INTRODUCTION

THEMES AND APPROACHES

This book is an attempt to account for and interpret the phenomenon of caste in the Indian subcontinent. It deals primarily with the period from the mid-eighteenth century to the present day, though the first two chapters explore the spread of castelike norms and values in the age of the great sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Indian dynasts.

Of all the topics that have fascinated and divided scholars of south Asia, caste is probably the most contentious. Defined by many specialists as a system of elaborately stratified social hierarchy that distinguishes India from all other societies, caste has achieved much the same significance in social, political and academic debate as race in the United States, class in Britain and faction in Italy. It has thus been widely thought of as the paramount fact of life in the subcontinent, and for some, as the very core or essence of south Asian civilisation.

There is of course an enormous body of academic writing on caste. Studies by anthropologists and other social scientists provide a wealth of closely observed ethnographic detail; many propose sophisticated theoretical interpretations. So, given the notorious sensitivity of this terrain, what is the case for an attempt to explore it from an historical perspective?

In recent years historians have broken much new ground in the study of political and economic change in the subcontinent, both before and during the colonial period. But caste, which is best seen as a meeting ground between everyday Indian life and thought and the strategies of rulers and other arbiters of moral and social order, tends to provoke more heated debate than almost anything else in the specialist literature.

It has been common since the days of British rule for both historians and anthropologists to refer to India as a ‘caste society’, and to treat the values of so-called caste Hindus as an all-pervading presence in Indian life. Since the 1970s, however, there have been commentators, both within India and abroad, who have accused these
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earlier specialists of massively overstating the importance of caste. Some have gone so far as to question the very existence of an ancient pan-Indian caste system, dismissing the idea of caste society as a fabrication of colonial data-collections and their office-holding Indian informants. This often perplexes newcomers to the field when they read about the many important Indians, including Mahatma Gandhi and other past and present politicians and social reformers, for whom caste was and is a real force in Indian life, and certainly much more than an orientalist’s ‘imaginings’.¹

The subject of caste throws up other difficulties as well. Those unfamiliar with the field often complain that even the best modern historical studies make little effort to explain what they mean by caste, despite the fact that these works so often refer in passing to such mysterious phenomena as jati and varna, Backward and Forward Castes, Brahmanism and non-Brahmanism, purity and pollution, untouchability and outcasting, caste movements, casteism, ‘caste wars’, and much more.

Furthermore, in dealing with such major historical events as the 1857 Mutiny-Rebellion and the anti-colonial ‘freedom struggle’, the literature often identifies groups of Indians by specific regional caste titles, often without making clear whether this kind of group affinity truly overrides individual decision-making in times of crisis. Not surprisingly, many readers wish to understand more fully what is meant when they read that, in 1857, there were areas where ‘the Jats’ remained loyal, while ‘the Rajputs’ and ‘the Gujars’ rebelled; or that in the 1920s, ‘the Patidars’ of the Gujarat region joined Gandhi in acts of resistance to British rule. They read too of how Gandhi and his powerful opponent B. R. Ambedkar clashed in the 1930s over the issue of how best to ‘uplift’ India’s millions of so-called untouchables.

Those to whom these terms and concepts are unfamiliar will rightly want to know what an endowment of Jat, Patidar, Brahman or ‘untouchable’ caste identity actually entailed at these times. Further-

¹ See Inden 1999. Such works as Dirks 1992a, 1992b, Cohn’s ‘The census, and objectification’ in Cohn 1987, Appadurai 1992 and Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993 improve greatly on studies which treat Western orientalist ideas in isolation, especially in suggesting that colonial rule had the effect of turning such ‘constructions’ into lived reality. (See also Washbrook 1975.) The present volume shares these historical perspectives but argues that while colonialism deserves much emphasis, so too do the many changes which were underway well before the British conquest. Furthermore, much weight will also be given to factors promoting the assertion of caste values in the years since Indian Independence in 1947.
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more, did such affinities change, or did they remain constant and immutable when so much else was changing in India’s culture and material environment? Readers of both historical and anthropological works have good reason to ask whether caste is to be seen in any sense as an ancient or primordial essence of Indian life. Should such be the case, how is this to be reconciled with what many historians now say about the fluidity and dynamism of the pre-colonial state systems and economies?

By the same token, non-specialists sometimes find even the most stimulating anthropological discussions of caste hard to reconcile with accounts of nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalist politics. Those reading these historical treatments of the early nationalist era find once again an emphasis on subtly overlapping affiliations of religious community, class and regional or linguistic affinity. They are therefore taken aback when they then turn to works by those anthropological theorists for whom Indian life and thought are represented in an apparently very different way, featuring fixed and arbitrary schemes or structures of caste identity.

ISSUES AND PREMISES

This study will argue that caste has been for many centuries a real and active part of Indian life, and not just a self-serving orientalist fiction. Yet it will also seek to show that until well into the colonial period, much of the subcontinent was still populated by people for whom the formal distinctions of caste were of only limited importance as a source of corporate and individual identities.

Of course long before the age of European expansion, these and other regional societies knew norms and conventions which named, grouped and sometimes ranked people by order and function. There is much debate about the nature of these social forms as they emerged in India’s medieval kingdoms, and this study will not attempt a detailed reconstruction of these usages in the distant past.2 It is clear though that some at least of these diverse and fluid ideas and practices

2 For one such reconstruction see Inden 1990: 213–62 on castes as political assemblages or ‘subject-citizenries’ within medieval Indian kingdoms.
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prefigured what we now know as caste; indeed the names of many individual castes as well as other elements of the terminology used in contemporary caste life derive from these earlier regional schemes and groupings. But this certainly does not mean that a single static system of caste has dominated Indian life since ancient times, despite the fact that a reverence for certain generalised caste ideals is extolled in important scriptural writings. Nor did the emergence of the varying castelike observances of the medieval realms translate directly into the very different forms of so-called caste society which anthropologists observe today.

These current manifestations of caste are now far more generalised across the subcontinent than was the case in former times. The book’s aim is therefore to show that caste as we now recognise it has been engendered, shaped and perpetuated by comparatively recent political and social developments. The initial premise is that even in parts of the so-called Hindu heartland of Gangetic upper India, the institutions and beliefs which are now often described as the elements of ‘traditional’ caste were only just taking shape as recently as the early eighteenth century – that is, the period of rapid regional state-building which accompanied the collapse of Mughal rule and the expansion of Western power in the subcontinent.

Furthermore, from the early nineteenth century onwards, British rule significantly expanded and sharpened these norms and conventions, building many manifestations of caste language and ideology into its structures of authoritative government. It was Indians as much as Britons who took the initiative in this process, even though the impact of these moves was all the more compelling because it was supported by the apparatus of an increasingly powerful colonial state, and also by the effects of India’s involvement in a Western-dominated global market economy.

Ironically, the practices of representative government, which became more deeply rooted in British-ruled India than in any other part of the non-white colonial world, served further to enhance the importance of caste affinities in the political arena. Both for early participants in electoral politics and to a significant extent in the period since Independence, caste has been an effective tool and resource for the creation of common interests across the boundaries of region, language, faith and economic status.

The argument here is not that Indians have somehow lacked the
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capacity to develop ‘modern’ political allegiances. On the contrary, it has often been avowedly ‘modern’ men and women who have taken the lead here, discovering that by embracing caste principles, or by imposing them on others, one may gain an extraordinarily flexible resource in uncertain times. On the one hand, the assertions of caste have made it possible to build broad allegiances which breach India’s many boundaries of region, faith, language and economic status. Yet, at the same time, caste principles have often provided the means of excluding, disempowering or subjugating others. This has proven to be of great advantage in situations where other differentiations – those of class, for example – may be far less effective than an assertion that a group or individual is of alien or inferior caste. This may go far to explain why consciousness of caste differentials has not altogether given way in contemporary India to other markers of social difference – for example, those of class, colour, language or occupation – even though in many situations considerations of caste may overlap or be partially supplanted by any or all of these.

These manifestations of a more consciously castelike social order became increasingly apparent in the turbulent environments of the later Mughal realm, as well as those of the eighteenth-century post-Mughal kingdoms. This explains the book’s somewhat arbitrary starting point of 1700. Of course the making or remaking of caste in the forms that we see both in the colonial period and today was a long-term process which cannot be pinned down to specific dates. Even so, the book will attempt to show that the later eighteenth century in particular was a period when India’s regional societies underwent profound and complex changes which tended to give more Indians than hitherto a stake in this ‘traditional’ caste order.

The reasons for this are extremely diverse, and no single book can encompass all the ways in which caste and castelike identities were shaped, debated, attacked and contested even in the relatively recent past. There will, however, be an attempt to identify the most decisive of these changes, and to write about them comprehensibly, avoiding the use of abstruse technical jargon wherever possible. At the same time, the book will seek to build on the best of the existing empirical and theoretical literature. But, like the other New Cambridge Histories, this volume was commissioned as an interpretive synthesis rather than a survey. So what can it achieve that has not already been done by other specialists?
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First, it will seek to draw on interdisciplinary perspectives in an attempt to bridge the gaps that often divide historians from social scientists in the treatment of caste. Particular emphasis will be given to the work of anthropologists: this discipline's special skills, and its insights into the values of the small-scale community, can and should be drawn on in the attempt to explore both changes and continuities in the experience of caste. Secondly, the book will attempt to frame its questions along rather different lines from those pursued in other studies. In particular, using both historical and anthropological perspectives, it will ask why caste has so evidently mattered to so many Indians, why it has aroused so much debate both within and outside the subcontinent, and why its norms have been so widely acted on in so many areas of economic, political and religious life, both in recent times and in the more distant past.

The aim here is certainly not to defend caste. Nor is it the intention to offer an all-embracing theory of caste, or at least not the kind of theory proposed by those social scientists whose goal is to identify a single principle such as purity, power or orientalism with which to explain caste experience, regardless of regional or historical context.

This does not mean that the book will disregard the rich but confusingly diverse theoretical literature, though it will give priority to those approaches which treat caste as a dynamic and multidimensional reality of Indian life, rather than an orientalist fiction or monolithic cultural code. The underlying premise then is that caste is a topic that can and should be explored by those seeking to grasp the complexities of both past and present life in the subcontinent. Indeed, given the vast array of empirical and theoretical studies that have contributed so much in recent years to the disciplines of Indian anthropology, sociology and history, the time is certainly ripe for an attempt at synthesis and interpretation.

What then of value judgements? Generations of well-meaning observers have denounced caste as a source of dehumanising inequalities and enfeebling social divisions. And it is true that in recent times especially, caste has been for many Indians a system of oppression comparable with the racist doctrines of apartheid, or the worst abuses of European serfdom. But it is impossible to understand its full effect on Indian life if we see caste only as a scheme of social and material ‘disabilities’. On the other hand, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century critiques of caste did have a powerful impact on colonial
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policy, and on the ways in which Indians themselves have come both to understand and to experience the phenomenon. Many modern south Asians are fiercely disparaging about caste, dismissing it as a legacy of a backward and inegalitarian past. Yet this kind of internal scrutiny was itself a major factor in the shaping of present-day caste society. Its effects are most visible today in a number of far-reaching provisions of India’s post-Independence Constitution. Though now widely contested, these empower the state to advance or ‘uplift’ those of its citizens who are defined as ‘backward’ or collectively deprived on the grounds of low-caste birth. Ironically, as will be seen in the book’s final chapters, the implementation of these provisions has played an important role in perpetuating rather than eliminating the claims of caste for many Indians.

More broadly, this study seeks to show that both before and after the end of British colonial rule, the perceptions and writings of both Indian and foreign observers contributed directly to the shaping of caste as a ‘system’, both in the distant past and in more recent times. In other words, caste was and is, to a very considerable extent, what people think of it, and how they act on these perceptions. Far from being a static reflection of received codes and values, caste has been a dynamic force in Indian life and thought: it has been embodied in what people do and say at any given moment about the conventions and values which they define as those of ‘caste society’.

This does not mean that the book will seek to reduce caste to the realm of imagination or ‘discourse’. For centuries, south Asians have found ways to make caste or castelike identities serve them in changing and often threatening circumstances. As a means of coping with a diverse and unpredictable social and physical environment, the titles, symbols and lifestyles of caste have proved to be remarkably durable and adaptable. So if caste is neither an orientalist fiction nor a shameful crime to be disguised or ignored in discussing India’s history, it must be a fit subject for historical exploration. It is this which the volume will attempt to provide.

3 The term ‘discourse’ is being employed here in the crude though widely used sense of purely cognitive or unconscious operations without connections to an active social or political domain.
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DEFINITIONS AND PRINCIPLES

The English word caste has come to be widely used in south Asia, even by speakers of vernacular languages, though many equivalent terms for human orders or ‘communities’ exist in the subcontinent’s regional languages. (On the origins of the term in English usage, see Chapter 3.) Today, as in past centuries, most Indians who would classify themselves as Hindus (and also many non-Hindus) are likely to be at least broadly familiar with two distinct concepts of corporate affiliation: the jati (birth group) and the varna (order, class or kind).4

The term caste is commonly used to refer to both of these. Both may be used of non-Hindus; they sometimes designate distinctions of species or kind amongst gods, animals and even inanimate objects and substances.5 Nevertheless, both now and in past centuries, the term jati has most often been used for the units of thousands or sometimes millions of people with whom one may identify for such purposes as marriage. There are thousands of titles associated with specific jatis in different parts of the country. A few such titles – most notably Rajput, Chamar and Jat – have come to be quite widely recognised; most will be unfamiliar to people outside a limited geographical area.

In contrast to this profusion of jatis or birth groups, the concept of varna involves a scheme with only four divisions. Thus what would now be called Hindu society is conceived of as being divisible into four very large units which transcend specific regional associations. This scheme is propounded in a variety of widely revered Hindu sacred scriptures (see below, pp. 13–14). It has been most commonly understood as a ranked order of precedence, with the four varnas or idealised human callings appearing in the following order:

- the varna of Brahmans, commonly identified with those fulfilling the callings of priests and spiritual preceptors;
- the varna of Kshatriyas, usually associated with rulers and warriors, but also including seigneurial landed groups;

4 These usages include such regional vernacular terms as gaum, sampraday, samudi and jatti. Like other English terms made familiar through colonial administrative practice, ‘community’ is still widely employed in both English and the vernaculars. It is often a reference to ethno-religious origin, as when newspapers refer euphemistically to Hindu–Muslim riots as ‘clashes of two particular communities’. It is also a term for caste origin, often with an implication that such a ‘community’ shares an inherited moral mandate to promote common interests by coercive means. (See Chapters 8 and 9 below.)

5 Sharma 1975; Marriott and Inden 1977.
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- the varna of Vaishyas, often identified with commercial livelihoods, though associated with other producers and wealth-creators as well;
- the varna of Shudras or servile toilers.

So-called untouchables (and also the hill and forest populations who are now commonly called ‘tribals’) occupy an ambivalent place below, outside or parallel to this varna scheme. The titles of these four archetypes or orders, and the hierarchy of ranked callings and moral endowments which characterise them, are defined in ancient religious scriptures which became increasingly well known both before and after the British conquest. It is important to note too, however, that there are many widely revered sacred texts and doctrines which devalue or condemn caste principles. (See Chapter 1, below.)

In the words of the anthropologist R. S. Khare, the concept of jati refers to the experience of caste in the ‘concrete and factual’ domain of everyday social life, as opposed to the ‘ideal and symbolic … archetypes’ which are embodied in the concept of varna.6 Once caste or castelike norms have come to be widely shared in a given region, a reference to jati can therefore identify people in a very minute and precise way; the designations of varna evoke vast and sweeping generalities. While one would expect to find at least a rough match between the two, there has often been much dispute about the precise order of merit among the various jati populations of a given region. Furthermore, people of different doctrinal traditions and social circumstances have attached differing degrees of importance to these schemes of caste. Indeed all these conceptual principles, and the ways in which people have acted on them, have been far more diverse and flexible than has often been thought, both by academics and by would-be reformers of caste.

For all this fluidity, it is still the case that certain basic ideas subsuming both jati and varna were shared by at least some people in the subcontinent well before the colonial period. The underlying premise here, which is still widely known today, is that those who would nowadays call themselves Hindus are born into fixed social units with specific names or titles. Such a unit is one’s caste or ‘community’.7 And, insofar as individuals and kin groups recognise the claims of caste, these embody something broader than the notion

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7 This is the sense in which the term jati is generally used, though without necessarily overriding its meaning as a reference to broader species-like groupings. (See note 4 above.)
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of a common kin or blood tie. Indeed caste is widely described by anthropologists as a notion of attachment which bundles together a given set of kin groups or descent units. Both in the past and for many though not all Indians in more modern times, those born into a given caste would normally expect to find marriage partners within these limits, and to regard those outside as of unlike kind, rank or substance.

Furthermore, both in the past and today, those sharing a common caste identity may subscribe to at least a notional tradition of common descent, as well as a claim of common geographical origin, and a particular occupational ideal. Neither now nor in past centuries would an individual claiming Brahman parentage have been obliged to follow a priestly or preceptorial livelihood. Nor would a man professing princely Rajput descent automatically expect to wield a sword. Yet such claims have often conveyed recognisable messages to other Indians. In particular, those claiming Brahman or Rajput descent would definitely not expect it to be thought that their ancestors were humble labourers or providers of menial service, as would be the case for an individual identified by a low-caste jati designation such as Paraiyan or Chamar. (On the important topic of women’s caste status, see below, especially Chapters 1 and 3.) Above all, the concept of caste has come to imply both boundaries and collective or corporate rank. In theory at least, civilised ‘caste Hindus’ should regard it as wrong and unnatural to share food or other intimate social contacts with those who are radically unlike them in caste terms. In theory too, the central characteristic of ‘caste society’ has been for many centuries the hierarchical ranking of castes or birth groups. The implication here is that to be of high or low caste is a matter of innate quality or essence. This is what is said in many scriptural codifications of caste ideals; in real life, these principles have often been widely contested and modified. Nevertheless, even people who came to reject caste principles either recently or in the more distant past are at least likely to have been familiar with these notions of corporate moral essences or qualities, meaning that in ‘caste society’, gradations of rank and precedence are innate, universal and collective. The implication of this would be that all who are born into so-called clean castes will rank as high, pure or auspicious in relation to those of unclean or ‘untouchable’ birth, regardless of wealth, achievement or other individual circumstances.