Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age

The phenomenon of caste has probably aroused more controversy than any other aspect of Indian life and thought. Some scholars see India’s caste system as the defining feature of Indian culture, although it is dismissed by others as a colonial artefact. Susan Bayly’s cogent and sophisticated analysis explores the emergence of the ideas, experiences and practices which gave rise to so-called ‘caste society’ over a period of 300 years, from the pre-colonial period to the end of the twentieth century. Combining historical and anthropological approaches, Bayly frames her analysis within the context of India’s dynamic economic and social order. She thereby interprets caste not as the essence of Indian culture and civilisation, but rather as a contingent and variable response to the enormous changes that occurred in the subcontinent’s political landscape both before and after colonial conquest. In subsequent chapters, she explores the idea of caste in relation to Indian and Western ‘orientalist’ thought, and the upheavals associated with competing understandings of Indian nationalism and the creation of the modern Indian nation-state. The book’s wide-ranging and rigorous analysis offers one of the most powerful statements yet to be written on caste in South Asia.

SUSAN BAYLY is a Fellow of Christ’s College, Cambridge and holds a lectureship in history and social anthropology at the University of Cambridge. Her previous publications include Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700–1900 (1989).
THE NEW CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF INDIA

General editor GORDON JOHNSON
President of Wolfson College, and Director, Centre of South Asian Studies,
University of Cambridge

Associate editors C. A. BAYLY
Vere Harmsworth Professor of Imperial and Naval History, University of Cambridge,
and Fellow of St Catharine’s College

and JOHN F. RICHARDS
Professor of History, Duke University

Although the original Cambridge History of India, published between 1922 and 1937, did much to formulate a chronology for Indian history and describe the administrative structures of government in India, it has inevitably been overtaken by the mass of new research over the past sixty years.

Designed to take full account of recent scholarship and changing conceptions of South Asia’s historical development, The New Cambridge History of India is published as a series of short, self-contained volumes, each dealing with a separate theme and written by one or two authors. Within an overall four-part structure, thirty-one complementary volumes in uniform format will be published. Each will conclude with a substantial bibliographical essay designed to lead non-specialists further into the literature.

The four parts planned are as follows:

I The Mughals and their Contemporaries
II Indian States and the Transition to Colonialism
III The Indian Empire and the Beginnings of Modern Society
IV The Evolution of Contemporary South Asia

A list of individual titles in preparation will be found at the end of the volume.
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IV · 3

Caste, Society and Politics in India from the
Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age

SUSAN BAYLY

University of Cambridge
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GENERAL EDITOR’S PREFACE

The New Cambridge History of India covers the period from the beginning of the sixteenth century. In some respects it marks a radical change in the style of Cambridge Histories, but in others the editors feel that they are working firmly within an established academic tradition.

During the summer of 1896, F. W. Maitland and Lord Acton between them evolved the idea for a comprehensive modern history. By the end of the year the Syndics of the University Press had committed themselves to the Cambridge Modern History, and Lord Acton had been put in charge of it. It was hoped that publication would begin in 1899 and be completed by 1904, but the first volume in fact came out in 1902 and the last in 1910, with additional volumes of tables and maps in 1911 and 1912.

The History was a great success, and it was followed by a whole series of distinctive Cambridge Histories covering English Literature, the Ancient World, India, British Foreign Policy, Economic History, Medieval History, the British Empire, Africa, China and Latin America; and even now other new series are being prepared. Indeed, the various Histories have given the Press notable strength in the publication of general reference books in the arts and social sciences.

What has made the Cambridge Histories so distinctive is that they have never been simply dictionaries or encyclopaedias. The Histories have, in H. A. L. Fisher’s words, always been ‘written by an army of specialists concentrating the latest results of special study’. Yet as Acton agreed with the Syndics in 1896, they have not been mere compilations of existing material but original works. Undoubtedly many of the Histories are uneven in quality, some have become out of date very rapidly, but their virtue has been that they have consistently done more than simply record an existing state of knowledge: they have tended to focus interest on research and they have provided a massive stimulus to further work. This has made their publication doubly worthwhile and has distinguished them intellectually from
other sorts of reference book. The editors of The New Cambridge History of India have acknowledged this in their work.

The original Cambridge History of India was published between 1922 and 1937. It was planned in six volumes, but of these, volume 2 dealing with the period between the first century AD and the Muslim invasion of India never appeared. Some of the material is still of value, but in many respects it is now out of date. The past fifty years have seen a great deal of new research on India, and a striking feature of recent work has been to cast doubt on the validity of the quite arbitrary chronological and categorical way in which Indian history has been conventionally divided.

The editors decided that it would not be academically desirable to prepare a new History of India using the traditional format. The selective nature of research on Indian history over the past half-century would doom such a project from the start and the whole of Indian history could not be covered in an even or comprehensive manner. They concluded that the best scheme would be to have a History divided into four overlapping chronological volumes, each containing short books on individual themes or subjects. Although in extent the work will therefore be equivalent to a dozen massive tomes of the traditional sort, in form The New Cambridge History of India will appear as a shelf full of separate but complementary parts. Accordingly, the main divisions are between i. The Mughals and their Contemporaries, ii. Indian States and the Transition to Colonialism, iii. The Indian Empire and the Beginnings of Modern Society, and iv. The Evolution of Contemporary South Asia.

Just as the books within these volumes are complementary so too do they intersect with each other, both thematically and chronologically. As the books appear they are intended to give a view of the subject as it now stands and to act as a stimulus to further research. We do not expect the New Cambridge History of India to be the last word on the subject but an essential voice in the continuing discussion about it.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

While this book builds on my research and teaching over many years, it is also a work of synthesis and interpretation and therefore owes much to the work of others. Among the many specialists cited in the notes and bibliography I must mention particularly Professors André Béteille, Veena Das, Jonathan Parry, Romila Thapar and Peter van der Veer whose arguments and insights inspired much that I hoped to achieve in this volume. My earliest attempts to understand the life and history of the subcontinent were made under the supervision of the late Professor Eric Stokes; the field of Indian studies still sorely misses his ebullience and intellectual verve.

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My attempt to make this an interdisciplinary work was greatly aided by the generosity of the Cambridge University Isaac Newton Trust which funded my appointment to an Affiliated Lectureship held jointly within the Cambridge History Faculty and the Cambridge Department of Social Anthropology. I also thank my College for agreeing to participate in this scheme. I am especially grateful to Professor Marilyn Strathern and to my other colleagues in the Department who have done so much to welcome me into the lively and
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Dr David Reynolds has long enriched and invigorated my academic life. He too read the entire manuscript in muddy typescript and provided a trenchant critique from the perspective of the international historian; this has greatly aided me in sharpening both the structure and arguments.

As always my greatest intellectual debt is to my husband Professor Christopher Bayly. The example of his own scholarship has been an inspiration throughout my career. Without his exhilarating enthusiasm, his willingness to endure impromptu domestic seminars, and his lively companionship on many journeys to India, this book would have been neither conceived nor completed.

Cambridge, S.B.B.
February 1998
Map 1 The break-up of the Mughal empire and the emergence of the successor states, c. 1766.
Map 2 British India, 1858–1947, showing provincial boundaries