

RECASTING CASTE

From the Sacred
to the Profane

HIRA SINGH



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Hira Singh



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Recasting Caste

To my family
Raghunath Singh and Dhanwanti Singh (parents);
Alakh Narain Singh (brother);
Chhabi, Shyama, Mulhura (sisters); and Frehiwot

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Preface

Growing up in Caste, Studying Caste— A Personal and Professional Story

I was born and grew up in a multi-caste village in Eastern Uttar Pradesh. All social intercourse in the village was organized in terms of caste. The zamindar (landlord), barber, washerman, priest, artisan and the ploughman—each belonged to a particular caste: that is how people in the village were seen, and that is how I saw them while growing up in that environment. We were told that is how we were made (by God) and well, that was their karma (result of we did in the past) and dharma (what they are destined to do in this life). That was the dominant view of caste, and that is how I understood it. That is what I internalized. What I was not aware of then was that it was the dominant caste's view of caste. Little did I realize that behind caste identities were concrete material interests embedded in dominant economic-political relations, most importantly land relations, which determined the role a caste played and the position it occupied. It also conditioned our consciousness of caste. In other words, caste consciousness in the village was a product of the caste structure and the foundation of the caste structure was the relationship to land.

The village was residentially segregated. At the centre were three Rajput families. There was a cluster of Brahman families. In between there were Baniyas, goldsmiths, ironsmiths, barbers, *Kahars* and a *Kayasth* family, a cluster of *Ahir* (peasant) and *Gaderia* (shepherd) families. Segregated from these were the two settlements of *Chamars* known as *Chamrauti*. While we were allowed to move freely in most parts of the village, it was not the same with the *Chamrauti*. What was particularly conspicuous about it that we played together with kids from the Rajput and non-Rajput kids, but not with kids from the settlements

of the *Chamars* even though we saw those kids almost on a daily basis as they were always present around our houses usually accompanied by their parents or elder sibling. We never felt it awkward that we did not play with them. In her seminal work on whiteness as privilege, Frankenberg (1993) argues that physical distance between white and black settlements in the United States is the marker of social distance between the two. The material boundaries were also the symbolic boundaries. She also shows how the social landscape of childhood shapes one's consciousness in which boundaries of race—both material and symbolic—are naturalized. It is equally true of the caste. The social landscape of growing up in the village shaped my caste consciousness in which material and symbolic boundaries of caste were naturalized.

Growing up in the village, I also saw that the Rajputs and the Brahmans did not engage in manual labour, particularly labour in agricultural production, the main economic activity and the main source of subsistence of all in the village. In particular, neither the Brahmans nor the Rajputs will ever touch the plough. *Ahirs* and *Chamars*, on the other hand, always used the plough; *Ahirs* on the lands either owned or leased and the *Chamars* on the lands owned by the Rajputs or the Brahmans. It was presented as 'natural' order of things, and that is how I understood it. To engage in manual labour was derogatory to the caste status of the Rajputs and the Brahmans while it was normal for other castes. Much later when I read Max Weber, I could reflect back that to engage in or abstain from manual labour was a matter of 'status disqualification–qualification' associated with 'negative' and 'positive' honour. It did not occur to me that the Rajputs and the Brahmans, particularly the former owned most of the lands including the commons in the village which in turn made it possible for them to abstain from manual labour, while the *Chamars* did not own any land and had to work on lands owned by the Rajputs and the Brahmans in order to survive.

The family and the village environment I grew up in was very religious. Within my family compound, there were installations of three gods: first, Thakur Jee inside the house. No adult was served a meal before the Puja for Thakur Jee was performed. Then, there was a small shrine for Shiva under a big Peepal tree adjoining the family well. Little ahead, there was the temple of Hanuman (the monkey god). The festivals of Dussehra, Diwali and Holi had religious legends and rituals associated with them. The only books in the house were

religious texts—Ramcharitmanas (a Hindi version of Ramayana), Mahabharata, Prem Sagar and the Gita. Once a year, the family used to make a pilgrimage to the temple of goddess Durga in the district town some 20 kilometres from the village. Once a year, the family priest used to visit and stay over a week or so. Then, there were roving Sants and Sadhus. They used to come, eat the food they cooked themselves (using the provision supplied by the host), talk about gods, goddesses, heaven, hell, piety and sin. I grew up believing in what I listened to. The first books I read were Ramcharitmanas and Mahabharata believing that Ram and Krishna were gods incarnate. We were told that the rain was brought by god Indra and the wind by god Pawan (progenitor of god Hanuman). Later on in the school when I heard the scientific explanation of rain, I had difficulty to relate to that. What makes the story of religion relevant to the present context is that the caste was embedded in the idiom of religion. We were taught to respect and bow to the Brahman. We were told that the Rajputs (Kshatriyas) were created to rule and all other castes had to obey them. I was told that the caste rights and obligations were divinely ordained. I had no way to believe otherwise. It was natural if I grew up believing that what held different castes in the village together was religion since caste rights and obligations towards one another were couched in religious idioms. The land was not missing from the story of the caste in the village. Like all other rights and obligations associated with particular castes, for example, land rights of the Rajputs (owning most of the lands including commons) and landlessness of the lower castes, were held as given by God.

Leaving the village did not mean leaving the caste behind. Going to the primary school, I confronted caste. The school was located in another village about a kilometre walk from our village and we (children from different castes) walked together. There was a sense of group identity based on belonging to the same village, but overriding that was the sense of our distinct caste identities that determined how we were related to one another. The children of the upper castes had a sense of entitlement to deference that was not formally defined but taken for granted. Caste distinctions were further visible in the classrooms, on the playground and during lunch breaks in the school. There were other markers of caste. The terms used to address the teachers were marked by caste distinction. A teacher belonging to the Brahman caste was addressed as 'Pandit Jee', a Rajput as 'Babu Saheb', and all the rest

as 'Munshi Jee'. Muslim teachers were called Maulvi Saheb and the Christians as Master Saheb.

Thinking of experiencing caste during my elementary school days, I must mention a particular incident that left a long-lasting imprint on my consciousness. One day coming back home from the school, I saw some adults of the Rajput caste sitting outside the house (as a rule, among the Rajputs in the village, men stayed outside and women inside the house), with their heads bandaged. They were surrounded by other men from the same caste. It was a very sombre setting. A bit frightened, I ran inside the house curious to know what had happened. The atmosphere inside the house was even more sombre, and no one wanted to tell me anything about it. Slowly, I found that there was a dispute over a piece of land claimed by one of the Rajput families as its ancestral property that was challenged by a former tenant (of a lower caste) who had acquired independent proprietary right in the same piece of land on the basis of long-term tenancy under the provision of the abolition of landlordism legislated by the new government that came into power following the end of the colonial rule. The members of the landlord family accompanied by other members of their caste (other Rajput families in the village) had gone to take possession of the land in dispute. They were taken by surprise when rather than showing deference, which the Rajput landlords anticipated and were accustomed to in the 'natural' order of things, the former tenants and their supporters physically attacked and assaulted them. Thus, humiliated and injured, these Rajputs sought their revenge the very next day. Decades after the incident, I still have the memory of what I witnessed that day. The story of that incident, along with that of another incident of a similar nature I witnessed as a child growing up in the village, is narrated in Chapter 6.

Caste remained a factor in the High School and the Intermediate (between the High School and the Undergraduate). There was tension (sometimes hidden other times open) between students of the Brahman and the Rajput castes for domination that occasionally erupted into physical fights. During this entire period of schooling lasting five years, I lived in the boarding house where we had to eat together in the common mess. The cook in the mess was invariably a Brahman. We addressed him with respect as Pandit Jee. There was not a single student from any of the lower castes, particularly the Schedule Castes, in the boarding house. But that was normal and we paid no attention to it.

Caste followed during my time as student at the university. It remained a factor when I started and continued to teach at the university and moved on from one university to another (Lucknow to Jaipur to Delhi). It remained a factor in my research not only my research on princely states of Rajasthan in India, but also on Indian indentured labour in South Africa.

The purpose of briefly stating my experience of caste through various stages of my growing up is to acknowledge that caste is a reality of Indian life. My question therefore is not whether caste is real rather, what is the reality of caste, and how it has been presented in mainstream sociology from the classical tradition to the present?

I Became Sociologist by Default

My schooling started in the early days of independent India following the end of the colonial rule, when there was much emphasis on natural sciences with the prospect of getting into medical or engineering school. I did study general science and agriculture in High School and joined the Intermediate grade (between High School and undergraduate) to study agriculture, with physics, chemistry and mathematics as supplementary subjects. I soon realized that I was falling behind in agriculture, science and mathematics so much that I started losing interest in the school altogether. Dropping out of science and mathematics meant giving up on the idea of a future in engineering or medicine. The choice for me, however, was to either drop the science and mathematics or drop out of the school altogether. The idea of sitting in science classes and feeling lost every day of the school was getting increasingly unbearable. It was not so much the prospect of a future career but to find something I could relate to and feel good about being at school that was predominant in my mind and I switched over to the liberal arts—against the will of my family. That was not easy, since the family was the sole source of support—emotional, social and financial. But I survived, with the support of the family, of course. For the undergraduate studies at Lucknow University, I took Anthropology, but quit it at the Masters level. By that time, the only option in social sciences available at the university was sociology, and I became a sociologist by default.

Transition from Sociology to Political Economy

The focus of sociology at the Lucknow University was on classical theory (mostly Durkheim and Weber) and social philosophy, with components of Hindu social theory. We had to read Kane's *Dharmasastra*, Radhakrishnan's *Hinduism* and A. K. Coomaraswami's *Hinduism and Buddhism*, along with commentaries on the *Manusmriti*, among others. Moving to Rajasthan University as a Lecturer, I got interested in development studies. From Rajasthan, I went to McGill for graduate studies in the area of development, but had to quit after one year. It was a turning point in my academic (and political) orientation—beginning of skepticism not only towards my sociological orientation, but much more (as it unfolded later on). Until then, I had no awareness of political economy, mainly because I was never exposed to it. It was, however, after I joined the Delhi School of Economics first as a National Fellow and then as a Lecturer that I began moving away from sociology towards political economy. The experience during the emergency rule and its aftermath set me irreversibly on path to political economy that provided the conceptual tools and the critical vantage point to look at society and history and also at the mainstream sociology. This work is a critical interrogation of the mainstream sociology of caste from the vantage point of political economy.

Moving to Canada

My interest in caste goes back to my very initiation in sociology. For my degree in sociology at Lucknow University, I had to read caste. My interest in caste got deeper when I wrote my Master's thesis on 'Sanskritization and Westernization'. The very first article I published was on caste. It was followed by a 'Comment' on another author's work, which was on caste. I kept on writing on caste directly or indirectly as the time passed, but never ever thought of writing a book on caste. Moving from India to Canada, particularly the struggle to enter the academic job market had a detrimental effect on my interest in caste. There was very little interest in Canadian universities in any particular issue relating to Indian society in general let alone caste,

which dampened my interest in caste. At the same time, I found another problem, which was very Western, very Canadian as well. It was ethnicity and race. The very first teaching job I got was to teach ethnicity at one of the universities in the Maritimes. It was an interesting experience. I spent three years in the Maritimes teaching at two universities and each year I taught a course on race and/or ethnicity. It was the same when I moved to the University of Victoria, Wilfrid Laurier and finally to York where each of the first five years I taught a course on race or ethnicity. By now, I had enough exposure (and some stability) to start thinking of race, ethnicity and caste comparably. It was, however, not until I started teaching 'social stratification' that I inserted caste in my teaching for the first time and rather hesitatingly. And it has been an interesting experience. Most importantly, for me, it revived my interest in caste.

Serendipity in Research

I remember talking to Dipankar Gupta in Toronto on the eve of my departure to South Africa when he told me that given the constraint of time and resource, I may not be able to find much about Indians in South Africa, but I may be surprised to find there something interesting about India. It turned out to be prophetic. I did discover something interesting about India in South Africa, that is, whatever happened to caste and the caste system during and after the end of indenture. I did not go to South Africa to study caste, but ended up doing just that (Chapter 7).

Why This Book?

It was sometime back I met my friend and former colleague Abdul Kalam (then Professor and Chair of Anthropology, Madras University) at a conference and we conversed about sociology of caste. In particular, we talked about the regional and temporal variations in caste, which is rather conspicuously missing in sociological accounts that impose uniformity on caste built around certain ideas. We planned to write an article to address this and some other issues in

sociological studies of caste. When I started reading some of the old and new works on caste for our article, I was suddenly struck by serious gaps. It led me from one issue to another and I realized that it was not possible to capture the gaps in mainstream sociology of caste in one single article. This is not to say that there are no differences within mainstream sociology of caste. Notwithstanding the internal differences though, there is something important missing there. This book is about what is missing in the mainstream sociology of caste and the alternative.

Invitation to Debate

In my writings on caste spread over several years, I have suggested that there are serious issues—theoretical and methodological—in the study of caste, which call for debate (Singh 2008). When it comes to caste studies, there are two solitudes: (1) mainstream sociology and (2) Marxism. The former shuns history and studies caste mainly at the level of ideas in isolation from material conditions. Marxists, on the other hand, have, by and large, stayed away from studying caste. According to sociologists, Marxists do not study caste because they consider it as ‘superstructure’ determined by ‘infrastructure’ hence, secondary and less important. That is not even vulgar Marxism rather vulgarization of Marxism. The question whether caste is infrastructure or superstructure is redundant. It is both infrastructure and superstructure intersect in caste. However, in their ideological battle against Marxism, sociologists have erred on the other side, focusing on the superstructure to the exclusion of the infrastructure. This is most clearly the case with Louis Dumont. Critics of Louis Dumont from within mainstream sociology have not adequately addressed this critical issue. The other serious problem in sociological studies of caste is the neglect of history. Finally, the mainstream sociology has dubbed Marxism as ideology, but it does not recognize its own ideological orientation and how that has shaped its perspective on caste. My book is, however, not a denunciation of the mainstream sociology of caste, but an invitation to debate caste.

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