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Contents

Issues and Agenda

Terminology, History and Debate: "Caste" Formation or "Class" Formation*

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"To the great despair of historians, men failed to change the vocabulary every time they change their customs." Marc Bloch *The Historian's Craft* Mass. 1954. pg. 55.

Introduction

In recent years, the re-emergence of Orientalist ideology, and the questions of "identities" and "subjectivities" have been the dominant topics in most scholarly discussions in South Asia as well as in other countries. The reason for focusing on the question of "caste" and "class" in this essay is not simply to join the dominant discourse on identities *but* to clarify the confusion that surrounds the terminology of "caste". This exercise became necessary because the question of "caste/class" is not simply an issue of scholarly debate, but also a question of access to resources, power, and subsequent social policies. Most of all, these social and political policies, based on scholarly analyses, affect real people's everyday lives which sometimes lead to major social conflicts in the form of "riots", destroying innocent lives. It is important that scholars are careful in their analyses while explaining various historical processes of the social formations, cultural practices, human agency and social structures, and not rarify them. It is with this in mind that I attempt to show, contrary to the ideas propagated by the Subaltern Studies scholars, that India today is indeed a "class" divided (dynamic) society and it is not the same old frozen – as it was probably 3,000 years back – so called, "caste" divided society. This conclusion is made with full awareness that many people in India today (as well as the scholars and policy makers) continue to use the terminology of "caste" in their daily lives in different social contexts, in different regions, in different rural and urban areas of India. This apparent contradiction is explicated in the second half of the present essay through a survey of the historical process of the "class/caste" formation in India from ancient to the present day, including the emergence of *dalit* movement and related complex issues.

In the first section of this essay, the issue of "caste/class" is located in recent debates as generated by the Subaltern Studies (now on referred as SS) historiography. Furthermore, in this section the SS historiography's implicit connection with the legacy of the concept of "backwardness" and with the concept of "uniqueness of Indian caste system" are highlighted. Following the critique of Subaltern Studies, I tried to clarify the confusion surrounding the concept of "caste system" and its complex relationship to the terms *jati, varna, jajmani*. After an historical survey of "caste/class" formation in India, as mentioned above, the example from my own case study of the Indian steel workers is presented to further substantiate the following suggestions in this essay.

I suggest that India is a "class" divided society (constantly in the process of change) even when there are many dynamic religious/sect/*jati* differences – (also continuously being redefined and restructured) – among the people. At the same time, India's dynamic "class" structure exists along an idea of the so called, "caste" (imagined *jati* or sub-*jati*) as it is everyday reinforced through the access, or lack of access, to resources, and through other contemporary social and political conditions. I conclude that the misconception about India's social structure and its social stratification is due to, among other things, the use of the terminology of "caste" (a term created by Portugese who lumped all sorts of things in it) instead of developing a more appropriate term for the specific historical situation responsible for India's present social structure and its social stratification. In absence of a new terminology to explain the evolving social relations and social conditions of Indian society, people go on using handy prevailing terminologies to make sense of their daily lives. The job of scholars is to look beneath these "obvious" popular usage of terminologies to find the dynamic processes of social formations rather than simply label people as "backward" – as Orientalist had been doing for long – who are seen as stuck in their "primordial values" and are incapable of "modernizing" (or so called, "progress"). A similar implicit suggestion in the formulations of Subaltern Studies spokesperson Chakrabarty about the Jute workers is problematic, but ironically he claims to be doing otherwise.

The Subaltern Studies Historian on the "Cultural Roots" of the Indian Working Class

One of the main spokespersons for Subaltern Studies, Dipesh Chakrabarty (Chakrabarty, 1989), in his monograph has focused on the cultural roots of the Indian working class, i.e., the Indian "caste system", and writes, "[T]he power relations that made up

their (workers) everyday life arose out of a culture that was hierarchical and inegalitarian, subordinating the individual to imagined communities of a distinctly precapitalist character . . . the issues of consciousness, solidarity, organisation, and protest in that history can be posed within our framework in terms of a tension between the undemocratic cultural codes of Indian society and the notion of 'equality' that socialist politics both assume and seek to transcend" (Ibid: 229). He questions the formation of the subject category itself and suggests that subjects should be engaged in the formation of their own categories. According to Chakrabarty, that can be done by looking at the "primordial values" of the people based on the power relations (i.e. pre-British hierarchical system) in their day to day life, which have longer historical roots than the British rule. Once that is done it would be possible, he says, to find the roots of India's "backwardness" in its own culture and there will be no need to find a "fetishised demon called 'colonialism' or 'imperialism' to blame" (Chakrabarty, 1991). It is only then, he claims, that we shall be able to break away from master narrative, European influences and thought, which always "peripheralise non-Western pasts and universalizing them". Explaining his ideas further, Chakrabarty suggests that historically worker's resistance to capital has arisen from pre-capitalist, communal forms of organisation and consciousness (Chakrabarty, 1989:226). By choosing the concepts of "hierarchy" and "inegalitarian relations" to understand Indian working class consciousness, his politics (and Subalternists' politics in general) – are more "radical (emancipatory)" because they break away from western bourgeois culture and the master narrative.

Chakrabarty points out that the ultimate issue in understanding labor conditions is to examine the problems of discipline and authority within the factory. Therefore, according to him, the focus of such study should be on worker's culture (Ibid: 70) and not on their real living and working conditions. By using this perspective in his case study of Calcutta jute workers he came to the conclusion that these workers were mostly ignorant peasants from the state of Bihar and U.P. who were least aware of the concept of human equality in their daily lives (Ibid: 69). Based on his study, Chakrabarty justifies the primacy of culture and cultural roots of the Indian working class, i.e.; in the "caste system" to write working class history. Ironically, this strategy of Chakrabarty, in effect, helps in bringing back the old ideology of cultural "backwardness" of colonised societies as was earlier promoted by the Orientalists and later by the theory of modernization.

I am not promoting the idea that culture should not be included while examining the conditions and actions of the working class. It

is probably the case that the cultural dimension has long been neglected in the analysis of labor historiography, and this neglect should be rectified. But it is one thing to say that culture should be included while analysing working class struggle, and it is quite another thing to say that culture should be the basis in understanding the worker's struggle. I have no quarrel with the first claim. It is the latter assumption that I am concerned with in this essay. Contrary to Chakrabarty's jute workers struggle, my study of Tata Iron and Steel Company (TISCO) workers' movement at Jamshedpur shows that in spite of the divisions among the workers based on "caste", region, religion, and languages, these workers were able to transcend these divisions and unite against the Tata management for two long decades. It does not mean that other types of social conflicts did not exist at that time. More importantly, these workers were able to unite for their common need for improving their living and working conditions. This is significant because the unskilled workers in the Tata steel industry came from the same area as for the Jute industry studied by Chakrabarty. The question is: Why did the workers in Jute industries, coming from the same background, remain loyal to their so called "primordial values", while Tata steel workers of the same time period were able to transcend them?

Since the workers of steel industry at Jamshedpur as well of Jute industry came from the same cultural background, it is not possible to find the answer for the questions raised here by focusing on the cultural roots. We need to look for different historical data to understand these differences. I am not trying to answer this question, and instead I want to show how the use of certain perspectives and related fixed terminologies may put a scholar in the company of those very people whom he/she wishes to oppose in the first place. It is with this in mind that I am suggesting that we need to understand the historical context in which the ideology of "backwardness" initially came into being, and the reasons for its re-emergence in the last quarter of the twentieth century in the garb of postmodernism/postcolonialism, in which the role and contribution of Subaltern Studies had been very substantial, while claiming to be challenging Orientalism and Eurocentrism (See for detailed discussion on this issue: Dirlik, Bahl, Gran, 2000).

The Legacy of "Backwardness"

Since the beginning of the classical political economy, references to "backward countries" were constructed to designate the impact and consequences of European colonial experience on these countries. For example, most political economists at that time believed that European colonialism would help break the "millennial"

pattern of stagnation in these countries and put them on the road to "progress" (Larrain, 1989:22). This belief was used as one of many justifications for colonizing the "backward nations"; colonization was seen as a temporary measure for educating these "immature" nations in European values and cultures. Marx and Engels also believed in the "world mission of European capitalism" and showed similar bias as well. In sum, the 19th century theory of imperialism was clearly based on the idea that the colonized people had "no history", and that their culture was "stagnant" and "backward", as these people were incapable of any material "progress" on their own and were unable to present any opposition to the European experience (Ibid).

The theories of development that emerged within the capitalist world after the Second World War were called modernization theories. Through these modernization theories, earlier prejudices of classical political economists were reintroduced. Once again, programs were started to explore and study the institutional arrangements, values, and class structures of societies that made development possible. Post Second World War modernization theories used "implicit or explicit reference to a dichotomy between two ideal types: the traditional society [*i.e. equal to being 'rural' and 'undeveloped'*] and the modern society [*i.e. equal to 'urban', 'developed' and 'industrial'*]" (Ibid, emphasis added). The crux of modernization theories of development was the evaluation of culture, instead of economy or polity, as the basis to measure the success or failure of various "backward" societies in becoming modern. Based on this perspective, the so-called "Third World (ex-colonies)" countries were considered "traditional" cultural entities, while West European and North American societies were conceived of as modern social entities (Mukherjee, 1991:65–66). Thus the idea that "cultural processes intervene into the social processes of 'modernization'" gained ground among development theorists in the West. Armed with the theory of modernization, Western scholars increased the propagation of "developmentalism," which in turn increased the existing polarization between the West and the "Third World" (ex-colonies). The increased polarization between the two "worlds" was explained as a cultural deficiency of "Third World" people. This rationale of modernization theory is succinctly expressed by Wallerstein:

First of all here is the universalist theme. All states can develop; all states shall develop. Then come the racist themes. If some states have developed earlier and faster than others, it is because they have done something, behaved in some way that is different. They have been more individualist, or more entrepreneurial, or more rational, or in some way more "modern". If other states have developed more slowly, it is because there is something in their culture . . . which prevents

them or has thus far prevented them from becoming as "modern" as other states (1991:177–78).

Along similar lines of modernization theory, Wittfogel had earlier contended that Oriental civilizations, including India, saw no basic change in their social structure even after the advent of the European political, economic and industrial revolutions (Wittfogel, 1957:80). These cultural explanations for the so called "backwardness" of India are problematic because the majority of writings focusing on India's "caste system" have been undertaken to prove the so called "uniqueness" of India and, therefore, its unchanging character. For example, Weber himself implied that "caste" is a peculiarly Pan-Indian phenomenon. The well known French theoretician of the "caste system", Dumont, has also argued that the "caste system" is unique to Indian society, and therefore, not comparable to other cultures (Dumont, 1972).

It seems that most Indian specialists have overlooked the ability of the "caste system" to change drastically in its form, content and meaning in spite of the historic changes that took place in the modes of production in South Asia. Interestingly, Dipesh Chakrabarty agrees that the "caste system" did change, but he objects the overarching notion of progress (Chakrabarty,1989:218). By challenging Marx's construct of "progress" and "class consciousness", Chakrabarty, while raising an important question, ignores a more fundamental issue: the process through which change takes place in any society and in its culture (Ibid: 114). For example, when renowned Indian scholar Amiya K. Bagchi challenges him on the issue of the process of social change (Bagchi, 1990), Chakrabarty replies sarcastically that "Bagchi looks for a comforting narrative where all Indians are cast into the role of passive victims of the huge juggernaut of colonialism" (Chakrabarty, 1991). Chakrabarty complains that Indians do not take responsibility for their own histories and that "Indians in contrast, are never present at our [their] own 'unmaking'." He condemns Indian historians for blaming the British and the "fetishized demon called 'colonialism'" for every current problem in Indian society. He suggests that historians should look for cultural codes that had a history much longer than that of the British in India and not blame everything on colonialism. According to Chakrabarty "blaming colonialism" is to "present a point of view and not a proven fact; nor is it to give a very precise definition to colonialism itself." He thinks that after four decades of India's independence it is time for Indians to stop putting all the blame for every visiting sin on "our (past) foreign masters" (Ibid).

In this reply Chakrabarty, while making an important point about human agency (that people should take responsibility of

their actions and not simply blame others), also helps exonerate colonialism in creating – of course with the help of Indian capitalists and nationalist leaders – certain social, economic, political and cultural conditions within which India's development took place after its independence. It is not that India started as a clean slate in 1947 therefore, after 55 years of independence colonialism can be treated as a thing of the past which has no bearing on the present day India. Chakrabarty's idea excludes the role of larger historical forces, which also play important roles along with individual actions and choices (human agency). By denying the role of larger historical forces, Chakrabarty's suggestions seems similar to what some of the newly-emerging upper middle class African-American intelligentsia have started telling poor African-Americans that they should stop blaming slavery and white majority rule for their problems. Instead they should take responsibility for their lives, and look into their own cultural values for their putative "backwardness".[1] It is one thing to say that people should continue to strive (celebrating human agency and creativity) to improve their lives in spite of all odds – something people have been doing in any case. It is a totally different thing to say that people should not blame the larger historical forces or their historical context for their present living conditions meaning, not to blame capitalism, slavery or imperialism for creating – and continue to create – miserable socio-economic conditions for years.

Chakrabarty's emphasis on the specificity of Indian culture in constructing workers' history vis-a-vis their "inegalitarian values," thus brings us back to a much discussed question: Is India "unique" because it produced an "unparallel system" of social stratification called a "caste" system? In the wake of the emergence of neo-colonialism in the form of "globalisation" that is affecting every aspect of our lives, it will be revealing to understand how (or is it possible that) the so called "India's uniqueness" and its "inegalitarian cultural values" could remain intact in spite of India's incorporation in the global capitalist system, creation of a large Indian middle class, increase in mass consumption, increase in the adoption of western life style and introduction of contractual relationships in the workplace.

Revisiting the Issue of India's "Uniqueness"

If one agrees with the statement that "India is a unique society," then every society in the world is ultimately unique. As Berreman has correctly pointed out, the only way one can make comparisons between societies is to find common elements in every culture, every institution, every object and every event. This is the only way

to determine what is specific to one's culture, society or situation, and what is common to recurrent processes and historical circumstances. In any scientific study it is imperative to identify and compare common phenomena in the universe of unique elements. He explains that such study does not require that all phenomenon be in all respects identical because that requirement would deny the possibility of a science of society, that is why, he suggests that "unique is scientifically incomprehensible" (Berreman, 1971:71).

While agreeing with Berreman, I suggest that the uniqueness of Indian society (or any society) can exist only in a vague geographical sense, which is to say that there cannot be distinctly Indian properties in chemistry or biology. Thus the phenomenon of uniqueness does not necessarily mean anomalous social phenomena. What is unique in India – or in any other society – is the specificity of the social formation in special geographical, or ecological conditions. "What is unique in the case of ancient Indian society is the fact that different elements of compulsion, physical and ideological, were interwoven into a social texture called the *varna* system" (Sharma, 1958:318). Even the British colonial masters found that the social stratification based on the "caste system" in India was not unique, as "*varna*" stratification of society was similar to social stratification systems under different nomenclatures in other societies. This observation is clearly stated in the writings of various scholars in the late 19th and early 20th century: Jolly (1896), Oldenberg (1897), Senart (1927).[2]

In his various well-known works Ramkrishna Mukherjee has also pointed out that the "caste system" did not exist in the same form throughout India. For example, in Southwest India the village "community system" did not emerge as a dominant institution in society because that region was blessed with two monsoons instead of one. Therefore, there was no great need for artificial irrigation for the agrarian economy (Mukherjee, 1974:154). That is why we find a different form of "caste" structure in this region than the rest of the country. No one can disagree that every country has specific physical and geographical conditions that contribute to the specificity of its history, which includes its social stratification system. In that sense, India is no more unique than, say, China or Egypt. As Berreman has pointed out, Indian people have always been as human as any other people in the world with similar human needs in day to day life:

Like people everywhere, Indian people are also doubters and believers, conformists and non-conformists. They are defiant, compliant, selfish, magnanimous, independent, innovative, tradition bound, fearful, courageous, optimistic, pessimistic. They hope, aspire, despair, subvert, connive, abide, enforce, manipulate and choose among alternatives as they cope with their society and its values (1971:72).

The production of peoples' forms of consciousness – ideas, feelings, desires, moral preferences – and forms of subjectivity do not develop outside of their society, because these formulations cannot arise in a separate institutional arena of social life. Mentalities and subjectivities are formed and exposed in every sphere of social existence. Therefore, the conditions of existence of "classes" would more profoundly shape "class" cultures than "caste" specific interests or "caste" loyalties. In other words, the development of working class culture cannot be located in the mythologies of kinship network and "inegalitarian" ideas. It must be located in the understanding of the complex and contradictory forms and conditions within which the working classes live their subordinate lives. The history of working classes is full of narratives that show how they had struggled to improve their living and working conditions and not always retained their "caste" and kinship loyalties. To define the "caste system" on the basis of what exists today, and then project it back into history, with assumptions derived from the *Sastras* (frozen culture), is to misrepresent the historically changing role of the "caste system". It is, as Wallerstein points out:

> If, despite this assistance [*from developed countries*], they [*Third World*] are making no or little progress, it is because they [*Third World*] are being "racist" in rejecting universal "modern" values which then justifies that the "advanced" states are scornful of them or condescending to them. Any attempt in an "advanced" state to comprehend "backwardness" on terms other than willful refusal to be "modern" is labeled Third-Worldism, or reverse racism or irrationalism. This is a tight system of justification, since it "blames the victim," and thereby denies the reality (1991:178) (emphasis added).

Chakrabarty's cultural argument and making "culture" the basis of historical analyses, leads to blaming the poor, which by extension, further promotes sexism and racism. For example, the cultural argument of modernization leads to the following explanation:

> The Moslems, it is argued, are not culturally capable of recognizing the same universal principles of man-woman relations that are said to be accepted in the Western (or Judeo-Christian world) and from this it is said to follow that they are also not capable of many other things (Wallerstein, 1991:172).

This argument, Wallerstein explains, implies that Western culture is a universal culture. The West has emerged into modernity when others have not; therefore, if any society wishes to be modern it must also adopt Western culture. Expanding on this logic modernization theorists maintain that the high Oriental cultures are frozen and are incapable of evolving. Therefore, the existing inequalities among the societies are due to historically unequal adoption of different work ethics. Similar arguments are also used to justify paying lower wages to Blacks and women. "Those who

have less have less because they have earned less . . . Blacks and
women are paid less because they work less hard, merit less. And
they work less hard because there is something, if not in their
biology, at least in the 'culture,' which teaches them values that
conflict with the universal work ethos" (Ibid).

This "cultural" argument to justify inequalities in the world will
continue unless we try to first understand the sources through
which culture is formed. Culture is "an aggregate of values and
traditions which is deeply linked to the everyday life of the people,
and in that sense it is a matrix of perception which allows one to
appraise the world" (Mukherjee, 1991:PE21). Cultures do not
change by themselves because culture on its own is incapable of
self-revision or self-production because it only registers a world-
view that human beings create in the process of their daily inter-
action. In other words, the cultural products are created in the
process of social formation in a particular time period, while the
social processes indicate what was happening in society within and
across culture products over a period of time (Ibid).

With this understanding of the definition of "culture," I shall
historically examine the so called "primordial values" (culture) of
the Indian people, which, according to Chakrabarty, are based on
the same "caste structure" that hindered the development of "class
consciousness" among the Calcutta jute workers. I wish to refute
Chakrabarty's claim by exploring how far these values have
changed historically along with the evolving Indian "class" struc-
tures in the larger historical context of different time. However
to refute Chakrabarty's claims, I intend to clarify the meaning of
various concepts and their relationship to such terminologies as
"caste", *varna*, *jati*, and *jajmani* because the misinterpretation of
these concepts has also contributed – along with the role of various
other historical forces – to the reinforcement of the image of India
as "backward" (inegalitarian, undemocratic). Such reinforcement of
the "backward" image not only legitimizes the old idea of "civiliz-
ing mission of the Western world" but it also keeps scholars eter-
nally bound in various artificial binary concepts of modern/
backward, progress/tradition, east/west, North/South and so on
– which further promotes Eurocentrism.

Relationship Among the Terms "Caste", *Jati*, *Varna*, and *Jajmani*

"Caste" and "Caste System"

The problems inherent in Dipesh Chakrabarty's ideas about the
"caste system" can be fully grasped by looking at the history of the

misinterpretation (and reification) of the concept of "caste" and the "caste system" itself. Recently, Mukherjee has reiterated that at first there was no confusion between the terms *varna* and *jati* when the Indian people were defined in relation to land for production and the ancillary activities of trade and petty craft production. The confusion in definition was created by British researchers in the 18th–19th centuries when they found that the instruments of production (viz. plough, cattle, manure, etc) were held by Indian families but the land for production was held by villagers in common under the "village community" system (Mukherjee, 1991:PE22). Lord Bentick, the Governor General of India, admitted in 1829 that:

This unified strength of the Indian peasants, artisans and traders under the village community system was shattered by introducing the "zamindari" system. This system was first introduced in 1793 in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa (the subah of Bengal) as the "Permanent Settlement of Land", and in due course spread all over India (Mukherjee, 1999).

The British research scholars in the 18th and 19th centuries who started studying the institution of "caste" began to falsify the role of the "caste" (*jati*) system in India and these newly created myths about the "caste system" were uncritically accepted and promoted by Indian scholars (Mukherjee, 1957).

Mukherjee demonstrates that the *jati* division of society denoted the relation of people to land for production and ancillary artisan and trading activities. Thus *jatis* proliferated along with specialization and division of labor in society (Mukherjee, 1999) but the "caste system" received a new lease on life by "invaginating" itself into the colonial class system ushered in by the colonialists (Ibid). By the term "invaginating" of "caste system" Mukherjee probably could mean that the existing form of Indian social stratification system proved useful as a connective tissue to bind it, and by closely fitting it with the elements of a social stratification system that started emerging in the wake of people's interaction with the British colonial rule. The British rulers suppressed the anti-caste movements, that started in the 14th century and went on until the 17th century, by enacting laws supporting the Hindu and the Muslim orthodoxies during Warren Hastings's time in India (1772–86). Mukherjee maintains that this side of India's history was distorted by the British scholars, and by the bulk of the Indian scholars who followed the British version of history. Those who welcomed British rule in India promoted the view that the "caste structure" ruled the society (Ibid).

Recent studies of the term *varna* have shown that the social complex that Indian speakers associate with this term *Varna* is

almost impossible to translate (Kantowasky, 1984). Kantowsky explains how Weber misunderstands a key statement in the Hindu scriptures. "The mind is the forerunner of all action" – this opening stanza of *Dhampada* sounds a little less idealistic in the Weberian terminology of the "Introduction": "Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men's conduct. Yet very frequently the 'world images' that have been created by 'ideas' have, like switch-men, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest" (Ibid).

This critique of the Western mind can be corroborated by a discussion of the word "*varna*," which in English is translated as "caste". It is easy then to misinterpret the meaning of Indian words in vogue in the West but used differently in India. There are two basic controversies involving the use of the word *varna*: First, whether it denotes 'race' or 'occupation' or both. Second, whether and in what respect, if at all, it is synonymous with the word *jati*. Sharma has shown that these two issues are interrelated in the sense that if *varna* denotes race its membership should be based on birth; in this sense it may be equated to *jati*. The membership of a *jati* is, of course, based on birth and the *jati* says precisely this. Yet if *varna* denotes occupation or quality (*guna*) or broadly specifies a style of life, then there is an element of choice which an individual may exercise in this regard. In this sense *varna* cannot be equated with *jati* (Sharma, 1975).

Kantowsky explains the etymological derivation of the word *varna*. This word can mean description (*varna*), praise (*stuti*), to expand (*vistar*), to make effort (*udyoga*), to light (*dipan*), alphabet (*Akshra*), painting (*citra*), fame (*Yasha*), quality (*guna*) inducement (*prerna*) or it could mean selection and acceptance (*varana*). He emphasized that whichever root this word is derived from, "it is obvious that it connotes some freedom of choice and therefore cannot mean color, especially skin color or race" (Kentowasky, 1984). His search shows that he has not come across any Sanskrit text which would say that the four *varna* belong to four different races.

This discussion on the etymology and usage of the word *varna* indicate that it is not easy to find the correct meaning and inter-pretation of Sanskrit words and translate them into English. The Portuguese also translated the concept of *varna* as "caste". Later Indianists, following Max Weber, extended the formulation "caste" in itself to the *jati* stratification of society. In this respect Louis Dumont (1966) promoted the misconception by declaring the uniqueness of "caste-ridden" Indian people as *Homo Hierarchicus.* In general, western scholars and the great majority of Indian scholars, led by M. N. Srinivas, supported and propagated the

perception that "caste" sans "class" represented "modern" India (Mukherjee, 1999). Therefore, according to Srinivas's formulation, social change in modern India would be possible only through a combination of sanskritisation and westernization (Srinivas, 1966). Such ideological positions on the "caste system" generated a facade of "community consciousness" in India, and today this idea is widely spread in society.

The scholars supporting such ideas do not realize that the "caste system" did not emerge full blown from the inception of Vedic society as is generally believed. This misconception has been properly refuted by Uma Chakravorty's study of Budhist sources. She writes:

An exclusive reliance on Brahmanical sources will quite naturally result both in an incomplete picture of ancient society and in a misleading view of it. The Budhist sources show that caste did not always exist as the finished product that it is now made out to be (Chakravorty, 1985).

According to Uma Chakravarty, "For ancient India we should not use the 'caste' framework as a basis of society because in the pre-Christian era these categories had not crystallized." She finds that in Budhist texts the term *varna* appears only in the context of an abstract division of society. The terms *Jati* and *kula* used more often. Therefore, *jati* was a conceptual and actual scheme, and identification therein was depicted in the occupational division of the lower strata; the Brahmans on the other hand, had emerged as a distinct social group with a distinct ascribed status (Ibid).

Chakravorty has also called attention to new category called *gahapati*, which is not accommodated in Brahmanical sources. *Gahapati* cut across other social groups, and they were the major employers of labor. "In Budhist literature the gahapatis stand in a direct economic relationship not with *sudras* but with *dasa-karmakars* as their master. *Gahapati* was not a group whose status was based on birth. This was clearly a category in the system of production" (Ibid). Thus she concludes that during the period of approximately 600 years (from the 5th century B.C.E. to 2nd C. E.) people's primary identity was based on their economic functions. There is no evidence to suggest that there was even a secondary identity based on *jati* during the same period.[3]

Varna, Jati and Jajmani

There is an urgent need to clarify the terms *varna*, *jati* and *jajmani* because many scholars have used them interchangeably. The interchangeable use of these terms leads to the conclusion that the

"caste system" was/is a stagnant phenomenon. Contrariwise, the difference in these terms in fact explains the different historical periods of India. The "caste system" was not a product of a single mode of production and does not indicate a particular set of relations of production. These terms are the product of the then prevailing relations of production i.e., from pastoral to agrarian economy.

These differences are even more confusing in modern Indian society. Hutton clearly points out this problem when he writes:

> Some in India may argue that there is no "true" *kshatrya jati* anymore, or no "true" *vaishya*, but such assertions in no way prevent *jatis* from claiming membership in either of the four *varnas*. The caste system seems to function perfectly well in spite of all that. Indeed, it appears to function despite the fact that there are regions in India without *kshatrya* and without *vaishya* (e.g. Bengal and south India) while in almost any part of the subcontinent there are *jatis* to be found which have never been assigned to any of the four *varnas* (1969:66–67).

The roots of Hutton's observation about this peculiarity of *varna* and *jati* are traced by R. S. Sharma. He explains that in Bengal and peninsular India there were only landed Brahmans and no *kshatriya* "caste". The reason for the absence of the *kshatriya* "caste" was that the unequal distribution of land and military power created new feudal and social ranks that could not fit into the old four fold *varna* system (Sharma, 1974). It seems that the concepts of *varna* and *jati* varied according to region and historical periods. It would be appropriate to trace these changes in order to comprehend the meaning of, and difference between, these two words so often used as synonyms.

Most scholars agree that *jati* (sub "caste") truly represent the Indian "caste system". The previous division of Aryan society into four *varnas* could only present a social ranking based on birth qualification. But *jati* came into existence when stable relations were established between various people in different regions of India and village communities were established. Explaining this phenomenon, Mukherjee writes that *jatis* were located as immutable social units within the broad framework of the *varna* stratification of society. At the same time, *varna* classification was not the cornerstone on which the "caste structure" was built. For example, in Bengal it was the jati division of society, which represented the "caste system" in Bengal, and not the four *varnas* (Mukherjee, 1957:66).

But the *jajmani* system was the economic aspect of the "caste system". The services, duties and payments, which the various "castes" performed for one another, were regulated by a socio-

economic system known as *jajmani*. In it there were two partici-
pants, *jajman* and *kamin*. The *jajman* was the participant receiv-
ing certain services, the *kamin* rendering these services. It is
possible to show that these two were not a part of a static system.
As two groups interact with each other and are subject to external
stress and conflict, which are present in Indian villages, the system
has changed. Since this interaction was based on "caste" (*jajman*
from higher "caste" and *kamin* from lower) it reflects, both the
socio-economic and religious gradation, sanction, and specializa-
tion inherent in the "caste" hierarchy. Position in this system rests
upon a person's relation to the land (ibid). The obligations are not
those of a specific payment for a specific job in a competitive mobile
society. Moreover, this relationship changed with population
increase and the introduction of modern gadgets. Population
increase caused an ever-increasing excess of labor in many artisan
"castes". The lower "castes" have been displaced from many trades
due to the appearance of foreign manufactured goods. A high
rate of unemployment has forced many *kamins* to stick to the
jajmani system because it ensures steady employment. But the
jajmans now are not interested in keeping these relations because
it is more profitable to sell their product in the market than to
retain their *jajman* status. Srininvas, Majumdar, Miller, and Gough
(Srinivas, 1961; Majumdar, 1958; Miller, 1954; Bhattacharya,
2003) have shown that land tenure, loans, and farm produce
rather than "caste" structures *per se*, have sustained such a
system today. In more recent years the jobs as temple priest and
barber, which fall under the *jajmani* system, are becoming dispen-
sable with the appearance of modern shaving equipments and
video-tapes.

   Based on the above information it may be suggested that the
"caste structure" or social stratification as it was prevalent in
12th and 13th century B.C.E. was very different in form and
content than it was in the 5th and 6th century B.C.E., though
its general framework was built up during this period. Mukherjee's
observation in this regard also confirms my conclusion. He pointed
out that in the earlier time "class" relations in society were
represented only by the *varna* stratification of society. It was later
in the social development of Indian society that *jati*s built up
the economic structure of the society. At the same time, the *varna*
system did not vanish, but it went on broadly representing
the "class" relation in society by grouping the *jatis* in the four
levels (Mukherjee, 1958:154). These observations are substantiated
below with a brief history of the changing social structure in
India.

History of the Changing Social Stratification Structure in South Asia

500 B.C.E. to 10th century C.E.

The following narrative is based on the studies available on the history of "caste system". Romila Thapar, a well known historian of ancient "India", explains the social formation that was taking place in "India" from a lineage based to a state society, which she ascribes to the period of 500 B.C.E. (Thapar, 1984). In her view, lineage, which is different from the "egalitarian" tribal groups, played a dominant role in determining access to economic resources, power and status. This is mainly true of the predominantly pastoral society of Rig Vedic times and the agricultural society of the late Vedic age. Thapar thinks that because of its inherent exploitative tendencies, lineage led to the institutionalization of political leadership. Coupled with this exploitation, the principle of descent helped the *Kashtrya* and *Brahman* to emerge as separate *varnas*. The element of hereditary in *varna* was derived from the lineage system (Ibid: 52).

Thapar explains that lineage also generated genealogical inequality, which is different from clan inequality based on access to land and production. It is only in the late *vedic* age, when agriculture society came into being, that the tribal chief appeared as the "eater of cultivation" (Ibid: 60). Thus according to Thapar early *varna* was a ritual status. But articulation of its economic status followed the emergence of two changes, the peasant economy and the rise of towns and commerce (Ibid: 171). Both these changes in the middle of the first millennium B.C.E. helped weakening the lineage system and the consequent importance of ritual status in a society dominated by Brahman values, as well as the state power of the ruling classes. Thapar points out, however, that many aspects of the earlier system survived, overlapping the two eras and maintaining links between ritual and economic status. This overlap then led to the clouding over of economic status by ritual status that effectively hid both essential points of historical changes (Ibid: 173).

Confirming Thapar's interpretation, Sharma adds that until the discovery of iron based craft, agricultural productivity remained very low, which led to the rapid growth of rituals and the ritualist class in India (Sharma, 1975). But as the lineage system declined, Sharma points out that a "class society" (means social differentiation based on control of means of production) began to emerge in India and ritual status of early varnas changed into economic status with the discovery of iron from 500 B.C.E. During the same

historical time the gender based hierarchies also started taking stronger roots along with the addition of *Sudra* as a varna to the original social structure. Such changes became necessary as artisans and cultivators as well as many alien groups had to be accommodated into the existing social stratification system. That is why in the last millennium B.C.E. there was no exact correlation between *varna* status, and economic status (Thaper: 163). Thapar suggests that in order to understand any social group one needs to locate each group both in terms of ritual rank and economic status although two need not necessarily coincide (Ibid: 169).

Later, in the second phase with the increased use of iron, agricultural surplus was created that led to state formation. This process of state formation in turn sharpened the economic status of different existing "caste" groups and the existing social stratification structure became more rigid. The state further strengthened the rigidity of "social stratification" by protecting the increased agricultural surplus and by protecting the development of trade and commerce in newly emerging towns. Under the newly rigid "caste structure" the need to preserve the "caste purity" also increased, which entailed a strict monitoring of the sexual behavior of certain categories of women, and increasing the dominance of husbands over women and over women's sexuality. It also means the encoding of social law became necessary so that the authority of the Brahmins and its sources the Vedas remain intact. Thus, it might be said that during this time period the existing social division, loosely based on both ritual status and economic status of people, was converted into a rigid "caste structure" through the social laws and control of the interpretation of sources of such laws for the benefit of the ruling "caste/class." This emerging "class/caste" formation, while becoming more rigid with the force of the law further made it a rigid division based on birth, seems to have also a close resemblance to a Weberian understanding of class/status: "stratification by status group goes hand in hand with a monopolization of ideal and material goods or opportunities . . . Besides the specific status, 'honor' which always rests upon distance and exclusiveness, we find all sorts of material monopolies. Such honor . . . may consist of the privilege of wearing special costumes, of eating special dishes taboo to others, of carrying arms. . . . the decisive role of a 'style of life' in status 'honor' means that status groups are the specific bearers of all 'conventions'" (Weber, 1949; 187–88; 190–91).

During this time, many *srenis* (guilds) composed of certain communities and tribes were also formed. The function of these guilds was primarily to meet the needs of the state and nobility.

Confirming this understanding Kosambi, another well-known historian of ancient India, also notes:

There are references in *Narda* (legal text) giving detailed rules about the division of profit for a craftman's guild. Brahmins became the arbitrators of these guilds. These guilds were not simple village artisans. Their existence implied the commodity production and merchant trade. The state policy to judge each group according to its own particular law clearly emphasise the existence of the groups as units of production and not in the earlier ritualist sense (1946).

It was during the later Vedic period that Buddhism came into existence. Buddhism objected to the sacrifices involved in Brahman rituals, mainly because they proved uneconomical. The growing tension due to "class" formation in this period was thus ameliorated by the Buddhist religion, which never challenged the existing "caste system". Sharma points out that by the 1st century C.E. the lower "classes" refused to comply with the upper "class" authorities. In addition, the state had started giving grants of land to Brahmins in lieu of gifts (Sharma, 1965). By the 4th century these gifts had become frequent; along with them came the transfer of sources of revenue, and of police and administrative functions to the Brahmins. These processes led ultimately to the disintegration of central authority. Historians have also pointed out that by the 7th century no more slaves were hired for agriculture work; instead, the *sudras* were raised to peasant status. But *vaishay*'s status went down with the decline of trade and commerce during the same time period (Sharma, 1975, Kosambi, 1984:164).

During the 8th century the decline in central authority and decay of urban centers led to the formation of a closed economy and rise of self sufficient regional production units. As pointed out earlier, the existing guilds crystalized into *jatis* during this period. It may not be far fetched to state that occupational specialization originated in this historical process. During this period basic production became more and more local, while at the same time the density of village settlements increased. The village community now was able to fulfill the vital demands of the society and its material needs. Thus the rigid occupational specialization supplied the social foundation for the community. In order to keep village tension in control, *jati* divisions kept everybody in a definite socio-spiritual position and in specific work. Mukherjee suggests that these social and economic developments in commodity production at the local level increased the importance of the role of religion in enforcing social order while decreasing the function of the central government (Mukherjee, 1958; Thapar, 1984). It is in this context that the doctrine of *karma* and the theory of incarnation[4] became useful in containing the social system, as the earlier "caste" divi-

sions in this period were changing completely in their form and content. By now *varna* division, which was ritual based, became an abstract idea and *jati*, as economic category, became more important.

It may be relevant to state that it was in the third stage of socio-economic organization, i.e. from pastoral to peasant economy and then to village community, that *jati* (the sub-"caste" system) gained currency. In this new relation of production land was broadly held in common by the village so that all transactions in land could be undertaken by the villagers with the permission and direct supervision of the village assembly. The sovereign authority ruled over the whole territory while what went on within the village was not a matter directly for the ruler. Production in the village had only use value. A part of the rural production would be consumed directly by the producing household and another would be bartered between the priest and the artisan and other members of the village community in exchange for services. Land tax had little effect on rural produce turning into a commodity. The state was the only one to transfer the rural surplus into commodity (Kosambi, 1955). Thus it seems that no matter what the form of rituals their content and social functions were now fundamentally different in nature. It seems that earlier "primitive" magic was performed to control nature and increase production. But now the reasons for performing rituals and observing taboos were primarily to maintain the status quo in favour of a definite social group in power (Kosambi, 1946).

My approach in this essay makes it necessary to relate the ideological structure of the "caste system" to the peculiarities of socio-economic formation of its epochs unlike Srinivas, who disregards the *varna* model because "untouchables have no place in the varna scheme" (1961:65). The notion of "untouchable" came into being only in the later so called "feudal" time when certain occupations were labelled "unclean." "Untouchability is . . . a historical cohort of the caste system, but not its essence" (Gupta, 2000:143–44). Purity and pollution was linked with the institution of untouchability and not with *varna* system. Therefore, purity and pollution cannot be the basis of understanding "caste system". My discussion also refutes the idea that the "caste system" was a full blown system from the very inception of vedic society.

11th Century to 17th Century

With the advent of the Muslim rule during the 11th century another change occurred in Indian society. Under Muslim rulers the state started interfering directly in the village communities. Collective

subjection was accompanied by individual subjection in varied forms through the framework of "caste". Irfan Habib, a well known historian of "medieval" India, writes that "the entirely new centralised fiscal structure under the Muslims was inconceivable without extensive social changes" (Habib, 1969). But from the 14th century on the institutions of "caste" and village community started weakening with the emergence of new forces both within and outside Indian society. For example, the intervention of the state in villages to increase revenue slowly opened up village social life. It started with Sher Shah Suri who made civil servant of village headman answerable to the state. Similarly, Akbar's reorganisation created direct relationships between the individual peasant as he was treated as an independent unit (Ibid). Money rent was introduced in Akbar's time. This insistence on the payment of money rent further help increased commodity circulation in the village on a larger scale, which in turn shook the foundation of the village "community".

These new conditions for the creation of a rural market was possible by bulk removal of the rural surplus from the village "community". This new market mechanism, when well established, must have affected a change in the mode of agricultural production (Ibid). For example, these market mechanisms increased the land revenue as well as increased the social stratification, leading to the pauperisation of the poorer strata. This restructuring of the village "community" ultimately affected the whole peasantry and changed social relationships of production (Mukherjee, 1958:179). Over time the ties among people based on "caste" or fraternity became loose as the gap between the rich sector of society and the rest became bigger. In these circumstances it is not difficult to imagine that "the richer peasants would begin to dominate over others within the community" (Habib, 1969).

The poor could not compete in the market because at this time cash crop had also been introduced on a large scale, which led to creating debt conditions for the poor. Elaborating on the process that led to poor people's indebtedness Habib writes that the new social and economic conditions created many other new players within the rural economy: money changers, usurers, and traders.[5] With the availability of high interest rates the capital was invested mainly for usurious purposes. At the same time *zamindars* (landlords) were transformed into intermediaries between peasant and the state, who had the power to evict the peasants and extract more rent. Thus "Monetization made *zamindari* rights as a saleable commodity in the 16th century." It seems that the introduction of money corroded the old "caste" base and created a large "class" of landless laborers. These new conditions made it possible for any

outsider to exploit the village resources and cheap labor (Habib, 1963:128). The woes of these landless poor increased as their menial "caste" status (within the broader "caste" system) compelled them to serve the interests of peasants and other cultivators alike (Ibid: 162).

In addition, the ruling "classes" and royalties promoted the "caste system" as well because all of them owned large orchards, plantations of cash crops and *karkhanas* factories. They found that it was in their interest to keep the "caste system" intact with *karma* theory (i.e. one is born in a particular "caste" based on one's *karma* in previous life, therefore, the social mobility is possible only in the next birth when one fulfills one's "caste" duties in present life), in order to ensure the labor supply. Fakwaza's study of the Maratha kingdom (Fukazawa, 1969) shows that within both the Mughal and the Maratha territory none of the rulers ever tried to override the "caste" rules. Instead, they supported Brahmans' demands and their interpretation of any situation of conflict between "castes". Even the most fanatic Aurangzeb did not go against "caste" rules. At the same time, the growing importance of the new forces, i.e., artisans, traders and merchants, created a need for further changes in the society. That is when Indian sub-continent witnessed the emergence of the Bhakti (devotion to god) movement, which grew from within the prevailing Hindu fold and was strongly anti-hierarchical and anti-ritualistic, using local languages, and demanding social change.

The Bhakti movement first appeared in the Tamil country during the seventh to tenth centuries of C.E. Later it moved to the regions of Andhra, Karnataka and Maharashtra. Between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries, it spread all over the sub-continent in various forms and in the process reshaping and reinterpreting Hinduism. Even when these movements were different in form and content from one other, their opposition was targeted at the same things: Brahmanism and the Varna order. The Bhakti movement promoted the idea of changing existing social relationship and suggested that "salvation could be attained independently of priests, rituals, and caste by devotion to Divine only" (Rawlinson, 1937:426). The leadership of this movement came from such lower orders of the society as tailors, carpenters, and shopkeepers, as well as from women, and India witnessed a great emergence of regional languages and literature. It may also be pointed out that the teachings of medieval saints like Basavanna, Ramanuja, Tukaram, Kabir (muslim) Purandaradasa, Andal, Akkamahadevi, Meerabai and Guru Nanak contributed in the making of the modern "Hinduism". Most of the Bhakti leaders used regional languages (and in Hindavi tradition which was syncratic and remained

oppositional to both Islamic high culture and Brahmanical one) for preaching their ideas, which made the common man aware of the need for a change in the society. It gave hope of salvation to millions of people from among low "caste" groups and women. The Bhakti saints proclaim that a non-intellectual love of god was all that mattered. Thus the Bhakti movement helped the common person in demanding social change to uplift her/his life conditions. In this movement people's "caste" and "community" ties also helped in enlarging the scale of peasant uprisings. At the same time "caste" ties obscured the "class" nature of leaders of Bhakti movement (Habib, 1963) because at some stage during this movement zamindars (or Bhakti movement leaders who later became zamindars) took over the leadership of the social-religious movement (Habib, 1963:337). Within this context of the Bhakti movement Akbar and his successors tried to bring harmony in their empire and introduced new values along with social reforms (Ibid). It is fair to say that these social measures in fact reflected the wider social demands.

One essential social demand could have been to create conditions for further promotion of industry and trade by bringing artisans and traders belonging to different religions under one system or under equal control irrespective of the faith, so that there could be no hindrance put before their production and commercial pursuits in the form of special taxes on the Hindus (Mukherjee, 1958:203).

Besides this essential social demand, the agrarian crisis was deepening with the increased demand of the state for rent due to its war policies and other conspicuous consumption. This agrarian crisis threatened the existence of the Mughal Empire, thus transforming the economic crisis into a political crisis marked by agrarian uprisings. In the end these agrarian uprisings led to the collapse of the Mughal empire and with it "the weakening of several aspects of the economic and social situation that it had sustained" (Habib, 1969). One neo liberal economist has also noted that the European history books and travel literature of Europeans (visiting India) of the time (1600 C.E.) hardly mention the existence of "caste" (Morris, 1967). It does not mean that "caste system" had vanished but it was probably on wane.

It might be suggested that these powerful social movements as well as various agrarian crises at the beginning of the seventeenth century must have put pressure on the existing form of "caste system" leading to its break up and slow decay. But before the new historical forces could gain sufficient strength to eradicate the earlier form of "caste" system completely, the Indian subcontinent was colonized. Under British colonial rule the "caste system" got a new lease of life, as the colonial ruling elite found it a beneficial

system for sustaining their power and control over the resources. Summarizing the benefits of the "caste system" for the various ruling elites, Habib argues that by repressing the menial "castes", the "caste system" helped cheapen the labour supply available for agriculture.

At the village level, by providing for the services of hereditary village artisans and servants, it reduced the necessary expense on the tools, goods and services that the peasants needed. By thus reducing the portion of agriculture needed for the peasants' subsistence, it enlarged the surplus product, out of which came the revenues of the ruling class. At the same time, through hereditary skill-transmission, caste cheapened artisan-products, and thus reduced wage-costs generally (Habib, 1984:16).

Thus the primary economic consequence of the "caste system" was a substantial enlargement of the income of the ruling class from both agriculture and crafts. This economic consequence was unaffected by whether the ruling class was part of the "caste" structure or had its origin outside the "caste system". Habib concludes that the ruling classes were well served under the arrangement of "caste system" whether they were Indo-Greek, Kushanas, Rajputs, Muslims, or English (Habib, 1963).

But in the case of British rule the old agrarian relationships were completely changed by the use of coercion, violence and by a stroke of the pen. From now on a polarization of the rural scene started taking shape. In this polarisation the issue of identity formation suddenly became more important in the Indian subcontinent. In the promotion of identity formation it seems the role of many historical forces, including the role of the Census system, were important because the entire colonial system, due to the necessity of governance which was based on the principle of scienticism, was geared to define the exact locations of various religious and "caste" groups in the Indian society.

18th Century to the Middle of 20th Century

Mukherjee points out that many research works ignore the fact that in British India the "caste" structure had "invaginated" (the existing "caste" system served as a connective tissue to the emerging social relations under the colonial rule while binding together the component elements of emerging social stratification and holding it in place) itself into the "class" structure (social relationship based on contract, wage labour and control of means of production). For example, in British India the landlords, big landowners, wholesale traders, and moneylenders essentially belonged to the high "castes". The bulk of self-sufficient peasants,

small-scale artisans, petty traders, etc generally belonged to the middle "castes". The marginal peasants and landless workers (new categories of lower class people that had emerged under the colonial capitalist system) belonged overwhelmingly to the lowest "castes" and the "tribes". Mukherjee suggests that during this time, while not all "castes" were transformed into corresponding classes, there was a definite correlation between "castes" and the capitalist class structure (Mukherjee, 1957:1–58).

In the beginning of the 1920s, land and crops were viewed as commodities rather than as necessities for subsistence. Alienation from the land and accumulation of crops enriched some (though not many) peasants, artisans and traders who had hitherto been low in the "caste" hierarchy. With their enhanced economic status, these "caste" groups started aspiring for a better "social status". The new conditions of some "caste" groups created a new alignment between "caste" and "class" which allowed the "caste" structure to "invaginate" itself into the "class" structure of society. A similar process took place when *jatis* were incorporated into the capitalist social structure under the influence of both colonial capitalism and later under the Indian capitalist system. In the last days of the Raj, the so called, "Depressed Classes" clamoured for economic and social equality with the "high castes". They were pacified by the enactment of the Scheduled Castes Order in the 1930s which helped the British Raj to consolidate its own political position in Indian society. But *dalits*[6] who were not part of the "caste" hierarchy were left out as the Congress Party was able to persuade sudras (called "scheduled caste") to keep away from making alliances with *dalits*. After independence in 1947, the Indian rulers retained the nomenclature of the "scheduled caste" as was created by British rulers, and added that of the "scheduled tribes". But interestingly, as Mukherjee points out, by this time there were no truly autonomous "tribes" even in the remote corners of India (Mukherjee, 1999). Later, the Indian government further categorized the "other backward classes (OBCs)" thus completing the new "caste" hierarchy in the following order of: the high "caste", other "backward" classes, the "scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes" (Ibid).

Indian research scholars have generally ignored Mukherjee's understanding of "caste system"; instead they have promoted the non-threatening ideas of Srinivas who mooted the notion of "dominant caste" in the 1960s. According to Srinivas "dominant caste" exists not in its content but in the appellation. By promoting the notion of "dominant caste" it was possible for Srinivas to avoid the term "class struggle" which was a threatening term and unacceptable to conservative scholars (Ibid). The recent scholarship of

Subaltern Studies is also based on similar notions, as they deny the existence of "classes" in India. For example, as mentioned earlier, Subaltern Studies scholar Chakrabarty suggests that British rule exists in the fantasies of Indian Marxist historians. By ignoring the existence of colonialism or British rule Chakrabarty wishes to avoid the use of meta-narrative in explaining Indian social reality. But many other research scholars have explained that the British found in the "caste system" a useful structure on which they could build a strong economic and social base in India for themselves, the "caste system" thereby claimed stability and simultaneous existence as long as the landlords dominated rural society. Landlords as a "class" gave constant support to Brahmanism and to that most important institution, the "caste system". Remarking on the utility of the "caste system", O' Mally wrote in 1932, that a system which is based on religion will be utterly opposed to the Bolshevist doctrine of a war upon religion. That is why many Indians strongly favour a "caste system" on the ground that it is a "bulwark of society against revolutionary assault." It was obvious to these Indian landlords that a strong belief in the divinely ordained social hierarchy would keep poor people out of the "class" war (O'Mally, 1932).

"Caste" identities were further sustained through the Census operation and people's claims for different "caste" identities. In this regard Srinivas has noted, that during the 1867–71 a nation wide census operation many "caste" groups insisted on changing their "caste" identities. For example, two Tamil castes "Vellas" and "Padaiyachi" wanted to be recorded as belonging to a higher varna than that popularly conceeded to them. The vellas portested against being included among shudras and wanted to be called vaishyas, while the "Padaiyachis" wanted to be called Vaniya Kula Kshatriyas (Srinivas, 1996). On similar lines, O'Mally has also recorded that at the time of the 1911 Census operation there was a general idea in Bengal that the object of the census is not to show the number of persons belonging to each caste but to the relative position of different "castes" and to deal with the question of social superiority. Many "castes" were aggrieved at the position assigned to them and complained that it lowered them in public estimation (Srinivas, 1961).

Thus, both through Census operation and recognising Brahmin's superiority in landholdings, the colonial state reinforced the existing "caste" structure with a new meaning and with a redefinition of the prevailing social relationship. The British created another new "caste" conscious group, which realised that it could benefit in the new system more by sticking to its "caste" (meaning *jati* or sub-caste). This new creation developed into a new form of

interest group completely different from the earlier version of
"caste".[7] Cohn has clearly shown in Hobsbawm's volume *The Inven-
tion of Tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) how the British
Government in India tried to create new relations using the old
traditional structures. He (Ibid: 172–73) explains that the *durbar*
system of Mughals that was retained by the British administration
in India was no longer a relation of incorporation of the subject
chief (as it was under the Moghals) but one of the ruler and the
subordinate subject.

A more recent study by Kochhar (1992) also highlights the role
of British colonial rule in reinforcing both "caste" and communal
(based on religious belief) divisions amongst the Indian masses.
"The British rule was like passing a strong current which brought
about decomposition and permanent polarisation" (Ibid). But
British conquest of, and rule over, India would not have been
possible without the cultivated support of native people. In one
of many such efforts British officers carefully cultivated the use
of certain terms in the beginning to address Muslim and Hindu
harkaras. Muslim *harkaras* were called *moonshee*; but Hindu
harkaras irrespective of their "caste" were called *pandits*. Kochhar
calls this phase the *moonshee* phase, because, "The Muslims gen-
erally kept away from the next, better known, *baboo* phase in which
the natives were given English education and hired as adminis-
trative assistants" (Ibid).

In the *baboo* phase a small sum was allocated to educate Indians,
with the clear goal of cultivating Hindus support for the British
empire in India, as the following note of the East India company
Directors explains:

We shall consider the money beneficially employed, if it should prove the means,
by an improved intercourse of the Europeans with the Natives, (means Hindu) to
reproduce those reciprocal feelings of regard and respect which are essential to the
permanent interest of the British empire in India (Sharp, 1920).

The company's policy of supporting Hindus at this point
proved very useful in keeping the two communities divided.
Kochar explains that by emphasising joint Indo-European origins,
the British rulers successfully presented themselves as patrons of
India's ancient culture. They presented the Muslim rule in India
as an aberration, and the British rule a continuation of the Hindu
golden age. Later, amidst rising Indian nationalism and Hitler's
Aryanism in Europe, British rulers were able to promote the theory
of Aryan invasion. The opportunity to promote their theory of Aryan
invasion destroying native Indian civilization arrived with the
excavation of the Harappa civilisation, even though there was no

evidence to suggest the theory. These theories of India's past history galvanized Hindus to use Vedas, Upnishadas and Gita as a stimulant under the British rule. Based on these scriptures a pre-Islamic history of India was reconstructed in which India's ancient "scientific" and literary achievements were highlighted. For example, as Kochhar points out, an old pillar near Allahbad, ignorantly described by the villagers as the *danda* (a thick bulky stick) used by Bhima to grind his *bhang* (marijuana), was shown to be Ashoka's pillar (Ashoka became a role model for Jawaherlal Nehru). Thus, "in the process of empire-building, the British discoverd India's past not only for themselves but for the Indians also. The past glory, certified by the European masters themselves, transformed the Hindu psyche" (Kochar, 1992).

Significantly, the agricultural and artisan "classes" were excluded from this process of re-creation of Indian past and creation of a new one, as British rulers were interested in sponsoring only the Indian middle "class" that belonged to the Hindu upper "caste". The reason for keeping lower "castes" uneducated was that "if all castes were to feel equally motivated towards any goal, they will not have been different to begin with [since to assume otherwise would be interfering in the existing caste system]" (Ibid). Moreover, it was assumed that the classroom education was of no use to "caste" groups engaged in agriculture, manufacture and menial services; it was useful and attractive only to those "castes" which had traditionally been associated with learning, commerce, or penmanship. Accordingly, "Brahmins learnt Sanskrit, baniyas their secret script and kayasthas and khatris Persian" (Ibid).

In spite of their efforts to keep Hindus and Muslims separated, the British rulers could not make the Hindus feel an aversion for the Muslim religion, as Hindus happily studied Persian from Muslim teachers. This agreeable coexistence between Hindus and Muslims changed when British made Hindus aware of the Muhammadan invasion of India. Kochhar explains that the British deliberately emphasised the "caste" hierarchy among Hindus, and at the same time underlined the foreign origin of Islam. This strategy was useful in making the common man disapprove of this territorial affiliation. This disapproval was further reinforced by representing Muslim in India as a structureless society of foreign origin, which by implication had no right to be on good terms with and acceptable to the Hindus, whose social structure is characterised by "ethnicity" and "caste" (Ibid).

The success of this program was announced in the 1858 report of the Punjab Director of Public Instruction. The report states "In every Tehselee school there are boys able to give an intelligent account of the early Muhammadan invasion of India" (Richey,

1922). Subsequently, the British strategy proved successful when the response to English education proceeded along predictable "caste" and communal lines. In this respect Kochhar reports:

> For the upper castes that had traditionally depended on government jobs and patronage English was the new bread and butter language in place of Persian; they therefore filled the new class rooms with alacrity. The lower castes on the other hand cannot have benefited from English education as far as their traditional bread earning was concerned. The number of new jobs was very small, and in any case the social structure so rigid that shift from traditional occupation was well nigh impossible. These castes therefore kept out (1992).

Similarly, the lower "caste" Muslims were themselves also kept out of the catchment area of English education (Ibid). The new opportunities for the lower "castes" to receive education were hardly available which further reinforced the existing assigned social status. In short, one could climb up the new ladder, but only according to the old rules. Thus, it seems that Muslims who had not been enriched by the Mughal empire were not enriched by English education either (Ibid).

But the British strategy of dividing people based on "caste" and communal lines also created new problems for British rule itself. One new problem, as Kochhar suggests, was the emergence of a new Hindu middle class independent from the old "caste" structure, which could demand concessions from the government without offering subservience in return. This assertiveness of the Hindu intelligentsia became a new problem for the stability of British rule in India. Therefore, the British turned to Muslims who could now be developed into a counter-poise to Hindu middle class assertiveness. But it was not an easy task, as within the Muslim community, there were differences in attitude between the South and North of India. A similar differences in attitude prevailed amongst the Muslims who converted from the lower "castes" of Hindus and those who claimed foreign descent by virtue of foreign bloodline, Hindu upper "caste" background or simple wealth. In spite of these hurdles British colonial rule was largely successful in reinforcing division amongst the Indian people by exploiting religious, "caste", and community differences, rewriting India's history, by valorising the glorious past of the Hindus, by creating new theories to define Hindu identity, and by documenting religious scriptures.

The British, thus, tried to do two contradictory things simultaneously. One was to change the old relations of production in agriculture and develop the formation of a "class" relationship. The other was to depend on the religious values and structures of the decaying "caste" system for their own stability, i.e., by supporting

the landed "castes" and the communal divisions between Hindus and Muslims. The economic power of rural society now decisively went over to the landlords, who were mostly from higher "caste" groups, while the bulk of poor cultivators, sharecroppers, and agricultural labourers in rural society belonged to the low "caste". Mukherjee calls this phase of Indian history a "second Feudalism" (Mukherjee, 1974:337). At the same time, in the absence of new traditions that could fill the void left by the decline of old traditions and customs, people went on finding their identities in old structures called the "caste system". Though the nomenclature of "caste" was still being used, it had changed completely in form, content, and meaning. All these developments make the search for distinction between "castes" and "classes" difficult. That is why one has to uncover the layers in the area of interaction of various forces rather than resort to a mechanical determination in understanding "caste" or "primordial values".

While uncovering the layers in the areas of interaction of various forces in India, I found that the Bengali educated middle class – as of other regional languages – also played an important role in creating "caste" and communal divisions by an artificial "purification" of the Bengali language and the purging of naturalised Persio-Arabic words from its active vocabulary. It was achieved by making a separation between "pure" Sanskritised style (identified as Hindus) and its "lesser" Islamic variant (identified as Muslim) under the colonial rule. As Ghosh points out, this linguistic "purification" process that helped mould a distinctive communal identity for Muslims in the communalisation of vernacular print languages in the subcontinent was not untypical during the 19th century. According to her, it was an inevitable outcome of the steady sanskritisation of Indian vernaculars under the Orientalists, deriving in turn from artificially constructed concepts of Aryan Hindu purity (Ghosh, 2002).

But while agreeing with the above statement it should also be pointed out that the Bengali middle class of the 19th century was not a simple phenomenon. According to Sarkar, the lower rung of middle class groups were almost invariably from the three ascribed upper "castes", who swelled the lower rungs of the *bhadralok* in the city. These people were able to join the ranks of the middle class due to the increased job opportunities in government and commercial establishment (Ibid). Whereas Ghosh and Mukherjee suggest, that *bhadralok* was a de facto social group as membership of the class was not ascriptive, and had to be acquired by virtues of a lifestyle that was marked by education, abstinence from physical labor – and not absolutely but frequently – a high "caste" status. Education and prosperity through commercial activities

had thus created significant number of claimants to the *bhadralok* world. But these "petty *bhadralok*" or "lesser *bhadralok*" could exist only as defining "others" of upper *bhadralok* identity. Ghosh explains that it was only in the closing decades of the century in the writings of the "romantic nationalists" and the "disgruntled educated class" that these petty and lesser *bhadralok* began to be accommodated for the first time, but only as a metaphor of the "authentic" and the "indigenous" in Bengali society. Since then, as it is today, ideas about literary worth became crucially linked to identities and internal struggles for dominance between the different elements of *bhadralok* society. But the lower "caste" and lower class groups, including women and poor Muslims, who were inhabiting the "peripheries" of the western educated world, did not accept their ascribed status and they kept on (and still doing it today) challenging the dominant ideas about literary styles and aesthetics (Ghosh, 2002).

The role of the elite group in promoting Sanskritised Hindi or Sanskritised Bengali should be seen in the context of the deliberate efforts of British colonial officers to provide separate linguistic identities to Urdu and Hindi since the beginning of the nineteenth century (Rai, 2000). The following excerpt (1898), part of the reaction of students when the principal of Banaras Hindu college asked them to write "pure" Hindi excluding "Musslaman" words, is revealing in this regard:

We do not clearly understand what you Europeans mean by the term Hindi, for there are hundreds of dialects all in our opinion equally entitled to the name and there is no standard as there is in Sanskrit. If the purity of Hindi is to consist in its exclusion of Musalman words, we shall require to study Persian and Arabic in order to ascertain which of the words we are in the habit of using everyday, is Arabic or Persian and which is Hindi. With our present knowledge we can tell that a word is Sanskrit or not Sanskrit, but if not Sanskrit it may be English or Portuguese instead of Hindi for anything we can tell . . . what you call Hindi will eventually merge in some future modification of the Urdu: nor do we see any great cause of regret in this prospect" [George *Nicholls (1848)*, cited in Rai, 2000: 65–66].

Rai explains that it was the interplay of colonial and nationalist politics which was to lead to the divisive politics that finally separated Hindi and Urdu. This political division was built on the early split when two separate departments for Hindustani (Urdu) and Hinduvi (Hindi) were established at the college of Fort Williams in the early nineteenth century. This was done in spite of the similar origin of them from a composite Hindavi tradition that found an early expression in literature since about the 12th–13th centuries and continued as an uninterrupted literary chain till about the 18th century. Hindavi continued to be written in both the Arabic

and the Nagari scripts. It was syncretic in religious matters as it did not uphold either the Islamic high culture or the Brahmanical one, but rather remained in opposition to both (Misra, 2003).

In 1900, the Lt. Governor of North West Province and Oudh, officially promulgated that Hindi be recognised alongside Urdu as official court langugage, an obvious collusion of British colonial officers with the high "caste" Hindu elite of the north west provinces who were developing Hindi with rapid Sanskritisation (Dalmia, 2000). British rulers dealt with Hindus and Muslims as constituting two different religious groups, must speak different languages and that languages belong not to regions but to communities (Ibid). Bengali intelligentsia contributed further in this process as they occupied important bureaucratic posts in the NW Provinces. Since about 97 percent of people in that province were illiterate the issue of Hindi as court language remained a power struggle between elites only (Dalmia, 2000). Subsequently, in this context of British rule both Hindu and Muslim elites tried to reconstruct their histories differently. Muslims took 1857 as a cut point to show the decline of Indian civilization and the Hindu elite saw the present (British rule) as an end to centuries of Muslim tyranny (Ibid).

Besides the role of both the British Colonial Government and the regional linguistic elite groups in promoting "caste/class", communal divisions, the other nationalist forces also played an important role in reinforcing these divisions. For example, by equating India with Hinduism and denying the Untouchables a separate electorate except for some reserved seats within the Hindu electorate, Gandhi helped in promoting the "caste structure" and communalism. Gandhi was so determined to keep the issue of Untouchable as internal to Hinduism that he threatened to go on a fast rather than concede the demand for separate electorates for the "depressed classes" (Kumar 1987).

Even while the British authorities, local upper "classes" and linguistic groups, as well as the political leaders were promoting the "caste system", the new contractual relationship between peasant and landlord under British rule were helping to dissolve the "caste system". Land had become a marketable commodity under permanent settlement laws enacted in the 19th century. To maintain themselves on the continually reduced production from the lands they owned, the bulk of peasants began to sell or mortgage parts of their holdings. These holdings of poor peasants went to a few well-to-do peasants in the country who, according to Mukherjee, broke the subsistence economy and there developed a rapidly growing home market in cash crops. In the absence of any alternative source of income (owing to the lack of any industrialization) poor peasants had to buy and borrow crops from a few

prosperous peasants or landlords, which led to the formation of modern bonded slavery (Mukherjee, n.d). Thus began a process of change within the rural communities that led to the formation of modern "classes" in India. The convergence of "caste" and "class" can be seen clearly in those parts of India where "caste" riots today are more frequent. For example, in Bihar, Maharashatra and Tamil Nadu where "caste" riots are frequent "the castewise social deprivations were manifestly correlated with the classwise economic deprivation" (Ibid).

In these regions another new development was taking place as former "caste categories" were now becoming "caste associations" (groups) (Bailey, 1958). These "caste" groups started competing with each other rather than serving each other under *jajmani* (patron/client). Thus, once "castes" start competing with one another "caste" comes to an end (Leach, 1971:233–37). "Caste" is a misnomer because these groups were only local *jatis* that differed in each region. In South India the famous anti-Brahmin movement in the early 20th century completely destroyed the earlier structure of the system. "Caste" was dissolved by famine, by new railways and by a new communication system; "purity/pollution" could not be observed any more. More "caste" groups were seeking state help through the upgrading from the Census Commissioner, an action which had been possible throughout history, even before the British. British rulers did not see the need for changing this custom. Dumont writes that, "Economic insecurity and the development of some alternative forms of support (production from market, new caste free salaried and wage occupations) encouraged *kamins* to reject their positions as clients in relations to *jajmans* and to enter into competitive economic relations with them" (Dumont, 1972:274). Thus, population increase, the increase of a cash economy and of advance technology, the extension of cash crops and the decline of subsistence farming, the effects of national and international markets on food prices, the replacement of many artisans goods by foreign imports, urban migration and employment, widespread unemployment, and new "caste" free occupations, all have seriously weakened the *jajmani* system (Ghurye, 1960:84).

Today "caste" associations (based on the same *jati* connection), like any other associations, have their elections, registrations, and constitutions, and struggle to attain more welfare schemes, jobs and other "secular" benefits for their members, rather than maintaining the old values of purity or hierarchy. Wilkie and Mohan suggest that caste associations facilitate change from macro-society to micro-society. Tracing the history of "caste" associations, they also point out that these associations did not come

into vogue until the British census procedures requiring "caste" enumeration were introduced. The census procedures made "caste" more confusing for the British rulers because different sections of a single "caste" claimed different varna statuses. This confusion compelled Indians to unify their "caste" conceptions. But even in this process of unifying "caste" concepts the British government played an instrumental role in shaping and moulding the character of tradition (Wilkie and Mohan 1978:219).

The role of "caste" association in improving the life chances of its members is also supported in Rudolph's observation of the Shanan caste. He writes that the "caste" association enabled middle and lower "castes" to establish self-esteem. They won their social esteem, "first from the state, then the macro-society and last and more slowly from the micro society of village and locality" (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1969:62). Thus the concept of "caste" changed from a rigid system to a vehicle of social change. Mohan and Wilke (Mohan and Wilke, 1979:9–22) in another study have pointed out that low "caste" members in the villages and cities have become extremely influential in the wider arena of state and national politics.

These changes took place at the time of the emergence of capitalism in India. The so called "dominant castes" strengthened their position in relation to non-dominant "castes" through new means that were introduced under the capitalist economy. In this competition the "dominant castes" could keep an upper hand due to their access to finance and education, which in turn gave them better access to external markets, exchange, private ownership of land, new political institutions, and cultivation of non-traditional education and occupation. Thus the dominant "castes" were able to mobilise better internal resources for power, which in fact resulted in the dissolution of "caste" dominance, because by then "the non-dominant groups also entered the market system and non traditional occupations" (Desai, 1984:1112). Once again we would emphasise that these subtle changes and developments can be noticed only if we strive to uncover the internal dynamics of the society.

After 1947

In independent India the government tried to do away with the "caste system" by declaring so in the constitution and by giving protection to the "backward" (earlier sudra category in the "caste" hierachy) and Scheduled Castes (dalit not part of the "caste" hierarchy). In spite of this declaration, the "caste" identity of all groups in independent India has seemingly increased and it is being used for "secular ends by both Hindu and non-Hindu alike" (Ibid). One

should be careful in using the word "caste" because today the word "caste" does not have the same connotation and meaning as it did in the 5th century, nor is it the same in content and form. The concept of "purity" has changed, and physical cleanliness has now become more relevant as a criterion for judging status, than impurity in the religious sense. Desai correctly points out that there is a coexistence of low occupation, low income and low education for certain caste groups, but they are not the functions of a "caste" hierarchy. There is also a growing separation between "caste" and occupation as well as increasing commensurality. Today occupational activity may remain the same, but the person engaged in the activity is a new person; he is a barber or washerman by occupation and not by caste. Nobody has an ascribed status based on birth or determined by his/her deeds in the previous life. Now he/she has a right to refuse to do his/her duties and has a larger space to move about in his/her choice of occupation, life partner, or religion. But the problem is that these new situations and larger spaces translate into real life differently for different people. A majority of people, who do not have the ways and means to attain upward mobility, remain in the earlier mode in comparison with those who have ways and means. As noted by Desai, "In urban areas the growth of the informal sector is the breeding ground of socially and educationally backward classes of modern times. Caste or religion is irrelevant here" (1984:1106).

A migrant to an urban area always seeks an acquaintance for help so that he/she can adapt to new urban situations and conditions. This acquaintance can be from the same village or region, belong to the same "caste" group, religion, or spoke the same language. When people are separated from the place of their origin they do not organize on the principle of purity and pollution, or organise themselves into high and low "castes" any longer. The reality of the new urban situation goes against the hierarchical principle of the "caste system". The fact is that the "caste system" is giving way to a system of "secular stratification" (Ibid). Desai, while discussing the new situation emerging in independent India, explains that today the lower "castes" are trying violently to make themselves acceptable, and they refuse to accept the higher status of others. He maintains that the non-Brahmin movement in South India in the late 19th century and movements of the oppressed groups and "castes" in independent India are clear proof of it. Today nobody loses "caste" support for disobeying the rules of purity or pollution. Today caste groups highly approve of individual group member's achievements in "secular" areas; for example, having higher education or getting access to better life chances. Thus one can notice a growth of "secular" interests among the

"caste" groups operating in economic, political, and social fields. Those who believe that "caste" as a system has not weakened, are ignoring the growth of the rival "secular" basis of differentiation and stratification that is the product of contemporary economic and political development (Ibid).

A complete transformation of the "caste/class system" has occurred in independent India. In becoming a bourgeois national state, India needed its workforce freely available in the labour market. Therefore, it tried to free its workforce further from all traditional bonds-including the "caste system" – by declaring its intentions in its Constitution. There were special provisions designed to put the "backward" classes (earlier called *sudra*) on a par with the privileged sections of society. Along with this, today all production relationships in India are based on contract and not on "caste". This fact itself is mainly responsible for breaking the "caste" ties. Any individual of any "caste", even if he is performing his "caste" occupation, is not the same as he was in the past. His status today is of an employer/or employee. Desai explains, "The worker is an employee whatever is his caste. Even if one is taking up the caste occupation his status has drastically changed in independent India" (Ibid:1112). In the villages "caste hierarchy, purity" and "caste" exploitation is kept alive by the upper "caste/class" landlords with the help of political machinery and other private militant forces.

Today "caste" as an ascriptive category plays little part in determining "caste" status, but it is useful in obtaining life chances. Desai appropriately points out that the basis of unity and attitude has changed due to modern secular attributes such as wealth, income, education, and occupation. The individual today has far more choice in life partners, and occupations than was ever possible earlier in the "caste system". He explains that scholars" claim that the lower types of jobs are taken up by lower "caste" people only, are not completely true. Refuting this claim, Desai points out that almost all types of "castes" are doing many types of different jobs and occupations because "caste" and "class" do not coincide in a single coordinated stratum for the upper "castes", though such parallels may hold true for lower castes like "untouchables" (dalits not part of "caste" hierarchy). It seems that "untouchables" have the characteristics of both "caste" and "class". But they tend to view themselves as a "class" whereas others treat them as a "caste" (Ibid).

In recent years upper "caste/class" members have not hesitated to join any lucrative occupation without losing their "caste" identity. In the 1920s and 1930s Brahmans joined textile mills as weavers and spinners, and worked as police and constables

without feeling such jobs were below their dignity (Ibid). Today, with the increase in the price of hides, leather dealing is no longer the monopoly of untouchables. The Brahmins and people from other upper "castes" no longer feel any moral compunction about dealing in the leather or bone trade. However, there exists a large section of the population both in rural and urban areas, who belong to socially and educationally "backward classes" and whose "life chances" are bleak irrespective of their "caste" and religion. Desai maintains that it is the formation and growth of this section of Indian society, which has to be understood in order to identify the modern problems of "caste" or "class" conflicts. According to Desai, new production relations and income distribution have led to the tendency to take whatever one gets from whatever source, which, Desai points out, indicates the existence of a general malady contravening "caste" and religion. He writes:

> Both Hindus and Muslim communities, which would not like to be considered socially backward, have also presented (to the Commission) their cases for being considered socially and economically backward classes. They felt that if they did not they would be nowhere (Ibid:1107)

Reporting on the criteria for "backwardness" the Mandal Commisson report 1992 notes that "though caste was a good indicator of backwardness and had to be relied upon as one of the criteria, it could not be the sole criterion for determining backwardness" (Desai, 1991). Desai has pointed out that the Commission finally selected 11 indicators to determine "backwardness". These indicators were based on the social, educational and economic "backwardness" of the people.

Today the widening of "caste" interests is a recent phenomenon made possible by the modern postal and transport system. I have shown elsewhere that internal remittance from the Middle East has made it possible for lower "caste" men in South India to find brides from the Brahmin "caste" (Bahl, 1985). Sinha shows that "even in a caste ridden state like Bihar the major considerations for any action of the Bihar Congress are two. The first is money and the second is inherent in the typical realisation where "A" wants to stay in a position of power with the support of "B" who is looking for immediate gains. In this process "caste" sometimes recedes in the background" (*Times of India*, 30/8/1986). Another aspect of the same phenomenon can be seen in the example of Karnataka. In Karnataka belonging to the "backward caste" is good because it helps those "castes" take advantage of a Government patronage. One of the "castes" that had moved socially and economically forward and was not included in the "backward" list any more,

called for agitation and won their case; now other "backward" "castes" are resisting on the grounds that it is unfair to ask them to compete with these forward moving "castes" for educational opportunities and government jobs (Ibid, 9/11/86). By the year 2003 even Brahmins in Jaipur (Rajasthan) area have started demanding reservation in educational institutions as well as in government jobs for their social group.

These examples clearly indicate the complexity of the present day Indian social situation, where access to the economic gains is the primary object for all the "castes". It is this need which compels individuals to remain in their "castes" (meaning *jati* or sub-*jati*) because these days they can hope to get government patronage and educational benefits only by being associated with their "caste" names. Thus today "caste" is a useful channel in obtaining government protection and a consequent hope for social and economic mobility. Today in almost all over India, the organisation of political parties are on "caste" lines. It is no longer possible to say that "castes" coincide with "classes". But at the same time this coincidence does sometimes happen in areas where historical circumstances have developed differently. The most serious distortion in the understanding of Indian society has been the overriding importance given to the concept of "caste". Beteille points out that "when the basic groups in a social system are defined as being non-antagonistic, very little room is left for the analysis of either conflict or change. In fact, this conception of Indian society is only one step short of the popular 19th century view of it as integrated, harmonious and unchanging" (Betteille, 1969:18). We may say that in India today what we observe is not the same old historic "caste" system, for the terminology of "caste" has lost its content and meaning as it was understood in the 8th or 12th centuries. Today many Brahmins have adopted the names of "scheduled castes" (earlier sudras) in order to get reserved seats in jobs and educational institutions. In this case downward social mobility is important for economic upward mobility. Thus today there is no connection between those people who share names like Rajputs, Brahmans, or Chamar and their living conditions, occupations, or religious linkages. Often different patterns of social realities are lumped together because of similar nomenclature, which are sometimes adopted for the sake of social mobility. It should be pointed out that many royal families until the 5th century B.C.E. had come from shudra "caste". More shudras belonged to an unusually large number of royal families: Pals of Bengal, and Maratha royal houses (Pannikar,1955:9). Moreover, "caste" function and "caste" nomenclature have become so confused that today they are relatively useless as methodological tools. Therefore, reference to the

nomenclature of "caste" does not help to explain the extraordinary growth phenomenon of Indian society.

When colonial people of Portugal coined the word "caste," they included all sorts of meaning in it. So it may be permissible now for us to separate ourselves from the colonial meanings of "caste" and look afresh into modern social stratifications in India and their relation to material life. In other words one cannot understand these "caste" groups without identifying their "class" position in society today because there is a constant action and reaction of the natural and social environment on man and of man on his environment, each determining the other and being determined by it (Marx and Engles, 1976).

In this sense we find that in India the "caste system" was not the product of a single mode of production and does not indicate a particular set of relations of production. On the other hand, it does appear to have served as a mechanism of social division. The masses went on defining themselves in terms of their *jatis*, language, region and religion as no new idiom, with changed meaning and changing context of identities, developed in place of earlier "caste" names. After independence, the ruling "class" used these identities to keep the growing working class divided. Thus the consciousness of the masses remained clouded with local identities. The reservation policies for the "backward classes" and "caste" only increased the need for retaining those boundaries in view of poor economic opportunities for most of the sections of the Indian society. Sreenivasan writes:

Reservation has become a booty, a loot to be fought and scrambled for by every caste in the garb of class and community. Backwardness had become a prized goal. There is a frantic rush to be backward. Ironically, even those that are well off, well educated and well placed in government offices and even in ministries enter the competition to win the backward tag (1986).

With the effect of green and white revolution in areas like Gujarat many people from *dalit* and *adivasi* (original inhabitants) groups have been able to join the middle "class" economic status which is eroding the traditional social structure while also creating an ideological vacuum. Hindutva forces filled this vacuum by providing an ideology to the newly emerging middle class to gain respectability among Hindus of their present new economic status and security for their future, thus erasing earlier "caste" grouping. These *dalits* and *adivasi* middle class people also joined enthusiastically the ferocious violent orgy against Muslims in Gujrat riots 2002 (Ganesh and Mody, 2002, Gupta, 2002, Varshney, 2002). How should one explain such developments with the rigid

concept of "caste system"? In another instance, lower "caste" Muslims are trying to make alliances with *dalits* and other oppressed section of Indian society to obtain social justice and improve their living and working conditions (Sikand, 2002:3849–3857). These muslims are rejecting ritualism and other worldliness as propagated by conservative section of upper "caste" muslims, who control the mosques, and daragahs, in favour to improving their lives in the present material world based on Islam liberation theology and rejecting all power structures and icons. At the same time many "scheduled caste" people (earlier sudras) have also moved up the economic ladder due to green revolution. They are now the landlords and they refuse to join the cause of *dalit* movements to abolish "caste system", because their economic interest as landlords clash with landless *dalits*. Instead they see that their interest serve better by keeping "caste" hierarchy intact (Assadi, 2002). Can we understand these developments as simply based on the concept of "caste" as an unchanging and monolithic system? Is it possible to agree with Subaltern Studies scholars that "Subalterns are the embodiment of authentic culture" (Joseph, 1997:2517–2523) when so called "subalterns" themselves are trying hard to adopt brahmanic culture and using their new found economic power against the rest of the oppressed groups? During the 1990s period the Anthropological Suvery of India, undertook a national project on the "people of India" (making observation of 700 cultural "traits" within material and non-material range of culture) and its results highlight the cultural plurality of India concluding that "there is very high correlation of traits between Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribes, between Scheduled Tribes and Hindus, between Hindus and Sikhs and between Hindus and Muslims" (Singh, K.S.:1992). It is pointed out in the Survey that India comprises of 4,634 communities and each religious group is divided into multiple communities, more than 300 among Muslims, above 200 among Christians, and over 100 among the Sikhs and Jains. A more recent study (Bharucha, 2003) about the impact of identity politics on voter outcomes further confirms my suggestions in this essay. "With caste acting no longer as a traditional vote bank, masses no longer feel compelled to vote solely according to caste considerations and parties have begun to encompass a greater salability of broad based appeal" (Ibid: 552). This study points out that there is a perceptible decline in the association of votes with "caste/community" in recent times across most states, declining from high levels of "caste" association. Even in "caste" based states this type of voting also has declined since 1971 (Ibid: 554).

The Untouchables (also Called "*Dalit*") under Independent India

Today Untouchables/*Dalit* do not accept the logic of *karma* theory which is generally forced upon them; therefore, one should question this theory before accepting it as the basis of "caste". One can find impure Brahmans in India[8] who perform ritual ceremonies for the Untouchables (Hanumanthan, 1979). In fact it is not "caste" but the social and economic differences within the larger society, that hold Untouchables together. "Scheduled caste" members in India are now employed under the general rubric of "agricultural labour". The erosion of the tenancy and sharecropping system also added to the trend of increasing agricultural labour (Desai,1984). "Scheduled castes", who were formally tenants, were forced to become wage labourers. These landless labourers belonging to "scheduled caste" have rushed to the cities for more permanent employment in the industries, thus producing the phenomenon of large "scheduled caste" labour colonies in and around the cities. Nirmal Kumar Bose noted in his survey of Calcutta city in 1962–63:

> Actually, the superstructure that coheres the castes under the old order seems instead to be re-establishing itself in a new form . . . In Calcutta the economy is an economy of scarcity. Because there are not enough jobs to go around everyone clings as closely as possible to the occupations with which his ethnic [so called] group is identified and relies for economic support on those who seek his language, on his coreligionist, on members of his own caste and on fellow immigrants from the village or district from which he has come. By a backwash, reliance on earlier modes of group identities reinforces and perpetuates differences between ethnic groups (Bose, 1965:265).

These shifts from one form of labour to another have created a general mass of labour undifferentiated by occupational "castes" (Desai, 1984). The trends in the past century indicate that low "castes" increasingly tend to identify themselves with the general category of landless labourer rather than with their traditional "caste" occupation. Their condition over the period has deteriorated, which has created among them a consciousness of being an economically suffering social group. As pointed out by Rudolph and Rudolph:

> By acquiring a class consciousness that would unite a sense of economic exploitation with question of dignity and status, untouchable landless labourers might, given effective and united leadership and organisation and propitious circumstances, be welded into a revolutionary force (1969:151).

It is the religious differences between the upper and lower "castes" which make class consciousness (in the sense that lower

classes see themselves in opposition to the upper class) possible in the first place (Desai, 1984). Today "caste" is no longer sanctioned by religion or by the law. This fact has made Untouchables perceive modern Indian society and their own social conditions differently, and they have formed their own independent militant organisations to improve their plight. Therefore, "caste" in the present day India must be understood in relation to the formation of the "classes" rather the ancient values of the people. Recently, Mukherjee once again pointed out that the correlation between "caste and class" in colonial India is being transformed and not "caste in class":

The scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes – not to speak of the other backward classes – are ranged within the spectrum of the high, middle and low echelons of the class system in society. This is clearly manifest in the political alliances among these categories. Also in "cultural" matters, the differentiation is being growingly manifest within the evolved class categories of the scheduled castes and "tribes" (1999).

In a study of several villages in Rajasthan over a 10 year period (Sharma, 1997), it is found that the "upper" scheduled "castes" are inviting the upper echelon of the "high castes" to such life-cycle ceremonies as marriages, and the latter are heartily participating in the ceremonies (Ibid). Deliege's study of a Tamil Nadu village also shows that ritual pollution had lost much of its importance in inter-caste relations. He observed that the Pallars suffered much more from their lack of education, capital and family connections in their attempt to improve their conditions, but less from the hierarchical stigmas attached to the "caste" (Deliege, 1999). The breakdown of ritual hierarchy is even more evident in urban areas as illustrated for example by brahimn cooks serving under Schedule Caste ministers or officers. On the other hand, another study has shown the lower "castes" are raising their voices against the monolithic constructions of their "castes" (Sharma, 1997). For example, in the southern parts of Tamil Nadu the "weaker" sections of *dalits* are challenging the leadership of the usurping "stronger" segment of the *dalits*. Similar discontent is not unheard of in Maharashtra, Gujarat and even in Bihar (Santhals, Oraon-Mundas). Thus, according to Mukherjee:

Today class structure has cut across the caste hierarchy, forming new alliances and antagonisms. Indeed, it is in the process of withering away of a phenomenon along with the march of history or remains of an atavism, like the distinction between Jews and the Gentile, the Hindus and the Muslims. Yet, it is propped up, for their own gain, by the politicians and a brand of social scientists. Today in India caste in class depicts the reality, and not caste per se or caste and class (Mukherjee, 1999).

Similarly many lower "caste" muslims are challenging the control of upper "caste" muslims and demanding to make alliances with other oppressed groups of people and *dalits* transcending religious boundaries (Sikand, 2002). It is not surprising as one observer pointed out that:

under the new dispensation of parliamentary politics the OBCs (other "backward classes") have got opportunities to send their own "caste" people to legislature both at centre and state levels. Gradually, they have emerged as a major force in political arena. Hence, it is inevitable that they should be claiming a share in the control over administrative machinery to which is attached a high social status, handsome economic gains and political linkages (Chaudhry, 1990).

Dalit as well as other oppressed social groups got a powerful impetus to the search for identity and equality, earlier through the bhakti movement, and later under the colonial Census, getting jobs in urban areas and military, and by conversion to Christianity. Under independent India, many oppressed groups sought their identity in a range of relationships to Hinduism and at various distances from it. Some people from this category moved to metropolitan areas in the 1970s, while other sections had to contend with the locality. The land reforms also helped in creating new categories of identities. For example, "Billavas, a toddy tapper community was able to claim an identity as traders, businessmen, politicians, hoteliers, import export businessmen, and all of them becoming part of the merchant capitlaist class" (Assadi 2002). This merchant class is forming a social coalition with Hindutva forces to control local economy against the "outsiders" (multinational corporations, globalization and so on), thus strengthening Hindutva hold in the area.

Today the *Dalit* movement in various forms has developed to a point that it is able to produce a large literature to create, reinforce and strengthen *dalit* identity. But ironically, even when they are resisting upper "castes", there remain internal divisions, "caste" sentiments and "caste" ideology among *dalits* themselves. In this division differential access to power and position has also contributed to this phenomenon (Upadhaya, 2003). For example, "Gujarat has a schedule of 30 "castes". There is a sub-regional distribution of these castes, such that any one local area includes only about half a dozen of them, and any one village includes hardly two or three, sometimes, even one, of them. Every dalit "caste", called 'jnati,''nati','nat','jati', 'jat' in Gujrati, in an endogamous unit" (Shah, 2000). Moreover, there is Untouchability among the Untouchables also (Ibid) and political leaders are busy in providing for reservation quotas within the quota for *dalits*. One can find that in Gujarat dalits have created a hierarchy among themselves

on the model of "caste" hierarchy which consists on the one end, *garodas* (priests), mendicants (*sadhu*) and, on the other end *bhangis* at the bottom of the hierearchy, who are most underprivileged (Ibid). In spite of all these divisions and differentiations, the *dalit* movement in India has been able to gain a level of momentum at the beginning of the 21st century that it got hearing at the UN world conference on Race.

The Role of the Capitalist Class in Maintaining "Caste" Division

The Subaltern Studies spokesperson Chakrabarty rejects the idea that the state or the capitalist classes have any role in putting obstacles in the formation of working class consciousness (in the sense of solidarity against the capitalist class). He writes "Sympathatic observers of the working class often explain the weakness of worker solidarity in terms of the seeds of division deliberately sown among workers by interested people from the ruling classes naturally including the employers (Chakrabarty, 1989:198). Chakrabarty thinks that such explanations are based on a crude theory of manipulation and conspiracy (Ibid: 199).

Deploying post-structuralist arguments, the Subaltern Studies scholars reject the concept of "class" and the related categories. This has enabled them to get away from the older frameworks of colonialism and nationalism within which Indian history has been studied. Subalternists try to reveal India instead as "a multiplicity of changing positions which are then treated as effects of power relations" (Ibid). They also disparage Marxist and social historians" concern with capitalism as a "system' of political economy and coercive instrumentalities" (Ibid). But I maintain that the role of the colonial state and capitalism in the formation of "caste" identities cannot be easily wished away by denying its existence.

Capital certainly has a stake in the forms of working class culture. It has a stake in labour availability, willingness of workers to labour under conditions rational for the production of surplus, and workers having a suitable level of skill and aptitude. Thus working class culture is also the form in which labour is reproduced. These processes require continual management as is clear by the beginning of the 21st century (Bahl, forthcoming, Henderson, 1991)**.** In order to create the pool of available recruits, capital has to control the social reproduction of the working class. For example, Henderson's (1991) historical study highlights the process of how capital with the help of the state, religion, ideology, media, and medical system prepares labor to accept its fate while simultaneously developing a culture appropriate for capitalist

exploitation. The significance of the whole network of social welfare can be understood in a similar context. Wallerstein's observation is revealing in this regard:

> Indeed, so much were employers of wage labour unenthusiastic about proletarianization that, in addition to fostering the gender/age division of labour, they also encouraged, in their employment pattern and through their influence in the political arena, recognition of defined ethnic groups, seeking to link them to specific allocated roles in the labour force, with different levels of real remuneration for their work. Ethnicity created cultural crust which consolidated the patterns of semiproletarian household structures. That the emergence of such ethnicity also played a political-divisive role for the working classes has been a political bonus for the employers but not, I think, the prime mover in this process (1987:27–28).

Wallerstein has correctly pointed out that the capitalists may not be the prime movers of divisiveness among the working masses, but capitalists are also never neutral in this process. Besides the issue of divisiveness among the working masses, capital's requirements are frequently themselves undergoing transformation. Since the process of reproduction is always a contested transformation and capitalists are also divided by competition with one another, they are sometimes compelled to rely on traditional forms of labour management (Elbaum and Wilknson, 1979:279–303). It is suggested in a study that workers' organisation in the context of the weakening competitive position of the British steel industries contributed significantly to the survival of archaic structures of production in Britain as compared with the US (Ibid). The development of industrial capitalism failed to eliminate all such "traditional" groups as craftsmen and even outworkers, but the relations between different groups of workers (craftsmen and less skilled workers) have also played a crucial role in determining the structure of the division of labour, which emerges from technical change (Ibid).

Working class culture is formed in the struggle between capital's demand for a particular form of labor power and the search for a secure location within this relation of dependency. The outcome of such struggle depends on what ideological and political forces are in play at a particular historical time, as well as on the specific needs of the capitalist. Sometimes capitalists may require hierarchical division of labour as modes of management. In determining the structure of these hierarchies, formal and informal struggles by strategic groups of workers often play a crucial role, particularly when capitalists are divided by intensive competition. Elbaum and Wilkinson explain that mule spinners, who were supposed to be crushed out of existence by the transition from the common mule to the self-acting mule, remained a strong occupational cat-

egory. Despite the technical deskilling of the jobs, they continued to perform a crucial supervisory function within the labour process (Elbaum and Wilkinson and Zeitlin, 1979:227–230). This continuity, as pointed out by Elbum et al., cannot be understood solely as resulting from the organised strength of the workers in maintaining their strategic position, but rather as a consequence of the weakness of capitalists who, divided by competition, had to rely on traditional forms of labour management.

Veeraraghavan and Thankappan (1990) have also pointed out in their study of Madras Presidency up to 1918, that:

the struggles of the workers provoked an immediate response on the part of the employers and the state. The capitalists, almost wholly European, reacted to the struggles by recruiting strike breakers. The State as an employer was no different and went further by inducing convicts to break strikes. The colonial state was ever ready to go to the assistance of the capitalist whenever the latter looked to them for help.

In my study (Bahl, 1995) of the Tata Iron and Steel Company (TISCO, 1880–1946) I find that the formation of the TISCO labour force was the product of two important processes. These were, first, British colonial forest and agrarian policies, and second, control mechanisms of Tata management. The role of the colonial state and Tata management proved decisive in giving a distinctive character to the TISCO labor force in its initial formation. The colonial forest policies created migratory workers ready to be absorbed into the emerging steel industry. The agrarian policies further helped in keeping the large number of surplus wage labourers floating. The frequent famines in the area, a result of colonial policies, increased the number of such wage labourers. TISCO, therefore, never suffered labor shortage and this helped keep the wages down.

The Tata company was well aware of the possibilities of large strikes since it had followed the United States Steel Corporation in its structure of industry and management. It had the advantage of securing advanced technology and could successfully adopt the ideas and practices that other advanced countries had developed. It could lower its production cost by cutting down on labour as well as increasing efficiency by mechanisation. Through the manipulation of working hours and overtime, TISCO further decreased production costs. The lower wage rates in India helped TISCO reduce production costs. In fact, by 1923 TISCO had achieved a lower cost of producing pig iron than Western industries.

Aware of the consequences of its policies, Tata management from the beginning created an authoritarian control mechanism to keep its labour force divided both at the point of production and of reproduction. The company tried to foster division by hiring workers

from different "castes", religions and regions. The discrimination between the covenanted and the uncovenanted workers extended to every sphere including wages, bonuses, benefits, and other welfare activities. It was reflected in the construction of houses in ways that gave graphic expression to division and hierarchy. Every care was taken in planning the houses for the Europeans to provide all comforts, even though most were single. Conversely, in the allotment of quarters to Indian unskilled or skilled workers, no notice was taken of the number of family members. There was, therefore, extreme congestion in these quarters and most of the unskilled were housed in mud huts. The scarcity of water often rendered the hut settlements unsanitary slums. Medical facilities were available only to the workers not to their families, and this added to their expenses. Only the well paid workers made use of the education facilities; the number of school children from unskilled workers was nominal at best. The shops and co-operatives sold goods primarily for the consumption of better-paid employees. TISCO subsidised the selling of grain inside the works, but this was discontinued in order to crush the workers" movement in the strike of 1920. With TISCO being the landlord, and having a hold on public services as well as over the government representative (only one was appointed) who lived in Jamshedpur, it could easily threaten with the support of the colonial machinery, to stop all public facilities. This control mechanism of the Tata Company cannot be ignored when attempting to understand the making and shaping of the TISCO working class (or if one is looking for in so called "caste") consciousness.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to show that India today is a "class" (a dynamic one) divided society. People use "caste" identities (a more appropriate term would be local identities) because these have not been replaced by a new nomenclature. The "caste" function and "caste" nomenclature tend to become so confused that they are relatively useless as methodological tools. Local identities such as, *jatis*, or the connection with village or with a particular local sect, were retained as they were useful in getting government patronage, jobs, and entrance into educational institutes. These identities got reinforced because of reduced opportunities for most sectors of Indian society. Thus people's consciousness about their belonging to a social group remained clouded with local identities which are erroneously seen by social scientists as a social stratification based on the "caste system". In recent riots in India this error was reinforced when the riots were called "caste" conflicts

rather than a "class" conflicts. The lack of opportunities for education and employment, and not their "class/caste" identities, have made lower middle class students and other poor sectors of the society react violently at the reservation system for the "scheduled castes". During the colonial period "caste" identities were reinforced both by the colonial government and the capitalists for their own vested interests. The Indian working class, much admonished for retaining its "caste" values, was struggling within a particular configuration of historical forces. These historical forces were equally responsible for reinforcing the "caste/class" values of the Indian working class. Today all political parties are operating by using "caste" votes and further reinforcing these identities. Even when some lower "castes" groups are able to achieve economic mobility they do not wish to abolish the "caste" identities. Instead, they try to become as oppressive as Brahmins are towards the lower classes and "caste" groups. Therefore, the responsibility of social scientists is to look underneath the appearances of social stratification so that they do not reinforce inegalitarian systems in the name of dismantling them. Following two examples should make us think about the issue differently.

A research study about Punjabi diaspora in England shows that younger generation, which is influenced by "secular" institutions in the host society (England) despite resistance from the older generation, are changing their views about "caste" hierarchies. The younger Punjabis who did not experience "caste" identities in their daily life learnt about it only from their parents and not by daily social interaction with other people (Judge, 2002). In another example, Government of India's home resource ministry has funded a project for a three month course in "pourohitya" – priesthood, specialist in conducting Hindu rituals. The first of these courses ended in May 9, 2002 at Sanskrit Sansthan in Lucknow. The academy ran these courses through 100 centers in 60 cities with 3,000 students of which over 40 percent are *dalits* and other oppressed groups. These graduate purohit *-dalit* and other oppressed social groups, all the same – would do pujas and perform marriage, and other ceremonies, thus possibly easing oppresssive rigidity of the varna system (Sau, 2002). These two examples further suggest that so called "caste" identities can be erased by creating such social conditions where everyday social interaction is based on secular identities, as well as by making structural changes through educational institutions. It means that we need to dismantle cultural imperialism as much as economic imperialism. The Portuguese coined the word "caste" when they colonised India before the British. Similarly, the terms "adivasi", "adimjati", and "janjati" now used in Indian languages for tribals

are not originally Indian. They are translations of English terms introduced by the British. Earlier there was no concept of tribe and people used to refer these so called tribal people with specific names, bhil, naikda, kokna. A.M. Shah, a renown anthropologist, explains that nomenclature "tribe" was also created by British colonial administration, influenced by the evolutionist and diffusionist theories of 18th and 19th century anthropology in Britain (Shah, 2003). Earlier in 1930, a renowned sociologist, G. S. Ghurye challenged this nomenclature. Is it not time we coin a new terminology for modern Indian social stratification that includes class stratification as well, so that we can develop better strategies to attain socio-economic equality?

Notes

* This essay is adapted from my forthcoming: *What Went Wrong With History from Below: Reinstating Human Agency as Human Creativity.* I thank my colleagues Rifaat Abou El Haj, Dan Doyle, and Richard Sahn for their valuable suggestions.

Note: Due to the nature of the argument, the words caste, class and identity are best read throughout this paper as "caste", "class", and "identity".

[1] Interestingly African Americans are now demanding to be compensated for forced slavery as are the Native Indians in Canada. Churches are getting bankrupt as they are asked to pay penalty for demonising native Indians to fufill the state agenda under white imperialism. By using Chakrabarty's approach and blaming one's cultural attitude only Native Indian and African Americans would not have gained any form of justice from the plunder, coercion, brutalization of white imperialist masters.

[2] Mukherjee, 1999. Mukherjee cited the following works in support of his argument Jolly, 1896; Oldenberg, 1897; Senart, 1927.

[3] Uma Chakravorty "Toward a Historical Sociology of Stratification in Ancient India. Evidence from Budhist Sources" *Economic and Political Weekly* March 2, 1985. A recent article on "Legal Invention of an Artifact: Birth of Identity in Asian America" Anurima Banerji, *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 5, 2002, has brought out the process how governmental laws and immigration policies helped in creating a new category of race and their identities which are based on some fictional idea. But once these ideas become law and people start following it that fiction becomes a reality, making people feel certain identities and prejudices. Similarly "caste" can also be seen as a fictional ritual idea which became slowly more real when people started treated each other on that basis.

[4] The concept of incarnation means the following: one is born in a particular "caste" due to one's karma in previous birth. Only way to improve one's chances to have caste mobility is to religiously observe one's "caste" duties in the present birth and then one would have a chance to be born in a better "caste" group in next birth.

[5] Habib explains: "The possessors of zamindari rights were not possessors of a visible article of property, like any other, but of a title to a constant share in the product of society. This right could not have dropped from the sky, and must have been created by social forces. The traditions show that first a settlement by members of a "caste" or clan,

perhaps dominating over peasants settled earlier, or perhaps peasants themselves. Then another clan appears, drives them out or establishes its dominions over them: and then still another. At some stage, if not from the beginning, the dominion of the victorious "caste" crystalizes into zamindari rights, held by various leading members of it over different portions of the subjugated territory. It appears that this process continued down the Mughal times and we have other sources besides the traditions to tell us that it did not end there" (Habib, 1963, 159–60). "The territorial division of the zamindari possession among clans and castes was a result of the way the zamindari right had come into existence. It was historically created. It would be mistaking the nature of its creation if one supposed that it was systematic. A clan might subdue a piece of territory, but it might not be able to drive away all men belonging to the clan previously dominant, and some of the latter might continue to hold their own in enclaves and corners. A still greater irregularity would be introduced whenever the zamindari right became a full-fledged article of property and so became subject to sale and purchase, as it was throughout the Mughal times" (Ibid: 162).

[6] The term *dalit* was first used by Jotirao Phule 1826–1890, but it became popular only in the 1960s with the emergence of Marathi literature and *Dalit* Panthers in Maharashtra, later by its use in the mass media. It seems *dalit* term is used for variety of "caste" name groups. Before the use of the term *dalit* there were other terms which were used for this section of society: Gandhi invented the term *harijan*, Phule used the term shudra to denote non-Brahman "caste" including untouchables. *Dalit* leaders also invented the Adi movement to mean original people, to separate their identity from Brahmans and other "caste" Hindus. The term dalit emerged as signifying the reality of oppression of and resistance by these groups. Some people prefer to call *shoshit* because women and many other untouchables and tribal workers cannot be included in the concept of *dalit.* More recently people want to call these people as neo Budhist to include all oppressed groups (Upadhya, 2003).

[7] In 1998 a report of the findings of the Archaeological Survey of India prepared under the guidance of Dr. S. Singh (employing 500 Sociologists and 3,000 research scholars working among 4,000 communities in India) explodes the myths surrounding "caste" and religious beliefs, attitudes and behaviours in India. It would be interesting to know the details when they are finally available. More recently Sukanta Bhattachaya's findings in a case study of a village of Burdwan concludes that there exists a class structure at every level of so called "caste" hierarchy "Caste, Class and Politics in West Bengal/Case Study of a Village in Burdwan" *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 18, 2003.

[8] Hanumanthan wrote that "there is a Muruka temple where the Antis or non-Brahman priests were performing pujas (worship) to the idol for a long time. At that time devotees could go very near the idol and even touch it. But when it became famous, Brahmans priests came into the field and devotees were kept at a distance from the deity. On personal enquiry it has been revealed that at Samayapuram (near Tiruchirapalli), Palani, Tirupati and Tiruccentur, originally there were only non-Brahman priests who were later on replaced by Brahman priests when the temples became wealthy and brought under the Religious Endowment Board. The original priests i.e. the Parayaras are stationed some two furlongs away from the temple, worshipping the goddess in their own way and acting as soothsayers to the devotees." (Ibid. footnote 62 on p 81).

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