ambedkar threatened the unity of nationalist purpose by pressing his case for separate electorates for scheduled castes in a heroic struggle with Gandhi in 1932. Caste politics did not interfere with the triumph of the nationalist movement, as did communal strife between Hindus and Muslims in the tragic preemption of Partition, but it returned soon after independence to contest the easy assurances of modernity in the new Nehruvian secular vision of society, both at the national level and once again in regions such as Madras. The sociological assurance that caste would disappear except as a form of domestic ritual or familial identity when it entered the city and new domains of industrial capital turned out to be a bourgeois dream disrupted both by steady reports of escalating caste violence in the countryside and then the turmoil over reservations in the principal cities of the nation. Caste did not die, it did not fade away, and it could no longer be diagnosed as benign. At the same time, caste remains the single most powerful category for reminding the nation of the resilience of poverty, oppression, domination, exclusion, and the social life of privilege. And some of the most eloquent expressions of political community now come in the form of movements that take caste as a primary focus of social mobilization. One could even argue, following recent formulations by Partha Chatterjee, that caste has moved from its place as a colonial substitute for civil society (or, in Chatterjee's terms, the colonial argument for why civil society could not grow in India) to a new position as a specifically postcolonial version of political society.²¹

And so, for better and for worse, caste did replace the crown that came before. If the crown was literally emptied of the political dynamic and authority that characterized precolonial regimes in India's history, caste entered, Athena-like, into the places left behind. Recounting the history of caste, in other words, is one way of narrating the social history of colonialism in India.²² This is a history in which the past itself was colonized, in which the domain of civil society was abandoned to theories about the weight of tradition, in this case the totality represented by the caste system. Caste became the colonial form of civil society; it justified the denial of political rights to Indian subjects (not citizens) and explained the necessity of colonial rule. As India was anthropologized in the colonial interest, a narrative about its social formation, its political capacity, and its civilizational inheritance began increasingly to tell the story of colonial inevitability and of the permanence of British imperial rule. If caste occupied the place of the social and constrained the possibility of the political, colonial rule could consist largely of the enumerative technology

of the census and the ethnographic survey, producing by the late nineteenth century what I call the “ethnographic state.” This is not the whole story, of course, for at the very time that caste was consolidated as the primary object of social classification and knowledge, it was appropriated in other ways, as well. And it was also steadily subordinated to the political mobilization around the nationalist movement, which disproved one colonial myth after another. But caste remained, and was in fact recast, in ways that have caused embarrassment and critique and have provided the basis for new forms of social mobilization and progressive politics. Caste has become uniquely Indian, and not always in ways that satisfy either liberal or conservative agendas of national identity.

Caste is a specter that continues to haunt the body politic of postcolonial India. Whether in constitutional claims about the abolition of caste discrimination or in political claims about the formation of the national community, it has become the subject of national shame. In part this is an extension of the “women’s question” that emerged so powerfully in relation to social reform debates and movements of the nineteenth century. Most of the issues that attracted the attention of social reformers, from widow burning to prohibitions around widow remarriage and controversies over the age of consent, were embedded within caste protocols and related to caste status. The fundamentally gendered character of caste as an emergent cultural system will only occasionally be remarked in the argument that follows, even as I must note at the outset that many of the most egregious effects of caste have been expressed through gender.²³ Colonial sociology was almost as silent as nationalist sociology about the ways in which caste encoded the treatment and management of women in Indian society; it either assumed the pervasiveness of India’s abuse of women or anthropologized the whole set of questions around marriage, reproduction, and the family. In the nationalism of the twentieth century, Gandhi was one of the few major figures to attempt to keep the women’s issue alive, if in registers that have attracted considerable dissent. Gandhi’s principal amendment to the social reform agenda was, in fact, his plank concerning “harijan uplift,” although this too became severely contested as his efforts at compromise and incorporation fell afoul of increasing Dalit mobilization.

Nevertheless, whether in relation to the history of gender, the victimization of Dalits, or the rise of anti-Brahman and backward-caste politics, caste has worked to compromise the easy affiliations of national unity and civilizational history. Caste has become the focus of progressive movements and of debates—both local and national—about the character of postcolonial politics. It has also become the uncomfortable reminder that community is always segmented by class, gender, and region, that the nation might be threatened less by religious difference than by other pervasive grounds of difference; it is a reminder that all claims about community are claims about privilege, participation, and exclusion. Caste has been the site of collisions between patriarchy

and tradition; in its valorization of Brahmanic ideals around the status of women and the general subservience of women to marriage rules and domestic conditions, caste has simultaneously preserved the patriarchy of premodern society and worked to sanction the continued oppression and exclusion of women in nationalist reimaginings of the past. But it has also made it clear that neither Brahmanism nor Hinduism can be the genuine basis for a national community, even as religion itself cannot be sequestered (indeed never has been so sequestered) into a private sphere, whether in traditional or modern terms. And caste haunts all assertions of return to a premodern past, all claims about the glories and values of tradition. Caste may be the precipitate of the modern, but it is still the specter of the past.