

Caste Wasn't a British Construct – and Anyone Who Studies History Should Know That

This false thesis allows upper-caste intellectuals to maintain privilege in both India and the US.



A Brahmin family photograph from the 1880s, likely from Maharashtra. Image: Wikimedia Commons

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The geographer Sanjoy Chakravorty recently **promised** that, in his new book, he would “show how the social categories of religion and caste as they are perceived in modern-day India were developed during the British colonial rule...” The air of originality amused me. This notion has been in vogue in South Asian postcolonial studies for at least two decades. The highest expression of the genre, Nicholas Dirks’s *Castes of Mind*, was published in 2001.

I take no issue with claiming originality for warmed-over ideas: following the neoliberal mantra of “publish or perish,” we academics do it all the time. But reading Chakravorty’s essay, I was shocked at the longevity of this particular idea, that caste as we know it is an artefact of British colonialism. For any historian of pre-colonial India, the idea is absurd. Therefore, its persistence has less to do with empirical merit, than with the peculiar dynamics of the global South Asian academy.

The origins of this idea lie in Bernard Cohn’s work on the census’ role in codifying *jāti*, and on the role of Brahmin native informants in shaping the British imagination of Hinduism. The first process was peculiar to British colonialism, since this bureaucratic technology was new. The second process is familiar: Brahminism has shaped state ideology since the Gupta empire. Exceptions – like the 17th-century Nāyaka states that celebrated the commerce and cultural life of ‘left-hand castes’ – only prove the rule.

Also read: [To See Just How Far Outside Our Genes Our Differences Lie, Step out of Caste](#)

Somehow, scholars leapt from Cohn’s work to a thesis that caste as we recognise it is a poisoned gift of the British. In the region where I have some expertise, the Marathi-speaking pre-modern world, English and Marathi scholarship amply document caste as both material oppression and *varna* ideology. More viscerally, low caste *sants* speak to us, centuries later, of their poverty, their back-breaking labour, and the dishonour and loneliness of their social position. Consider just two examples, the first an *abhang* by Tukaram, the second by Janabai:

Born a shudra, I was a tradesman.
God comes to me like a sacred keepsake...
I was miserable in mundane life
Ever since I was orphaned.
Famine reduced me to utter poverty, I lost all honour.
I watched my wife starve to death...

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Jani has had enough of mundane life—
But how will I repay my debt?
Discard your grandeur
To grind grain with me.
Hari, become a woman
Bathing me and washing my dirty clothes.
You carry the water with pride
And gather dung with your own two hands...

For both poets, imagining God as their companions in the daily grind of labour, poverty and social marginality, poetry and devotion were their only refuge. To read them and deny the existence of caste ‘as we might recognise it today’ is a violence that no historian should commit.

In my own research, evidence of caste as an organising principle of social life is everywhere. At the Goa State Historical Archives, I recently transcribed a late-17th-century register of slave manumissions. The vast majority of the freed slaves were from lower castes in the Konkan, such as *kunbis* and *kolis*, which still exist today:

Date	Name of Slave	Original Name	Caste/Race	Status	Origin	Age	Years of bondage
24/9/1682	Jabo		Cole				
24/9/			Cole				
24/9/			Cole				
24/9/			Cole				
24/9/			Cole				
26/9/			Cole		das Norte	10	
3/10			Cole				30
26/1			Cole				7
19/1			Cole	Negrinha	Terras de Norte		13
29/9/			Cole		das Norte	22	8
29/9/1682	Vitoria		Cole		das Norte	12	
29/9/1682	Domingas		Cole		das Norte	20	
21/9/1682	Margarida		Curumby			20	
22/9/1682	Ursula		Curumby			15	
22/9/1682	Ignacio		Curumby			18	8
22/9/1682	Antonio	Cano	Curumby			18	
22/9/1682	Antonio	Rudro	Curumby			18	4
24/9/1682	Francisca		Curumby			40	
24/9/1682	Tereza		Curumby			20	4
24/9/1682	Pirasca?		Curumby			12	
25/9/1682	Antonia		Curumby			25	
25/9/1682	Dominga		Curumby			10	8
25/9/1682	Macota		Curumby			17	3
25/9/1682	Mathery		Curumby			14	5
25/9/1682	Maria		Curumby			20	7
26/9/1682	Miguel		Curumby			10	
26/9/1682	Joao		Curumby			10	
26/9/1682	Pedro		Curumby			12	
26/9/1682	Luzia		Curumby			10	
26/9/1682	Phillipa		Curumby			8	

So durable and adaptable is caste that it continued even after conversion. In the 17th-century baptismal records of the village of Loutulim, we see how caste even affected godparenthood, a new form of elective kinship brought by Catholicism.

Date	Baptized	Father	Caste/Status Origin	Residence	Mother	Caste/Status Origin	Residence	Padrinho	Caste/Status Origin	Residence	Madrinha	Husband	Caste/Status
17/10/1676	Esperanca	Lourenco	Curumbi		Isabel			Manuel	Son of Bartholomeu Purco		Paulina?	Antonio	
10/7/1680	Marana	Juze de Quadros			Antonia de Azevedo			Joao Tavares	Son of Bento Tavares		Mariana	Daughter of Gaspar de Seib	
18/5/1652	Maria	Henrique Alv Aurives			Phillipa			Joao	Son of Camann, Sudra		Anna	Estevaso de Bi Sudra	
15/11/1615	Joana	Miguel Pescador			Isabel			Freguesia de Domingos de Son of Tome de Miranda			Joana	Antonio Alva Pescador	
9/11/1616	Salvador	Antonio Sudra			Maria Sudra			Bairro de Var Antonio Dug Sudra			Domingas	Joao Bhiru Sudra	
2/7/1617	Lourenco	Gaspar Palatto			Anna			Bairro de Var Lourenco da Sudra					
7/12/1617	Maria	Paulo Colaco Sudra			Madanela			Antonio Sudra			Maria	Antonio god Sudra	
11/9/1670	Esperanca	Diogo de Mir Gancar			Maria de Quadros			Bairro de Var Pero Sobrini Sudra			Ana de Francisco	Sudra	
30/7/1676	Joao	Pascoal Ferns Sudra?			Joana			Ephede Fons Sudra			Dominga	Manuel Buqs Sudra	
16/8/1676	Lourenco	Francisco Sudra			Joana			Bairro de Var Sebastiao Sudra			Joana	Simao Sudra	
2/11/1676	Maria	Joao Francis Sudra			Francisca			Racaim	Phillipe Perel Sudra		Maria de Araujo	Sudra	
23/6/1680	Joao	Antonio Betu Sudra			Isabel			Miguel Sudra			Phillipa	Pedro Sudra	
11/11/1677	Monica	Antonio Oha Sudra			Margarida			Sebastiam Ca Sudra			Monica	Antonio Sudra	
1/1/1678	Antonio	Francisco de Sudra			Phillipa			Antonio Sudra			Domingas	Wife of Antonio, godfather	
12/1/1651	Domingas	Pedro Sudra			Dominga			Phillpe Sudra			Catarina	Sudra	
28/2/1652	Antonio	Joao Purso Sudra			Esperanca Sudra			Antonio Sudra			Luzia	Francisco Sudra	
21/4/1652	Antonia	Crossed out- illegible (maybe Aleixo?)			Catarina	Widow		Antonio Ferns Sudra			Maria	Dias Sudra	
12/5/1652	Luzia	Bartolomeu f Sudra			Anna			Antonio Ferns Sudra			Maria	Daughter of J Sudra	
23/5/1652	Joao	Martinho Rai Sudra			Catarina			Joao Sudra			Anna	Manoel Sudra	
21/5/1652	Maria	Francisco Dhi Sudra			Marta			Goncallo Sudra			Anna	(Widow) Sudra	

Undoubtedly, caste changed under the British – but this is trivially true of every period of Indian history. Caste adapts to changing state technologies and political economy, but remains a total social fact, organising every realm of Indian life: legal, economic and political, religious, aesthetic and cultural.

This is not to minimise the pernicious nature of colonialism, or postcolonialism’s critique of it. The horrific immiseration of the Indian countryside by British colonialism – which wiped out rural wealth, laid waste to millions of lives in

famine after famine, and destroyed artisanal economies that had driven global trade for centuries – affected the lower castes in particular. Simultaneously, British education created both the upper-caste elites who became their successors, and nurtured lower-caste thinkers like Mahatma Phule and Dr B.R. Ambedkar who articulated devastating critiques of varna ideology. Colonialism, like all forms of rule, had complex effects on caste. Yet the British did not create it.

Also read: ‘Voices of Dalit Women More Marginal Than Men – That’s Why Their Resistance Hits Hard’

Given how evidently untrue this thesis is, the question is why it persists. The answer, in part, is that postcolonial studies is its own echo-chamber. Works like these are not vetted by boring historians of pre-colonial India like myself. Rather, under the sexy sign of theory, postcolonial scholars make sweeping claims about pre-colonial India, without expertise in the period.

More importantly, this thesis allows upper-caste intellectuals to maintain privilege in both India and the US. The Indian educational system, which disproportionately benefits upper castes, allows them to migrate. Once there, without the prop of caste privilege, postcolonial theory provided an avenue for critiquing white elites. Scholars like us have held elite academic positions for decades now on the basis of representing the brown voice of the subaltern in the West.

By then foisting the blame on colonialism, we absolve ourself of complicity in caste, even as we continue to benefit from caste oppression in India. Academic gate-keeping – through patronage networks of teaching and hiring, journal editorial boards and conference invitations – keeps this monopoly in place. Meanwhile, the same tired theory is repackaged and resold by scholars eager to profit from this monopoly. If you think about the academy as an economic institution, it is a fascinating case of covert collusion.

I speak as an insider, a whistleblower. I come from precisely this class of upper-caste diasporic intellectuals. The big secret of South Asian postcolonial theory is that its obfuscatory

language – signalling sophistication to mere mortals – actually hides power. The scholars avow progressivism, but their theories defend privilege in both India and the US.

Also read: [The Casteist Underbelly of the Indian Private Sector](#)

No wonder that Hindutvadis in both countries are now quoting their works to claim that caste was never a Hindu phenomenon. As Dalits are lynched across India and upper-caste South Asian-Americans lobby to erase the history of their lower-caste compatriots [from US textbooks](#), to traffic in this self-serving theory is unconscionable.

The painful irony is that Dalit scholars have said this before, while struggling to get past academic gate-keepers and scholarly chowkidars. It took a Chakravarti saying it on Twitter for this critique to garner mainstream attention. In 2019, the question is not whether the subaltern can speak – it is whether us double-Brahmins of the academy, who perform progressivism while maintaining caste, will ever allow them to be heard.

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