

Western Foundations of the Caste System

Edited by
Martin Fárezek, Dunkin Jalki,
Sufiya Pathan and Prakash Shah



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Martin Fárez • Dunkin Jalki • Sufiya Pathan • Prakash Shah
Editors

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1

Introduction: Caste Studies and the Apocryphal Elephant

Martin Fárez, Dunkin Jalki, Sufiya Pathan
and Prakash Shah

‘When thinking about India it is hard not to think of caste’, said Nicholas Dirks as the opening statement of his book *Castes of Mind* (Dirks 2001). Even though the book seemed to indicate some reservations about such a situation, neither the book, nor anything that has followed, has altered the situation. The study of India across disciplines has been significantly shaped and driven by the study of caste. Caste is still considered the ‘master

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key to unlocking the Indian world' (Guha 2013, 21). References to caste in literature about India go back at least to the sixteenth century. Thus, it certainly has a well-established lineage of scholarly interest and research.

Yet, there is a fundamental peculiarity in the status of caste studies today. There is a clear consensus about certain matters pertaining to the caste system. For instance, scholars are unanimous in their agreement on at least the following three matters: (a) the existence of the immoral caste system across India (or as some prefer, South Asia), albeit with some regional variations; (b) its persistence, or the failure to eradicate it in spite of concerted attempts by social reformers (from the Buddha's time down to the present!), the Indian State and any number of non-governmental organisations; and (c) its negative impact on several parameters of social justice.

The peculiarity emerges, however, when one notices that there is no consensus on a number of matters that cannot but form the basis for any understanding of the-caste-system. For instance, scholars have not reached any consensus on: (a) how castes are different from other kinds of human groups (i.e. how a group can be recognised or distinguished as a caste) and how they are to be classified; (b) how the caste system came into being and what sustains it; (c) the relation of the caste system to ordering social hierarchy; (d) the constitutive and necessary properties of the caste system; and (e) its relationship to social conflict.

While we cannot take up here the task of elucidating all of the fundamental disagreements in relation to caste, here is a brief overview of some of the basic and persistent problems that have cropped up in caste studies.

Nature of Caste and Its Classification

The problems over caste classification are at least as old as the first censuses conducted by the British government in India. In his *Memorandum on the Census of British India of 1871–72*, presented to the British Parliament in 1875, Henry Waterfield noted as follows:

Great pains have been taken by the writers of the several reports in the classification of the population according to caste. The result, however, is

not satisfactory, owing partly to the intrinsic difficulties of the subject, and partly to the absence of a uniform plan of classification, each writer adopting that which seemed to him best suited for the purpose. (Waterfield 1875)

For instance, the census officials of the nineteenth century found it next to impossible to distinguish between caste, tribe and nationality. Faced with such an obstacle, the census takers often incorporated all these categories as variations of caste in their data collection. In some places, caste was classified purely on the basis of occupation groups (for instance, in Madras). The classification of the employment groups as it was proposed was certainly influenced by background theories of caste, but the data collectors simply found it easier to sidestep the questions of trying to figure out which of the many group divisions respondents offered could be taken to be their caste. For some census officials it was impossible to map the innumerable caste divisions in any coherent fashion along the line of the four divisions, which were held to be the 'principal castes' or *varnas*.

One would assume that things have evolved a great deal since 1871–1872 (when the first all-India census was attempted), with all the scholarly attention that caste studies have received. Waterfield's problems, we would expect, have been overcome and it is a different set of challenges that now bog caste studies. Surprisingly, that is not the case. In reviewing the Indian government's decision to re-include caste as a category for census data collection Samarendra raised the alarm once again. 'Colonial census officials, working with concepts of *varna* and *jati*, struggled unsuccessfully to define and classify these into castes on a single pan-India list, where each caste had to be discreet, homogeneous and enumerable.' And yet, he noted further, we have 'embark[ed] on a new caste census without having addressed many of these challenges' (Samarendra 2011, 51).

Debates about how to understand *varna* and its relation to *jati* are still rife. Just like Waterfield and his colleagues did in the 1870s, we continue to debate the value of what is considered Manu's classification of Indian society into the four *varnas*. We are yet to decide upon what the proper unit of caste is. Is it caste or sub-caste? What sounds to any Indian

language user who employs the word *jati*, as common sense is not even a half-serious question when we discuss caste in English and other European languages. That is, the referents of ‘jati’ and ‘caste’ are not uniform in all contexts where they are nonchalantly used as synonyms today in European languages (Fárek 2015; Jalki and Pathan 2015). A common usage of *jati* in Kannada, such as, *marada jati* and *jati naayi*, would constitute a category mistake when translated ‘literally’ into, say, English: ‘caste of a tree’, ‘a caste dog’. To make these expressions meaningful in translation, *jati* has to be understood as ‘type’, ‘category’, or ‘class’. Here is Samarendra again:

[I]n vernacular literature, we come across the Lohar and the Sonar jati (professional communities), the Maratha and the Bangla jati (linguistic or cultural communities), the Hindu and the Mussalman jati (putatively, religious communities), the Munda and the Oraon jati (communities presently registered in the government documents as tribes), the Vaidya and the Bhumihar jati (communities which are endogamous), *mardon ki jat* and *aurat jat* (community of men and community of women), etc. Jati thus denotes professional, regional, linguistic, religious, only locally recognisable and even gendered communities. (Samarendra 2011, 52)

Thus, *jati* refers to an entity that is neither discreet nor homogeneous. As a result, we are bound to fail in our attempts to use this as a unit of caste classification. Those who favour *varna* as the mode of classification face an even worse fate.¹ Not only is it impossible to get any clear correlation between sets of *jatis* and *varnas*, with *jatis* constantly disputing which *varna* they belong to, the added complication is that we currently have no idea how to deal with the textual sources which were taken to be the source of the theory of *varna*. For instance, there is no consensus on the status of the *Manava-dharmashastra* or other such texts, which formed the main textual corpus supporting the theory of *varna* classification as the caste system in early Indological study. While some census officials suggested Manu had simply invented the four *varna* description and

¹ For a discussion about how *gotra* further complicates these matters, especially in relation to seeing castes as endogamous groups see, Jalki and Pathan (2015).

nothing like it had ever existed, other Orientalist scholars were compelled to discredit particular sections of these texts as being interpolations driven by later political agendas.

Current scholarship, however, has raised a whole new set of questions. It is now well-established that the nature of these texts and their role in the parent culture has been misunderstood (Balagangadhara 2005; Mani 1998). These texts are neither prescriptive nor do they hold any kind of sacred value nor do they have any pan-Indian significance. All of these assumptions were, however, prerequisites in the Orientalist arguments relying on these texts as the sources sanctioning the caste system.

What this basically means is that (a) we have been unable to say what caste is, or what kind of group is a caste ever since empirical studies about the caste system began; (b) we have simply been unable to find any reliable unit of classification for the caste system; (c) neither empirical research, nor textual sources are in a position to settle the difficulties in the area of classification of caste.

Origin and Propagation

In the introduction to an unpublished report on a project undertaken in 2001 to investigate some of the assumptions about the caste system, in Karnataka (India), S. N. Balagangadhara pointed out the following:

That the 'caste system' emerged as a full-blown social system, simultaneously all over India, some 3500 years ago is a sociological impossibility. It is equally unlikely that this system emerged simultaneously in several places and converged. To argue any of these is to transform 'the caste system' into a miraculous social organisation. No known (or conceivable) social mechanism can help explain any of the above theses. The only reasonable hypothesis is to assume that it emerged in some place at some time.

This assumption, however, has to solve many difficult questions if it has to play the role of a premise in a research study. How did it propagate itself? Because we are talking about 'the caste system' (in the singular), somebody or something must have enabled its propagation. The possibility that there

is no one single caste system, but many caste systems need not be entertained, at least until those who call upon to do so prove it.

If we now consider India of some 4000 years ago (the famous Purusha Sukta, the favourite piece of all Orientalists, Indologists, leftists, etc., is dated thereabouts), with vast distances separating the cities from each other, with huge differences in languages, it is a prerequisite (almost) that some central political, or administrative system imposed this system on society. We know this was not the case. Without such an imposition, however, there is no way, on heaven or on earth, that a system with the same four varnas, with the same four names (with an identical 'caste' of untouchables or whatever else), with an identically structured set of practices could come into being from the crest of the Himalayas in the North to the tip of Kanyakumari in the South. The vastness of the region, its multiplicity of languages and dialects, its diversity in practices make it impossible to conceive anything else based on what we know about human beings, societies, social organisations, etc. Yet, it is an established fact that neither the origin nor the propagation of 'the caste system' (let alone its reproduction) was due to the existence and efforts of a centralised system.

Instead of asking the question about the origin and propagation of 'the caste system,' the mainstream opinion on 'the caste system' simply assumes that 'the caste system' 'somehow' came into being (*deus ex machina*, as it were), somehow propagated itself, and that it holds the Indian culture as a hostage.

While it seems counter-intuitive for us today to entertain the suggestion that current theories of the origin and propagation of the caste system in India are simply untenable, this was not the case a 100 years ago. For instance, an anonymous reviewer of Elphinstone's *The History of India* (1841) notes:

The division into castes, . . . especially the relation of the Brahminical caste to the inferior orders of society, the more intimately we study its genius and the laws to which it was submitted, becomes a still more curious and inexplicable problem. It cannot be satisfactorily accounted for by the vulgar notion of an hereditary priesthood, a race perhaps of more highly civilised strangers, who have settled in the midst of barbarous hordes, have

imparted the arts and conveniences of life, have assumed or been welcomed under the character of messengers from heaven, and have therefore retained a kind of mediatorial power between man and his gods; who have kept the ministrations in the temples and the custody of the sacred in their own hands, and maintained their dominion by the wealth and power which they have acquired from the homage or the fears of men.

It is by no means unintelligible that a sacerdotal aristocracy thus founded should maintain its own high character in the estimation of men by the severest discipline towards its members. . . . But the establishment of this singularly artificial political system over the vast region throughout which it seems to have prevailed in India constitutes at once the distinction and the difficulty. That one family should be invested in spiritual superiority, and that family grow into a sacerdotal tribe, which should preserve its sanctity among other tribes; that a conquering nation should bring its priesthood with it, and with its own enlarged dominion enlarge the sphere of their priestly dominion; that, even in a limited kingdom like that of Egypt, this growth of a foreign or a native hereditary hierarchy should take place – all this, though embarrassing, does not appear beyond our conception. But the Brahminical order appears as a nation within a nation, a nation not limited within narrow boundaries, but spreading over what we may almost call a continent. That society throughout so extensive a region – apparently without a capital or central government – as far as history, we will not say, but, tradition teaches, no single kingdom or republic, but an aggregate of numerous independent states and sovereignties – should thus fall into the same orderly subdivision of the people; that one class should set themselves apart as warriors, another as merchants and artisans, a third submit to the degradation of being, we say not slaves, but altogether a base and inferior class; and that over and aloof from all should stand this one gigantic hierarchy, stern to the utmost haughtiness and ferocity in the assertion of its own privileges, and at the same time severe in the exaction of a life, three parts of which were to be passed in austerity, under the humblest discipline, under a stern rejection of all the enjoyments and luxuries of earth; that one class should possess itself of a legislative authority strong enough to enact, whether by absolute edict or by admitted usage, these enduring decisions; and the others acquiesce, in unrepining patience, in the irrevocable order by which they were doomed to a subordinate position – (the pride of caste, which, according

both to Mr. Elphinstone and Mr. Wilson, adheres to the lowest, was probably the slow growth of a corporate spirit, or of party attachment): – all this seems to require a vast series of time for its entire and unquestioned development. (Anonymous 1841, 381–383)

There are many interesting aspects to this quote, but we limit ourselves here to raising one question in relation to it: what was a common sense question in relation to proposed theories of caste in the nineteenth century has turned into an unthinkable question to raise in the twenty-first century, in spite of the fact that no one has answered it. Can such a development really mark the growth of scientific knowledge in an area of study?

The only point of defence that was raised by Orientalists was to systematically date every reference to what they saw as the caste system in classical Indian texts as an extrapolation, which must have come at a much later date than the original dating of the text itself. Preferences for the dating of the extrapolations usually then went to periods of more consolidated pan-Indian sovereignties in order to ascribe to the king and the reigning political class the power of the central authority which was responsible for creating and upholding the system. Such an account has to then find some reasoning to account for why the ruling class would collude with the Brahmins, the authors of the caste system, in establishing such a system; what possible benefits there were to creating and upholding such a system; and why the system outlived the demise of these kingdoms with the onset of any number of invasions, rebellions and the fracturing into smaller kingdoms. In other words, conjecture rules the roost and, as the next section shows, current research does not provide adequate answers to any of these questions.

Relationship to Ordering Social Hierarchy

The quotes above already raise suspicion about how a small group of Brahmins, who are considered the prime motivators of the caste system, gained such success across the country. What pan-Indian institutions did

they have at their disposal? Who conferred such power and authority on one set of people? What made this currently extremely diverse group across India into one set in the first place?

Several scholars like Declan Quigley, Susan Bayly and Sumit Guha, do not go along with the idea that the Brahmins engineered the caste system. They are more inclined to say that state power colluded with dominant elements in the society, in some cases Brahmins, but also others in different territories, in order to generate a regionally varied caste system. Such scholarship calls for detailed historical investigation rather than making blanket assumptions about Brahminical dominance. However, such studies raise a fundamental problem. They cannot tell us why they are studies of the *caste system* at all.

For instance, Guha proposes that the Portuguese and later British colonial categories of caste were overlaid on to existing social categories. These were ‘rigid birth derived categories’ with ‘mental and physical traits associated with them’ that were native to the land and extremely ancient (Guha 2013, 25–26). He discredits the idea that a Brahminical class systematically coerced people into taking up these categories since such a hypothesis does not explain how birth-derived hierarchies (or the caste system) make their appearance even within the Semitic religions as they developed in India, especially Islam. Thus, Guha, endorsing the claims of Susan Bayly and to some extent Declan Quigley before him, presents a picture of a ‘complex’ system of state power and caste categorisation with many regional variations, but native to the land nonetheless.

But here is the question Guha fails to answer. He finds evidence for social categorisations based on birth in ancient South Asia. There is, however, ample evidence all over the world for social categorisations based on birth in the same period (see, De Roover and Fárez’s contributions to this volume). What makes such categorisations evidence for caste system in India, but not in England for instance? Again, this is a question that did preoccupy the nineteenth-century writers on caste, has not found any adequate answers and yet has been buried in current discourse on caste. For instance, Reginald Heber, who served as Bishop of Calcutta (1814–1822) raised many of these questions and it was far from clear to him how caste was different from certain customs in Spain, America or the Western

world in general. Discussing the kinds of requests that Indian Christians made in relation to separate seating for some groups in Church and other such matters, Heber said the following:

Now it is desirable to know whether these are insisted on as *religious* or as merely *civil* distinctions; whether as arising from a greater supposed purity and blessedness in the soodras over the pariahs; or whether they are not badges of nobility and ancient pedigree, such as those which in Spain, even among the poorest classes, divide the old Spaniards and Castilians from persons of mixed blood; – and in the United States of North America entirely excluded negroes and mulattoes, however free and wealthy, from familiar intercourse with the whites; also whether the Christians of high Caste adhere to these distinctions, as supposing that there is any *real value* in them, or merely out of fear to lose the society and respect of their neighbours and relations? . . . We all know, that in Europe, persons of noble birth or great fortune claim and possess precedence in our churches, and I have already observed, that the Whites take the same priority to themselves in America. But there is no reason for this but custom, inasmuch as a gentleman and a beggar are as much equal in God's sight as a soodra and a pariah. The reason why the Christian gentleman conforms to these rules is, because, by acting differently, he would lose influence with those of his own degree in society, and a soodra may say the same thing, and does say it. (Widow [of Reginald Heber] 1830, 2:376–377, italics in the original)

If Guha were to say that merely the nomenclature changes but the caste system, or ethnic categorisations, in some form or the other has characterised human societies across the world, he fails to address the question why colonial officials did not recognise the caste system in any form back home but saw it in clear terms in India. Obviously, the colonial authors writing about 'the caste system' saw the Indian social organisation as significantly different from that in Europe. These officials and Orientalists did not see it as a regionally varied system of birth-derived social categories emerging out of collusion between state power and locally dominant groups. Were they hallucinating when they saw the caste system as the rigid hierarchical structure that characterised Indian society? Were they simply blind to the genuine social organisation of caste? Or were they lying in order to create a picture of depravity

of the East? The studies that develop such accounts of caste seem compelled to attribute either cognitive deficiency or dishonesty to generations of Western authors.

Properties of the Caste System

None of the intensity of these debates recedes when we consider any of the other points of contention mentioned above. The properties of the caste system and which of them should be considered fundamental properties, which subsidiary properties, or even what property should be considered *the* constitutive property along which caste may be organised, opens a veritable minefield of dispute. From endogamy connected with the concept of race (G. S. Ghurye) to different conceptualisations of the role of ritual purity (M. N. Srinivas, Louis Dumont), to occupational division, to those who propose the presence of any one of a whole list of properties as sufficient (Sumit Guha), to those who seek an amalgamation of all but in no particular order or intensity (Declan Quigley), the field remains wide open with nothing to recommend one approach over another.

Should the lack of consensus about properties be considered unimportant? For instance, for long centuries before the rise of chemistry taught us that water is essentially H_2O , we knew that it is wet and colourless, that it quenches thirst, that it is essential for the growth of plants, etc. However, it is one thing to say that we can go about with (or without) caste in society without studying its properties and another to say that we do not require any understanding of the constitutive properties of the caste system in order to study it. Let us imagine that a colourless, tasteless liquid, which seems at first sight to be water, is discovered on Mars. Would it require chemical testing to establish whether this liquid is constituted as H_2O before we could say without a doubt that we have indeed discovered water on Mars? The scientific community could only agree that this was indeed the crucial test required. Similarly, if we ever hope to answer the questions raised in the previous section about how to distinguish the caste system from

other social systems in other parts of the world, we must be able to do more than to relegate it to a matter of nomenclature. That is, one cannot resolve the matter by saying – the caste system is a social system; the social system of the South Asian region is the caste system. This is a classic example of the fallacy of *petitio principii*. What is the ‘social system’ that is being referred to and how does one describe this ‘social system’ in terms other than the explanans, that is, ‘social system’ and its supposed equivalent in India or South Asia, the ‘caste system’?

As the quotation from Heber in the previous section indicates, these are not in any way new questions. While these questions have a long and complex trajectory, we can give only a very brief sense of the problems with this area here. One of the major hurdles in the discussion is that of all the properties ascribed to the caste system, none of them are unique to it. Hierarchy, purity-pollution, endogamy, occupational communities and any and all such properties have been and continue to be properties of several human social systems across the globe and continue to be produced in multiple social settings (even within India itself), that do not seem to have anything to do with the caste system. For instance, it would be very difficult to show that religious groups in India such as Muslims or Christians are not just as endogamous as any particular caste groups. Even further, it would be next to impossible to show by empirical study that religious groups, ethnic groups, national groups, class groups across the world are *not* largely endogamous units.²

Similarly, the contention that the caste system is the only system of hierarchy that is based solely on birth can neither be corroborated nor rejected under the current circumstances since some of the groupings that are referred to by the term *jati* are birth related, others are not. Besides this, sociologists have long noted that even where the categories are birth related, they do not mark a static designation in hierarchy. M. N. Srinivas’ famous term ‘Sanskritisation’ denotes precisely this fluidity amongst castes. Add to that the current political exigencies which make certificates of lower caste attractive in order to gain educational or

² For discussions of endogamy as a property of the ‘caste system’ see, Martin Fárez in this volume and Jalki and Pathan (2015).

employment benefits and we have simply no way of upholding the classical description of a static hierarchical caste system based on birth.

Thus the problems the current lack of understanding about the properties of the caste system lead us to are: which phenomena across the world may be productively studied as related to caste and which ones not, if none of the properties are unique? How do we establish that a particular property found in Indian society, which is also found in other societies across the world, is the result of the caste system and not of any other multiple social forces or organisations?

Some scholars propose to solve this problem by characterising the caste system as the only system that brings these properties together (Quigley 1993). Thus, the convergence of these various properties is the unique property of the caste system. However, this does not solve the problem because scholars are hard-pressed to show that these properties do indeed coexist wherever the caste system purportedly manifests itself. Thus, the only approach that allows caste scholars to continue their work is a sort of cafeteria approach whereby any and every property may be considered either essentially constitutive, or merely secondary, depending on no other justification but the preference of the scholar studying the area.

As we have already indicated above, attempts to build a defence for current scholarship on caste by admitting the proviso that knowledge of the caste system is not yet scientifically advanced enough to answer this question, but this should not stall studies of the phenomenon, cannot be admitted in any way as a sound apologia. For this simply leads us to the question: *which* phenomenon are they studying?

Relationship to Social Conflict

In the project report mentioned above, Balagangadhara also pointed out that:

almost all the discussions about the ‘caste system’ refer to or narrate (i) stories of discrimination about water wells; (ii) physical beatings; (iii) denial of entry into the temples; and (iv) ‘untouchability’. (It is not clear what the latter is about though.) . . . In discussions it is never clear whether

(a) the above four aspects are the empirical properties of 'the caste system' or whether (b) they are the causal consequences of 'the caste system.' If they are empirical properties, we need to ascertain whether they are the constitutive properties of the system or not. If they are constitutive properties, then the condemnation of 'the caste system' based on these properties could be justified. If they are, by contrast, secondary (or not necessary) properties, then the discussion will have to take an entirely different route.

However, if they are the consequences of 'the caste system', then 'the caste system' is something other than and different from these consequences, which are the themes of moral indignation. If they are the consequences, we need to know whether they are necessary consequences of 'the caste system.' If it turns out that these are not the necessary consequences of 'the caste system' or that other things generate these consequences severally, again, the discussion has to take a different route. These analyses involve a kind of theoretical research into 'the caste system,' and into its theories.

The confusion Balagangadhara points towards takes us back to the fact that a deep consensus coexists with deeply contested ideas about caste. In the case of the relationship between caste and social conflict, there is a clear conviction that a relationship necessarily exists and therefore this relationship must be fundamental to understanding caste. Yet, it is impossible in the current context, when no consensus exists in relation to the properties of the caste system, to say whether conflict is a *property* or a *consequence* of the caste system, let alone examine which property of the caste system leads to the consequence of social conflict, if we hold the latter viewpoint. For reasons of economy we will say less about this area of study here since the piece by Jalki and Pathan in this book also addresses questions about the current scholarship on caste atrocities and the data related to it.

The Argument so Far . . .

For a field of study that has enjoyed over four hundred years of attention, how do we reconcile the extent of scholarly attention caste has received, with the results, which leave even the basic questions unanswered? We cannot write it off to bad scholarship or to lack of interest since some of

the best scholars have devoted a lifetime of research to the area. We also cannot ascribe bad intentions to several generations of scholars across over 200 years. Then how do we understand the problem that an area of research, which has received so much attention, has shown such inadequate progress in knowledge? It is this question that sets off this volume.

One set of answers to the dissatisfaction raised in relation to the status of caste studies proposes that the caste system is such a complex social structure with so many regional variations and with evolutionary patterns that are so unpredictable, that it is impossible to reach a consensus about the fundamental properties of the caste system or caste relations in India. This defence, however, sidesteps one crucial question. If there cannot be a consensus in relation to fundamental properties of the caste system or to a story of how it evolved across India, how can we have reached a consensus on the first set of ideas: that there is a caste system in India, that it is oppressive towards the lower castes, and that it has been practically impossible to eradicate?

In other words, what we do not have any clear knowledge about is:

What is the basic unit of the caste system? *Jati*? *Varna*?

What constitutes this basic unit? Employment/race/ethnicity/nationality?

What are the fundamental properties of this basic unit?

How are the units related to each other? Or what forms the organising principle of the 'caste system'?

How did this system come into being?

What sustains it?

How does it resist the relentless attempts to destroy it?

What does this system serve to protect?

What we do know is the following:

The caste system is an ancient Indian social system.

It is hierarchical and oppressive.

This situation brings to mind an ancient story, albeit it requires that we raise a slightly different set of questions to the story. The story is that of the six blind men and the elephant. In the case of caste studies (as in the case of the

elephant), none of the blind men agree on the characteristics of the object that they have within their grasp, but curiously enough, each agrees there's an elephant in the room. The question is, how do they know it's an elephant?

Who Brought the Elephant into the Room?

There are scholars who have raised suspicions about the premises of caste studies before us. The most notable are the constructivists. Nicholas Dirks suggested that it was Orientalist/colonial scholarship that had constructed the notion of the caste system as it continues to be understood today. Dirks also suggested that through mechanisms of administration, especially the census, colonial officials had managed to create a means of generating a social organisation in India akin to their notions of the caste system by reorganising already existing elements but in ways that were different from the way these elements were arranged in pre-colonial India.³ This position is both interesting and dissatisfying.

It is interesting because it highlights an important point. The difficulties that colonial officials faced while attempting to fit available data to their classificatory scheme seems to indicate that their classificatory scheme was not quite suitable for the Indian reality. Yet, Dirks' assertion that they were successful in *implementing* the caste system as they saw it in India, is dissatisfying. What was it that the British implemented? A classificatory scheme or something else?

There are two problems with this assertion. One is its implausibility. How could the census using 'caste', which did not last longer than 60 years, from 1871 to 1931 to be precise, successfully 'create' the caste system in India? To make such a claim one would have to assume that in less than 60 years, Indian society could somehow be magically transformed merely by the implementation of a classificatory scheme. If indeed Indian society was so malleable, then we cannot account for the rise of

³ While it is not clear exactly what elements Dirks claims existed and what new elements were introduced, he does say, 'caste – at least in the areas of southern India that I had studied intensively – was profoundly embedded within political society, not at all as it has been portrayed in contemporary anthropological literature' (Dirks 2001, ix).

protests that Dirks himself documents.⁴ In addition, the colonial officials *failed* in their census attempts, in their own assessment of the situation. Yet, Dirks makes them out to be extraordinarily successful. What did the colonial officials see as their failure if their efforts were able to re-shape Indian reality? Why then did they discontinue the caste census?

The second problem is the lack of clarity about what it is that was implemented. If one takes Dirks' claim at the most concrete level of state classifications, these are invented and discarded constantly by states. For instance, definitions of the poverty line change periodically. They include more or less numbers of people within them. These people derive certain benefits if the definition includes them. Thus, state categorisation has the power to change social reality in this specific and limited sense. Yet, if all the caste system does is extend benefits to some and not to others, then what makes it more remarkable than other classifications like the ones that gives benefits to senior citizens or to members of the armed forces in India today? For instance, how do we understand the conviction that the caste system generates widespread conflict in Indian society if it is merely a state classificatory scheme? Are all conflicts related merely to contestations about state benefits? Surely this is not Dirks' claim since he himself documents a wide array of conflicts in the latter part of his book.

If one takes Dirks' claim in the wider sense in which he seems to make it, he seems to be claiming that a state classificatory scheme, flawed as it was, short-lived as it was, created a social order in India which has been extremely tenacious and extremely resistant to change. This brings us to the same kinds of logical questions about what sustains the caste system that we encountered in the earlier section. There is, however, another way of dealing with the problem Dirks grapples with and a whole set of alternative questions that may be raised.

⁴ 'Caste associations sprung up to contest their alleged position in the official hierarchy, holding meetings, writing petitions and organising protests. By 1931 some caste groups were distributing handbills to their fellow caste members to tell them how to answer questions about their religious and sectarian affiliations, as also their race, language and caste status. After 1931, the British could no longer ignore the political fallout of the census, and abandoned the use of caste for census counting altogether' (Dirks 2001, 48).

Balagangadhara proposes that the ‘caste system’ names the structure that the British tried to develop using different criteria none of which worked in ordering and classifying the data they assembled.⁵ That is to say, the British failed in classifying data (which they collected) about marriage, commensality, profession, entry into temples, accepting water, etc. into a single structure, whose units carried indigenous *jati* names. Of course, this failure does not unequivocally tell us anything except that ‘the caste system’ names the classificatory structure the British tried to develop. In what sense can we then fruitfully speak about the colonial ‘construction’ of the caste system? The only question one could justifiably ask is this: why the obsession in collecting all kinds of data, order and classify them in one single scheme? How could such a classification tell them anything about the structure(s) in the social world? Why did they believe that these snippets of information had something to do with the social organisation?

In addition, the British gave up this way of organising their census reports because it was not useful for their purposes any more. That is why one can raise the question which Dirks does not pose: why did the British need to build a ‘caste system’ for their purposes of collecting revenue and rule over India? After all, the Muslims also collected revenues and ruled over India without creating such a classificatory scheme. It is in the difference between these two colonial rulers that we will find a partial solution to the puzzle of ‘the caste system’. We will have to look elsewhere than in ‘power/knowledge’ relation to find answers: we will have to look at the Western culture. This volume seeks to take the first steps in this direction.

The Nature of the Elephant in the Room

The problems that the above discussion has raised are the following:

- Foundational questions about the caste system have found no adequate answers in spite of the fact that they have been raised since the

⁵ Reference here is to Balagangadhara’s unpublished writings.

nineteenth century. In fact, contemporary studies, instead of engaging and tackling these questions often sidestep them.

- There is a consensus on particular matters in relation to the study of the caste system. Yet, it is logically impossible to reach a consensus on these matters without first having some kind of consensus on the matters which are under dispute.
- It would also seem as if these points of consensus – that there is a caste system and it is oppressive, for instance – act as constraints on what we can or cannot say about the caste system. These constraints operate even within theories about the caste system that seem to vary drastically, that is, those that say it is an ancient Indian system to those that say that it is a colonial product. This is the only way we can understand why scholars like Dirks are compelled to hold on to the idea that the caste system exists, in spite of raising doubts about its genesis.

It follows, therefore, that instead of studying the caste system, we should attempt to study what has generated this consensus on the caste system and why it works within particular constraints. Nothing in the field of caste studies today has anything but tangential answers to such a question. For instance, Dirks suggests that the Orientalist scholars, colonial administrators and Brahmin informants colluded in creating the caste system. They indulged in ‘textualist’ theories which did not reflect the empirical situation. However, such answers must rely, at some level or another, on imputing bad intentions to the participants of this process. For instance, the Brahmins are imputed to have bad intentions when they report on the texts in a manner beneficial to their class; or the colonial administrators must be imputed to have bad intentions when they see the caste system in India based on birth-ranking but fail to see similar systems in their home countries as caste systems. Explanations which rely on imputing intentions to a group (that too across a fairly long period of history) are necessarily weak explanations. If an account about how the consensus on the caste system emerged can do so without imputing bad intentions to any of the participants, such an account would obviously have stronger explanatory potential.

Such an account is available from the research programme developed by S. N. Balagangadhara over the past four decades. He proposes that it