
UNIT 25 STUDYING CASTES IN THE NEW HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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25.0 INTRODUCTION

Caste is the most contentious issue that has fascinated and divided scholars who have wished to study this system of stratified social-hierarchy in India. There is an enormous body of academic writing and political polemic on the issue. These are basically the part of debate on the transformation of Indian society under the impact of colonialism and its administrative mechanisms. Some argue for the continuities of pre-colonial social-structures including caste. Others stress the basic qualitative changes introduced by the colonial rulers.

Louis Dumont, the French scholar and writer of a famous book on caste, *Homo-Hierarchicus*, constructed an image of caste based on certain texts. In this image, two opposing conceptual categories of purity and pollution are the core elements of caste- structure. These unique core principles of caste-hierarchy, according to Dumont, are observed in scriptural formulation as well as the every-day life of all Hindus. In other words, these values separate Indians culturally from the Western civilization, making India a land of static, unchangeable, ‘oriental’ Brahmanical values. Nicholas Dirks and others have challenged this notion of caste. They cite ethnographic and textual evidence to demonstrate that Brahmans and their texts were not so central to the social fabric of Indian life. According to this view power-relations and command over men and resources were more important. Brahmans were merely ritual specialists, often subordinate to powerful ruling families. The caste-based scriptural or Brahmanical model of traditional India was an invention of the British Orientalists and ethnographers, according to this view. However, caste played a very critical role in the Indian social-reformers and nationalists’ perception of caste. It was certainly not a mere product of British imagination.

25.1 CASTE AS THE INVENTION OF COLONIAL MODERNITY OR A LEGACY OF BRAHMANICAL TRADITIONS

As we hinted above, two opposing viewpoints see caste differently. Some view it as an unchanged survival of Brahmanical traditions of India. According to this view, Brahmanism represents a core civilizational value and caste is the central symbol of this value. It is the basic expression of the pre-colonial traditions of India. Contrary to this view, Nicolas Dirks, in his *Castes of Mind* (2001), argues that caste is a product of colonial modernity. By this he does not mean that caste did not exist before the advent of British. He is simply suggesting that caste became a single, unique category under the British rule that expressed and provided the sole index of understanding India. Earlier there were diverse forms of social-identity and community in India. The British reduced everything to a single explanatory category of caste. It was the colonial state and its administrators who made caste into a uniform, all-encompassing and ideologically consistent organism. They made caste as a measure of all things and the most important emblem of traditions. Colonialism reconstructed cultural forms and social-institutions like caste to create a line of difference and demarcation between themselves as European modern and the colonized Asian traditional subjects. In other words, British colonialism played a critical role in both the identification and production of Indian 'tradition'. The colonial modernity devalued the so-called Indian traditions. Simultaneously, it also transformed them. Caste was recast as the spiritual essence of India that regulated and mediated the private domain. Caste-ridden Indian society was different from the European civil society because caste was opposed to the basic premises of individualism as well as the collective identity of a nation. The salience of this pre-colonial identity and sense of loyalty could easily be used to justify the rule by the colonial modern administrators. So, according to Dirks, it was the colonial rule of India that organized the 'social difference and deference' solely in terms of caste.

The attempts to downplay or dismiss the significance of Brahmans and Brahmanical order is not in accordance with much familiar historical records and persistence of caste-identities even in contemporary Indian social life. Caste-terms and principles were certainly not in universal use in pre-colonial periods. Caste in its various manifestations and forms was also not an immutable entity. However, starting from the *Vedas* and the Great Epics, from Manu and other *dharamsastras*, from *puranas* texts, from ritual practices, the penal system of Peshwa rulers who punished culprits according to caste-principles, to the denunciations of anti-Brahmanical 'reformers' of all ages; everything points towards the legacy of pre-colonial times. It is true that there were also non-caste affiliations and identities such as networks of settlements connected by matrimonial alliances, trade, commerce and state service in the pre-colonial times. However, caste was also a characteristic marker of identity and a prevailing social-metaphor. Caste was not merely a fabrication of British rulers designed to demean and subjugate Indians. It did serve the colonial interests as by condemning the 'Brahmanical tyranny' colonial administration could easily justify their codes to 'civilize' and 'improve' the 'fallen people'. Moreover, strengthening of caste-hierarchy could also act as a bulwark against anarchy.

25.2 ORIENTALISTS PERCEPTION OF CASTE

The colonial construction of India began by the early Orientalists with their own cognitive maps and with texts explained by *pandits*. Their social model was *varna*-based Brahmanism of Manu. The early admiration of a golden age gave way to a condemnation of Brahmanical tyranny. William Jones translated and published *Manu Dharma Sastras* or *The Laws of Manu* (1794). Manu was concerned with such topics as the social obligations and duties of various castes (*varnas*), the proper form of kingship as upholder of *varna*, the nature of sexual relations between males and females of different castes and ritual practices related to domestic affairs. It became the main authority in imagining of Indian tradition as based on *varnasrama-dharma* (social and religious code of conduct according to caste and stage of life). Scholars have questioned the attempt to codify Indian social relations according to this single, orthodox Brahmanical text. The text, compiled by Brahman scholars, depicted a caste society under the exclusive domination of Brahmanas who reserved for themselves pride of place in the caste hierarchy. The prescriptive text also became the basis of actual description of Indian social order. James Mill, in his *History of India* viewed caste as a prime example of an Indian social institution based on priesthood and adapted to oriental despotism. Mill borrowed from Jones' work despite his attack on the Orientalists.

Max Muller also based his interpretation of caste on textual sources. He suggested that the caste in Vedic period was different from caste in the later degraded periods. For Muller, the soul of Indian civilization was that of the Vedic age, while the later distortions began in the time of Manu. Orientalists saw the Hindus as victims of an unchangeable, hierarchical and Brahmanical value system. Their insistence on this played a crucial role in the making of a more caste-conscious social order. The basic objective of the colonial state was to procure data about Indian social life so as to tax and police its subjects. From the early nineteenth century, the company officials turned increasingly to literate Brahmins or to scribal and commercial populations to obtain such information. The Orientalists treated *shastra* texts as the authoritative sources on 'native' law and custom. Such informants had an incentive to argue that India was a land of age-old Brahmanical values. They insisted that effective social-control and cohesion could be achieved only if hierarchical *jati* and *varna* principles were retained. Many nineteenth century Orientalists saw priestly Brahmins as an important but also pernicious force in the society. They doubted the veracity of claims of these indigenous literate specialists.

The image of India as a Brahman-revering caste society in some instances suited both the colonial rulers and local landed elites. For example, the landed- aristocracy in the early colonial era in Tamilnad found it advantageous to play up claims of superior *varna* and *jati* origins in their dealing with the colonial judiciary and revenue officials. The colonial judges and revenue officials had come to see the use of prestigious Brahman and Vellala caste titles as evidence of authentic lordly origins, even though they were aware that families of humble birth had acquired rights and property under recently subdued warrior dynasties through purchase or endowment. The colonial establishment looked for social-stability and emphasized on age-old *jati*-statuses and divinely mandated traditions rather than individualistic principles of achievement and personal gain. The local landed magnates used these caste-principles in order to get preferential treatment from the colonial state.

25.3 COLONIAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND CASTE: CASTES AS VIEWED BY THE ETHNOGRAPHERS

By mid-nineteenth century, especially after 1857, anthropology supplanted history as the principal colonial modality of knowledge and rule. The taste for ethnographic inquiry was stimulated by new trends in the intellectual world. New formal schools of social and scientific thought were taking shape in the academic institutions. These influenced the colonial ethnographic curiosity about caste as the primary object of social classification and understanding. The colonial ethnographers compiled new kind of compendia about castes, tribes and their customs. W.W. Hunter, who was appointed director general of statistics to the government of India in 1869, produced and supervised a series of gazetteers that sought to systematize official colonial knowledge about India. These contained descriptions of the local castes and tribes including their manners and customs. More specifically, they described marriage system, kinship patterns, funeral rituals, clothing, geographical distribution of different caste groups and adherence to Brahmanical priesthood and values. M.A. Shering's *Hindu tribes and castes* (1872) was part of a new kind of empirical quest. Manu and his *varna* categories and *dharmic* explanation for multiplicity of caste because of inter-marriage were retained in his description. Caste, thus, became the site for detailing a record of people, the locus of all-important information about Indian society.

H.H. Risley, in his multi-volume work, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (1891) stressed the racial basis of caste. His work, *The People of India* (1901), resulted directly from his work as Census Commissioner for the census of 1901. Risley emphasized anthropometric measurements for origin and classification of Indian races or castes. Another colonial ethnographer William Crooke (1848-1923) questioned subsuming of caste-categories into biologically determined racial essences. He suggested that occupational criteria provided much more comprehensive and accurate indices for understanding caste as a system. Risley had proposed that anthropometry would provide good results in India because caste system as the organizer of social-relations was based on the principle of absolute endogamy. India, thus, became the testing ground for speculative theories of races and human species propounded in Europe. The ethnographic surveys were also useful as easy reference works for the colonial administrators, for police as well as revenue authorities, district magistrates and army recruiters.

However, the colonial ethnographers and data-collectors' viewpoints regarding castes were not part of a uniform 'colonial' discourse that worked to invent the ideology and social-experience of caste in India. Sometimes, race and racial categories played a more significant role in their thinking rather than a monolithic consensus on caste. Denzil Ibbetson's picture of castes in his *Punjab Castes*, demonstrate marginal importance of Brahmans and their standards of rank and hierarchy. Ibbetson stressed that castes like Rajput and Jats in Punjab were based on the concepts of occupation and accessibility to political power and resources. Here, the caste-like affinities and ranking schemes were not based on four fixed *varnas*. Other colonial ethnographers such as W.W. Hunter, the author of famous *Annals of Rural Bengal* (1868), and Walter Elliot also depicted caste as a feature of life for some Indians, but not all Indians. In their analysis caste is often a subsidiary to racial categories.

25.4 ENUMERATING CASTES UNDER THE COLONIAL RULE

Census took over the task of producing empirical data and information on caste from 1871-72 onwards. Census consolidated the imperial ideology of caste by meticulously gathering data about castes. There was a general consensus among most of the enumerators that caste should be the basic category to classify diverse population of India. There were, however, differences about the manner and procedure regarding organization of information about castes. Risley adopted a procedure to organize castes on the basis of 'social precedence' in 1901 census. As a result of this, a number of caste associations emerged to contest their assigned position in the official hierarchy, each demanding a higher position and organizing their fellow caste members in the colonial public space. After 1931, the colonial state found it difficult to ignore the political implications of the caste-oriented census. It abandoned the use of caste for census counting altogether.

The idea of an all-India census was first seriously contemplated in the mid-1850s. It had a number of precedents. There were regional household counts, an attempt in 1846 to test population estimates that had been derived from land settlement records, and presidency-wide census of Madras before 1851. The first all-India census took place in 1871-72, although it was flawed in that it did not cover all the regions and was not very systematic. The primary principle of classification used in 1872 and in the next decennial census of 1881 was that of *varna*. The statistical project was enmeshed with the Orientalist categories for the classification of social-hierarchy. The minute and endless ramification of castes was classified according to the fourfold *varna*-system. In this mode of classification, Brahmans held the first rank. Majority of Hindus were indiscriminately thrown together into the category of *Sudra* or servile classes. The regional enumerators often ignored regional variability. In actual practice, the *varna* or ritual markers were used to differentiate and order the higher castes, and occupational markers to classify the lower caste groups.

The British enumerators associated with census operations recognized the problem of using *varna* as a single classificatory category. The regional position of Brahmans varied. Aside from Brahman and Rajputs, few actual castes could be easily correlated with *varna* distinctions. The caste configuration varied from one place to another. Dominant caste groups in most regions were confined to those regions and did not have an all-India presence. The use of occupational criterion for differentiating castes was also based on shaky and unsound foundations as formal caste titles only rarely indicated true occupations. Even there was difficulty of ascertaining caste status within a particular locality because caste titles, names and other markers of caste identity were used in numerous and apparently conflicting ways.

In the census of 1881, enumerators were asked to classify only caste groups whose size was more than one lakh. The total population was sub-divided into Brahman, Rajputs and other castes. The number of other castes, who crossed the requisite number of 100,000, was 207. They were listed in an alphabetical order, as classification of castes according to their social position was an explosive issue. The Census Commissioner, W. C. Plowden, further aggregated census data to create caste blocs such as major agricultural castes, major groups of artisans and village servants and so on. Large caste blocs were seen as amenable to administrative concerns of the colonial state regarding recruitment to the colonial army, maintenance of social order, agrarian policy and legal adjudications. Although enumerators were

enjoined to find where different caste titles or names could be merged into single groups, they, in fact, found a huge proliferation of actual caste groups.

The 1891 census formally abandoned *varna* criterion for enumeration in favour of occupational criteria. J.C. Nesfield in his *Brief view of the caste system of NWP and Oudh* (1885) and Sir Denzil Ibbetson as the Census Commissioner for Punjab in 1881 census advocated a functional approach to caste enumeration. The adoption of occupational criteria in 1891 census was based on the proposal of Nesfield and Ibbetson. Nesfield suggested that tribal groups based on descent became amalgamated into larger tribal groups that were organized around occupations and specific functional affiliations. The census of 1891, thus, broke sixty sub-groups into six broad occupational categories of castes: agricultural and pastoral, professional, commercial, artisans and village menials and vagrants.

H.H. Risley, as the leading proponent of colonial ethnology from the late 1890s until his death in 1914, criticised Nesfield. He divided Indians into seven main racial types on the basis of physical measurements of various bodily traits. In his anthropometry, these physical measurements and colour of skin became the basic principle of caste ranking—“the social status of a particular group varying in inverse ratio to the mean relative width of their noses”. As census commissioner for the 1901 census and honorary director of Ethnological Survey of the Indian Empire, Risley conceived a grand scheme for the mapping and measurement of every racial ‘type’ and ‘specimen’ in India. His basic assumption was that although there were frequent cultural borrowing and exchange between different caste groups, but due to the practice of endogamous marriages, there was hardly any racial-mixing. Risley’s sociology of caste, however, was based on Brahmanical indices such as the acceptance of food and water, the use of Brahmans in rituals, ritual proximity to Brahmans. The question of social precedence and hierarchy assumed greater force in the census of 1901. Caste as subject of social analysis not only organized many administrative concerns from famine relief to criminality, but also constituted the Brahmanical ritual system. The attempt of census of 1901 to rank castes by status induced a number of petitions from caste-associations clamouring for higher status for their own caste. Therefore, although the census of 1911 continued to gather caste-information, it abandoned the scheme of ranking them according to status. In 1931, the colonial state completely stopped the use of caste data in census.

25.5 CASTE IN THE MAKING OF NATION

There was an indigenous side to the perception of caste that was reformulated by nationalists and social-religious reformers. The Indian thinkers identified caste as a topic of vital concern for the making of modern nation. They debated at length whether caste was good or bad for the Indian society or whether the collective identities of castes could be reshaped and function as a new kind of bond of unifying nationalist visions. Broadly two viewpoints emerged in these debates.

- a) Those viewing caste as a divisive and harmful institution negating nationhood.
- b) Those who saw caste as *varna* or an ideology of spiritual and moral order, a source of national strength and the ‘essence’ of Indian civilization.

The following sub-sections will deal with some aspects of these debates and their implications.

25.5.1 Social Reformers Perception of Caste

In the nineteenth century, the traditional learned scholars defended Brahmanism. They insisted on the knowledge of *Vedas* as a prerequisite of salvation and saw the *varna* based social-hierarchy as the essence of Indian civilization, a hierarchy that debarred those of non-twice born status from access to *Vedas* or the source of salvation-knowledge. However, they were also critical of certain aspects of these traditions. Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) insisted on a critical examination of *shastric* texts. He attacked many forms of polytheistic Hindu worship advocated by the traditional and mythological texts or *puranas*. He indirectly challenged the legitimacy of caste. The Brahmo Samaj (1828) saw itself as an advocate of a new, universal, casteless religion. Paradoxically, however, Brahmos themselves became an exclusive endogamous community within Hinduism.

In the late nineteenth century, controversies about whether caste was a degenerate social evil or an embodiment of progressive spirituality were articulated in the *Indian Social Reformer* (a journal founded in 1890). Even religious revivalist reformers like Swami Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of Arya Samaj (1875) and Swami Vivekananda, the founder of Ram Krishna Mission (1897) were united in depicting India where universal standards of reason and morality were to be applied. In their indirect critique of caste, various social issues cropped up. These included the claims of Brahmins to possess unique sacred knowledge, the age of marriage and other matters of corporate honour and sexual propriety; and the origin and meaning of untouchability. All these indigenous intellectuals exalted the values of purity, hierarchy and moral community, the virtuous cornerstone of caste ideology. As a result, the new spiritually regenerated India which they envisioned was an India in which the forms and values of so called traditional *varna* were to remain salient and active, even if in a modified form.

25.5.2 Early Nationalists and Caste

Among the early nationalists, M.G. Ranade (1842-1901) floated a reformist organization, National Social Conference. The organization, founded in 1887, aimed to persuade Indians to modernize their values and behaviour. One of the chief aims of this western-educated intelligentsia was to campaign against the 'evils' of caste. It helped to define an ideal of enlightened social upliftment. They did not regard every aspect of caste as an 'evil', to be annihilated. Nevertheless, Conference adherents were expected to endorse so called uplift for the untouchables and reform the high caste Hindus especially with regard to the position of women. Contemporary western ethnology and eugenics shaped their ideas to some extent. A leading activist of Conference, T. V. Vasvani, justified a stance against the 'evils' of caste on the basis of Aryan 'race genius'. The bond of race was extolled as the force, which could eliminate divisions and unify people into a single nation. In the resolutions of National Social Conference, caste was seen as a 'national' problem for the freedom-loving people of India to be solved through their own free will and initiative. Its evil practices were to be challenged primarily in the field of faith and social morality. It attacked caste as 'an alien and slavish institution', a relatively recent creation that shackled Indians within a prison house of superstition and oppression. The reformers attacked the 'fetters' of caste as pernicious and shameful obstacle to the moral and political regeneration of the nation.

The radical congressmen of 'Extremist' stream, especially B.G. Tilak (1856-1920) led a militant public agitation for immediate home-rule and saw nationhood as an

expression of collective moral, spiritual and racial essence. Tilak and his followers were deeply conservative in social and spiritual matters. They viewed the reformist challenge to the so-called caste evils as an attack on the national faith, and a challenge to divinely mandated standards of decency and biological purity. They did not want these divisive issues to be raised from the congress platform.

25.5.3 Caste Conferences and Upliftment of ‘Community’

A score of caste conferences and associations sprung up between 1880 and 1930s in response to census operations. These regional-based associations claimed to act as moral exemplars for their *jati* members. Most of them belonged to castes of scribes, trading communities and cultivating agricultural castes. However, some like Tamilian Nadars or Shanars were low in caste-hierarchy. Their educated and prosperous leading men raised vocal opposition to stigmatization of their castes as ‘unclean’ and ‘backward’. Many of these associations were anxious that public recording of *jati* and *varna* status might be used by the colonial state in such important matters as military recruitment and the creation of electoral constituencies. Western moral convention and *dharmic varna* norms of purity both were utilized by such associations to achieve a creditable reputation for their community in the public arena. Many of them advocated temperance, remarriage of widows, the raising of age of consent for marriage, the abolition of temple prostitution and sympathized with campaigns such as against ‘lewd’ female dance performances, in order to achieve social-purity.

National social conference’s scheme for upliftment of India’s ‘depressed castes’, or untouchables, and Arya Samaj project of *Shudhi* or purification of low-caste converted groups were also part of similar concerns. They were means of restoring both the numerical strength and the ethnological vigour of the ‘Aryan community.’ Their ideal of a transcendent pious community was far from being hostile to caste. Their ‘modernizing’ critique of caste challenged the idea that the highest forms of knowledge and ritual expertise should be the preserve of a closed caste of Brahmans. They advocated a purified form of caste based on a bond of idealized moral affinity of followers rather than blood or birth. Many of the caste associations drew inspiration from the ideology of such reforms. Such purified *varna* or *jati* social order did not challenge the caste-hierarchy although it was based on collective moral identity of its members. However, such idioms and ideologies furnished the themes and strategies for the uplift of ‘community’.

25.5.4 Hindu Nationalists Defense of Caste

The Hindu nationalists emphasized racial pride, ties of blood and nationality. They resisted modernization of the Indian social order. While they sometimes deplored certain features of caste in contemporary Indian social life such as untouchability, they insisted that caste in its true form was essential to the spirit of Hinduism. It represented a legacy of higher moral values from the national past. Vivekananda condemned the oppressive treatment of untouchables and other subordinate castes. Yet, he defended caste and *varna* hierarchy as a natural order and matter of national pride. G. K. Gokhale (1866-1915) was particularly concerned about the declining number of Hindus and saw the success of Muslim, Sikh and Christian proselytizers in attracting low castes as a sign of Hindu weakness and racial decline. When Ambedkar bid for separate electorates for the untouchables at the second Round Table Conference (1931), this ploy aroused deep anxieties about Hindu representation and electoral arithmetic especially in Punjab and Bengal. Therefore,

Hindu Mahasabha and other Hindu revivalist organizations intensified their 'purification' drives among untouchables and tribals by vesting such people with markers of Hindu identity such as sacred thread and a recognized set of *jati* and *varna* titles.

In Bengal, the Hindu zamindars and other followers of Hindu Mahasabha took lead in promoting programmes of Hinduization of tribals and untouchables who were induced to declare their allegiance to the Hindu 'community'. The Hindu nationalists campaigned actively among groups such as Rajbanshis and Namsudras to identify themselves to the census officials as Hindus of thread-bearing Kshatriya varna so as to swell the number of Hindus in the provincial census returns.

25.6 RECASTING THE CASTES IN THE DOMAIN OF POLITICS

As we have already noted, caste came to preoccupy the minds of Indian intelligentsia. Their responses were diverse. Some used to explain it as an exotic institution to the alien British administrators and defended it as the very essence of Indian civilization. However, most of them decried caste oppression and saw it as a symbol of backwardness of Indian society, a force that was impeding its progress and was responsible for the subjugation of women in the society. It was condemned for its divisiveness and as a barrier in the way of formation of national identity. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this critique of traditional social-cultural order also influenced the ways caste was treated in the emerging political space under colonial rule. In the next sub-sections, we describe these major political responses.

25.6.1 The Modernity of Non-Brahmanism

In the late nineteenth century, the educated and politically active intelligentsia utilized new avenues of 'public space'. They expressed themselves in a language of universal rights and citizenship. This modern discourse was at odds with a caste-fettered India, which acted as an impediment to the attainment of nationhood. The social background of newly western educated as revealed by census enumerators for the Western India and the Gangetic North, shows that they were mostly from Brahmans and other service groups with a tradition of literacy and occupational mobility. The lower-rung bureaucracies came to be dominated by persons of similar castes. When municipalities were established under the so-called Ripon Reforms in 1880s, they also dominated them. This was the context in which non-Brahmanism emerged as a political force uniting a mixed array of service, commercial and agricultural castes with artisans and other lower-caste educated activists.

Jyotiba Phule in Maharashtra wrote against Brahman privilege and domination in 1850s. Rejecting emulation of Brahmic customs and manners and breaking himself free from the usual pattern of caste movements for upward mobility, he directly attacked Brahmanism. He represented Brahmans as Aryan invaders who conquered local indigeneous people by force and concealed their act of usurpation by inventing 'caste system'. In 1873, Phule established the Satyashodhak Samaj, an organization for challenging Brahmanic supremacy. Phule and his fellow radicals projected a new collective identity for all the lower castes. He used the existing symbols from Maratha warrior and agriculture traditions for discovery of this identity. He underplayed the social-differences that divided mali-kunbi, mang-mahar or

Shudra-Ati-Shudra. In his *Ballad of Raja chatrapati Shivaji Bhonsale* (1869), Phule depicted all lower-caste people as the forgotten descendents of the heroic race of Kshatriyas. The King Bali was refigured as representing the utopias of beneficence, prosperity and casteless order. By claiming Kshatriya status for all the lower castes, Phule was trying to harness the existing trend of upward social mobility to a radical end but it also contained the possibility of slip back into caste-based claim for higher status. The Satyasodhaks failed to evolve a unified and homogeneous sense of identity over a longer period.

Sometimes, the development of ‘Non-Brahmanism’ is seen as the product of colonial ‘modernity’ and official encouragement to ‘un-shackle’ Hindu minds by challenging ‘Brahman tyranny’. Anil Seal, for example, sees non-Brahmanism as a reaction to the monopolization of opportunities in bureaucracy and professions by Brahmans. However, Phule’s critique reveals a wider consciousness of caste inequalities and their correlation with social subordination and material and cultural oppression of the Shudra castes.

The Justice Party articulated the non-Brahman resentment in Madras. The founders of this organization were leaders’ like. T. N.Nair, P.Tyagaraja Chetti and C.N. Mudaliar. They demanded reserved seats in the Provincial Legislative council and other concessions in education, public appointments and nomination on local boards for the non-Brahman professional middle classes. In 1926, E.V.Ramaswami Naicker, popularly known as Periyar (meaning ‘Great Man’) established the ‘Self-Respect Movement’ which took a different political trajectory than the Justice Party even though it inherited rhetoric of non-Brahmanism. This new radical political stance advocated the overthrow of caste and instituted new forms of marriage and other ritual practices designed to promote inter-caste social intercourse. The movement further engaged in a radical critique of religious belief and practice. It attacked the Brahmans and the whole Brahmanical ideology of privilege and sacred authority in general. Periyar advocated outright atheism as the only true rational worldview. Periodically, the movement organized dramatic assaults on religions and priestly symbols like beating of priest and idols with shoes, and burned ‘sacred’ texts like *Manusmriti*.

The term Non-Brahmanism might have been an invention of the colonial political arena. However, their political strategies involved use of slogans and symbols reflecting satirical and hostile views of Brahmans which were common in many regional folk cultures as well as ‘modern’ Hindu reformist teachings. In South India, growing literacy in the vernaculars also helped in spread of awareness of regional identities conceived in term of resistance to the traditional authority of Brahmans. The ideology of such resistance was often an amalgam of traditional devotional *bhakti* faith and appropriated theory of Aryan race that distanced indigenous Dravidian people from outsider Brahmins.

25.6.2 The Nationalist Ideal and the Gandhian Critique of Untouchability

The Indian National Congress issued its first guarded declaration on the amelioration of caste disabilities through a resolution in 1917. The provisions of the resolution were reaffirmed in the Congress 1920 resolution on Non-Cooperation. It committed the Congress to make the removal of ‘Depressed Classes’ disabilities a major nationalist priority. It, however, favoured voluntary ‘religious’ solutions and urged the Hindu religious heads and other leading Hindus to make sustained efforts to reform Hinduism. There was no emphasis on legislation or any other sort of action

by state. In 1920s, Gandhi and other prominent leaders pursued a variety of religious solutions. They took the fight against the 'evil' aspects of caste to the Hindu temples. They organized a temple-entry campaign at Vaikam in Travancore (1924-25). Gandhi soon lost faith in such agitations as they went against Satyagraha's morality of non-violence. Gandhi, however, continued to make passionate appeal against 'satanic' practice of untouchability, which he described as a stain on Hindu faith.

Gandhian 'reform' minimized caste differences and underplayed caste-identity. It stressed organic unity and harmony of varna-system rather than hierarchy. Gandhi continued to exalt the principle of *varna* until the 1940s as an ideal and natural order of things (around caste, stage of life and the performance of duty or *dharma*), an egalitarian law of life. In 1940s Gandhi called for full repudiation of caste, abandoning his earlier goal of a purified caste order purged of 'sinful' belief in untouchability. The goal of Harijan Sevak Sangh (1932), established by Gandhi and his close associates, was to instill habits of cleanliness and social propriety in their untouchable beneficiaries and to wean them away from toddy-drinking, meat-eating and unseemly sexual indulgences. The idealized and reformed *bhangi* (domestic sweeper), with his meek posture and emblematic basket and brushes was supposed to an exemplar of the virtues, which the Harijan Sevak Sangh wished to spread among the 'depressed classes'.

Throughout 1930s and 1940s, Nehru and Congress Socialists expressed their concept of the Indian nation in casteless and egalitarian term. The Karachi Resolution of Congress (1931) was formulated around ideal of a democratic polity and industrial modernization, although there was no mention of caste in of resolution. They believed that caste would wither away with industrialization or with state legislation. They did not formulate any political programme or strategy for abolition of caste. The radical Congressmen Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose equally insisted on abolition of caste in a new India. In 1930, Bose declared that no Indian should be denied of bearing arms for his nation on grounds of his caste origin. He also called for inter-communal and inter-caste dining in his Indian National Army. This commitment to casteless egalitarianism was enshrined in 1950 constitution of India.

25.6.3 Ambedkar's Idea of the 'Annihilation of Caste'

B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) made a scathing attack on caste from the standpoint a modern democratic thinker. He saw caste as an impediment to attainment of social justice, equality and reform in the Indian society. Initially, Ambedkar stood for the cause of educational access for the untouchables. He voiced his views against performances of traditional labour services and 'village duties' by the *mahars*. He also advocated forced temple-entry and use of 'clean-caste' markers of *varna* status. He took lead in the Kalaram temple-entry campaign (1930) at Nasik and in the satyagraha for drawing of water by untouchables from the Mahad tank in Maharashtra. He burnt Manusmrti in public in 1927 as the work defined the codes of Brahmanism. This radical gesture challenged the values of those for whom such sacred writings were embodiment of divinely sanctioned order. Ambedkar's notion of caste rejected colonial ethnographers' criteria of understanding caste as well as the idealized depiction of certain indigenous thinkers' visualization of caste as a natural order. He rejected Nesfield's criterion of occupational differentiation to identify castes and Risley's racial categorization of

different castes. Ambedkar's *The Annihilation of Caste* (1936) made the most potent attack on caste.

Ambedkar utilized the opportunities offered by the colonial public space and constitutional politics. However, his political options were determined by his own living experience and his links within newly constituted lower-caste identities. He was apprehensive of political implications of colonial constitutional arrangements as well as future democratic institutions for the fate of untouchables. He referred to India's untouchables as 'slaves of slaves' undergoing double oppression of colonial state and Hinduism at Nagpur in 1930. His mistrust of Gandhi and colonial rulers led him to articulate demand for the separate electorates for the untouchables at the second Round Table Conference (1931). The compromise formulae of Poona Pact gave a new constitutional package of higher proportion special reserved seats in the provincial assemblies for depressed caste candidates than promised in the original plan of the colonial state. This was an acceptance of electoral representation for 'communities'. It gave the colonial state a new task of 'scheduling' caste-based constituencies. After the brief attempt to unify non-Brahman tenants and labourers by Independent Labour Party (1936-39), Ambedkar returned to the champion the common cause of all those who suffered the disabilities on account of *dharmic* impurities under the umbrella of All-India Scheduled Caste Federation (1942).

25.7 SUMMARY

Caste, though sometimes depicted as the essence of the Indian civilization, has always been a fluid phenomenon. Both the moral normative side of caste or *varna* and *jati* as small-scale endogamous groups have been refashioned and remade throughout Indian history. The fluidity of caste phenomenon was also reflected in the criticisms and reformulations of the conventions of rank and corporate essence under colonialism. Both the colonial state and the indigenous agency were involved in this process of invention and reformulation. Under the colonial rule, the Brahmanical normative codes became more deferential as the colonial state legal codes and administrative practice sanctified them, thus, intensifying a trend towards ritualization of social life. Although, these trends were not merely a creation of colonialism and but also represented a survival of pre-colonial legacy. The colonial public arena offered ideological and political mobilization space in which various indigenous players and activists; reformers, nationalists and anti-caste radicals articulated their identities and remoulded caste in the process.

25.8 GLOSSARY

Anthropometry: The measurement of physical types in different human populations.

Brahmanical Order: A ranking or hierarchical system in which Brahmans or priestly caste and its rituals and life-style gets unsurpassed position.

Dharmic: Pertaining to religiously sanctified moral and normative order.

Ethnography: a category of anthropological research, characterized by empirical, first-hand study of a community or ethnic group.

Invention: Use of pre-existing customs, traditions in a reformulated way in a changed context.

Varna: Fourfold text-based division of society in India.

25.9 EXERCISES

- 1) Which of the following statements are correct? (Mark v or ×)
 - a) Risley emphasized occupational criterion for identifying castes.
 - b) Nesfield favoured *varna* criterion for enumerating castes.
 - c) The question of caste ranking and social-precedence assumed greater force in the census of 1901.
 - d) For Max Muller, the soul of Indian civilization lays in the Vedic age.
- 2) Analyze whether caste was an ‘invention’ of colonialism or a legacy of Brahmanical traditions.
- 3) What was the purpose of enumerating castes in censuses?
- 4) Explain the context of emergence of non-Brahmanism and its perception of caste.
- 5) Compare Gandhi and Ambedkar’s views on caste-oppression.