
UNIT 28 CASTE, TRIBE AND GENDER

Structure

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28.1 INTRODUCTION

When modern anthropological and historical writings on Indian society began, the close relationship between caste, tribe and gender became evident. Colonial historians and anthropologists saw that the peculiarity of Indian society lay in caste. They also saw that there was a section in Indian society, namely the aboriginal tribes, which had not been brought into caste society. The constitution of caste society differed from tribal society in many respects. Gender was one important respect in which the organisation of a tribe differed from that of a caste. It is not merely that the tribal economy differed from that of castes. It is also true that the marriage systems differed radically in the two types of society. Outwardly, it was the sexual organisation of society which made it easy to set caste apart from tribe. The polarity of purity and pollution, which characterised caste society, was absent among the tribes. The tribes were no part of ritual hierarchy. And in a related way, the gender system of the tribes also differed from the marriage structure of caste society. In fact, a unique organisation of gender lay at the heart of the caste system. In general, it may be said that there is a hidden connection between gender, caste and tribe which must be kept in view when studying Indian's society and history.

The historical and anthropological literature on caste is voluminous and of long standing. There is also a new and burgeoning literature on gender studies and women's history. The tribes do not figure so importantly in Indian historical writing. There is, however, a considerable body of anthropological literature on the tribes which includes some historical material.

The dalits or untouchables have become an important force in Indian politics. It is not a matter of surprise, therefore, that historical inquiries into their condition have attracted several researchers. The *adivasis* or aboriginal tribes do not have that sort of importance in politics, except in the north-eastern hill states. There are, consequently, fewer researchers in tribal history. Women, on the other hand, have attracted a growing number of historians. This is because of the feminist movement. The movement has had the effect of focusing public attention upon the subject.

28.2 THE DISCOVERY OF CASTE

The colonial British administration in India used the concept of caste in a principal way to understand the society it administered. The British derived the term 'caste' from the Portuguese word *casta*. The Portuguese observation of a social institution called *casta* during early maritime voyages led in due course to the elaboration of the concept of 'caste system'. This happened in the nineteenth century, in course of which the colonial administration came to understand the entire social formation (minus the tribes) in terms of the caste system. Colonial administrators commented on the existence of the institution of caste, in an imperfect form, even among the Muslims and Christians.

The Portuguese travelogue, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa An Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and their Inhabitants. Written by Durate Barbosa and completed about the year 1518 A.D.*, trans M.L. Dames (London, 1916) was among the first works to touch upon the institution. But the first to conceive 'the caste system' was the French Missionary, Abbe Dubois. In a work of 1816, entitled 'Description of the Character, Manners and Customs of the People of India, and of their Institutions, Religious and Civil', (translated by Henry K. Beauchamp subsequently as *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (Oxford, 1906)), he referred to the caste system of India. He said, 'I am persuaded that it is simply and solely due to the distribution of the people into castes that India did not lapse into a state of barbarism and that she preserved the arts and sciences of civilization whilst most other nations of the earth remained in the state of barbarism.' Other Christian missionaries did not share his favourable view of the civilisational value of caste and the Madras Missionary Conference of 1850 held caste to be 'one of the greatest obstacles to the progress of the gospel in India.' Indian social reformers, while unwilling as yet to condemn the caste system as a whole, also dwelt on some of the harmful social consequences of the institution.

Colonial social ethnology debated the origin and function of caste extensively in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On the basis of the census of 1881, two colonial administrators speculated in their reports from the Punjab and North-Western Provinces and Oudh that caste was basically a frozen occupational system. These early official reports are Denzil Ibbetson, *Report on the Census of the Punjab* (1883), subsequently re-published as *Punjab Castes* (Lahore, 1916), and John C. Nesfield, *Brief View of the Caste System of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, together with an Examination of Names and Figures Shown in the Census Report* (Allahabad, 1885). A brilliant Bengal official named H.H. Risley disagreed with this view and put forth the influential contention that caste had a racial origin, to be found in the Aryan conquest of India's darker original inhabitants. Not all colonial officials agreed with this view which was set forth in Risley's *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, 2 vols. (Calcutta, 1892), and *The People of India* (Calcutta, 1908). William Crooke, an official in sympathy with Ibbetson and Nesfield in his matter, argued against Risley's race theory, and emphasised occupational criteria for understanding caste in *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, 4 vols. (Calcutta, 1896). Risley and Crooke based their official reports on the census of 1891. Whatever their difference on the origin of caste, the colonial census had by then officially established caste as the principal concept for analysing Indian society. Risley's attempt to establish the social ranking of caste through the census set off a keen competition among various caste groups about matters of rank.

In due course the colonial administration fostered political rivalries among the various castes and the proposal for separate legislative representation of 'the depressed classes'

led to Mahatma Gandhi's fast unto death and a compromise between the caste Hindus and the untouchable leader B.R. Ambedkar. The keen interest regarding caste at this time is reflected in works by both Indians and foreigners: Nripendra Kumar Dutt, *Origin and Growth of Caste in India* (London, 1931); J.H. Hutton, *Caste in India: Its Nature, Function and Origins* (Cambridge, 1946); and G.S. Ghurye, *Caste and Class in India* (Bombay, 1950). Though none were professional historians, all three speculated about the origin and meaning of caste. Hutton, who was the Census Commissioner of 1931, was dissatisfied with the race and occupation theories of caste. He speculated:

'The fact is, many roads of migration have led to India - and have ended there. This has resulted in the accumulation of a large number of societies of very different levels of culture and very varying customs in an area in which they have neither been mutually inaccessible nor without some measure of individual isolation. The mere inescapable necessity of finding a *modus vivendi* on the part of a number of different cultures has probably played a not unimportant part among the various factors that have combined to cause the caste system to develop.'

Speculation about the nature of caste continued in the period after independence. Louis Dumont's modern sociological classic, *Homo Hierarchicus: Essai sur les systèmes des castes* (1967, English translation 1970) argued that the purity-pollution hierarchy, by which all castes are placed in relation to each other, was the central feature of the caste system. Morton Klass, in his *Caste, The Emergence of the South Asian Social System* (1980), argued on the other hand that a caste, in its irreducible essence, was a marriage circle, common occupation or other features being secondary to the system.

28.3 COLONIAL ETHNOLOGY AND THE TRIBES

Colonial speculation about the origins of the caste system included the assumption that various tribes had at different times been given a specific caste ranking and had thus been absorbed into the caste system. The colonial administration also discovered, however, that several aboriginal tribes had not been so absorbed and had maintained a separate existence of their own. These tribes, which had remained apart from the rest of society, were thought to be dependent on forest produce and shifting cultivation, and were supposed to be simple, backward people prone to violence. Closer acquaintance with the tribes showed, however, that their conditions varied, and that many had taken to settled agriculture. Early colonial ethnology included speculations about the origins and history of the tribes. Colonel E.T. Dalton, who was Chota Nagpur Commissioner and had close acquaintance with that wild country which today constitutes, along with the Santhal Parganas, the new state of Jharkhand, was among the first to venture into the history and present condition of the tribes. His work was entitled *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1872). It was a pioneering work.

After Colonel Dalton, an amateur Bengali ethnologist who lived in Bihar became interested in the tribes of the same area where Dalton had served as Commissioner. His name was Sarat Chandra Roy. His inquiries were more detailed and he showed a remarkable academic grasp of the new discipline of anthropology. He wrote a number of works on the tribes of Chota Nagpur. It may be noted that the area, along with the Santhal Parganas, was included in his time in the province of Bihar and Orissa. In Colonel Dalton's time, the whole area, today the state of Jharkhand, had been part of the huge Bengal Presidency. In whatever administration the area might be included at different times, it had a distinctive habitat. It was a wild plateau, and the caste system

had not developed there into a predominant social system. Some of the wild tribes had their own Rajas, some lived under their local chiefs. The Santhals of the Santhal Parganans and the Mundas of the Chota Nagpur division were numerically large population blocs. In a famous work on agrarian history, *The Annals of Rural Bengal* (1868), W.W. Hunter had earlier touched on the Santhal insurrection of 1855. Sarat Chandra Roy turned his attention to the Mundas, and produced an anthropological work on them entitled *The Mundas and their Country* (Calcutta, 1912). He went on with his detailed researches and produced two more works: *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur: Their History; Economic Life and Social Organisation* (Ranchi, 1915); and *The Birhors: a Little – known Jungle Tribe of Chota Nagpur* (Ranchi, 1925). Dalton had commented on the joyous life of the tribals. Roy added that every bachelor had his sweetheart among the maidens.

It was clear by this time that the sexual organisation of society was very different among the tribals compared to the more familiar caste society. A missionary named Verrier Elwin who had developed empathy with the tribals of Central India turned his attention to the matter. He touched on an institution called the *ghotul* which permitted free mixing. ‘Throughout tribal India’, he said, ‘divorce is easy and generally the wife has the same rights as her husband’. Among his works may be mentioned *The Baiga* (1939), *The Muria and their Ghotul* (Bombay, 1947) and the *Bondo Highlander* (London, 1950). A novel feature of his work was the use of tribal songs as primary material for depicting their condition and mentality. A Baiga song which he collected runs as follows:

In some houses there is food

In other houses there is money

But in every house there is youth and desire.

There is a hint here that the material condition of the tribals might not be easy, but their social organisation left scope for the natural joys of life.

Some of the early colonial anthropologists speculated about the history of the tribes, but actual historical materials were not forthcoming from a non-literate society. A.R. Radcliffe Brown, in his influential anthropological work entitled *The Andaman Islanders* (1922), disapproved of such speculative history and urged that tribal society should be studied as it appeared in the present before the anthropologist. The inherent difficulties in constructing the history of the tribals meant that the main body of research work regarding them was anthropological. The work of the Anthropological Survey of India accentuated this tendency. However, these same anthropological reports on current conditions among the tribals became valuable historical documents when, as it happened in independent India, their condition changed beyond recognition, and for the worse.

28.4 LOW CASTE AND TRIBAL PROTESTS

When historians turned to studying the conditions of low castes and tribals, they devoted a good deal of attention to the question of oppression and protest during the colonial period. Both groups were marginal, and were discriminated against. Yet from time to time ideological leadership emerged from amongst them and there were movements of protest which figured in the colonial archives. Among the low castes at least, statements of their own point of view were also sometimes available. Two recent works which have made interesting use of such material, telling the story from the point of view of the

group concerned, are: Rosalind O' Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Western India* (Cambridge, 1985); and Shekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: the Namasudras of Bengal 1872-1947* (Richmond, 1997). The gender mores of the low castes and the tribals differed from the high caste ethic, and in their studies of protest. O'Hanlon and Bandyopadhyay did not forget the gender factor. They also showed how the Non-Brahman movement in Maharashtra and the Namasudra movement in Bengal negotiated terms with the broader issues of social reform and political nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

It should be noted that the Non-Brahman movement in the peninsula of India, especially as it developed in the Maharashtra region and the Tamil country, did not necessarily represent the lowest of the low. The distinction between the Non-Brahman movement and the Dalit movement has become clearer in the historical literature relating to the matter. Eugene F. Irschik, an American historian, who suggested that caste played an important role in colonial Indian politics, dealt with the Non-Brahman castes, as distinct from the untouchable Adi Dravidas, in *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: the Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969). He showed that the Non-Brahman movement in Tamil country was a protest movement of the middling castes against the Brahman-dominated nationalist movement of the Congress. Below the middling Non-Brahman castes, which suffered from a sense of discrimination, there were untouchable castes that were even more oppressed. It is from this section of society that the Dalit movement emerged in late colonial India under the leadership of B.R. Ambedkar. The Maharashtra region witnessed both the Non-Brahman movement and the Dalit movement and the distinction stands clear in two separate works, both by Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India, 1873-1930* (Bombay, 1976); and *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (New Delhi, 1994). Another work dealing with the Dalit movement is Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi, 1992).

Movements of protest turned violent more readily among the tribals, at least among those tribes living in the remoter jungle regions. The tribals were not integrated with the rest of the society, and they did not fully comprehend the might of the colonial state. Invariably their rebellions were drowned in blood. We have seen that W.W. Hunter left an account of the Santhal rebellion in his *Annals of Rural Bengal*, written not long after the event happened. Tribal movements of protest did not draw much attention afterwards. The focus was upon the more organised politics of nationalist and low caste protest. The focus upon history from below has resulted in greater attention to tribal revolts in more recent years. Among such studies may be mentioned K.S. Singh, *Dust Storm and Hanging Mist: The Story of Birsa Munda and His Movement* (Calcutta, 1966); and J.C. Jha, *Tribal Revolt of Chota Nagpur, 1831-32* (Patna, 1987). Dealing with the Munda and Kol rebellions respectively, both works related to the Chota Nagapur plateau. Historians of India have paid little attention to the tribes of the north-eastern hill states. Many years ago, the anthropologist Christophe von Furer-Haimendorf wrote the well-known work, *The Naked Nagas: Head Hunters of Assam in Peace and War* (Calcutta, 1946). Recently research in the history of the north-eastern hills has begun in the north-east itself, and in pace with the trends in current research, social factors such as gender have begun to figure in this research. For instance, there is Frederick S. Downs, *The Christian Impact on the Status of Women in North East India* (Shillong, 1996).

28.5 ARE CASTE AND TRIBE REAL?

Post-modernist historians have recently questioned whether categories such as ‘caste’ and ‘tribe’ are real. In their opinion, colonial administrators invented these categories in their discourses upon India and Africa. The argument that ‘tribe’ is a figment of the colonial imagination appeared in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983). Terence Ranger, a historian of Africa, argued this in relation to the Dark Continent, but there was resonance of ‘the invention of tribalism’ in the Indian subcontinent, too. That caste, too, was a product of colonial discourse and not a natural growth of pre-colonial history, was argued by Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford, 1990), and by Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind : Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, 2001). These arguments have not found general acceptance outside post-modernist circles. Historians are aware of the dangers of ‘essentializing’ categories such as tribe, caste and religious community, and are also conscious of the constructed element in the colonial ethnology regarding these groups. Nevertheless, they have not been able to dispense with ‘tribalism’ or ‘casteism’ in interpreting Indian history. That tribal society is a real social category has been reasserted by Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri in his essay, ‘Tribal Society in Transition: Eastern India, 1757-1920’, in Mushirul Hasan and Narayani Gupta (eds.), *India’s Colonial Encounter : Essays in Memory of Eric Stokes* (New Delhi, 1993). That caste assumed new forms in colonial India was recognised several years ago by Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susan H. Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India* (Chicago, 1967). Thus there was recognition that caste might have ‘re-invented’ itself in colonial India. That it was often a smoke-screen for others interests in the politics of the colonial period is an argument that figures in John Gallagher, Gordon Johnson and Anil Seal (eds.), *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays in Indian Politics, 1870 to 1940* (Cambridge, 1970). But that caste became a real factor in politics, at least in the colonial period, is not denied even by post-modernist historians such as Dirks. The point is not to essentialise these categories too readily. Dirks observes, ‘Caste as we know it today is not in fact some unchanged survival of ancient India...Rather...Caste... is a modern phenomenon, that is specifically the product of an historical encounter between India and Western Colonial rule’. However, feminist historians, in their studies of pre-colonial Indian society, have found caste to be very much an oppressive presence in the lives of women even then. Uma Chakravarti in *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai* (New Delhi, 1998) found this to be the case with regard to Maharashtra in the age of Peshwas, as well as in the time of Pandita Ramabai in the late nineteenth century. This takes us to the question of gender.

28.6 GENDER

During the colonial period, two controversial works focused international attention upon the women’s question in India. Highly critical of the condition of the Indian women, these two works were: Pandita Ramabai, *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1887) and Katherine Mayo, *Mother India* (1927). At an early date serious historical interest on the subject of women in Indian civilisation was indicated by B.C. Law, *Women in Buddhist Literature* (1927); I.B. Horner, *Women under Primitive Buddhism* (1930); and A.S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization from the Prehistoric Times to the Present* (1938).

The feminist movement and the International Women’s year, 1975, set off a wave of women’s studies, beginning with such works as B.R. Nanda (ed.), *Indian Women:*

from *Purdah to Modernity* (New Delhi, 1976). Soon however, women's history broadened out and assumed the more complex shape of gender history. Instead of studying women as such, gender historian studied the problem in terms of the power relations between the sexes in society. An influential work edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, entitled *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi, 1989) indicated the transition to gender history. This was followed by more collections of articles that exhibited the new sophistication of gender history: J. Krishnamurty (ed.), *Women in Colonial India: Essays on Survival, Work and the State* (New Delhi, 1989); Bharati Ray (ed.), *From the Seams of History: Essays on Indian Women* (New Delhi, 1995); and Aparna Basu and Arup Taneja (eds.), *Breaking out of Invisibility: Women in Indian History* (New Delhi, 2002). The voices of women through the ages were collected together in the important anthology edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita and entitled *Women Writing in India 600 B.C. to the Present* (2 vols., New Delhi, 1991-1993). Two authoritative, male produced texts for the guidance of Hindu and Muslim women respectively were critically examined in Julia Leslie, *The Perfect Wife: the Orthodox Hindu Woman according to the Stridharmapaddhati of Tryambakayajvan* (1989), and Barbara Metcalf, *Perfecting Women, Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi's Bihishti Zewar* (1990).

Bengal took the lead in the women's movement. Not surprisingly, a large number of works relate to the gender relations in colonial Bengal. These works include: Usha Chakraborty, *Condition of Bengali Women around the Second half of the Nineteenth Century* (Calcutta, 1963); Ghulam Murshid, *Reluctant Debutant: Response of Bengali Women to Modernization 1949-1905* (Princeton, 1984); Malavika Karlekar, *Voices from within* (Delhi, 1991); Barbara Southard, *The Women's Movement and Colonial Politics in Bengal: The Quest for Political Right, Education and Social Reform Legislation (1921-36)* (Delhi, 1996); and Sonia Nishat Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal 1876-1939* (Leiden, 1996). Other provinces of India have been covered more recently. For instance, Prem Chowdhury, *The Veiled Woman: Shifting Gender Equations in Rural Haryana 1880-1990* (Delhi, 1994); Sita Anantharaman, *Getting Girls to School: Social Reform in the Tamil Districts 1870-1930* (1996); and Gail Minault, *Scheduled Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1998), which covers North India. There is also a general study of Indian women in the modern period in *The New Cambridge History of India* series: Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge, 1996).

More recently, gender history has broadened out and taken up the study, not merely of femininity, but also of masculinity. An example is Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: the "Manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate Bengali" in the late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, 1995). Gender history now pays attention to race, community, caste and tribe. An inter-related field of social studies has emerged, and has enriched history writing.

28.7 SUMMARY

Caste was probably the most important category used by the colonial administration to understand the Indian society. The entire Indian society, including the Muslims and Christians, though barring the tribes, was viewed in terms of the caste system. While some of the early writers viewed caste as the occupational system, H.H. Risley, a colonial official posted in Bengal, put forward a radically different view which contended that the caste system had a racial origin, dating since the Aryan conquests of the early inhabitants of India.

In the early days of colonial rule, the tribes were also considered as part of the caste system by the colonial administrators. However, they later realised that the social organisation of the tribes was quite different from that of the caste society. The academic exploration of the tribes initiated the new discipline of anthropology in India. Several anthropological studies were undertaken by both the Indian and foreign scholars on the Indian tribes.

The non-Brahman and Dalit movements have also attracted the attention of the historians and many important books, particularly by Rosalind O'Hanlon, Eugene Irschik, Gail Omvedt and Eleanor Zelliott, have been published on them.

The gender question has also attracted a lot of attention, particularly because of the rise of the feminist movement in post-independence period. However, two important books on the conditions of women by Pandita Ramabai and Katherine Mayo focused attention on women's problem during the colonial period. Now, of course, we have a lot of literature on this issue covering various aspects of gender relations.

28.8 EXERCISES

- 1) How will you define caste? Discuss the writings of various scholars on caste.
- 2) Give an account of the colonial understanding of tribe.
- 3) Discuss the historical works related to gender.