

CASTE AND CLASS  
IN INDIA



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# Caste And Class In India

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CASTE AND CLASS IN INDIA

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Aborigines, so-called, and their Future  
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*Occidental Civilization  
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*Race Relations in Negro-Africa  
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*Family and Kin in Indo-European Culture*

*Sexual Behaviour of the American Female*

Dedicated  
to the  
**Alma Mater,**  
*The University of Bombay,*  
on her  
**Centenary.**

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3-1-1957

## PREFACE

In this edition of my book I have reinstated the chapter on Race which I had dropped out from the last edition. Teachers of the subject represented to me that the deletion of that chapter was felt by them and their students to be a great handicap in the study of caste. I have therefore brought it up-to-date and included it in this edition. In keeping with the new political and social set-up—I must point out that at the time of the last edition, the Constitution of India was not framed or published—I have added a much-needed chapter on Scheduled Castes. In other places I have only added here and there some of the evidence that I thought to be absolutely indispensable; otherwise I have kept the book as it was. I hope readers of my book will find these changes of advantage to them.

G. S. GHURYE

University Department of Sociology,  
Bombay,  
12-12-1956.

## PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

In 1921 when studying at Cambridge I chose caste as the subject of my research. Previously, while living in London for some time I had thought of combining the study of caste with that of class. The decision I took at Cambridge was the result of my preliminary study of the racial aspect of caste. It was by itself intricate enough to occupy me for the best part of two years which I could afford at Cambridge. At that time I could hardly dream of anyone approaching a similar avenue of study. But subsequent events showed that Prof. P. C. Mahalanobis was studying Bengal caste from a similar point of view. The results of my inquiry were accepted as one of the papers for the Ph.D. degree by the Cambridge University in the first quarter of 1923. The paper "Ethnic Theory of Caste" after some delay was published in *Man in India* in 1924. Before I left Cambridge in April 1923 I had signed a contract with Messrs. Kegan Paul and Co. for a book *Caste and Race in India* to be included in their series entitled History of Civilization, edited by C. K. Ogden. I had already prepared a tentative plan of not only the racial aspect but also the other aspects of caste and its historical setting. When at Bombay I sat down to it in 1924 I added to it as a natural conclusion the plan of analysis of contemporary trends. The final type-script of the book was despatched to the London publishers early in 1931 and the book was published by them in London in the beginning of 1932.

Between the time my type-script of *Caste and Race in India* left me and its publication in the book-form a number of papers and books appeared here in India in quick succession, demonstrating the fact that the subject of caste was in the air. The Report on the Indian Census of 1931 was published after my book but the anthropometric survey undertaken in connection with the Census was rather slow to appear. The Census Report contained Dr. Hutton's contribution to caste. The anthropometric survey when published,



created a little confusion in the beginning. Later on its grave defects were pointed out by me.

My book, as extracts of some of the reviews so insistently printed by the present publishers will show, was almost universally well received. It went out of print some years back, when owing to other pre-occupations I could not direct immediate attention to its revision. When I was almost free to do so I found that Dr. Hutton had forestalled me with his book *Caste in India*. Naturally I waited for some time.

During the interval of nearly twenty years from the time when the manuscript of *Caste and Race in India* was ready and the actual revision of it, the subject of caste as an extreme case of social stratification has assumed a significance which was realized by me but was not common heritage of sociologists. The European institution of class, too, has come in for a more detailed and analytical treatment. A number of investigations to measure its strength, to unravel its precise nature, were made, more in the U.S.A. than in the U.K. The Marxian doctrine of class-war, since the success of the Russian Revolution and the establishment of the Soviet Regime, turned the attention of not only professional students but wise statesmen to the understanding of class structure. In the United States the Negro problem worried and worries a number of sociologists and statesmen. Its apparent affiliation to caste has naturally turned American attention to the study of caste. Racial differentiation brought to the forefront by the Nazis in Germany further oriented the subject. The result is seen in the much fuller treatment of class and caste in the recent edition of the best of English text-books of Sociology, Prof. R. M. MacIver's *Society*, which he has brought out in collaboration with Page. A little earlier Cox wrote a whole volume, which for the first time brought the three aspect of social differentiation, caste, class and race, together under one title.

The importance of the study of social differentiation only adds its weight to my viewpoint. In the new set-up, national

and international, it was natural that class society should be more prominently associated with caste society and public attention should be specifically drawn to the developing transformation and to the dangers to be avoided. To achieve this end a new chapter entitled "Class, its Role" is added and the book is named *Caste and Class in India*. As for the rest, only slight alterations have been made. They incorporate additional evidence of the original viewpoint come to hand during twenty years' reading and thinking.

Khar,  
Bombay 21.  
30th June '50.

G. S. GHURYE

**PREFACE TO**  
**CASTE AND RACE IN INDIA**  
(Published in 1932 in the History of  
Civilization Series)

In the following pages I have made an attempt to give my views on the history and the origin of the caste-system as it was in the past and is today among the Hindus of India. As regards caste in recent and contemporary times, I have purposely restricted the treatment to the institution as it is found among the Hindus. Whatever elements of caste happen to occur among the other communities of India are derivative, and as such do not serve to illuminate the problem of caste. While writing about an institution which has been studied by scholars for over half a century, one receives intellectual stimulation on its many aspects from various authors. One's obligations to them are too indirect and indefinite to be mentioned in specific references. And when such references are made, they often do not measure the scope of one's obligations. In the present book I find myself in this situation with respect to some writers on the subject of caste, notably J. C. Nesfield, Professor E. W. Hopkins, E. Senart, Sir H. H. Risley and Dr. S. V. Ketkar. I have derived great benefit from their works, for which my sincere thanks are due to them.

Many of my friends have done me the honour of contributing something or other in connection with this work. Professor A. S. Altekar of Benares has read in manuscript the third and fourth chapters, and has made some useful suggestions. Mr. S. R. Deshpande of Bombay has particularly helped me in reading the proofs and making a few corrections. Professor D. R. Gadgil of Poona has read the whole manuscript, and enabled me to improve it very much by his penetrating criticisms. Dr. E. J. Thomas of Cambridge has helped me to avoid many pitfalls, and to insert the diacritical marks, so essential for proper pronunciation. To all of them I am grateful for their ready and generous help.

G. S. Ghurye

"Disinterested intellectual curiosity is the life-blood of real civilization. Social history provides one of its best forms."

G. M. TREVELYAN: *English Social History*, VIII

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## *Features of the Caste System*

A foreign visitor to India is struck by the phenomenon known as the caste system. He may not understand the full working of the system, but he is aware of the fact that Hindu society is divided into groups, known as castes, with varying degrees of respectability and circles of social intercourse. Baines observes: "It needs but a very short time in the country to bring home to the most casual observer the ubiquity of the institution, and to make him acquainted with some of the principal exoteric features."<sup>1</sup> This is due not only to the fact that caste is the most general form of social organization in India but also because it presents such a marked contrast to the social grouping prevalent in Europe or America. Owing to these two features—ubiquity and strangeness—the institution has found many able scholars devoted to its study. With all the labours of these students, however, we do not possess a real general definition of caste. It appears to me that any attempt at definition is bound to fail because of the complexity of the phenomenon. On the other hand, much literature on the subject is marred by lack of precision about the use of the term. Hence I propose to give a description of the factors underlying this system of castes.

The earliest account of this institution, given by a foreigner of the third century B.C., mentions two of the features characterizing it before it was modified by the close cultural contact with Western Europe during the last century. "It is not permitted to contract marriage with a person of another caste, nor to change from one profession or trade to another, nor for the same person to undertake more than one, except he is of the caste of philosophers, when permission is given on account of his dignity."<sup>2</sup> Though this statement of Megasthenes brings two of the most salient features of the

institution to the forefront, yet it fails to give a complete idea of the system.

The outstanding features of Hindu society when it was ruled by the social philosophy of caste, unaffected by the modern ideas of rights and duties, may be discerned to be six.

(1) Segmental Division of Society:—This caste-society was not a more or less homogeneous community in which, whatever distinctions of social status may exist, they are so much in the background that a special inquiry has to be made in order to realize their presence, but a society in which various groups with distinct appellations were prominent. Castes were groups with a well-developed life of their own, the membership whereof, unlike that of voluntary associations and of classes, was determined not by selection but by birth. The status of a person depended not on his wealth as in the classes of modern Europe, but on the traditional importance of the caste in which he had the luck of being born. On the distinction between caste and class, as far only as cleavage into well-marked groups is concerned, MacIver observes: "Whereas in eastern civilizations the chief determinant of a class and status was birth, in the western civilization of today wealth is a class-determinant of equal or perhaps greater importance, and wealth is a less rigid determinant than birth: it is more concrete, and thus its claims are more easily challenged; itself a matter of degree, it is less apt to create distinctions of kind, alienable, acquirable, and transferable, it draws no such permanent lines of cleavage as does birth."<sup>3</sup> To restrict myself to the Marathi-region, a person is born either a Brahmin, Prabhu, Maratha, Vani, Sonar, Sutar, Bhandari, Chambhar, or a Mahar, etc. If he chances to take a vocation which is not earmarked for a particular caste—say the military—he remains a casteman all the same. A Brahmin general and a Maratha general, though of equal status in the army, belong to two different status-groups in their private life and there could not be any social intercourse between them on equal terms. But this is not the case in a class-society where status is determined by vocation and consequent income. A class has

no council, standing or occasional, to regulate the conduct and guide the morals of its members, apart from the laws of the community as a whole. Members of one class follow different vocations, which, when organized, possess standing executive committees, which govern the members of their profession according to their rules. These rules generally exclude the legitimate province of the wider community, and refer only to professional etiquette or economic gain. "In the case of the brain-working profession, these common rules and this authoritative direction seek to prescribe such matters as the qualifications for entry, the character of the training, the methods of remuneration, the conditions of employment, the rules of behaviour towards fellow professionals and the public, the qualifications and methods of selection for public appointments, and the terms of service, the maintenance of the status of the profession, and the power of expulsion."<sup>4</sup> Most of the castes on the other hand, excepting the high ones like the Brahmin<sup>5</sup> and the Rajput, have regular standing councils deciding on many more matters than those taken cognizance of by the committees of the trade unions, associations, or guilds, and thus encroaching on the province of the whole community. How the Brahmin and other high castes managed their affairs is not quite clear, but in the case of the Brahmins of Southern India at least, it seems from an epigraphic record that as occasion arose they used to call a special meeting of the members of the caste.<sup>6</sup> The assembly could get its decree executed by the king's officials. The governing body of a caste is called the Panchayat. Some of the offences dealt with by it are: (a) eating, drinking, or having similar dealings with a caste or sub-caste, with which such social intercourse is held to be forbidden; (b) keeping as concubine a woman of another caste; (c) seduction of or adultery with a married woman; (d) fornication; (e) refusal to fulfil a promise of marriage; (f) refusing to send a wife to her husband when old enough; (g) refusing to maintain a wife; (h) non-payment of debt; (i) petty assaults; (j) breaches of the customs of the trade peculiar to the caste; (k) encroaching on another's clientele, and raising or lowering prices; (l) killing a cow or any other forbidden animal; (m) insulting a Brahmin; (n) defying the



customs of the caste regarding feasts, etc., during marriage and other ceremonies.<sup>7</sup> It will be seen from this list that some of the offences tried by the governing bodies of castes were such as are usually dealt with by the State in its judicial capacity. Thus, a caste was a group with a separate arrangement for meting out justice to its members apart from that of the community as a whole, within which the caste was included as only one of the groups. Hence the members of a caste ceased to be members of the community as a whole, as far as that part of their morals which is regulated by law was concerned.<sup>8</sup> This quasi-sovereignty of the caste is particularly brought to notice by the fact that the caste council was prepared to re-try criminal offences decided by the courts of law.<sup>9</sup> This means that in this caste-bound society the amount of community-feeling must have been restricted, and that the citizens owed moral allegiance to their caste first, rather than to the community as a whole. By segmental division I wish to connote this aspect of the system. The punishments that these councils awarded were: (1) out-casting, either temporary or permanent; (2) fines; (3) feasts to be given to the castemen; (4) corporal punishment, and (5) sometimes religious expiation. The proceeds of the fines were generally spent on a common feast. Sometimes the perquisites of the Panchayat were bought out of them and sometimes again they were devoted to charitable purposes.<sup>10</sup> This description of the activities of a caste-council will enable us to appreciate the remark, "The caste is its own ruler."<sup>11</sup> The diversity in the administration of law necessarily led to differences in moral standards of the various castes. There was thus created a cultural gulf between the castes. I may note some of the items of cultural differences among the castes to bring out clearly the implications of the segmentation. Many of the castes have their special deities. Among such castes the following may be noted from Southern India: Komāti, Kamsala, Gamalla, Idiga, Māla, and Mādiga<sup>12</sup>; from the Central Provinces, Ahir<sup>13</sup>; from the United Provinces: Aheriya, Bahaliya, Kharwār, Korwā, Chero, Bhuiyār, Dom, Musāhār, and Nāi<sup>14</sup>; and from Gujarat, Vaishyas.<sup>15</sup> About the differences in religious outlook of the Madras castes it has been said: