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# On the Difficulty of Refuting or Confirming the Arguments about the Caste System

*Abstract: Any attempt to understand Indian society through the scholarship on caste confronts us with a large number of problems. Scholars of the last 150 years have routinely observed and even criticised writings on caste for these problems. Such criticisms, however, have neither led us towards a confirmation nor the abandonment of the so-called caste theories. How do we explain this curious fact? Caste scholars hold the complexity of the issue as responsible for the lack of a robust theory of the caste system. Hence, they set out to collect more facts in order to buttress the theory. More facts, however, create more problems.*

*It is not only the quest for more data, which is expected to save the 'theories' of the caste system, but also a struggle to match the thus collected field data with the claims about the caste system that unites the colonial and modern writers on the caste system. This paper suggests that the failure of caste scholars to account for field data is not a result of the complexity of the field, but rather an outcome of the kind of entity that the 'caste system' is. The so-called caste system is an experiential entity of the West, which can neither be confirmed nor refuted by using empirical facts from India. Any attempt to do so will only generate unproductive debates.*

*Key words: caste system – endogamy – orientalism – anti-clerical – Christianity*

I t is generally agreed today that study of caste – more in the line of what can be called an academic or social-scientific study of caste – was inaugurated by Orientalist translations of important Hindu texts, such as the 1798 translation of the Manudharma Shastra by William Jones, which described a divinely ordained rigid system of hierarchy with Brahmins at the top and Shudras at the bottom. As the narrative goes, till about the mid-19th-century it was this 'textual'[1] approach to the study of caste that held sway.

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1    Nicholas DIRKS first proposed this description of caste studies as moving from the Orientalist 'textual' approach to the colonial ethnographic 'empiricist' approach in his article *Castes of Mind*, Representations 37, 1992, pp. 56–78.

Arguments about caste were purportedly stable at this time.[2] There was a consensus on many aspects of this "monstrous" system. For instance, even the two debating factions of Orientalists and Anglicists had no problem accepting that India's culture was corrupt and it was because of the Brahmans and their caste system.[3] However, an important shift in the study of the caste system occurred in the middle of the 19th-century. This shift, which can be called an 'empirical turn'[4] in the study of caste, subsequently became the cornerstone for the sociological study of caste in India. As Dirks, a scholar known for his focus on this empirical turn, among others,[5] notes:

"*One of the first general compilations of material on caste was assembled by the Rev. M. A. Sherring, who in 1872 published his influential three-volume work, Hindu Tribes and Castes. […] But unlike earlier colonial works that relied on textual varna categories as a general guide about Indian society and then turned to historical modes of investigation, Sherring used these categories to frame an empirical study of Indian society.… Gone is the ubiquitous reliance on Manu; orientalism has become empiricist rather than textual.… Collection of the kind of empirical information assembled by Sherring, and sharing the increasing formalization of his information, soon became the centre-piece of an official colonial sociology of knowledge.*"[6]

The new approach to studying caste confronted scholars with a whole new problem. Instead of naming or defining this problem, let us try to understand it within the context where it emerged. Several scholars have noted that the beginning of the census in India in 1871 became an important starting point for a problem that caste studies would face when taken to the field. Henry Waterfield, in his Memorandum on the Census of British India of 1871–1872, observed that the data collected from the field by colonial administrators and writers was immensely complex and gave a varied picture of the caste groups.

"*Great pains have been taken by the writers of the several reports in the classification of the population according to caste. The result, however, is not satisfactory, owing partly to the intrinsic*

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2    Nathaniel ROBERTS, *Caste, Anthropology of*, in: William S. Darity (ed.), International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, New York 2008, pp. 461–463.

3    Raf GELDERS and Willem DERDE, *Mantras of Anti-Brahmanism: Colonial Experience of Indian Intellectuals*, Economic and Political Weekly 38.43, 2003, pp. 4611–4617.

4    Dirks called it the 'new empiricism'. N. DIRKS, *Castes of Mind*, p. 67.

5    Bernard COHN, *The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia*, in: An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays, New Delhi 1987, pp. 224–254; Ronald INDEN, *Orientalist Constructions of India*, Modern Asian Studies 20.3, 1986, pp. 401–446; Frank de ZWART, *The Logic of Affirmative Action: Caste, Class and Quotas in India*, Acta Sociologica 43.3, 2000, pp. 235–249.

6    N. DIRKS, *Castes of Mind*, pp. 66–67. It is worth noting here that what ends with this 'empirical turn' is the "*ubiquitous reliance*" on texts like Manusmriti. For a useful analysis of the continued uses of this text, well into the 20th-century, see the essays in Kumkum SANGARI – Sudesh VAID (eds.), *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, New Delhi 1989.

*difficulties of the subject, and partly to the absence of a uniform plan of classification, each writer adopting that which seemed to him best suited for the purpose* […]".[7]

Or, as an anonymous reviewer of Elphinstone's *The History of India* (1841) noted, "*more intimately we study its* [the caste system's] *genius and the laws to which it was submitted,* [it] *becomes a still more curious and inexplicable problem*".[8] Thus began the frustration that bogs caste studies till today: it is a problem of a disjunction between the large claims about the caste system (based on the varna model of the society) and the empirical data about caste. How does one account for the caste data obtained from the field? The colonial officials collecting data in 1871 used a variety of different classifications based on occupations, nationality and race, besides the classical *varna* model. The allowance for a multiplicity of classificatory systems was seen as necessary since the four-fold varna system that the textual caste studies had fore-grounded simply did not yield empirically verifiable results.

> "*As per the new norms, the varna model was put through the empirical test, and rejected. Society was populated not only with brahmins, kshatriyas, vaishyas and shudras. Simultaneously, the questioning of the credibility of the propagator of this model – Manu – started. Let me cite here some of the officers associated with the census of different provinces in 1872. Referring to the 'Code of Menu and some of the Puranas* [that] *profess to give an account of the institution of castes', Cornish, who supervised operations in the Madras Presidency, commented: 'It is plain that in a critical inquiry regarding the origin of caste we can place no reliance upon the statements made in the Hindu sacred writings. Whether there was ever a period in which the Hindus were composed of four classes is exceedingly doubtful.' Similarly C F Magrath, the officer entrusted with the compilation of castes from Bihar, stated, 'it was necessary, if the classification was to be of any use, that the now meaningless division into the four castes alleged to have been made by Manu should be put aside…'*".[9]

Today, we tend to map this entire development as 'starting troubles' of some kind. It is assumed that late-19th-century scholars found it difficult to correlate the empirical data with the classical conception of the caste system (CCC, or the four Varna model) since, among other things, the 'field' was much more complex than the classical theory had predicted or presumed. This struggle of the colonial scholars, which is well documented

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7    Henry WATERFIELD, *Memorandum on the Census of British India of 1871–72*, 1875, p. Sec. "Nationality, language and caste". Available at URL: <www.payer.de/quellenkunde/quellen1601.htm> [cit. 2014–10–14].

8    *Art. IV-The History of India. By the Hon. Mountstuart Elphinstone. 2 vols. London, 1841*, in: The London Quarterly Review, New York 1841, p. 381.

9    Padmanabh SAMARENDRA, *Census in Colonial India and the Birth of Caste*, Economic and Political Weekly 46.33, 2011, p. 54.

today,[10] generated one of the most persistent axioms about the caste system that scholars have reiterated for over a century now: 'the caste system is extremely complex'. As B. R. Ambedkar notes at the beginning of the 20th-century, "*I need hardly remind you of the complexity of the Subject* [of the caste system] […]. *Subtler minds and abler pens than mine have been brought to the task of unravelling the mysteries of Castes; unfortunately it still remains in the domain of the 'unexplained,' not to say of the 'ununderstood'.*" And then he adds, "*I am not so pessimistic as to relegate it to the region of the unknowable, for I believe it can be known*".[11]

One may allow such a characterisation of the problem on one condition, that field investigations since the 19th-century have led to revisions in the CCC that have greatly reduced the number of problems in the argument, and today we are, at least, close to having a more robust account of the caste system. However, the writings on the caste system tell us a different story. While the missionaries had some consensus about the four-varna model of the caste society at the beginning of the 19th-century, colonial administrators and scholars did not continue to share in that consensus once the empirical studies began. Today, there is hardly any consensus on the any of the basic aspects the caste system. For instance, we cannot point out in any precise terms the progress we have made in the last 150 years with regard to our understanding of, say, any property of the caste system.[12] Is endogamy, that is a marriage within one's own caste as required by

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10 See, for e.g. Sekhar BANDYOPADHYAY, *Caste, Culture, and Hegemony: Social Domination in Colonial Bengal*, New Delhi 2004; Susan BAYLY, *Caste and "Race" in the Colonial Ethnography of India*, in: P. Robb (ed.), The Concept of Race in South Asia, Delhi 1995, pp. 164–218; N. DIRKS, *Castes of Mind*; P. SAMARENDRA, *Census in Colonial India and the Birth of Caste*; Lata MANI, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*, New Delhi 1989; Padmanabh SAMARENDRA, *Classifying Caste: Census Surveys in India in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies 26.2, 2003, pp. 141–164.

11 B. R. AMBEDKAR, *Castes in India: Their Mechanism Genesis and Development*, Jullundur 1916, p. 2.

12 Interestingly, 'serious scholarly' works on the caste system, in the last 50 to 60 years have stopped talking about the properties of the caste system in precise terms. (cf. Satish DESHPANDE, *Contemporary India: A Sociological View*, New Delhi 2003, p. 105.) For such properties, one has to either refer to early 20th-century scholars' work (like, G. S. GHURYE, *Caste and Race in India*, Bombay 1969) or infer those properties from the works of the later scholars. A search online for "major properties of the caste system", however, brings out various websites that seek to explain the essential or main characteristics of the caste system. They commonly mention marriage restrictions, hierarchy and atrocities of various kinds as some of the most important characteristics of the caste system. Here are some of those webpages: URL: <www.preservearticles.com/201105076399/6–most-essential-characteristics-of-caste.html>; URL: <http://agriinfo.in/?page=topic&superid=7&topicid=599>; URL: <http://seekingbegumpura.wordpress.com/2013/03/29/characteristics-of-contemporary-caste-system-dr-bharat-patankar/>; URL: <www.civilserviceindia.com/subject/Sociology/notes/caste-system.html>; URL: <www.sociologydiscussion.com/essay/essay-on-caste-caste-system-found-in-india/2358>. These and all other online documents and webpages cited in the essay were last accessed in October 2014.

custom, for example, a characteristic property of caste groups? Is hierarchy a necessary property of the caste system? That is, can there be a caste system based on heterarchy, instead of hierarchy? Are atrocities and violence a property of the caste system or its consequence? Is violence a necessary outcome of the caste system or a mere historical accident? There is no consensus on such issues among scholars.

What we want to point out here is this: notwithstanding the unmistakable fissure between the field data and the long held caste model of Indian society, one can also see an unmistakable continuity between the two. That is, the conviction that an immoral and inherently unjust caste system exists in India seems to have harmoniously co-existed, right from the beginning, with the growing disagreements and confusions that the ethnographic field data generated. This situation needs a better understanding. What has remained unchanged and what has changed in the discourse on caste? Scholars have routinely pointed out several confusions, unsupported assumptions, lack of consensus and inability to match ethnographic findings with the claims about the caste system in the modern (more specifically, post-19th-century) research on caste, including in their own works.[13] In this sense, the empirical data related to Indian caste practices, uncovered since the days of the 'empirical turn' has, in fact, become a liability to the caste scholarship rather than (empirically) strengthening it. Yet, scholars have dealt with these challenges by generating more and more ad hoc theories to accommodate the exceptions. However, while doing, so they have never actually questioned the validity of the classical theory of the caste system. This essay intends to reflect on why this is the case.

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13   For some prominent and recent examples, see: F. de ZWART, *The Logic of Affirmative Action*; S. DESHPANDE, *Contemporary India*, Chap. 5; S. BAYLY, *Caste, Society and Politics in India*; John E. CORT, *Jains, Caste and Hierarchy in North Gujarat*, in: Dipankar Gupta (ed.), Caste in Question: Identity or Hierarchy, New Delhi 2004, pp. 73–112; I. P. DESAI, *Should "Caste" Be the Basis for Recognising Backwardness?*, Economic and Political Weekly 19.28, 1984, pp. 1106–1116; Morton KLASS, *Caste: The Emergence of the South Asian Social System*, Philadelphia 1980, pp. 2, 20; Adrian C. MAYER, *Caste: II. The Indian Caste System*, Detroit 1968; Declan QUIGLEY, *The Interpretation of Caste*, Oxford 1993, pp. 1–2; Peter ROBB, *A History of India*, Houndmills 2002, p. 17; Brian K. SMITH, *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varna System and the Origins of Caste*, New York 1994, p. 315; R. L. STIRRAT, *Caste Conundrums: Views of Caste in a Sinhalese Catholic Fishing Village*, in: Dennis B. McGillivray (ed.), Caste Ideology and Interaction, Cambridge 1982, pp. 8–33; Melita WALIGORA, *What is Your "Caste"? The Classification of Indian Society as Part of the British Civilizing Mission*, in: Harald Fischer-Tine – Michael Mann (eds.), Colonialism as Civilizing Mission: Cultural Ideology in British India, London 2004, pp. 141–164.

## The Classical Conception of the Caste System

A lack of consensus among caste scholars on the basics of the caste system, which gets further complicated by the claims that the various principles and properties attributed to the caste system are not completely applicable to the way people live,[14] threatens the very possibility of having any serious and meaningful discussion on any aspect of the caste system. For, it makes the caste system so nebulous an entity that no finding can contradict or confirm it. A way out of this impasse, that this paper adopts, is to look for the majority opinion on the issues or aspects of the caste system. And we suggest that there is a minimum consensus on a textbook version of the story about the caste system which allows scholars to continue their research without questioning its existence. While we are speaking about a textbook story, consider how the current NCERT textbooks for the CBSE classes in India talk about caste. The Social Science textbook for the Class 10 on "*Democratic Politics*" says, "*caste division is special to India. All societies have some kind of social inequality and some form of division of labour. In most societies, occupations are passed on from one generation to another. Caste system is an extreme form of this. What makes it different from other societies is that in this system, hereditary occupational division was sanctioned by rituals. Members of the same caste group were supposed to form a social community that practiced the same or similar occupation, married within the caste group and did not eat with members from other caste groups. Caste system was based on exclusion of and discrimination against the 'outcaste' groups. They were subjected to the inhuman practice of untouchability.*"[15]

That is, in short, the caste system rests on the following four principles: (a) occupational division, sanctioned by rituals (read Hinduism), (b) hereditary membership, (c) endogamy, and (d) exclusion of and discrimination against the 'outcaste' groups (which includes commensality and 'untouchability'). In spite of the major shift in the caste studies in the 19th-century, which we discussed earlier, the core conception of the varna or the caste model of Indian society has retained many of these elements over the years. It is this basic notion of the caste system that we call in this paper the Classical Conception of the Caste System (CCC). Not many 'serious scholars' working on caste today may talk about the caste system so bluntly. Nevertheless, we submit, the CCC is present in all discussions on caste in various different ways. Two of them are important. First, it often takes the form of a tacit assumption in most of the works on caste issues. Second, it is presented as the 'textual' or 'ideal' version of the caste system. It is this textual or ideal notion of

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14   N. ROBERTS, *Caste, Anthropology of*; S. BAYLY, *Caste, Society and Politics in India*, p. 25; P. ROBB, *A History of India*, p. 17.

15   *Democratic Politics*, p. 49. The Textbook is available at URL: <http://ncertbooks.prashanthellina.com/>.

the caste system, which was taken to the field in the 19ᵗʰ-century. The field work data did not corroborate the CCC. The disjunction between the CCC and the field data was routinely observed and critiqued. However, we can see another curious development in the works produced in the last five to six decades. Caste scholarship has in this period even moved away from accepting this disjunction as a problem. The disjunction is now presented as a unique feature of the caste system.

## Endogamy and the Caste System

In this and the next section, we will analyse the debates on the caste system from two levels to further understand this disjunction between empirical data and the CCC. We will begin with a macro level analysis of debates on one of those aspects or principles held central to the existence of the caste system by a majority of scholars: endogamy. This will be followed by a micro level analysis of the work of an important writer on caste issues in the recent past: Declan Quigley.

As per the popular consensus among scholars, endogamy is an important characteristic of the caste system.[16] Sometimes it is treated as a *characteristic property* of the caste system, or as an essential or fundamental property.[17] Endogamy, thus, distinguishes caste from other types of social groups, like class and tribes.[18] According to B. R. Ambedkar, endogamy is "*the only*" characteristic "*that can be called the essence of Caste*", and which "*is peculiar to caste*".[19] If it is not "*the basis of a caste system*", says Schwartz, it is at least "*one of the necessary factors for the existence and perpetuation of caste*".[20]

Whether we take endogamy as a necessary factor for the very existence of the caste system or merely as one of its properties, we face several empirical problems when one puts it to use. A discussion on endogamy needs clarity regarding what an appropriate

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16  S. BANDYOPADHYAY, *Caste, Culture, and Hegemony*, p. 113; Louis DUMONT, *Homo Hierarchicus*, New Delhi 1988, p. 109; Noel P. GIST, *Caste in Transition: South India*, Phylon (1940–1956) 15.2, 1954, pp. 155–164; E. R. LEACH (ed.), *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North-West Pakistan*, Cambridge 1960; Declan QUIGLEY, *Is a Theory of Caste still Possible?*, Social Evolution & History 1.1, 2002, pp. 140–170; James M. SEBRING, *The Formation of New Castes: A Probable Case from North India*, American Anthropologist 74.3, 1972, pp. 587–600; Annapurna WAUGHRAY, *Caste Discrimination: A Twenty-First Century Challenge for UK Discrimination Law?*, The Modern Law Review 72.2, 2009, pp. 182–219.

17  Gerald D. BERREMAN, *Race, Caste, and Other Invidious Distinctions in Social Stratification*, Race & Class 13.4, 1972, pp. 385–414.

18  L. DUMONT, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 112.

19  B. R. AMBEDKAR, *Castes in India*, p. 7.

20  Barton M. SCHWARTZ, *Caste and Endogamy in Trinidad*, Southwestern Journal of Anthropology 20.1, 1964, p. 58. This article also gives an over view of similar arguments about caste endogamy.

unit of caste is, such that it can be defined as a custom that enjoins one to marry within one's own caste. However, as Klass notes, "*there has always been disagreement* […] [about] [w]*hat exactly are the 'units' or 'groups' which, taken together, comprise the system?*".[21] Caste scholars who go to the field invariably confront this problem. They begin with the assumption that endogamy is a property of caste, only to discover that castes are not essentially in-marrying groups.[22]

Let us explain the problem with the help of Dr. A. Shanmukha's observations from the field from Karnataka, South India. There are *jatis* like Kurubas and Nayakas[23] in Karnataka, which are said to have many 'sub-castes'. Among Kurubas, there are Halu Kuruba, Jenu Kuruba, Sanna Kuruba, Dodda Kuruba, Kadu Kuruba and so on. And among Nayakas, there are Myasa Nayaka, Valmiki Nayaka, Beda Nayaka, Uru Nayaka, and so on. In no case do we find that one 'sub-caste' of Kuruba is allowed to marry with another sub-caste of Kuruba, and the same applies to the Nayaka as well. In other words, Kadu Kurubas and Jenu Kurubas do not inter-marry, and Myasa Nayakas and Uru Nayakas do not inter-marry. Now, if you say that a caste is an in-marrying group, which unit is caste here: Kuruba or Kadu Kuruba, Nayaka or Myasa Nayaka?[24]

This is quite a significant impediment for caste scholars. As Dr. Shanmukha further points out, if one were to say that caste is an in-marrying group, we have to conclusively point out which one of the following is a caste group: Kuruba or Kadu Kuruba, Nayaka or Myasa Nayaka? That is, what is the primary unit of the caste: a caste or a sub-caste? If endogamy is a salient feature of caste, then those in-marrying groups like Kadu Kuruba and Myasa Nayaka should be considered castes and not sub-castes. And caste scholars have indeed offered this as a solution. According to G. S. Ghurye, "*to get a sociologically correct idea of the institution* [of caste]*, we should recognize subcastes as real castes*".[25] This, however, does not solve the problem. If sub-castes are 'real castes', what do we make of

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21   M. KLASS, *Caste*, p. 89.

22   L. DUMONT, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 61.

23   Kuruba and Nayaka are two important caste communities in Karnataka (South India). Kurubas are traditionally a shepherding community, and are the third largest caste group in Karnataka. Nayakas are traditionally a hunting caste. The former are recognised as 'Other Backward Classes' and the latter as 'Scheduled Tribe' by the state government of Karnataka. Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) are categories of groups that the Constitution of India recognises as communities that are historically most disadvantaged, both socially and educationally. The government of India strives to ensure their social and educational development through Affirmative action in the form of reservations or quotas in education and employment.

24   Dr. Shanmukha's original post is available here: URL: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/TheHeathen-InHisBlindness/message/2994>. The text cited here has been re-rendered into English from his yet to be published monograph.

25   Cited in Adrian C. MAYER, *Caste and Kinship in Central India: A Village and its Region*, Berkeley 1966, p. 9; see also M. N. SRINIVAS, *Caste in Modern India: And Other Essays*, Bombay 1962, p. 2.

the castes, like Kuruba, Nayaka, Brahmins, Baniyas, Parihas, Yadav and so on, which are said to have innumerable inner-groups called sub-castes? Furthermore, if endogamy is taken to be a property of sub-castes, we need to clarify what binds several sub-castes into a whole called caste. What are the distinctive properties of castes and sub-castes, which will help us to identify them as two separate entities? A fact that Dumont had observed half a century ago, further complicates the situation: "*In practice, one often marries not throughout the whole range of the unit of endogamy but only into a part of it, often a territorial part.*"[26]

As we can see, there is not even a basic consensus on any aspect of the caste system that missionaries and other writers over the ages have considered fundamental to the caste system. Perhaps, therefore, even though caste thinkers have been offering sub-caste as the 'real' unit of caste, they have rarely put this 'insight' into practice. That is, they have rarely used this 'insight' in actually understanding Indian society.[27]

Dumont rightly admits that if we hold on to a simple idea "*that caste is characterized by the obligation to marry within the group, by endogamy*" then "*one would have to admit a large number of exceptions*". He offers to save the argument by introducing "*two general principles*": first, to see endogamy as "*a corollary of hierarchy, rather than a primary principle*", and second, we take only the first and the community approved 'legitimate' marriage into account when viewing caste as an endogamous unit.[28] Whatever be the merit of these claims, in our case, Dumont's proposal (the first principle) is tantamount to giving up the very question that we began with. In practical terms, Dumont merely replaces one basic property of the caste system (endogamy) with another one: hierarchy. In any case, in the classical conception of caste, the system is seen as hierarchical and, in addition, as endogamous. Dumont's proposition to treat endogamy as an outcome of hierarchy goes no distance in solving the problem at hand.

Caste practices are so diverse and flexible that the current attempts to define them as one single entity (a system) that has properties like endogamy poses several problems. Consider the following practices that are not uncommon in India and challenge the CCC. There is "*a form of institutionalized intermarriage whereby the men of a higher caste-group may marry women of a lower group, but not vice versa.* […] *Highly developed among the Rajputs and Rarhi Brahmans, it is practiced by many other castes as well*".[29] The

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26   L. DUMONT, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 113.
27   Cf. L. DUMONT, *Homo Hierarchicus*, pp. 61–64; M. KLASS, *Caste*, p. 92; A. C. MAYER, *Caste: II.*; A. C. MAYER, *Caste and Kinship in Central India*, p. 20.
28   L. DUMONT, *Homo Hierarchicus*, pp. 109, 113.
29   Kingsley DAVIS, *Intermarriage in Caste Societies*, American Anthropologist (New Series) 43.3, 1941, p. 381.

picture gets even more complicated when one considers the role of the 'gotra' (roughly translated as lineage) in conjunction with caste. Let us explain with an example. Gotras play an important role in the selection of a bride among the Brahmins. Brahmins are an important caste group. Iyengar is an important Brahmin caste (or Brahmin sub-caste?), which is (further) divided into (sub-)sub-castes. Vadakalai and Thenkalai are two important Iyengar sub-castes. *Traditionally*, when a Vadakalai Brahmin goes in search of a bride, he is looking for a person who is (a) Brahmin, (b) Iyengar, (c) Vadakalai and (d) *who is not* from his own gotra. Hence, if we take the notion of endogamy as a fundamental property of the castes, Vadakalai is the only endogamous group. What do we make of 'Iyengar' and 'Brahmin' categories then? Furthermore, traditionally, not every Vadakalai will marry another Vadakalai, since in-gotra marriages are a taboo. That is to say, the Vadakalai sub-caste is simultaneously both exogamous and endogamous. An important caste thinker tackles this problem in the following way:

> "*regarding the peoples of India the law of exogamy is a positive injunction even to-day.* […] *Nothing is therefore more important for you to remember than the fact that endogamy is foreign to the people of India. The various Gotras of India are and have been exogamous, so are the other groups with totemic organization. It is no exaggeration to say that with the people of India exogamy is a creed and none dare infringe it, so much so that, in spite of the endogamy of the Castes within them [,] exogamy is strictly observed and that there are more rigorous penalties for violating exogamy than [there] are for violating endogamy.*"[30]

The caste system, thus, has both endogamy and exogamy. Yet, the author claims that the prohibition of intermarriage among castes, endogamy that is, "*is the only one that can be called the essence of caste when rightly understood*". What is this right way of understanding endogamy then? The right way, says Ambedkar, is to see caste as a system where endogamy is superposed on exogamy. That is to say, "*in an originally exogamous population* [which India was] *an easy working out of endogamy*" is "*equivalent to the creation of Caste.* […] *Thus the Superposition of endogamy on exogamy means the creation of caste*".[31] In simple terms, the argument here is that in an originally exogamous Indian culture, artificial divisions were drawn and endogamous units were created. These endogamous units are further divided into smaller exogamous sub-units. Ambedkar does not explain what to make of this claim in practical terms. It remains a fictitious claim about the pre-historical past of India.

However, this vague claim about Indian society offers to solve many a problem in one stroke. The problems created by the anomalous observations on the field are now made

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30   B. R. AMBEDKAR, *Castes in India*, pp. 8–9.

31   *Ibidem*, pp. 7, 9.

characteristic of Indian society itself: Indian society has both endogamy and exogamy. And what made this remarkable grafting of endogamy within an exogamous society possible?: "*This isolation among the classes is the work of Brahmanism. The principal steps taken by it were to abrogate the system of intermarriage and interdining that was prevalent among the four Varnas in olden times.*"[32] That is, in the absence of proper historical data, such issues are resolved simply by attributing immoral intentions to Brahmins. The supposed antiquity of the process precludes it from any historical investigation. As Samarendra points out, this is how the European writers, in general, used to solve problems in their argument. When difficult questions arose about their characterisation of Indians, the European scholars would give up their historical and factual arguments and recede "*into the background and the distinctiveness of the 'Oriental' character*".[33]

There is another way of wriggling out of such problems. That is to deny that we can talk about caste in terms of properties that remain stable or essential to its very existence over the years. Here is a recent article on caste endogamy that begins with the assumption that the "*principle of endogamy is no doubt an important ideal in a caste society*". However, "*a look at the* [data about the] *number of inter-caste, inter-religious marriages in urban India forces one* [the author] *to wonder why some violations of rules of marriage are tolerated and some are not*". If some rules of marriage are tolerated and some are not, it is more rational that we question whether a 'rule of marriage' called endogamy is constitutive of the caste system as it is supposed to be. However, this author does not question her strong belief that there is this caste system and endogamy is central to it. Instead, she produces a much-contrived defence by proposing that we should focus on "*two features of endogamy. The first is that the prescribed or acceptable circle of endogamy shifts over time and context, as does also the rationale for endogamy. The second, linked to this, is that while endogamy is and has been enforced often through violence, or the threat of violence or excommunication, this enforcement has also shifted with time and context.*"[34]

As noted earlier, the problems raised by the field observations that contradict the CCC are now made characteristic of Indian society itself. It is a 'feature' of endogamy that it changes in such a way that it is both a property of the caste system and yet we cannot speak about it thus. According to the author, the 'circle' of endogamy, its rationale and the methods of enforcing it has changed over 'time' and 'context'. (a) The 'circle'

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32  B. R. AMBEDKAR, *The Triumph of Brahmanism: Regicide or the birth of Counter-Revolution*, in: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches, Bombay 1979. Cited from unpaginated document available from: URL: <www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/19B.Revolution%20and%20Counter%20Rev.in%20 Ancient%20India%20PART%20II.htm>.

33  P. SAMARENDRA, *Classifying Caste*, p. 150.

34  Janaki ABRAHAM, *Contingent Caste Endogamy and Patriarchy*, Economic and Political Weekly 49.2, 2014, p. 57.

of endogamy here refers to two things: the unit of the caste that is endogamous and the criterion, other than caste, that is used in determining marriages in society. Hence, the author approvingly cites Beteille's argument that endogamy has shifted "*from sub-subcaste to sub-caste and to caste*". And then adds that this "*is generally true as marriage strategies include several considerations, class being an important one*".[35] If "*marriage strategies include several considerations*", class being one, endogamy is not essentially a caste-based institution. (b) A "*rationale*" of endogamy is a reference to reasons behind or the justification for following endogamous marriages in society. If this has changed temporally and is varied spatially (the "*shifts over time and context*"), all one can say is that sometimes, in some places in India, some caste communities prefer to marry within a caste group for several reasons, since class is also an important reason. (c) Finally, the enforcement of endogamy has also "*shifted with time and context*". That is, endogamy is sometimes forced and sometimes not, and some communities follow endogamy and some communities do not. In short, the so-called caste system is practiced in India sometimes, in some places, in some contexts and for various reasons other than caste itself. This then is how one has to speak about Indian society, if we are to hold on to the notion of CCC, despite noticing glaring mistakes in it.

## Are Arguments about Caste a Theory?

Declan Quigley has in the recent past provided one of the sharpest critiques of the decades of research on caste, including the much-acclaimed work of Louis Dumont. Referring to a version of what we call CCC here, he notes that historical and ethnographic investigations have repeatedly demonstrated that our "*theory* [of the caste system] *is at best inadequate, at worst wholly misleading. And yet it has remained remarkably resistant to attempts to modify it.* […] *Unfortunately, the more information one uncovers, the more one finds aspects of Hindu society which either cannot be explained by the three-line theory or directly contradict it.*" And he offers to show why scholars and lay people alike hold on to the faulty 'theory' of the caste system.[36]

We can formulate the problems that he highlights in the 'caste theory' as problems related to the way empirical data has been handled by caste scholars. One must be cautious about the use of the word 'fact' in relation to caste, he says. Every observation from the ground, including the fact of the domination of the Brahmins, has been disputed.

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35   *Ibidem*, p. 58.
36   D. QUIGLEY, *The Interpretation of Caste*, p. 2.

His essay *Is a Theory of Caste still Possible?* (1993) provides a sharper formulation of his thesis. He notes here that most of the so-called "*defining characteristics of caste*" are not, after all, unique to the "*Hindu communities or to the ideology of Brahmanism*" as caste scholars would have us believe. "*Some anthropologists have tried to side-line the theoretical problems by sticking to what they can actually observe on the ground during prolonged periods of fieldwork, as if ethnographic description and theoretical abstraction belong to mutually exclusive zones.*"[37] He, therefore, calls for a theory of caste that solves this problem. But, why should there be any difficulty in providing such a theory of caste, especially "*when an enormous amount of ethnographic and historical evidence on the subject has been produced over the*" years? Quigley offers many reasons for this situation. From the perspective of this essay, the following two points that he makes are pertinent. "*Most theories of caste appear to involve an unjustifiably arbitrary selection of evidence. Since it appears to many that it is the facts themselves that are inconsistent, a common approach has been to ignore those elements which are awkward and to present the allegedly overwhelming picture suggested by those facts which are retained. The objection to this is that the awkward facts still remain, even if they are hidden.*" For instance, analysing Louis Dumont's influential work on caste, he observes that Dumont asks us "*to be empirical when it suits his theory and something less than empirical when the facts appear to contradict*" his research.[38]

Note that an important difficulty in producing a 'theory' of the caste system, according to Quigley, is related to the way one handles empirical data. Let us see how he proposes to solve this problem. He begins by talking about the 'institutions' of caste. By which he refers to the usual aspects attributed to caste in CCC accounts: recruitment to one's social position at birth, kinship organization in terms of lineages; ritual as a mechanism for structuring social relations; endogamy, untouchability, importance of pollution and so on. Quigley thus uncritically accepts the 'facts' of the CCC. His 'theory of caste', therefore, is all about offering "*a way of ordering the facts in such a way that it does not diminish the significance of some or ignore others*".[39] At the root of his 'theory' is an empirical observation: "*virtually all of the institutions which one associates with caste are found in different degrees in other societies at different periods of history*". So, what constitutes the uniqueness of the Indian caste system then? In the caste system, all these institutions are found together when only some of them are found elsewhere. This suggests that any work on caste that bases its argument on any one property of the caste system is committing a mistake. Dumont's attempt to project the principle of hierarchy and the

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37  D. QUIGLEY, *Is a Theory of Caste still Possible?*, pp. 140, 144.
38  *Ibidem*, p. 152.
39  *Ibidem*, p. 140.

opposition of the pure and the impure, as constitutive of the caste system, therefore, according to Quigley, is wrong. The pure-impure opposition is after all found in all societies. The task for a theory of caste is to "*explain why and when*" all these institutions come together in the Indian context.[40] Quigley proposes a model of Indian society that seeks to tackle this issue. It is a model where the king is the central figure. This is how Quigley summarises his model:

> "*caste results from an uneasy stalemate between the pull of localised lineage organization and the forces of political, ritual and economic centralization encapsulated in monarchical institutions. Caste systems are the product of a certain degree of centralization which involves the organization of ritual and other services around the king and dominant lineages. The central institution is (as Hocart suggested) the kingship.*"[41]

What this model offers is a beehive-like structure where the king sits at the centre and "*attaches other castes*" and their services to himself. Thus, all kinds of inter- and intra-caste activities, competitions, fights will continue as we notice them on the field. However, that happens within this arrangement where castes group around the king in their own roles and capacities.

> "*The castes which supply the king's priests will undoubtedly claim higher status than the castes which supply the farmers' priests. Untouchables are frequently represented as being outside the community altogether and in fact must often live physically apart from other castes. This is because their primary function is to act as scapegoats and to take out pollution (i.e. what-ever threatens social order) to beyond the community's limits. Finally, it is also possible that there will be others somewhere in the vicinity (renouncers, independent sects, members of other ethnic groups) who cannot be accommodated easily within the local caste system. In spite of these qualifications, the underlying structure of caste organization* [remains intact] […]*.*"[42]

In this arrangement, the higher the position of a caste, the closer it will be to the king. The 'higher position' here is determined by many different criteria: it can be a higher position within the Hindu religion or a higher position by means of one's economic, intellectual and other social statuses. Thus, the king procures the best services he can find around him. Note also that finding a scapegoat caste, i.e., exploitation of a caste, is also important to this arrangement. A caste is oppressed into becoming a scapegoat in order to keep the pollution outside of the caste arrangement. This is how the king abides by the rules of the Hindu religion. As a result, the untouchable castes, which the caste system uses as scapegoats, "*are seen as not quite fully human and so must be excluded*

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40   *Ibidem*, p. 153.
41   *Ibidem*, p. 141.
42   *Ibidem*, p. 160.

*from society proper*". And they "*stand both literally and symbolically on the margins of society*" in India.[43]

This thesis, at this juncture, raises many important questions. The following is important for our discussion: Who is the king, who concentrates the "*ritual and other services*" around him, in the contemporary post-monarchical Indian society? Kings, he says, "*always retained a central position in the rituals they patronized and their functions were replicated on a lesser scale by the well-to-do members of dominant castes, a situation which has not changed with the collapse of Hindu kingship in the face of colonialism*".[44] This answer merely postpones the answer. It has to now answer the following question: What is a 'dominant caste' and how does one identify a caste as dominant? Is he referring to the Brahmins as a dominant caste? No. Quigley, in fact, warns us against thinking of the caste system as an unambiguous perpendicular ladder with Brahmans at the top and Untouchables at the bottom. In the beehive like model that he has proposed, the elites or the dominant castes are at the centre and not at the top and are connected to other castes "*by using their resources to employ members of other castes (or sometimes other, usually affinally related, lineages within the same caste) to perform various services for them. Obviously, the greater one's resources, the greater will be one's capacity to do this. But virtually no household is so poor that it cannot at least occasionally afford to retain others to perform specialised ritual functions – at funerals, weddings, or caste initiation ceremonies for example.*"[45]

How does this model explain the entire caste system with multiple 'upper' and 'lower' castes? Here is Quigley's answer. "*It is not only dominant castes and merchants who act as the patrons of ritual specialists. To a greater or lesser extent, depending on their resources, members of* all *castes fulfil this role.* […] *From the viewpoint of those castes that supply ritual specialists … [they] provide services for others and get others to provide service to them. The Barber might well employ another Barber as priest*" and so on.[46] A better formulation of this thesis is available in his article:

> "[I]*t is not only dominant caste households which are able to attach other castes to themselves. To a greater or lesser extent, households in every caste will attempt to replicate this pattern by using their resources to employ members of other castes* […] *to perform various services for them. Obviously, the greater one's resources, the greater will be one's capacity to do this. But virtually*

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43    D. QUIGLEY, *The Interpretation of Caste*, p. 156.
44    D. QUIGLEY, *Is a Theory of Caste still Possible?*, p. 151.
45    *Ibidem*, p. 159.
46    D. QUIGLEY, *The Interpretation of Caste*, p. 155.

*no household is so poor that it cannot at least occasionally afford to retain others to perform specialised ritual functions – at funerals, weddings, or caste initiation ceremonies for example.*"[47]

This is a breathtaking argument. To better understand what this model has done we need to understand what this model implies. Quigley argues, as we saw, that the Brahmin caste does not occupy the top of the hierarchy, as caste scholars have been arguing. Instead, *all castes fulfil this role*. That is, any caste can function as 'ritual specialists', the priests i.e., to another caste. "*Men of Barber caste, for example, often perform ritual activities for lower castes which are strictly analogous to those performed by Brahmans for higher castes.*"[48] Since, as Quigley asserts, to a greater or lesser extent, households in every caste will attempt to replicate the beehive-like pattern, the caste system is a collection of many small beehive-like patterns. In each beehive-like arrangement, then, there is a king-like dominant caste in the middle of the structure, a priest, other service providers and a scapegoat. Turning a caste into a 'scapegoat' too is necessary in this arrangement, because in the kind of religion that Hinduism is, people need someone 'to take out pollution (i.e. whatever threatens social order) to beyond the community's limits'.

What Quigley achieves with this turn of argument is that the immorality attached to the Brahmins and the caste system as a whole is now made characteristic of every single Indian. That is, every single Indian now is responsible for bringing the caste system into existence. For, every Indian is a potential priest (and a potential king/dominant caste) and is constantly engaged in scapegoating another caste in order to preserve the caste structure. More importantly, since the caste system is an arrangement of priestly services and all 'other services' around a dominant caste, in practical terms, the caste system comes into existence by virtue of anything and everything that Indians do in their day-to-day life. The following claim then is imminent: "*The really outstanding characteristic*" of the caste system is that it is "*culturally blind – it does not respect ethnic or religious divisions but absorbs all in its path. To say that caste is a product of Hinduism is to look at things the wrong way round. Hinduism is a product of caste organization.*"[49] Thus, according to Quigley's model of the caste system, every Indian participates in the daily establishment and functioning of the caste system. By implication, then, every Indian is immoral, in every single action of his/her life. If we accept the standard ethical theories, a moral action, by nature, is an action of choice, made freely without coercion. If so, every Indian is not only immoral but also so by choice.

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47   D. QUIGLEY, *Is a Theory of Caste still Possible?*, p. 158.
48   *Ibidem*, p. 150.
49   D. QUIGLEY, *The Interpretation of Caste*, p. 162.

An attempt to write a better theory of caste thus ends up characterising Indians as a bunch of immoral crooks. This, in short, is how the missionaries have been talking about the caste system since the mid-16th-century. A 19th-century missionary would express it much more succinctly and forcefully.

"*Idolatry and superstition are like the stones and brick of a huge fabric, and caste is the cement which pervades and closely binds the whole. Let us, then, undermine the common foundation, and both tumble at once, and form a common ruin. […] [T]he cruel, anti-social, tyrannical dominion of caste, is made to be known, abhorred, and trampled under foot – with an indignation which is not lessened by the reflection, that over ages and generations without number it hath already swayed undisturbed the sceptre of a ruthless despotism, which ground men down to the condition of irrationals; and strove to keep them there, with the rigour of a merciless necessity. […] There the whole are blended in one undistinguished mass. Scarcely an action of life can be named which is not amalgamated with some religious ingredient. There is no exemption for the most frivolous. Everything connected with the forms of buildings, utensils, dress, ornaments, meals, ablutions &c., is associated with some impression, or motive, or observance of a religious nature. Hence, the un-changeableness of Hindu customs. Being founded on the basis, or accompanied with the sanctioned rites of religion, they necessarily partake of its divine and inviolable authority.*"[50]

It seems, at first, rather strange that a scholar in the 21st-century would replicate the very understanding prevalent in the 19th-century while attempting to propose a radical break with dominant scholarship on caste. But, this has been the story of the last 150 years: first, an exercise in critiquing the writings on caste only ends up attempting to bolster the CCC, and, second, contemporary scholarship on caste is a rehash of the CCC ornamented with more empirical data and cast in a formalised and methodologically sophisticated language. One can easily test this rather harsh sounding claim: pick up any property of the caste system, like endogamy or commensality, and show that progress has been made in understanding it over the last 150 years. (We can easily do so for any fundamental concept, like 'gravitation' or 'black hole', used in physics today.) If one succeeds, our claim stands false.

Once a mindset with regard to the caste system is formed, it is as though these scholars lose access to almost everything: the information that the field data provides, one's insight in that data and the critique of the whole situation that one has proposed until then. That is, caste scholars routinely present the same old arguments about caste, in utter disregard of or even after noticing the problems with these arguments. Thus, these problems do not behave like anomalies of a theory. When a theory, say in the field of science, acquires enough significant anomalies, it is considered a degenerate theory. As we saw, caste

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50    Alexander DUFF, *India and India Missions: Including Sketches of the Gigantic System of Hinduism, Both in Theory and Practice…*, 2nd ed., Edinburgh 1840, pp. 615–618.

scholars have regularly noticed problems in the way we speak about the caste system and have even strongly critiqued it. However, instead of seeing them as warrant to question the very basis of the caste system, they have either explained them away by inventing innumerable ad hoc hypotheses or merely by ignoring them. As a consequence, after relentless discussion over a century and a half, caste scholarship looks like a laundry list of unanswered questions.[51] It is this situation that needs to be understood, if we intend to make any progress in understanding Indian society. In order to further our argument let us ask two questions. (a) Despite 150 years of discussion and critique, why have scholars not solved the problems that they find in the so-called caste theories and proposed a theory that at least achieves a basic minimum scholarly consensus on the fundamentals of the caste system? (b) If that is not possible, for whatever reason, why have they not abandoned the CCC and their premises, completely, and gone on to reconceptualise the field? In posing this question we are treating the arguments about caste as a theory in some or other sense. What if the arguments about caste are nowhere close to being called a theory? Hence, let us reformulate the two questions thus: What kind of a conceptual entity must the CCC be so that it is immunized against 150 years of empirical (and also conceptual) refutation? Any answer to this question has to make sure that it does not fall into the trap of attributing bad faith or ignorance to generations of brilliant scholars who have tried to understand the Indian society. This paper suggests that this situation can be better understood by formulating a hypothesis based on the work of S. N. Balagangadhara and his research team.

## Caste system as a Western Experience of India

S. N. Balagangadhara proposes that the notion of the caste system is an entity that exists only in the experience of the west. In a very specific sense of the term, the caste system is a '*creation*' of the west. When the necessity of going about in India arose, early European travellers and visitors to India began to figure out ways of dealing with everything that India was. We must remember that India for them was a place of monsters and marvels. It was an alien place, in short. None of the things that they were familiar with back home came to their rescue. Over a period of time, they had to turn the unfamiliar world into a familiar habitat. During this process of adaptation, they created a plethora of new signs, heuristics, shortcuts, maps (cultural as well as a geographical map) and so on, which helped them to create a cultural habitat in India. The caste system is a collection

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51 For some sample questions, see S. N. BALAGANGADHARA, *Reconceptualizing India Studies*, New Delhi 2012, p. 4.

of such entities that the West imagined, posited and created in the process. Scholars over the last 150 years have tried to find empirical data to either confirm or critique this experiential entity called the-caste-system.[52]

The story of the caste system developed in the initial stages as a story of wicked Brahmins, their sinful activities and the oppressed masses. As has been shown, this story of the immoral Brahmins was cast within the anti-clerical sentiments of the Protestant Reformation and the way the Catholic Counter-Reformation reacted to it.[53] Theologian after theologian, across Europe, was attacking the Catholic Church and the role that the priests played in the Church around this time. In order to have a sense of the anti-clerical sentiment of the time, let us consider Martin Luther's 95 theses, which he nailed on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, in 1517. It is clear that Luther's polemics were directed against Catholic saints, priests, nuns and their activities. Luther generally saw them as corrupt, leading the lay people astray and completely lost as they relied on their own works for salvation. It is worth noting in this context that nearly half of his 95 theses directly refer to various activities of the Catholic priests, preachers, bishops and, more importantly, the Pope. The clerical community is presented here as a bunch of greedy people trying to make money by selling indulgences to poor peasants. The peasants are seen as ignorant enough to give up their life savings to save their loved ones from the tortures of purgatory.

Another important aspect of these theses is instructions about what one should teach the Christians about these corrupt priests and their practices. Many of his theses (see especially, thesis 42 to 52) talk about the things that lay Christians should be taught. Nine of these theses even begin with "*Christians should be taught that* […]". And they have to be taught, among other things, (a) that trusting the priests (and purchasing pardons) is equivalent to purchasing the indignation of God, (b) purchasing pardons is not a legal requirement, and (c) selling pardons, which the Church indulges in, is a way of making money. The thesis 46, for instance, declares: "*Christians are to be taught that, unless they*

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52   One also has to understand this argument in the context of S. N. Balagangadhara's arguments about how Hinduism and the other so-called Asian religions are western constructs, in the sense that they are western experiential entities. For a lucid elaboration on what it means to say they are *constructed,* see: Jakob De ROOVER – Sarah CLAERHOUT, *The Colonial Construction of What?*, in: Esther Bloch – Marianne Keppens – Rajaram Hedge (eds.), Rethinking Religion in India: The Colonial Construction of Hinduism, London 2010, pp. 164–183.

53   S. N. BALAGANGADHARA, "*The Heathen in his Blindness…*" *Asia, the West, and the Dynamic of Religion*, Leiden 1994; S. N. BALAGANGADHARA, *Reconceptualizing India Studies*; Raf GELDERS – S. N. BALAGANGADHARA, *Rethinking Orientalism: Colonialism and the Study of Indian Traditions*, History of Religions 51.2, 2011, pp. 101–128.

*have more than they need, they must reserve enough for their family needs and by no means squander it on indulgences.*"

As early as 1543, Francis Xavier, a Catholic priest, seems to be reproducing Luther's criticism of Catholic priesthood in understanding Indian society. In his letter written to Ignatius, in the spring of 1543, Xavier presents the local Parava converts thus: "*Christian inhabitants here have had no priests; they just know that they are Christians and nothing more.* […] *I have found very great intelligence among them: and if they had any one to instruct them in religion, I doubt not they would turn out excellent Christians.*"[54] Throughout Xavier's letters, the Parava and other local communities are portrayed as ignorant, confused, poor, exploited but intelligent people, who are eager to receive the Christ. On the contrary, as we see in a letter written on December 31, 1543, Xavier characterizes Brahmins as greedy priests who, in the name of religion, constantly exploit "*the ignorant people whose blind superstitions have made them their* [Brahmins'] *slaves*". And this portrayal of the Brahmins is seen as "*exposing their tricks*" which creates indignation towards him.

"*We have in these parts a class of men among the pagans who are called Brahmins. They keep up the worship of the gods, the superstitious rites of religion, frequenting the temples and taking care of the idols. They are as perverse and wicked a set as can anywhere be found, and I always apply to them the words of holy David, 'from an unholy race and a wicked and crafty man deliver me O Lord.' They are liars and cheats to the very backbone. Their whole study is, how to deceive most cunningly the simplicity and ignorance of the people. They give out publicly that the gods command certain offerings to be made to their temples, which offerings are simply the things that the Brahmins themselves wish for, for their own maintenance and that of their wives, children, and servants. Thus they make the poor folk believe that the images of their gods eat and drink, dine and sup like men, and some devout persons are found who really offer to the idol twice a day, before dinner and supper, a certain sum of money. The Brahmins eat sumptuous meals to the sound of drums, and make the ignorant believe that the gods are banqueting. When they are in need of any supplies, and even before, they give out to the people that the gods are angry because the things they have asked for have not been sent, and that if the people do not take care, the gods will punish them by slaughter, disease, and the assaults of the devils. And the poor ignorant creatures, with the fear of the gods before them, obey them implicitly. These Brahmins have barely a tincture of literature, but they make up for their poverty in learning by cunning and malice. Those who belong to these parts are very indignant with me for exposing their tricks. Whenever they talk to me with no one by to hear them they acknowledge that they have no other patrimony but the idols, by their lies about which they procure their support from the people.* […] *If it were not for the opposition of the Brahmins, we should have them all embracing the religion of Jesus Christ.*"[55]

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54    Henry James COLERIDGE, *The Life and Letters of St. Francis Xavier*, vol. 1, London 1881, p. 146.
55    *Ibidem*, pp. 157–159.

Such examples from the European writings about India can be multiplied endlessly. What we have to see here is the way Europe tried to understand Indian culture from the background of their own culture: a Church, a people, a false but a religion nevertheless, a class of exploitative priests and so on. Since the days of Xavier, European writers have seen such cunning priests and superstitious masses everywhere in India. The notion of the caste system developed in this manner. The missionaries soon found 'evidence' for the existence, continuance and a support for this system of Indian priests in all and every text they found in India: be it the Vedas or folk stories.

A popular version of this history of India (qua the caste system) that Europeans conceived, notes three phases in the growth of religion in India: the Vedic period, the domination of Brahmanism, and Hinduism. As the names themselves suggest, the Vedic period was projected as the pristine part of the Indian past. In the next phase, under the dominance of Brahman priests, the degeneration of the religion and culture began. Brahman priests imposed the 'caste structure' on society. The present form of mainstream 'Hinduism' developed with the decline of Buddhism as a further degeneration of 'Brahmanism'. This Hinduism is what the caste system is. This story is presented today in various forms, shades and flavours. The basic thrust of the story, however, is always the same: the caste system is a creation of the Brahman and is linked to the Hindu religion. Here is how the *Catholic Encyclopedia* presents this story:

> "*Brahminism is* […] *the complex religion and social system which grew out of the polytheistic nature-worship of the ancient Aryan conquerors of northern India, and came, with the spread of their dominion, to be extended over the whole country, maintaining itself, not without profound modifications, down to the present day. In its intricate modern phases it is generally known as Hinduism.* […] *Our knowledge of Brahminism in its earlier stages is derived from its primitive sacred books, originally oral compositions, belonging to the period between 1500–400 B.C.* […] *Intimately bound up in the religious teaching of Brahminism was the division of society into rigidly defined castes.* […] *The steady weakening of Brahmin influence, in consequence of the successive waves of foreign conquest, made it possible for the religious preferences of the huge, heterogeneous population of India to assert themselves more strongly.*"[56]

This story is still an accepted and a dominant way of talking about the emergence and the development of the caste system.[57] In Bandyopadhyaya's words, "*debates on caste*

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56    Charles Francis AIKEN, *Brahminism*, in: The Catholic Encyclopedia, available at URL: <www.new-advent.org/cathen/02730a.htm>.

57    The works that try to present a history of India covering a vast period of time, often present a straightforward version of this story: David KEANE, *Caste-based Discrimination in International Human Rights Law*, Hampshire 2007; Gail OMVEDT, *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond*, New Delhi 2011; Hermann KULKE – Dietmar ROTHERMUND, *A History of India*, London 1986; Judith E. WALSH, *A Brief History of India*, New York 2006.

*have revolved round this stereotypical image of Indian society*" that links everything in India to its religion, Hinduism, including the castes.[58] This image was a belief held by "*early missionaries*" and later constituted "*the colonial empirical inquiries*". This notion of Hinduism or the caste system, which is neither historically nor empirically verifiable, "*unified the British experience of India; they implemented certain political and economic policies based on their experience. But this experience was* not of the caste system. *In fact, this experience was of no particular object but constituted the basis of their goings-about with the Indians. By creating such a 'system', the British lent stability and coherence to their cultural experience. Both the caste system and the Indian religions are constructs in this specific sense.*"[59]

When one goes to the field with this classical conception of the caste system, and with an absolute conviction that it describes the reality of India, one is logically compelled to save this conception against every contradiction from the field. The anomalous data then is taken as an indication for strengthening the idea of the caste system or simply as an exception. A researcher, therefore, is compelled to render consistent the contradictory facts s/he comes across during the study. A popular form it takes, it seems, is to say that India or Hinduism is so vast and diverse that it is normal that even, say, the properties of the caste system can vary from region to region "*given the wide cultural diversities of India, it is difficult to find all these features* [of the caste system] *in the same form or content in all the regions of the subcontinent*".[60]

The caste system then, and in this sense, is a description of the way the Europeans experienced India. Therefore, the way European writers and travellers wrote about India, Balagangadhara says, tells us more about their culture than the reality in India. They created the caste system as their 'experiential entity.'

"*Under this construal, the orientalists did not describe what exists in the Indian culture. Instead, they created* […] [an imaginary entity]*, constructed a pattern and a structure that lent coherence to their cultural experience of India.* […] *When the Europeans came to India and wrote down their experiences, they were not hallucinating. They did not write about their dreams nor did they compose stories. Whether of a merchant, a missionary or a bureaucrat, the reports had some kind of a structure. Reflections about such reports at second remove, or reflections on experiences at a later stage or in a distant way, led to finding a pattern or a structure in these experiences.* […] *These reports lent structure to what the Europeans saw. At the same time, they filtered out phenomena that could not be structured in this fashion. Thus, these reports contributed to structuring a European way of seeing and describing phenomena in India. Such texts, which embodied an explanatory structuring of the European experiences, ended up becoming the*

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58    S. BANDYOPADHYAY, *Caste, Culture, and Hegemony*, p. 11.
59    S. N. BALAGANGADHARA, *Reconceptualizing India Studies*, p. 54.
60    S. BANDYOPADHYAY, *Caste, Culture, and Hegemony*, p. 12.

*'ethnological data' or the 'anthropological fieldwork' that the social theories would later try to explain. […] The notion of such a system [the caste system] unified the British experience of India; they implemented certain political and economic policies based on their experience. However, this experience was not of the caste system. In fact, this experience was of no particular object but constituted the basis of their going-about with the Indians. By creating such a 'system' the British lent stability, coherence and unity to their cultural experience. Both the caste system and the Indian religions are constructs in this specific sense. It is not as though colonialism brought 'Hinduism' and 'the caste system' into existence. The Europeans spoke about these entities as though they existed. They acted as though these entities were real. However, neither before nor after colonialism have such entities or phenomena existed. […] These entities merely lend structure and stability to the European experience.*"[61]

The notion of the caste system, thus, is the actual experience of a people who lived and interacted with each other in the real world and thus grafted their experience onto the real objects in the world. Hence, as Balagangadhara [62] shows, it brought together such a wide variety of phenomena as the manner in which people bathe, get up, walk, sit, sleep; their occupation; their marriage customs; their food habits; customs related to travelling; poverty handed down from generation to generation; some texts that were translated in the 19th-century; answers to some census questionnaires that were distributed; various traditions, from Buddhism to bhakti traditions; varied rituals; inhuman practices like owning bonded labourers; and vague and failed theoretical claims like the Hindu form of 'Oriental despotism', the 'Hindu rate of growth', etc. However, no scientific theory exists that explains how these different phenomena are related to each other; which one is the cause and which one the effect of the so-called caste system; etc. Hence, the scholarship on the caste system is doomed to live like a loose collection of various claims, historical and sociological facts, anthropological observations, psychological insights, emotional opinions and so on.

## Conclusion

The basic notion of the caste system has stayed with us for so long and has routinely defended itself through various means that it has permeated not only our most fundamental observational descriptions of Indian culture but also the way the Indian state and other

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61  S. N. BALAGANGADHARA. *Orientalism, Postcolonialism and the 'Construction' of Religion*, in: E. Bloch – M. Keppens – R. Hedge (eds.), Rethinking Religion in India, pp. 137, 138.

62  See Dunkin JALKI (ed.), *Bharatadalli Jaativyavasthe Ideye?: Jaativyavasthe Kuritu S. N Balagangadhara Mattu Avara Samshodhana Tandada Vichaaragalu* [Is there a Caste System in India?: S. N. Balagangadhara and His Research Group's Views on the Caste System], Malladihalli 2012. This is a work in Kannada, a vernacular from southern India.

institutions function. A critique of the 'caste system' and the subsequent reconceptualization of caste studies, today, is not merely an intellectual exercise but has far more important and deeper implications. The so-called theories of the caste system, despite being deeply flawed, have been far more successful than we are currently aware of. The literature that has been reduced over the decades, whether scholarly or popular, is largely political rather than scientific. Much of India's internal laws and policies and Europe's and other international relations with India are significantly affected by these defective notions about India. On the one hand, these caste theories directly impact many of India's internal policies and laws. Much of India's developmental work, from its 'Poverty Alleviation Programme' to its reform of education sector, is formed largely on the lines of perceived caste inequalities. The question is not whether there are serious social issues in India (like economic inequality and growing social unrest) that need compelling and immediate attention. The point is, why assume that the caste system is responsible for these problems? What if the caste system, like Balagangadhara says, is an experiential entity of the west? As he further points out, this is like treating common cold with chemotherapy. On the other hand, the way the west sees and treats India is also significantly influenced by unscientific social theories about India, especially the caste system. As a consequence, the dominant frameworks through which the international community addresses issues related to India is by reproducing the centuries-old, unscientific and seemingly racist remarks, albeit in the guise of humanitarian concerns. The way European media treated even a significant scientific achievement of India, like its mission to Mars, Mangalyaan, is a good example. Consider the headline of the articles about Mangalyaan that the two leading British dailies carried on the day of its launch: "*How can poor countries afford space programmes?*", "*India mars mission to launch amidst overwhelming poverty*".[63]

In the fast growing globalizing world, S. N. Balagangadhara[64] warns, if what the west knows about India resembles what it claims to know about the caste system, it is going to end in a huge disaster. India will do no better if it blindly accepts European views about itself as scientific theories about its society and culture. It is high time we accept not only the problems inherent in the notion of the caste system and the scholarship on it but also recognise the nature of the larger Western project of presenting its experience of India as social scientific knowledge about Indian culture and its dire consequences.

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63   *The Economist*, 4 November 2013 and *The Guardian*, 4 November 2013, respectively.
64   S. N. BALAGANGADHARA, *Reconceptualizing India Studies*, pp. 1–12.

## Resumé

### Jak je těžké vyvrátit či potvrdit argumenty o kastovním systému

Každý pokus o pochopení indické společnosti na základě bádání o kastách před nás staví velké množství problémů. Na ty upozorňují odborníci, kteří pozorují a dokonce kritizují odbornou produkci o kastách, už sto padesát let. Tato kritika však dosud nevedla ani k potvrzení ani k opuštění tzv. kastovních teorií. Jak je možné tento podivný fakt vysvětlit? Znalci se domnívají, že jde o tak komplexní fenomén, že není možné hovořit o žádné solidní teorii kastovního systému. Proto se snaží získat co nejvíce informací, aby takovou teorii vytvořili a důkladně ji zdůvodnili. Jenže čím více faktů získávají, tím většímu množství problémů čelí. Nejsou tu však jen spory o nová data, jež mají zachránit "teorie" kastovního systému, problémem je také sladit výsledky pozorování s tezemi o kastovním systému, na kterých se shodují koloniální i moderní badatelé. Autoři tohoto článku navrhují vysvětlení, že důvodem toho, že se odborníci na kasty nemohou vyrovnat s nově získanými daty, není složitost celého fenoménu, ale spíše výsledek samotného typu entity, jakou kastovní systém je. Tzv. kastovní systém je zkušenostní entitou vytvořenou Západem, která nemůže být dokázána ani vyvrácena pomocí empirických faktů sebraných v Indii. Každý takový pokus povede jen k dalším neplodným debatám.