

## CASTE, ANTHROPOLOGY OF

The term *caste* refers, paradigmatically, to a social institution in India and elsewhere in South Asia in which endogenous descent groups, known as *castes* or *subcastes*, are hierarchically ranked. It has also been used to describe hereditary forms of social stratification in non-South Asian contexts, such as Japan, the American South, and elsewhere. The validity of usage outside of South Asian contexts, however, ultimately turns on how we are to understand the paradigmatic Indian case—a matter of considerable and ongoing debate. This article therefore confines itself to the study of caste in India, from its emergence in the colonial period to today.

### BEGINNINGS OF CASTE THEORY

Throughout South Asia individual castes and subcastes are referred to as *jāti*, an Indo-Aryan word meaning a category of related persons thought to be of the same physical and moral substance, though the word can also mean genus, species, or race and other allegedly natural types. *Caste*, meaning the systematic basis upon which individual *jātis* are organized, has never perfectly conformed to either popular or scholarly models; not only do the customs and practices of *jāti* hierarchies vary from region to region, they also are commonly interpreted in different ways even within a single village. All this has been well known since the colonial period. But while scholars had a growing appreciation of this empirical complexity, their basic interpretive framework remained, until recently, remarkably stable.

From the late eighteenth century, the colonial picture of caste society was shaped by Brahmin informants who regarded caste as a religious matter and who saw local *jāti* hierarchies as depending on the scriptural theory of *varṇa*—an idealized four-fold social division that proclaimed the spiritual authority of the *brahmana* (Brahmin) superior to the worldly power of the *kṣatriya* (warrior/king), who it enjoined to enforce brahminical law over the *vaiśya* (merchant) and *śūdra* (laborer). Colonial observers construed brahminical ideology as historical reality: The wily Brahmin had devised a hidebound social order that locked each caste into a particular occupation serving elite interests. Preoccupied with their own racial distinction, colonizers furthermore envisioned low-ranked laboring castes as conquered indigenes and high-ranked castes as the descendents of ancient Aryan colonizers. The guiding thread of colonial caste theory, however, was an orientalist notion of religious determinism—namely, that an elaborate ritual code had engendered universal respect for brahminical authority, enabling high-ranked castes to maintain unbroken control over the toiling masses for millennia.

### THE RITUAL CONSENSUS

Speculative histories and detailed catalogues of caste-based customs dominated colonial anthropology until systematic village-based fieldwork in the 1950s looked at these customs' everyday context to see how caste actually worked. That more sophisticated approach, which the influential Indian anthropologist M. N. Srinivas exemplified, helped undermine stereotypes of caste society as static and passively determined by religious ideology. Srinivas showed that wealth and physical force often trumped mere ritual (1959), and that, although an individual's ritual status was indeed fixed by their *jāti*, whole *jātis* could sometimes increase their status by adopting the customs of higher-ranked castes (1956). Srinivas's important insights nevertheless remained within the received picture of the caste system as an essentially religious affair by treating the control of land and servile labor, merchant capital, the state, and sheer physical dominance—all of which were termed *secular*—as extrinsic factors that might interact with caste, but were not an inherent part of it.

The tendency to idealize caste as inherently distinct from these less exotic aspects of social reality was taken to a new extreme by French sociologist Louis Dumont, whose *Homo Hierarchicus* went so far as to attack empiricism itself as “Westernistic” and therefore incapable of grasping caste's true, Indian essence (1980 [1966], p. 32). For the closer anthropologists had looked, the more caste appeared to be but congeries of variable and even contradictory elements, its singular essence reduced to a vanishing point. If such an approach were “logically carried out,” Dumont had observed in 1958, “we should have to pretend ... that India is a mere geographical entity [i.e., lacking a singular cultural essence] similar to Africa” (p. 50). Dumont's solution was to redefine the object of inquiry itself as being, not the messy realities of everyday life, but the flexible ideological principle that rendered such realities coherent. He named this principle *hierarchy*, novelly defined as a universal consensus of values pervading all levels of society and cognition, subordinating the individual to the social whole, political and economic power to the spiritual authority of brahminical religion, and the substantial historical realities of *jāti* to the timeless ideal of *varṇa*—all of which he explained as the hierarchical “encompassment” of the impure by the pure. Those who saw caste as exploitive or as stifling individual freedom had simply failed to grasp the reality of a culture that simply does not accept the West's egalitarian and individualist ethic. Exploitation cannot exist in a caste society, Dumont reasoned, because “an economic phenomenon [like exploitation] presupposes an individual subject,” whereas in caste society, “everything is directed to the whole ... as part and parcel of the necessary order” (1980 [1966], p. 107).

Dumont's brilliant synthesis of the existing scholarship made *Homo Hierarchicus* a standard reference for all future discussions of caste, despite disagreement over its visionary epistemology. At one extreme, American anthropologist McKim Marriott (1976) embraced an all-determining cultural hiatus between India and the West even more absolute than Dumont's, for the secular factors Dumont had merely downgraded to a subordinate level were dissolved entirely in Marriott's *ethnosociology*—an account built completely on native categories, thereby consigning non-culturally recognized reality to theoretical oblivion. On the other side, many sober-minded anthropologists continued to regard both secular realities and caste ideology as a matter of empirical inquiry, while nevertheless accepting the culturalist definition of caste as ritual order.

#### POST-DUMONTIAN CRITIQUE

This picture, however, would soon be questioned by two distinct groups of researchers: ethnographers studying the lowest-ranked "untouchable" castes (today called *Dalits*), and historians investigating transformations of native society under colonial rule. Both questioned the social and political bases upon which official knowledge about caste had been produced; both ceased to assume that caste had some singular cultural essence, analyzing it instead as a composite phenomenon intrinsically and irreducibly involving relations of power.

Throughout India the panoply of local caste differences are overshadowed—especially in the traditional heartlands of deltaic civilization—by a singular social division today commonly identified with a ritual distinction between "touchable" *jātis* and "untouchable" ones. The latter, whose *jāti* names were once used interchangeably with terms for slave, remained largely beyond the pale of Hindu society until the early twentieth century. Quintessential outsiders, Dalits were paradoxically indispensable to the very existence, symbolic and material, of caste society: Compelled to remove polluting substances, their labor guaranteed that others remained pure; hereditarily tied to producing for others, they underwrote other castes' material privilege. Were "untouchables" consigned to a life of hard agricultural labor on account of their impurity, or was being coded impure and assigned polluting tasks simply part of what it meant to be under the total domination of others? One can abstract a noetic model of ritual purity from the complex social phenomenon of caste, à la Dumont, but it is unclear why caste itself should be defined by the result of this exercise. Not only would this seem to reduce the anthropological explanation of a society to that society's own self-understanding, it was also far from clear that what Dumont described was not simply the view of some Indians but not others. As

anthropologist Owen Lynch (1977) would argue, Dumont's claim to have accessed a civilizational truth encompassing all socially locatable and interested representations amounted to a form of theoretical solipsism. Specifically, Dumont's synthesis had ignored the testimony of the most dominated peoples, prompting Dalit specialist Gerald Berreman to dismiss it as merely the "rationale for a system of institutionalized inequality as advertised and endorsed by its ... beneficiaries" (1971, p. 23), which only seemed plausible in the context of an anthropological tradition that had itself habitually privileged certain forms of representations and discounted others.

It would be wrong to assume, however, that anthropologists' neglect of the subaltern evidence meant they had simply reproduced the timeless ideology of elites. On the contrary, considerable evidence suggests that much of what anthropologists—as well as most Indians—have come to recognize as caste is a fallout of colonization and the practices by which colonizers sought to know and control the colonized. Research by historian Nicholas Dirks (1993), for instance, suggests that the subordination of kingly power to brahminical ritual, seen by Dumont as Hindu civilization's timeless truth, was in fact the handiwork of colonial power, which had reduced indigenous kings, for the first time in history, to a purely symbolic and genuinely inferior status. With the political authority of India's autonomous kingdoms no longer the legitimating framework for localized *jāti* arrangements, something quite new was born. As historical anthropologist Bernard Cohn (1984) showed, the novel idea that geographically and culturally distant *jātis* composed a single ritual order became an institutional reality, when, in the 1870s, census officials began to publicly rank all castes on this basis.

The claim is not, Dirks (2001) has stressed, that the British invented caste *ex nihilo*, but that they conceptually and administratively redefined it. Once formed and conceptualized within multiple, local logics—military, agrarian, mercantile, and (in the signal case of the Brahmin) religious—all of which were intrinsically political, caste was now subsumed under a single, allegedly apolitical, specifically Hindu, and pan-Indian social order. Defining caste religiously—as the ritual essence of a newly imagined Hindu community—made outsiders of Muslims and undermined real communities of allied Hindu and Muslim *jātis*. Dalits, conversely, were proclaimed (ritually disadvantaged) Hindus in the 1871 census, and were soon embraced as such by Hindu nationalists and reformers like Gandhi, who saw their inclusion within Hinduism as vital to national strength. Equally significant, however, was the fact that geographically disparate Dalit *jātis* had even been brought together into a single, officially recognized category. For in the 1920s they too would begin to

assert an autonomous political identity, under the leadership of Dalit statesman B. R. Ambedkar, and to reject the Gandhian claim that their interests lay with the Hindu community and caste elites.

Liberated from foreign rule, the democratic Republic of India has introduced numerous policies to protect Dalits from abuse and to better their lot (as long as they do not renounce Hinduism for Islam or Christianity), and, in the arena of electoral politics, parties representing Dalits and other disadvantaged castes have begun to encroach on what was once the preserve of caste elites. Yet Dalits remain significantly below non-Dalit counterparts in all social and economic indicators, and as Smita Narula's well-corroborated Human Rights Watch report (1999) attests, in much of rural India dominant castes continue to stigmatize, exploit, and violently suppress Dalits. Even in more urbane settings, Dalits describe a pervasive climate of discrimination in housing, the workplace, and classrooms, and Dalit activists have sought international recognition for their plight—most prominently at the 2001 U.N. World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance. Indians from more privileged backgrounds, however, frequently lament Dalit antagonism as the “politicization of caste,” a development they trace to colonial divide-and-rule policies. Indeed, in the latter decades of their rule, British officials had actively sought to undermine the nationalist movement by exploiting tensions between Dalits and the movement's overwhelmingly elite, high-caste Hindu leadership. The colonial roots of modern caste politics, however, go deeper and are more tangled than this observation implies. For claims about a “politicization of caste” are every bit as political and socially locatable as the Dalit activism they decry, and—by representing caste as formerly distinct from the political—are less a critique of colonial caste policy than the restatement of its fundamental premise.

SEE ALSO *Caste*

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Nathaniel P. Roberts

## CASTE SYSTEM, INDIA

SEE *Caste*.

## CASTRATION

SEE *Sterilization, Human*.

## CASTRO, FIDEL

1926–

Fidel Castro, a first-generation Cuban, was born August 13, 1926, to a wealthy farming family in the eastern region of Oriente. Their 11,000 hectares produced wood, sugarcane, and cattle. His father had migrated from Galicia, Spain, while his religious peasant mother had been born in Cuba of Spanish parents. Both parents learned to read and write although neither went to school. Fidel Castro was one of six children.