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The Political Intensification of Caste: India Under the Raj

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In 1989, some students protested Indian government plans to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission report, expanding affirmative action quotas for Indians of the lowest castes in universities and the bureaucracy by immolating themselves. While all discrimination based on caste is explicitly banned by Article 15 of the Indian Constitution, strong caste feelings continue to trouble the country to this day, and represent one of its greatest yet intractable human rights issues. While the social institution of the caste has been present on the sub-continent for at least 3,000 years, individuals have not always been moved to such drastic demonstrations as self-immolation in defense of caste prerogatives. In examining this issue, many historians point to the British colonial period as a key turning point in changing caste sentiment among Indians. Much caste division and discrimination, including the labeling of some individuals so polluting that the higher castes could not even touch or come into close proximity with them, predated the British. Regional differences, however, were striking: different castes predominated over others depending on the region. Colonial administrators began for a host of their own reasons—both imperial and more benign—efforts to systematize, categorize, and delineate castes into a set hierarchy that had never before existed in a formal sense. While these measures effectively codified and ossified the miserable conditions of the ‘lower’ castes, the British education and administrative system paradoxically began changing the lives of ordinary Indians, breaking down some of those very same conditions. While the caste system may have been originally dreamt up by “some speculative Brahmin”,¹ the British cannot claim to have had any ameliorating effect when one takes into consideration the exacerbation and magnification of the depth and scope of caste discrimination which occurred under their rule. Colonial policies, through their structuring and politicization of caste, were one of the direct causes for the incessant and often deadly caste conflict in India today.

No discussion of caste in India can begin without reference to its alleged basis in the *Rg Veda*, the most ancient sacred text of Hinduism. As part of a creation story, it describes the division of the primordial being Purusha into the four castes “for the protection of this whole creation”.² Brahmins were born from the mouth, Ksatriyas from the arms, Vaisyas from the thighs and Sudras from the feet.³ Each one of these castes from the beginning was assigned a particular purpose and station in life. Brahmins (priests) were to recite and teach the Veda, offer and officiate at sacrifices, and receive and give gifts⁴ while Ksatriyas (warriors) were charged mainly with protecting others⁵, and Vaisyas (merchants) were to engage in “trade, money lending and agriculture”⁶. These first three castes constituted the ‘twice-born’ who had, if they led pure lives, fairly decent chances of going to heaven. For the lowly, once-born Sudra however, “a single activity did the Lord allot... the ungrudging service to those very social classes”.⁷ Even though Sharma criticized the notion that Sudras came from the feet as derogatory, he argued that all the castes were equally valuable in some respects, noting that “the feet are as essential to the body as the head.”⁸

Discrimination based on caste was firmly established by the 2nd century CE with the writing of the *Law Code of Manu*. Manu’s Code was one of the most influential of the Hindu *dharmasastras*, law books listing not only edicts but also instruction on how to live purely and piously. All laws in Manu’s Code were caste based, with the severest punishments prescribed for Sudras, and the lightest for Brahmins. Interestingly, the Code contains no formal discussion of outcastes or untouchables. The Code became a “standard source of authority” in medieval India.⁹ These laws are clearly not a paragon of liberal fairness: the system advocated establishes Brahmins as the ultimate arbiters of all things earthly and holy, while it denigrates the Sudra caste to the lowest possible level of society in all aspects.

The Code, moreover, is riddled with inconsistencies and was probably never literally applied. Davis draws the analogy between the abstraction of western law texts and the “actual practice of law” to illustrate how the *Law Code of Manu* was probably never used verbatim; Hindu law could be seen as the embodiment of “legal positivism”.¹⁰ Lariviere agrees, writing that law “was a highly flexible and ingenious science in which the standards of orthodoxy and righteousness of a given locale or group could continually be adapted”.¹¹ Different groups in different regions enforced their own lists of crimes and punishments; the law therefore took on varied form depending on the locale. The British would implement the letter of these formerly flex-

ible *dharmasastras* as law, exacerbating caste difference and discrimination in the process.

The early British views on India were shaped by the debates between conservative non-interventionists such as Burke, and Protestant-inspired interventionists such as by James Mill. Burke took a Natural Law view of India in which the “peaceful and orderly polity” was anchored in the caste system. Each Indian had a place in the structure, and each performed a task useful to society. This polity preserved “the liberties and rights, as well as the duties of all groups”. The accusation of ‘Indian despotism’ was false—the power of the rulers was projected through a complex prism of caste and tradition, inevitably moderating it.¹² Thus, in order to preserve “the fabric of Indian society”, India was to be governed “according to Indian experience and tradition”.¹³ This staid view provided the basis for the remarkably mild colonial approach to administration Sir John Strachey described in 1911. He wrote that the British, “instead of introducing unsuitable novelties...have taken in each province...the old local institutions as the basis of our own arrangements,”¹⁴ including the incorporation of the *Law Code of Manu*.

Instituting what he saw as ‘normality’ in Indian justice, Warren Hastings, the first Governor General of India employed by the British East India Company in 1772, directed its courts to base their judgments as much as possible on texts such as the *Law Code of Manu*, to formalize caste law, and to apply it much more literally than the Code had presumably been applied before.¹⁵ Predictably, administering this ‘Hindu justice’ proved immensely difficult and frustrating, as English judges could not read the Sanskrit the laws were written in and had to trust learned pandits to interpret them; the *Law Code of Manu* was not translated into English until 1794.¹⁶ Rao writes that this effectively ensured a brahminical grip on British India by de facto granting them “the highest posts of power, profit and confidence”.¹⁷ Waligora agrees, arguing that the British were unduly influenced by the brahminical view, creating a self-fulfilling prophesy of caste hierarchy and identification.¹⁸ The full might of the state arrayed behind laws based almost exclusively upon caste redoubled the importance of caste in daily Indian life, and gave the institution governmental legitimacy it had not enjoyed since during the time of Manu, if even then.

The British did eventually realize that their faith in the *dharmasastras* as the traditional law of the land was not entirely accurate. By 1853, Cambell recognized that British thinking about caste was too much based on Manu’s strictures outlining how caste “*ought*” to exist (emphasis original).¹⁹ These

laws, however, gave ammunition to other British observers, such as Mill, who justified colonialism by its happy suppression of disgusting native customs.

Mill's 1817 canonical *History of British India*, required reading for generations of newly minted East India Company officials, condemns the native customs of Indian in the strongest terms. Bearce writes that Mill "considered despotism and superstition the twin evils of society, and he could not approve of any society in which these elements predominated"²⁰ Mill's reading of Manu alone is his basis for lamenting the plight of the "lower orders" of society, while "in other countries, are often lamentably debased; in Hindustan... are degraded below the brutes".²¹ He condemns the laws themselves as riddled with "ignorance and barbarism".²² Mill unequivocally viewed the institution of caste as the single most important factor impeding India's 'social progress'. In the course of describing Indian Muslim society, he praises its rejection of caste, an "institution which stands a more effectual barrier against the welfare of human nature than any other institution which the workings of caprice and of selfishness have ever produced".²³ To Mill, Indian religion was then "characterized by the overwhelming power of the Brahmins...and the emphasis on useless and harmful ceremonies rather than on morality and improvement". Caste was a social system unfitting civilized society, promoting "indolence, avarice, lack of cleanliness, venality, and ignorance."²⁴ While Mill's views provided the basis for the British moral crusades against Sati and child marriage later in the 19th Century, they ultimately had little effect on the early British policies addressing caste.

Mill diagnosed what many British authors complained of as the indolent and amoral views of the natives as a symptom of the disease of caste. He argued that "sympathy and antipathy are distributed by religious, not by moral judgment", thus men, no matter how upstanding in their daily lives, can never increase in societal regard any higher than the ranking of their caste.²⁵ Indians then could only ever decrease in worthiness as they violated caste principles, polluting or being polluted by other castes.

This attitude among British officials towards caste remained fairly consistent throughout the colonial period. Writing in 1932, Molony blamed caste discrimination on the "mentality of India"²⁶ for "in the Hindu religion there is no expectation or desire for a conscious individual immortality."²⁷ Risley agreed, attributing the growth of the caste system beyond its supposed racial origins to be entirely due to the defective Indian character with its "lax hold of facts, its indifference to action, its absorption in dreams, its exaggerated

reverence for tradition, its passion for endless division".²⁸ Strachey, reacting more calmly, but still no friend of "barbaric" Indian practices, viewed caste more as a self-evident fact of life that did not merit direct government intervention. In the ten pages he devotes to caste, he largely offers description and explanation over condemnation.²⁹

Strachey's concluding sentiments on the institution represent the standard thinking about caste featured in Ambedkar's and Gandhi's philosophies, ideas which remain orthodox theory today. In a footnote near the end of his comprehensive survey of British Indian Administration, Strachey writes that "in the long run, social reform in India means a reform of caste". The caste system, however, refused to disappear. Quoting Chailley, Strachey continues that caste "has modeled Hindu Society and holds it in fetters... render[ing] true social life and progress impossible...bar[ring] out altruism, unity and patriotism...it enlists the support of the Indian peoples... by appealing to the authority of their ancient sacred books".³⁰ British adherents to these views feared disaster if they launched any attack on the fabric of Hindu social life in the name of human rights.

Despite the widespread acceptance of Mill's negative views of the institution, the British took virtually no action to try and dismantle caste. Instead, they took quite the opposite course. Some officials worried that India would fall apart without caste. Whether correct or flawed, the view that caste was inseparable from Hinduism itself remained unchallenged until Gandhi's (unsuccessful) attempts to separate the two in the 1930's. One of the only views Ambedkar likely shared with Risley, the 1901 Census Commissioner, as well as other British authorities was that their writings made no distinction between caste as a system and Hinduism as a religion.³¹ Indeed, Risley held that caste was "more than a social system" but "rather...a congenital instinct, an all-pervading principle of attraction and repulsion entering into and shaping every relation of life... form[ing] the cement that holds together the myriad units of Indian society"³² To dismantle the structures of caste "would be more than a revolution; it would resemble the withdrawal of some elemental force like gravitation or molecular attraction. Order would vanish and chaos would supervene."³³ Similarly, Cust writes that the sudden destruction of caste "would entail considerable evils by the complete disorganization of society, which would ensue."³⁴ Thus they believed that no means of attacking caste in the name of human rights – without causing great catastrophe for the many – existed. Hyperbolic comparisons to gravity notwithstanding, the British also had practical reasons which dictated they interfere

as little as possible in Indian social life.

Bougle attributes British reticence to take concrete action against the caste system to laziness, noting that Raj officials were concentrated on efficient cost-cutting administration. Attempting to enforce caste legislation would have put too much of a strain on government.³⁵ Enforcement concerns also figured into social regulations the British enacted. Indeed Sati and child marriage were practiced throughout the colonial period. Molony, a former Indian Civil Service (ICS) official, explained in 1932 that any speedy action on the issue by the government “would have been impolitic”. Also, Molony warned that coercive action undertaken by the colonial administration on behalf of the lower castes could be construed as “morally wrong”. Rather than putting an end to discriminatory attitudes, Molony explains that the government did its best to appease and accommodate the lower castes by digging them separate wells, setting up “special” schools and employing “judicious” reservation policies.³⁶ While the British praised such efforts, they were merely working around, rather than removing, caste conditions their rule had in fact helped to sharpen.

While many British officials did claim a desire to radically remake the social life of India, the most common excuse for not doing so was the fear of violence. Strachey notes that “interference with ancient custom is usually an abomination to a Hindu, whether it be his own custom or not.”³⁷ Indeed, “we are bound to respect them, and the mere suspicion that we desired to interfere with them might be politically dangerous”.³⁸ Ambedkar concurred, identifying the root cause of British inaction as fear. Pointing out that British consideration of meddling with local social and religious sensibilities sparked both the Vellore Mutiny in 1801 and the great Sepoy Mutiny in 1857, they became “so panicky that they felt that loss of India was the surest consequence of social reform”.³⁹ The mutinies rendered the British more compliant towards the strictures of the caste system.

At the start of their reign over India until the Mutiny, the British army was the enthusiastic employer of large numbers of the lowest castes and untouchables. Military service brought not only a steady paycheck to these classes of Indians, but also long-term prospects of advancement. Recruits generally learned English, and the East India Company ensured both soldiers and their families had free access to education. By 1856, a full third of the Bombay army was made up of Mahars, Ambedkar’s untouchable caste.⁴⁰ After the terror of the 1857 Mutiny however, the British radically changed policy. Afraid of taking any further actions that might unnecessarily anger

upper-caste Hindus, the colonial government stopped all recruitment of untouchables.⁴¹ This change in military recruitment post-Mutiny was part of a plan that the army “be composed of different nationalities and castes as a general rule mixed promiscuously through each regiment”.⁴²

Policies of this type lead Waligora to argue that the British interests in building up the myth of a perfectly stratified caste system were based around hopes of dividing and ruling the subcontinent. The ostensible justification for the British Empire was its altruistic crusade to bring civilization to the parts of the world shrouded in the darkness of superstition. This mission required that India contain some sort of social evil that could then be combated by the colonists. The British also had to find means of maintaining their imperial hold on the sub-continent with the smallest expenditure possible.⁴³ One of the remarkable features of British India was certainly the spectacle of few thousand British ruling in relative peace and security over at least 300 million Indians. Combating social evils did not figure importantly into the agenda of most British officials; British administrators were more concerned with extracting revenue from their imperial possession. Regardless of the intent, the Raj benefited immensely from the creation of thousands of competing caste groups, making it unlikely that Indians could present a united anti-British front. At the same time, this ensured that the degradations of caste on the human spirit continued unabated.

Many British authors of the period certainly considered the persistence of caste as a factor which served to strengthen British rule. The 1865 remark of James Kerr, the principal of the Presidency College of Calcutta is most often quoted on the subject. He speculated that “it may be doubted if the existence of caste is on the whole unfavourable to the permanence of our rule. It may even be considered favourable to it, provided we act with prudence and forbearance. Its spirit is opposed to national union.”⁴⁴ Agreeing whole heartedly with Kerr, Cust, a missionary society member and former ICS official, asked the National Indian Society twenty years later

whether those provinces of South-Eastern Asia, where caste does not prevail...are more easily governed; whether the people are more moral, or advancing more steadily in the paths of civilisation and education, than the people of British India. One of the most time honoured maxims in the science of government is that famous phrase, “Divide et impera,” and in Caste we have ready-made fissures in the community, which render the institutions of secret societies,

so... dangerous among the Chinese and Malays, almost impossible in India.⁴⁵

Such considerations, although important, did not represent the whole of British thought and were bound to arise in any careful analysis of the prospects of and conditions conducive to the furtherance of British rule. The *Review of the Code of Bengal* noted that “the empire... was gained by ability and talent to use the Natives as the means of attainment... It is by justice, superiority of intellectual powers and knowledge... that our sway is to be upheld.”⁴⁶ The British were not so devious as to consciously exacerbate and exploit caste sentiments over the entire course of their rule, but “changed the ‘spirit’” of the structure to bring it in line with the colonial “civilizing mission”.⁴⁷

The British, however, did not originate such activities; indeed, many popular movements and leaders twisted the structure of caste long before the advent of British rule. Katten bases his disagreement with Waligora’s thesis along these lines, arguing that questions of caste under the British were not mainly a labor saving colonial device to divide Indians against themselves, but arose from general popular ferment over caste. He maintains that questions of caste “were signs not that conventional kingly politics, or its post-hollowing apparitions, were central in lieu of caste to begin with, but that personal politics, the politics of identity, the politics of culture... are what concerned people. Castes, labels, and categories all reflected these concerns”.⁴⁸ Katten cites the case of members of the Velama caste as a prime example of how “if... caste is now central in the late twentieth century, it is so because caste has been made that way by Indians historically. The Velamas crafted their own unique jati [sub-caste] out of a historical memory of suicidal resistance in a mid 1700’s battle against better-equipped French forces and thus “defined the jati as a product of its history- and in so doing developed a caste identity.”⁴⁹ The British, however, pro-actively took steps to ensure that playing the ‘politics of identity’ returned results in law courts and other administrative decisions.

Not all British commentators were in agreement that caste was necessarily an objectively ‘bad’ institution. Cust adopted what later effectively became the Gandhian view of caste, writing in 1881 that “Caste is... worthy of calls of condemnation, if it encourages the notion, that all mankind are not equal in the face of God and of their fellow-creatures, just... as it is bad in the Anglo-Saxon asserting a superiority over the uncivilized weaker races...

which he comes into contact". He certainly wasn't convinced, as most Indians did not actively think of their caste as necessarily better than others, but simply as different.⁵⁰ Putting aside the incredibly bizarre disconnect between Cust's enthusiastic imperialism and this professed opposition to dominating the "weaker races" of the world, caste clearly *was* over the colonial period an increasingly codified hierarchical structure of existence for most of India's hundreds of millions.

Writing much earlier than Cust, Cambell's more nuanced view shows the effect of British rule on building rigid hierarchy into the institution of caste. Attributing caste to the solidification of occupational preferences over the years, Cambell writes that the various caste labels did not generally denote rank; instead "there is, in fact, no fixed general classification of the rank of castes- it is a mere matter of opinion". Caste hierarchy is not rigid and "the higher castes have no considerable advantage over the lower in material enjoyments". Differences in condition between members of various castes, where it does exist, "is rather political than the result of caste".⁵¹ Even Cambell identified stark differences between castes. Taboos against members of different castes marrying one another or even eating together were, in his experience, absolute and more strict than in Manu's code.⁵² Despite this, as the British Raj built caste considerations into its codes and administrative practice, the line between 'political' and purely 'caste' all but disappeared.

Before the British, caste featured in public administration only in that members of one caste could ask a ruler to block members of another from using a specific sign or parading in a certain area. The British stopped honoring such requests and only backed caste discrimination in that they provided public funds to temples that generally did not allow the lowest castes admittance,⁵³ and allowed enforcement of ancient caste-based Hindu laws.

Thus the British efforts to include questions about caste in the census in the later 19th Century had "no valid public reason".⁵⁴ Bandyopadhyay is not satisfied with the simple notion that 'intellectual curiosity' drove colonial officials to spend as much time, effort and money to investigate and classify caste. Bandyopadhyay suggests that the shocking mutiny of 1857 forced awareness upon government officials of the fact that they were woefully ignorant of local Indian customs and mores. The violence of the mutiny also prompted colonial officials to scramble to find local allies to provide insurance against the possibility of a future uprising. Thus knowledge of internal Indian divisions had the potential to prove useful in playing groups off one

another. In this effort the British “overlooked the important fact that all these units were once tied to each other through inter-dependent relationships and thus constituted an organic whole.”⁵⁵ In these caste enumeration efforts, the British fell into the pit of determining which castes commanded higher social ranks. Such efforts in Bengal in 1881 immediately led to contention, as various prominent Indians in the British administration violently disagreed with every proposed ranking system, with each offering his own version of the ‘correct’ caste hierarchy⁵⁶.

The caste categorization of the census made possible public and private initiatives intended to benefit specific caste groups, which only served to intensify caste distinctions. Scholarships and military recruitment initiatives gave groups a direct incentive to have their jati classified one way or another. The importance of caste classification increased to the point that groups in Lahore distributed fliers to households in advance of the 1931 census listing the ‘correct’ answers respondents were to fill out on the census forms.⁵⁷ High tensions between various caste leaders and organization that the British considered them “threatening disturbance of peace in different quarters” marked the 1911 census in Bengal. Hundreds of petitions were sent to the census commissioner asking for slight changes in caste status, or an elevated status for various castes.⁵⁸ By 1943 Ambedkar was able to write that “today the census is a matter of first rate concern to everyone”, as Indian politics devolved into a numbers game in which every side tried its best to cook the books.⁵⁹ The immediate polarizing effects of caste in the census ensured the system’s role in the process of public administration,⁶⁰ as the aftermath of each census saw a spike in petitions by various jati groups to have their official status reconsidered.⁶¹ The simple act of taking a census, however, could not alone create caste sentiment were there was none previously.

Cohn disputes that the simple inclusion of census questions heightened caste differences among the population. In fact, he doubts that many census enumerators bothered to ask the question at all. Thus, the greatest effect of the census was not on the population who furnished information, but on the enumerators themselves. Rather, the caste consciousness of the at least 500,000 educated Indians who administered the census at the local level was aroused.⁶² This group of educated individuals made up the core of administrative officials under both the Raj and Independent India.

Risley’s attempts, as the 1901 Census commissioner, to combine ethnography and anthropometrical measurements to identify distinct races and castes proved even more divisive and contentious. The 1891 census stated

that caste was both “distinctly racial” and based upon group occupational choices.⁶³ Risley tried to rectify this contradictory statement by advancing an exclusively racial theory of caste. He held that invading ancient Aryans married indigenous women, creating groups of less racially pure individuals who became the lower castes. Thus he concluded that the varna division of caste was a purely a “grotesque scheme of social evolution”.⁶⁴ His measurements showed that India was made up of three main races- Aryan, Dravidian and Mongoloid.⁶⁵ Employed racial scientific differences hardened implacable caste divisions and contributed to caste solidarity.

Samarendra writes that this project of scientific classification necessitated that the British become the ultimate arbiters of which caste was placed where on their master hierarchy. The disorganized chaos of caste proved indecipherable and forced British officials to make arbitrary placements. Samarendra argues that the new section in the 1901 census on the history of Hindu rulers doing just that was added by British officials anxious to justify the colonial state following in their footsteps.⁶⁶

Coupled with the increased general visibility of caste brought about by the census was a greater visibility of the lowest castes and untouchables, known until 1936 as ‘depressed castes,’ and thereafter as scheduled castes. In 1853, Cambell only briefly mentioned outcastes, and was unconcerned with their classification.⁶⁷ In 1910, the British decided to list members of these castes separately from Hindus in the following census, which incited Indian nationalists. The British effort was seen as an attempt to separate the scheduled castes from the population considered Hindu in order to benefit the Muslim League in the distribution of seats under the new government legislative council reform schemes.⁶⁸

Special measures for the uplift of these ‘depressed castes’ quickly caught on as trend in British India. Though Bengal did not have particular problems with discrimination against lower castes in education, new rules introduced in 1915 reserved seats and scholarships at all levels of the education system; expenditures on education specifically targeting “backwards castes” nearly doubled between 1915 and 1916.⁶⁹ Various members of the new legislative councils throughout India between 1909 and the early 1930’s increasingly proposed plans for formal equality, greater affirmative action, increased education funds, and forced non-discriminatory temple entry. Coalitions of higher castes hoping to protect their prerogatives for the most part joined British officials afraid of angering too large a portion of Hindu society, and opposed the newly minted fiery leaders of the depressed castes

(who held out for full equality or fully separate electorates).⁷⁰ Ghurye notes that the British “never seem[ed] to have given much thought to the problem of caste... their measures generally [were] promulgated piecemeal”.⁷¹ The political firestorm that whipped up around the issue of ‘depressed castes’ stymied more sweeping reform efforts.

The crucial question of separate electorates for untouchables came to a head with the decision of the colonial government in the 1932 Communal Decision, which established separate electorates for depressed classes for 20 years. It rocked the independence movement, and touched off a critical political crisis. Gandhi, already in prison, pledged to fast to death if the decision was not repealed. He feared separate electorates would “signify a permanent split in Hindu society, would perpetuate the stigma of untouchability and would stand in the way of eventual communal assimilation of the untouchables into the Hindu community.” The prospect of responsibility for Gandhi’s death persuaded Ambedkar, acting as spokesman for the untouchable community, to agree to the December 1932 Poona Pact—a compromise which left set percentages of seats reserved for the ‘depressed classes,’ but did away with fully separate electorates.⁷² The Poona Pact left no side satisfied, and laid the foundation for India’s future reservation efforts targeted at the lowest castes.

Indian observers level many of the same valid criticisms of this system that are used in the U.S. today. Rajagopalachari, a loyal Congress Party supporter, attacks the “special favours” already allocated to scheduled castes in his pamphlet, *Ambedkar Refuted*. He notes that it is the most educated members of such castes who benefit from reservations, giving them a perverse incentive “to do their utmost for the continuation of the isolation of their community and to oppose and belittle all efforts at the removal of untouchability”.⁷³ Ghurye argues that the end result was again only to harden caste sentiments with reverse discrimination against better qualified higher caste individuals, which he terms the “pampering of caste”.⁷⁴ Bandyopadhyay criticizes this system as a form of “corporate pluralism” in which “power and rewards [are] based on group-affiliation and group rights”. The result of this perverse incentive structure functioned to keep people confined in their various social and caste groups, and strengthened the bright-line between them.⁷⁵ Thus, by separating out the ‘depressed classes’ for special treatment, the British successfully turned “a social category... into an interest group.” Affirmative action programs served only to ensure the loyalty of the elites of the lower classes in a position to benefit from them.⁷⁶ This criticism ap-

plies to any measure which recognizes untouchables as a target particularly because of group affiliation. It is no wonder that the British, and later independent Indians, could not come up with an alternative that failed to operate at the level of the caste grouping.

Bandyopadhyay, harking back to fears of divide and rule, suspects that something more sinister was afoot. He is not surprised that the British increased measures ostensibly aimed at aiding the 'depressed classes' right at the time nationalist sentiments personified by Gandhi and the Congress Party were exploding in visibility and popularity. The British "reinforced... structural separation between castes... and [gave them] an additional lease on life". Even worse, the separation "was now valid more in a secular rather than ritual context."⁷⁷ The compromise, while representing a final personal break between Ambedkar and Gandhi, also increased all parties' enmity with the British. Hynes suggests that the prospect of independence itself fanned caste antagonisms as "even the most casual thinkers" were increasingly motivated to prevent the departing British from simply handing over the reins to members of the 'higher' castes. "Thoughtful minorities" thus sought "freedom from Brahmin rule quite as much as freedom from foreign rule."⁷⁸ The British had created a system which built up intractable caste interest groups and pitted them against each other politically, ensuring not the extension of rights, but instead greater anger and discrimination.

British officials felt the best and most noticeable measure of social progress in India was the construction of a Western-style political system. Molony proudly wrote in 1932 of Britain's successes, noting that "a hundred years ago, fifty years ago, to speak of political representation for the depressed classes would have been akin to speaking of... representation for the cats and dogs".⁷⁹ Other writers attribute some success to breaking down caste barriers to the modernizing effects of British rule.

Many British writers touted their liberalizing education system as a counterbalance to other less positive administrative measures. The introduction of a 1826 critique of the colonial administration carefully notes that while "the acts of the British Legislature... will have controlling influence in Hindoostan" as the British had "plenty of cannon and bayonets... and a sufficiency of Englishmen to use them with", it argued that the true strength of the government lay in "a little true policy and conduct influencing the minds of men, a little real wisdom and intellect".⁸⁰ The British felt that Brahmins were attempting to obstruct the spread of learning. Strachey observed that the

influence antagonistic to a more general spread of literacy is the long-continued existence of a hereditary class, whose object it has been to maintain their own monopoly of all book-learning as the chief buttress of their social supremacy. Sacerdotalism knows that it can reign over none but an ignorant populace. The opposition of the Brahman to the rise of the writer castes has been already mentioned, and the repugnance of both, in the present day, to the diffusion of learning amongst the masses can only be appreciated after long experience.⁸¹

These sorts of attitudes provided a further impetus to hopes that the spread of knowledge would dislodge the Brahmins from their position of power.

British officials soon realized that expanding education could prove a double edged sword. The enlightenment literature featured in schools emphasized the duty of “resistance to authority, the doctrine that governments are always oppressive... and the canonisation of those who have built up the shrine of liberty with stones plucked from the fortress of tyranny.” Much of the resistance encountered by the Raj, at least up to the First World War, was from “school boys” utilizing their “great imitative faculties” to imagine that “we stand to the people of India in the position of the Stuarts and the Georges towards the people of England.”⁸² Strachey quotes Harmand: this liberal sort of education “is dangerous fare for Asiatic brains. It seems to dislocate all the foundations of what they know and what they feel, to deprive them or moral stability, and to perturb their souls with irresolution to their very depths.”⁸³

Once these radical youths reached maturity, they often reverted into staid conservatism, especially on caste and other social issues. Strachey speculates that “some of these native gentlemen are silent because they dare not... [collide] with the cherished beliefs and prejudices of their countrymen; others... are at heart as intensely conservative as the population, and have little desire for changes.”⁸⁴ Similarly, Risley criticizes “facile assurances” that modernization was starting to break down the barriers of caste as the product of those who know little about India.⁸⁵ Thus, British liberal education had neither any lasting effect on Indian attitudes nor did it empower those it did impact.

The overwhelming majority of the Indian population remained conservative and untouched by the education system. Strachey himself had “never

heard of a great measure of improvement that was popular in India”, among Indians themselves. Instead, he suspects that British observers “often deceive [themselves] in regard to the changes that are taking place” for they “believe that [their] Western knowledge... must be breaking up the whole fabric of Hinduism”. The “vast masses” of the Indian population, however, “dislike everything new... dislike almost everything that we look upon as progress, and... live... in blind ignorance of the aims and ideas of their rulers”.⁸⁶ After 60 years of anti-caste discrimination laws and widespread schooling in modern India, the process of breaking down caste barriers remains unfinished.

Foreign observers of India viewed the Raj’s modernizing administrative measures and common public works as drivers of modernization which would finally break down caste barriers. Rather, British reforms changed the modes of caste identification and repression, leaving caste identities intact. When sanitation-minded city administrators in Calcutta attempted to install a public water system, there was a great public outcry: members of higher castes protested that they would then have to drink the same water as the lower castes. British administrators resolved the issue only by convincing the learned-councils that the tax the British imposed to finance the project constituted a sort of penance which negated any contamination resulting from sharing the water with their inferiors.⁸⁷ While the lives of lower castes undoubtedly improved from the public water system, discrimination remained.

The introduction of modern methods of production destroyed many traditional caste economic pursuits. While factories and industrial development obliterated the livelihoods of many of craft-making castes, forcing them to diversify their occupations,⁸⁸ discriminatory practices were left in place. An American academic writing in the late 1930’s noticed that the increasing ease and speed of communication and travel, combined with Hindu reform movements, compelled village authorities to “noticeably relax” the severity of the punishments handed down for caste infractions.⁸⁹ Therefore, while conditions for the lower castes improved to some extent during the colonial period, the modernization of India failed to address caste discrimination by changing its form.

While the market system the British institutionalized did loosen the traditional ties between caste and occupations, thus enabling some degree of social mobility, it “did not threaten the existence of caste as a social institution”. Those of higher castes were better equipped to take advantage of the new economic opportunities as the relative “ritual ranks” of the vari-

ous castes remained static. Those of the ‘depressed classes’ had no reason to think of mobility in terms of the individual, but only in terms of the advancement of their caste group as a whole.⁹⁰

Paradoxically, liberalized British attitudes sometimes translated among Indian themselves as a renewed commitment to the caste system, as educated nationalists extolled Indian culture in the face of Imperial coercion. Despite Risley’s concession that the crowding of railway cars and the great cities caused even the haughtiest high born Brahmins to put aside fears of pollution by proximity, he argued that the caste consciousness and discrimination showed “no signs of compromise or concession”.⁹¹ Those Indians flouted caste barriers in their marriages and daily lives generally were the rare liberalized products of the British education system. Yet at the same time, Risley notes a shift among the educated class as the “growth of national consciousness” caused “traditional Indian values” to be praised as superior to western ideals of social organization.⁹²

The close of the colonial period saw the institution of caste instilled with renewed vigor, setting back the cause of social equality on the sub-continent. The British transformed caste from a loose, discriminatory hierarchy in which the main differences between castes were political, into an officially structured and state sanctioned hierarchy backed by the weight of ‘science’. In fact the only major success related to the caste system the colonists could claim over the period was an increase in political representation for educated and members of the lowest castes. This not only set the stage for affirmative action measures which cause violent protests to this day, but also for western educated anti-colonialist leaders such as Dr. B.K. Ambedkar. His view on caste under the Raj was clear, as he affirmed in 1943 that “we do not accuse the British of... want of sympathy. What we do find is that they are quite incompetent to tackle our problems”.⁹³ To Ambedkar, British attitudes towards caste discrimination and the plight of the untouchables in particular constituted “criminal neglect”.⁹⁴ Without question, the lack of British understanding of the caste system, and their misdirected efforts to reform it, has important ramifications which continue to influence the social climate in India today.

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