

Caste Wasn't a British Construct - and Anyone Who Studies History Should Know That

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This false thesis allows upper-caste intellectuals to maintain privilege in both India and the US.



A Brahmin family photograph from the 1880s, likely from Maharashtra. Image: Wikimedia Commons

The geographer Sanjoy Chakravorty recently promised that, in his new book, he would “show how the social categories of religion and caste as they are perceived in modern-day India were developed during the British colonial rule...” [1] The air of originality amused me. This notion has been in vogue in South Asian postcolonial studies for at least two decades. The highest expression of the genre, Nicholas Dirks’s *Castes of Mind*, was published in 2001.

I take no issue with claiming originality for warmed-over ideas: following the neoliberal mantra of “publish or perish,” we academics do it all the time. But reading Chakravorty’s essay, I was shocked at the longevity of this particular idea, that caste as we know it is an artefact of British colonialism. For any historian of pre-colonial India, the idea is absurd. Therefore, its persistence has less to do with empirical merit, than with the peculiar dynamics of the global South Asian academy.

The origins of this idea lie in Bernard Cohn’s work on the census’ role in codifying *jāti*, and on the role of Brahmin native informants in shaping the British imagination of Hinduism. The first process was peculiar to British colonialism, since this bureaucratic technology was new. The second process is familiar: Brahminism has shaped state ideology since the Gupta empire. Exceptions – like the 17th-century Nāyaka states that celebrated the commerce and cultural life of ‘left-hand castes’ – only prove the rule.

Somehow, scholars leapt from Cohn’s work to a thesis that caste as we recognise it is a poisoned gift of the British. In the region where I have some expertise, the Marathi-speaking pre-modern world, English and Marathi scholarship amply document caste as both material oppression and *varna* ideology. More viscerally, low caste saints speak to us, centuries later, of their poverty, their back-breaking labour, and the dishonour and loneliness of their social position. Consider just two examples, the first an *abhaṅg* by Tukaram, the second by Janabai:

Born a shudra, I was a tradesman.

* * *

[illegible]

Year	Country	Year	Country	Year	Country	Year	Country	Year	Country
1991	USA	1992	USA	1993	USA	1994	USA	1995	USA
1996	USA	1997	USA	1998	USA	1999	USA	2000	USA
2001	USA	2002	USA	2003	USA	2004	USA	2005	USA
2006	USA	2007	USA	2008	USA	2009	USA	2010	USA
2011	USA	2012	USA	2013	USA	2014	USA	2015	USA
2016	USA	2017	USA	2018	USA	2019	USA	2020	USA
2021	USA	2022	USA	2023	USA	2024	USA	2025	USA
2026	USA	2027	USA	2028	USA	2029	USA	2030	USA
2031	USA	2032	USA	2033	USA	2034	USA	2035	USA
2036	USA	2037	USA	2038	USA	2039	USA	2040	USA
2041	USA	2042	USA	2043	USA	2044	USA	2045	USA
2046	USA	2047	USA	2048	USA	2049	USA	2050	USA
2051	USA	2052	USA	2053	USA	2054	USA	2055	USA
2056	USA	2057	USA	2058	USA	2059	USA	2060	USA
2061	USA	2062	USA	2063	USA	2064	USA	2065	USA
2066	USA	2067	USA	2068	USA	2069	USA	2070	USA
2071	USA	2072	USA	2073	USA	2074	USA	2075	USA
2076	USA	2077	USA	2078	USA	2079	USA	2080	USA
2081	USA	2082	USA	2083	USA	2084	USA	2085	USA
2086	USA	2087	USA	2088	USA	2089	USA	2090	USA
2091	USA	2092	USA	2093	USA	2094	USA	2095	USA
2096	USA	2097	USA	2098	USA	2099	USA	2100	USA

This is not to minimise the pernicious nature of colonialism, or postcolonialism's critique of it. The horrific immiseration of the Indian countryside by British colonialism – which wiped out rural wealth, laid waste to millions of lives in famine after famine, and destroyed artisanal economies that had

driven global trade for centuries – affected the lower castes in particular. Simultaneously, British education created both the upper-caste elites who became their successors, and nurtured lower-caste thinkers like Mahatma Phule and Dr B.R. Ambedkar who articulated devastating critiques of *varna* ideology. Colonialism, like all forms of rule, had complex effects on caste. Yet the British did not create it.

Given how evidently untrue this thesis is, the question is why it persists. The answer, in part, is that postcolonial studies is its own echo-chamber. Works like these are not vetted by boring historians of pre-colonial India like myself. Rather, under the sexy sign of theory, postcolonial scholars make sweeping claims about pre-colonial India, without expertise in the period.

More importantly, this thesis allows upper-caste intellectuals to maintain privilege in both India and the US. The Indian educational system, which disproportionately benefits upper castes, allows them to migrate. Once there, without the prop of caste privilege, postcolonial theory provided an avenue for critiquing white elites. Scholars like us have held elite academic positions for decades now on the basis of representing the brown voice of the subaltern in the West.

By then foisting the blame on colonialism, we absolve ourselves of complicity in caste, even as we continue to benefit from caste oppression in India. Academic gate-keeping – through patronage networks of teaching and hiring, journal editorial boards and conference invitations – keeps this monopoly in place. Meanwhile, the same tired theory is repackaged and resold by scholars eager to profit from this monopoly. If you think about the academy as an economic institution, it is a fascinating case of covert collusion.

I speak as an insider, a whistleblower. I come from precisely this class of upper-caste diasporic intellectuals. The big secret of South Asian postcolonial theory is that its obfuscatory language – signalling sophistication to mere mortals – actually hides power. The scholars avow progressivism, but their theories defend privilege in both India and the US.

No wonder that Hindutvadis in both countries are now quoting their works to claim that caste was never a Hindu phenomenon. As Dalits are lynched across India and upper-caste South Asian-Americans lobby to erase the history of their lower-caste compatriots from US textbooks [2], to traffic in this self-serving theory is unconscionable.

The painful irony is that Dalit scholars have said this before, while struggling to get past academic gate-keepers and scholarly chowkidars. It took a Chakravarti saying it on Twitter for this critique to garner mainstream attention. In 2019, the question is not whether the subaltern can speak – it is whether us double-Brahmins of the academy, who perform progressivism while maintaining caste, will ever allow them to be heard.

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P.S.

- THE WIRE. 30/JUN/2019:
<https://thewire.in/caste/caste-history-postcolonial-studies>

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Early Modern Brazil and India, was published by Oxford University Press in 2018. She is working on a monograph on the Konkan, as well as a co-authored volume on caste with Varsha Ayyar. As part of RadicalxChange Foundation, Chakravarti is working on solutions for remaking the global academy as a non-capitalist institution.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-48619734>

[2] <https://thewire.in/education/caste-wont-be-erased-from-california-textbooks-says-committee>