A History of Caste in South Asia: From Pre-colonial Polity to Bio-political State

Ananya Vajpeyi

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Part I

Introduction

Indian history as a discipline stands at an interesting juncture at the present moment. After yielding a large body of work over the past quarter-century, postcolonialism and subaltern studies have reached a saturation point as theoretical frameworks, historiographical methods and ideological templates. The accidental coincidence of sixty years of Indian independence since 1947, and 150 years since the Great Rebellion of 1857, made 2007 a year of anniversarial excess, with historians of South Asia from around the world wanting to say something momentous about what are increasingly billed as the first (unsuccessful) and second (successful) moments of India’s struggle for independence from British rule. Meanwhile, there has been a small but growing trend among historians of the British empire to defend its depredations in India in the name of cultural contact, productive encounter, romantic love, benign modernization and globalization avant la lettre. Postcolonialists and subalternists now find themselves challenged by a style of revisionist history that seeks to justify colonialism and imperialism by uncovering the so-called ‘human’ flip side of the economic, political, military and cultural impositions of West upon East. In a global intellectual and ideological climate of conservatism and reaction, it is no surprise that Indian history too, has become the site for a contest between the resurgent Right and a Left in retreat.

A key intervention in what has suddenly — and, it is to be hoped, temporarily — become a rather acrimonious field, stands to be made by pre-modernists and early modernists. What did the state look like in India over the two centuries between the ascension of the last
Great Mughal, Aurangzeb (r. 1657/8–1707), and the establishment of the rule of Queen Victoria in 1857? What was the state of literary production in the subcontinent on the eve of the arrival of European languages? What was going on in the arts and sciences? What was the world, which was neither lost nor destroyed, but decidedly and irrevocably altered by the coming of white people with their friendly and not-so-friendly motives? How was it that India escaped the genocides that befell the native peoples of the Americas, and the deadly subjugation that benighted Africa, and yet things were never quite the same again for South Asians, once the East India Company and the missionaries had turned their covetous or Christian gaze, and the prows of their ships, eastwards? Like other historians of pre-colonial India, I too am interested in the continuities and disruptions that marked the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a period of profound cultural churning, and of the power struggle between Europeans and South Asians, that changed both parties in ways that shape and affect our lives to the present day. Moreover, I am keen to situate my findings and analyses in a comparative context that would clarify the parallels between the experiences of India and of other important Asian regions in the same period: Turkey, China and Persia, all of which shared a certain historical predicament.

**Shivaji the Sudra King**

The particular history I want to elaborate begins in the seventeenth century in Maharashtra. Maharashtra is the linguistic-cultural provenance of the Marathi language, corresponding to a large state in contemporary western India, with its capital in Mumbai. This region has a sustained history of popular movements, religious sects, state formations, legal discourses and literary production centred on the theme of caste, from at least the twelfth century. Caste has long been recognized in Marathi culture for its propensity to internally differentiate and hierarchically arrange Hindu society and to act, for better or for worse, as an organizing principle for the social identity, ritual status, economic privilege and political power of different groups. Simultaneously, the struggle against the humiliation of the lowest caste, the *Sudra*, has been a long one in Maharashtra. Starting with the radical works of the Marathi saint-poets of medieval times, this tradition of questioning and contesting...
caste hierarchy and caste oppression has continued right into the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{1}

Sometime around 1650, a warlord in Maharashtra began his dramatic ascent to political power. This man, by the name of Shivaji, came from a family of chieftains who served local kings big and small, while his father, Shahji, also served, for a time, the Mughal emperor in distant Delhi. Like his forefathers, Shivaji was responsible for raising and managing seasonal armies, defending camps in thinly-populated outposts of whichever kingdom he happened to be serving, and collecting revenue for his royal paymasters. Shivaji, however, had other plans. He spent some twenty-five years building forts of his own in hilly and coastal terrain, annexing new territories that no one save himself could properly map (leave aside control), securing the loyalty of the ordinary people of Maharashtra through his exploits, consolidating a fast-moving and recklessly brave personal militia, and freeing himself, sometimes gradually and sometimes through outright conflict, from the yoke of other rulers. By the year 1674, at the age of forty-four, Shivaji was thus ready to become king (Vajpeyi 2005).

Kingship may have seemed to him to be the next logical step, but king of what kingdom? And king in whose eyes? What lands would he declare to be under his rule, and who would recognize his rule as legitimate? To answer or indeed pre-empt these questions, Shivaji decided to perform a royal consecration, an investiture ceremony that would confirm his kingship in full public view, with all of the apparatus of religion, ritual and political pageantry, to uphold his claim to royalty. In June 1674 Shivaji was joined, in Raigarh in western Maharashtra (just southwest of the city of Pune), by his personal pundit Gagabhatta, a Brahmin from Banaras, a town on the banks of the river Ganges not far from the Mughal seat of power, Delhi. Gagabhatta came from a Marathi-speaking family of Sanskrit scholars and, thanks to his own writings as well as the writings of his father and uncle, was recognized all over northern and central India as an authority on matters of law, dharma, and hermeneutics, mimamsa. Recently, Gagabhatta’s intellectual milieu in seventeenth century Banaras has been reconstructed and described in the greatest detail in the work of Sheldon Pollock (Pollock 2000; 2001a; 2001b; 2002). On payment of a very large fee, Gagabhatta wrote for Shivaji the text of a coronation ritual, a personal eulogy in poetic form, and the programme for how
ceremonies were to be conducted over the course of seven days of prayers, rituals, feasting and celebration in the high summer of 1674, between 29 May and 6 June.

Shivaji, however, had many rivals in Maratha country. Other local warlords, some of them from distinguished families with serious political aspirations of their own, questioned Shivaji’s claim to royal power. Who was he to be king over them? Did he not come from a family of uncertain pedigree? It was well known that Shivaji’s father and grandfather were powerful, but hardly aristocratic. Shivaji therefore hurriedly sent an emissary to the Rajput kingdom of Mewar, and had the Sisodia family there, that ruled from the magnificent city of Udaipur, agree to the notion that he, Shivaji, was descended from one of their own ancestors. In other words, Shivaji’s emissary returned to Raigarh with a genealogy that linked Shivaji to the Sisodia Rajputs, a clan of chieftains both actually powerful as well as universally recognized as being highborn. Gagabhatta of course, as a juridical authority on matters of both birth and kingship, instantly ratified this genealogy, discovered in so timely a fashion! The genealogy proved, as it were, that Shivaji was a Rajput. What did this mean? ‘Rajput’, literally, means ‘son of a king’, and is the name for a number of powerful clans that in the late medieval period controlled large parts of northwest India, called, eponymously, Rajputana, today Rajasthan. The Rajputs often worked under Mughal overlordship, but no one, including the Mughals themselves, denied that they were kings in their own right, and of aristocratic stature.

To declare Shivaji a Rajput was to say, effectively, that he was a Ksatriya, a member of the second highest caste in the traditional Hindu scheme of four castes, below the Brahmin caste but above all others and, most importantly, in the caste that is appropriate for kings. Gagabhatta had to transform Shivaji from a local warlord, of which there were many in Maharashtra at the time, into a Ksatriya king, of which there could be only one. Gaga performed all the rituals proper to Ksatriya status. He invested Shivaji with a sacred thread and remarried him to his many wives by reciting mantras that are permitted only at high-caste weddings. Finally, he wrote a special ritual of royal consecration, endowing Shivaji with a throne, a crown and, above all, a gorgeous canopy, called a chatra (literally umbrella), thereby anointing him Chatrapati Shivaji
Maharaj (Shivaji, King with the Royal Canopy), and ruler over all his dominions.

In far Delhi, an imperial city, Aurangzeb was called Alamgir (Ruler of the World); in humble Raigarh, Shivaji was called Chatrapati, signifying a new centre of power to rival Mughal authority, with a claim of Ksatriya kingship the likes of which had not been seen anywhere on the subcontinent for a long, long time. The Mughal emperor was the most powerful monarch in the civilized world during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, controlling the most land, population and wealth at a time when several important dynasts ruled simultaneously in Ottoman Turkey, Safavid Iran and the various capitals of imperial Europe, Eurasia and East Asia. Shivaji’s challenge to the last of the Great Mughals, then, was no mean accomplishment for a man of uncertain, indeed fictive lineage who spent most of his short life of fifty years on horseback and who never built a city, a palace, a temple or even so much as a library in his own name.

I want to return us, however, to the figure of Gagabhatta (or Gaga), the pundit who made Shivaji not just king but a Ksatriya king, with all of the right trappings of ritually ordained kingship. What is so striking, actually, is not the spectacular birth of a king, which was the rebirth of a low-caste man as a high-caste ruler that Gaga managed to pull off in full view of thousands of spectators. That was no doubt a feat of, what shall we call it, pre-modern public relations and event management, not to mention social engineering, not to mention what could be described as ‘entrepreneurial kingship’, on the part of this winning team of Shivaji and Gagabhatta. But what is even more remarkable, for our purposes, is the fact that in his scholarly career, which was long and distinguished, Gaga in fact wrote entire works about the lowliness of the low-caste, the Sudra, and about how a Sudra is, precisely on account of low birth, prevented from access to the knowledge of sacred texts and the exercise of any kind of social or political power.

Gagabhatta, personal ritualist, poet and priest to Shivaji, was also a legal expert on the subject of the Sudra, the lowest of the four castes of traditional Hindu caste society. I titled my dissertation Politics of Complicity, Poetics of Contempt: A History of the Sudra in Maharashtra, 1650–1950 CE, to try and capture, among other themes, the shocking contradiction between Gaga’s academic and political careers, wherein he functioned simultaneously as the
scholarly authority on Sudra subjectivity, with all of its attendant disempowerment, and the kingmaker, in the pay of the most important Sudra monarch of India’s early modern period. I read Gaga’s Sanskrit works as well as the oeuvre of his father, uncle and other Banaras scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in some detail, to see how they theorized and elaborated their ideas of social inequality, ritual hierarchy and political power, especially centred on the person of the Sudra. I call this set of texts, which has never been explored systematically in the South Asian scholarship up until now, the ‘Sudra Archive’, a corpus limited in time and space and serving the extraordinary function of reiterating the rules of Dharma at the very moment of their utter breakdown.

This clash of abstract normative theory and on-the-ground politics, which illustrates the centrality of caste categories to pre-modern South Asia, was going on, I hasten to underline, before the colonial powers began to cast a greedy glance on our part of the world. At this point the colonial state was not even a threatening speck in the eyes of either Shivaji or Aurangzeb, one an upwardly-mobile Sudra, the other a pious Sunni Muslim, who between them controlled the greater part of what would, two centuries later, become the jewel in the crown of the British empire. Shivaji had some European ambassadors and observers at his royal consecration, who have recorded for us the splendid scenes before them; but what they witnessed was the enactment of social identities, political power and ideologies of state that had very little reference to the presence or gaze of foreigners.

Gagabhatta was not one of those hundreds of Brahmins who would, throughout the latter part of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, interpret and translate Sanskrit texts and advocate their values to white masters, thereby reinventing and confirming tradition for the consumption of the colonial state. Gaga was, rather, located squarely within the intellectual, social and political world of Indian pre-modernity, where caste was not a matter of trying to define and essentialize India to Europeans but, instead, a key factor in the pragmatics of identity and power framed in terms understood by all the actors, rulers and ruled, who inhabited and constituted this world. The salience of caste was such that without the Rajput genealogy and without Gaga’s machinations in transforming him from a Sudra into a Ksatriya, it is not clear that Shivaji could have become Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, founder
of the Maratha dynasties, in that crystalline moment in early June 1674.

From Caste Disputes to Jotiba Phule

In the centuries that followed Shivaji’s short but remarkable life — he lived from 1630 to 1680 — his Sudra kingship functioned as an important symbol, in Maharashtra, of the possibilities for self-fashioning and self-transcendence within the limits of caste society. Indeed, Thomas Blom Hansen calls the figure of Shivaji ‘the master signifier’ of Maharashtra’s history; in some sense, he has served as a symbolic resource far outside his region, throughout the Indian subcontinent, over the past 350 years (Hansen 2001: 20). During his lifetime, Gagabhatta was repeatedly called upon to adjudicate legal disputes between various caste groups, wherein groups perceived as lowly demanded better ritual status and recognition of such status from Brahmin authorities, whereas rival groups asserted that caste was not a matter of negotiation and flux, and those who were low down on the social ladder should know their place and remain there. The disputes continued throughout the late seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, even as the law underwent radical changes, ultimately transitioning from a patchwork of local legal regimes, some Hindu, some Muslim, some other, into a more-or-less uniform Anglo-Indian system of law. What I would like to stress, again, is that caste disputes preceded, persisted into and through, and finally continued even beyond the period when India increasingly fell under the unified Anglo-Indian legal system used by the colonial state. This continuity of dispute over the categories and classifications of caste is something that we can trace, and I have tried to outline in my work, through the legal archive of Maharashtra, recorded in Sanskrit, Marathi and English over the course of three centuries. I have kept to the thread of cases in which the precedent of Shivaji and of his caste, the Marathas, is cited, and/or the cases that Gagabhatta personally presided over, but in fact many different themes of disputation and negotiation could be traced, to show the deeper, pre-colonial history of social categories in South Asia.²

By the mid-nineteenth century, the example of Shivaji was so well established in Maharashtra that the social reformer Jotiba Phule (1827–90), a man belonging to the humble mali or cultivator caste, wrote an entire ballad about the life of Shivaji, describing
him as a son of the soil, a ruler dear to ordinary folk and king of the Sudras (Phule 1869). Phule, was educated in a Christian school, wrote and spoke in English in addition to Marathi and was exposed to the modern ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity. For him, Shivaji embodied an early attempt to realize egalitarian values in Maharashtra’s political history. As a Sudra who became a monarch, Shivaji represented, to Phule, a perfect example of how low-caste people could take their destiny into their own hands and stake their claim to the realms of ritual prestige, social power and political participation. Phule can be described as an early democrat. Shivaji’s caste mobility, his success in making himself into a Ksatriya and a king, thereby defeating the forces of orthodoxy that would have resisted his rise to royalty, gave Phule a powerful literary and historical symbol to work with and to deploy in his polemics against the upper-caste monopoly of all kinds of power in South Asia. In my book (under preparation) I read Phule’s ballad on Shivaji at some length, building on the pioneering work of the British historian Rosalind O’Hanlon (O’Hanlon 1985).

Ambedkar and the Sudra

But the real modernist capture of Shivaji as ‘master signifier’ came from the man whom Phule inspired, and who in turn changed the very terms of both the theory and the practice of caste in late colonial India: Dr B. R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar (1891–1956), a Maharashtrian like Shivaji and Phule before him, was the founder of the Dalit Movement, a leader of India’s anti-imperial Nationalist struggle, free India’s first law minister, the principal architect of the Constitution of the Republic of India, and, in his final years, the proponent of a new sect of Buddhism. Born into the Untouchable mahar caste, Ambedkar made sure that Untouchability, perhaps the single worst feature of the caste system that had adhered to Hindu society for well over two millennia, was both removed from practice as well as rendered illegal and unconstitutional in postcolonial India. It was this one man who ensured, together and often in conflict with Mahatma Gandhi, that even members of the lowest castes and former-Untouchables, in other words Sudras as well as Dalits, could enter into the framework of equal citizenship in democratic India. He also wrote special provisions into the Indian Constitution to recognize the historical injustice against low castes and Untouchables, and to compensate for centuries of oppression
with the help of reservations in various sectors of employment, education, government service and so on. It is only now, a good half-century after his death, that we are beginning to understand properly the full extent of Ambedkar’s contribution in revolutionizing the language of politics in modern India, changing the default from the language of caste to the language of citizenship.

On the eve of India’s independence from British rule in 1947, Ambedkar wrote a book titled *Who were the Shudras?* (Ambedkar 1946). This work attacks the category of the Sudra from every conceivable disciplinary and historical vantage, until Ambedkar succeeds in deconstructing it entirely. He has no patience for inequality. He cannot condone it in the name of history, religion, ritual, law, science, culture or indeed any system for the regulation and amelioration of collective human life. For Ambedkar, while *Dharma* rests on the pillar of social inequality, the ethical society must be founded on the idea of equality. Hindu society is, according to Ambedkar, irredeemably non-egalitarian. Again and again, throughout its history, under different names and in different guises, in service of diverse ideologies but under the spell of the same iniquitous values, it throws up its Brahmins and its Sudras, the oppressors and the oppressed. Sometimes these oppressed are altogether out-caste, ground down, crushed — that is the literal meaning of the word ‘Dalit’.

In Ambedkar’s telling, Shivaji’s story is a part of this narrative of persistent inequality: he is deserving of his power but unable to attain it without the help of a Brahmin, the conniving and unprincipled Gagabhatta, or without the entitlement that attaches to Ksatriya status. In a truly modern India, the attainments of a person like Shivaji would be freed from the thrall of both his previously low and subsequently high caste. Modernity is to be caste-blind; it is to create a society that allows equal opportunities to all citizens. For Ambedkar, the Shivaji story is important not for the account of what he did but rather as a cautionary tale, showing us exactly what it ought not be necessary for a leader of men to do, once India embraces equal citizenship, democracy, fraternity and freedom.

Thus, Ambedkar’s interpretation of Shivaji’s Sudra kingship or of his belated and contrived entry into Ksatriya status in order to attain royalty is very different from Phule’s; in fact, it is opposed to Phule’s interpretation. For Phule, Gagabhatta was a practical
man, and his services to Shivaji were not so much a matter of complicity as of compliance. For Ambedkar, Gaga was not the revisionist he ought to have been — he did not change theory to fit history; rather, he changed the status of Shivaji to preserve kingship as an upper-caste, Ksatriya prerogative. Moreover, in Ambedkar’s extraordinary work of deconstruction, the Sudra literally disappears from both past and present — the Sudra is neither this or that person, nor this or that group, nor this or that race. Instead, the Sudra is the concrete trace, in history, of all the most regressive and violent traits of Hindu society and, more broadly, South Asian culture. It is the Achilles’ heel of Indic civilization that will, one day, take down the entire edifice and force us to rebuild India from the ground up, as a place at once real and metaphorical that accommodates both the strong and the weak, and allows each one the opportunity to become his or her own best self.

The Constitution of India (1950), written under Ambedkar’s stewardship as the chairman of the Drafting Committee, could have been the charter of this India — new, free and equal. But in fact Ambedkar himself lost faith in the idea of ever transforming a country composed largely of Hindus and of many others who were not Hindu but nevertheless shared Hindu social ideologies and cultural practices, and who did not show strong signs of resistance, protest or dissent. Even Muslims and Christians in India practice caste. Towards the very end of his life, in the late 1950s, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism, taking with him many thousands of Dalits and founding, in the process, a new sect that came to be called Ambedkarite Buddhism. To embrace Buddhism was to abandon all hope of reforming Hinduism and caste-based Hindu society; it was to repeat the Buddha’s own gesture, made 2500 years ago, of rejecting the world of power and its pathologies, and retreating into a dispassionate contemplation of the relentless flux of identities, relationships and perceptions that constitutes human experience. Ambedkar’s Buddhist turn can be read as a rather unexpected denouement, perhaps something of an anti-climax, to his otherwise decidedly worldly struggle with the pragmatics of social hierarchy and political power. Ambedkar wanted to achieve what he called, in the title of his essay, ‘The Annihilation of Caste’ (Ambedkar 1991). But in the end, he left caste society, because caste society never left him, as indeed it never left India.
The Many Lives of Caste

Perhaps it is appropriate to take stock of the period I have tried very quickly to cover thus far; 1650 to 1950 is, we must admit, a long time. Luckily for us, the story of caste in this period, which spans 300 years from the precolonial, through the colonial, into the postcolonial phase of Indian history, is for one thing located in Maharashtra, and for another book-ended by two extraordinarily charismatic figures, Shivaji and Ambedkar, both of whom give to a historian a great deal of material to work with. I have also read (though I have not discussed here) a number of texts in Sanskrit, Marathi and English, all of which address in some genre or other the broad theme of the category of the Sudra and, in particular, the person of Shivaji as a Sudra king. In my work, I spend the most time setting up and then opening up what I earlier called the Sudra Archive, a body of ritual and legal texts in Sanskrit written by Gagabhatta and his relatives and colleagues, which elaborate in painful detail the Brahminical conception of Sudra identity, rights, rituals, privileges, prohibitions, professions, etc. This corpus of texts was produced in a small number during a limited period, from the mid-fourteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries, most of them composed by Banaras scholars.

In a sense, all these Sanskrit texts raise the very question that Ambedkar resurrected in 1946: Who is a Sudra? It is important to take note of this moment of civilizational attention to the problem of low-caste subjectivity — attention that is entextualized in a limited body of works in Sanskrit, many of which have survived into the present. According to the dominant position in South Asianist scholarship at the moment, caste had very little meaning before the exoticizing and essentializing gaze of the ‘ethnographic state’ created by the British in order to rule India, or, at least, little meaning that historians can reasonably hope to recapture and reconstruct. All the more reason, then, for us to be alert to the textual archive as well as the historical record on the Sudra available to us from, say, the seventeenth century.

On the contrary, I have tried to show that caste was exceedingly pertinent in a number of spheres of pre-modern life: scholarly debate, legal activity, political conflict, state formation and all manner of literary and cultural representation. This is best illustrated via the history of Maharashtra over the last three and half centuries, because Maharashtra has not only a polyvalent figure of authority
like Shivaji, who acts as a metonym for the history of caste, religion and many other themes in his region, but also a radical leader like Ambedkar, who was both a masterful historian and a debunker of the forms of social inequality that had been cemented through history. Both Shivaji and Ambedkar are important cultural symbols in Maharashtra and beyond, and as such they mobilize communities of identity and affect, sometimes positive, sometimes negative. However, I must note that similar narratives await elaboration from other parts of central and southern India in the same period. Kingship in the late medieval period was more often than not the prerogative of men of low or ill-defined caste, from tribal, pastoral or nomadic backgrounds, who nonetheless seized power and created a multitude of small to medium states all over peninsular India just prior to the arrival of the British, French and Portuguese on Indian shores, and the disintegration of the Mughal empire in the north.

Part II

Ambedkar and Caste in Modernity

I want to turn now, once more, to Ambedkar. Ambedkar was not just a politician. He was also a scholar and a lawyer. He had a Ph.D. from Columbia University at a time when men from Untouchable communities were seldom even literate, leave aside educated, and then he had his legal degree and license to practice from Gray’s Inn in London. Incidentally, his principal contemporaries in India’s nationalist movement, Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah, were all lawyers as well, and all educated in England. Like Gandhi and Nehru, Ambedkar was well read, deeply immersed in Indian history and extraordinarily prolific in terms of his own scholarly, polemical and religious writings. (At present there are fourteen volumes of his collected works, including a massive tome called *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, first published posthumously in 1957, that tries to re-tell the Buddha’s sermons for a modern audience.) Clearly Ambedkar was engaged, until his very dying breath, in the act of reinventing India’s long past, thereby acknowledging it to be, at every moment, present. Central to this grappling with the presence of the past in the present was, for radical Ambedkar as for devoutly Hindu Gandhi and progressive socialist Nehru, the problem of caste. For no matter how it changes, from a set of orthodox ritual categories
In the tenth mandala of the *Rg Veda*, the genesis of caste society is described like so, as the four orders of men arise from the body of the Primordial Being, Purusa:

With uncounted heads
Uncounted eyes and
Uncounted feet
He moves
As all of Creation.
Verily is He uncountable
Beyond the grasp
Of the hands of men.

From his mouth came forth
The men of learning
And of his arms
Were warriors made
From his thighs came
The trading people
And his feet gave birth
To servants.¹

In the Preamble to the Constitution of India, the genesis of society is laid out as follows, as the body of equal citizens arises from the will of the people:

WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN SOCIALIST SECULAR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens:
JUSTICE, social, economic and political;
LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship;
EQUALITY of status and of opportunity;
and to promote among them all
FRATERNITY, assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation;
IN OUR CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY this twenty-sixth day of November 1949, do HEREBY ADOPT, ENACT AND GIVE TO OURSELVES THIS CONSTITUTION.
I am comparing these two very different fragments of what are, each in its own way, foundational texts of India’s sense of its own history and historicity, each in its own way a sacred text, an article of faith, because I want to illustrate, dramatically, as it were, how two absolutely opposed visions of social order — one radically hierarchical, one fundamentally egalitarian; one ancient, one modern — can and do coexist in the very same culture and drive, with equal force if in opposite directions, the nation’s advance into the future. The standing body of anthropomorphic but supernatural Purusa is the icon of hierarchical society — Brahmins at the head, Sudras at the feet — while in the sovereign secular democratic republic of India the principles governing the relations between people are those of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity.

With his unparalleled sense of history, Ambedkar grasped, at once, the reality of both these imagined communities, as well as their weird simultaneity in the ever-present past of India. In fact, we could say that Ambedkar was himself, as the chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution, the author of one of these visions, one that subsequently was adopted by the entire nation, which is today, in 2008, one plus billion strong. The more abiding truth, however, is that even the Constitution of India, utopian as it may be, must remain attentive to caste and address it in a proactive fashion, which is does through the complicated legal and political apparatuses of reservation/affirmative action. The Constitution must recognize what it names the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, categories that rehabilitate former Untouchables and make them eligible for special protections and provisions. All the political will in the world cannot simply dismiss and undo, at the stroke of the midnight hour, as Nehru said on 15 August 1947, centuries of differentiation, hierarchy, othering and oppression. To make a truly equal society is, to paraphrase Pratap Bhanu Mehta, the ever-unfinished labour of democracy (Mehta 2003: ix–x).

**Caste and Biopolitics**

In August 2007, India completed sixty years of independence from British rule. In today’s India, political parties contest elections on a caste platform; voters constitute themselves into caste blocs; reservations are a burning issue in public debate over the distribution and redistribution of goods and resources in society; caste is firmly integrated into the new knowledge economy, the marriage market
and higher education; and state and corporate institutions are much more openly concerned with caste than they were, say, at the moment of the nation’s founding six decades ago. In other words, caste has become, along with religion and class of course, one of the organizing vectors of contemporary Indian social and political life. It is one of the mainstays of identity politics in India, the way race and ethnicity are in Europe or in the United States. Caste may not govern what people eat, how they dress, how they speak, how they carry themselves, how they perform rituals, how they worship and how they spell their last names, as it did two generations ago. But, paradoxically, caste does govern, very often, whom they vote for, whom they marry, how much they study and what work they end up doing. In other words, caste has a fully entrenched presence and a role to play in politics, in electoral democracy, in social reproduction and in the spheres of education and employment.

It is in light of this salience of caste to both the life of the people and the operations of the state that I want to begin talking about caste as the form taken, in India, by what is elsewhere called ‘biopolitics’. Biopolitics, a term given to us by Michel Foucault and most recently used by Giorgio Agamben, seeks to capture how a population is constituted, classified, categorized, managed, manipulated and sometimes murdered by the apparatuses of governmentality. Taken literally, biopolitics is the politics of life, bios — life in the sense not of biological life but, rather, human life in its peculiar capacity to organize itself in ever more complex ways into abstract patterns that are displayed to a much lesser extent by other species of natural beings. If bios is the conglomeration of humans into a political collective, then biopolitics is the full array of institutions and activities entailed by the challenge of governing such a collective. Foucault is concerned with a particular subset of biopolitical practices and with the institutions associated with what he calls ‘biopower’, arising in eighteenth-century Europe: the prison, the penal colony, the asylum, the hospital and so on, as also demography, eugenics, criminal psychiatry, public hygiene and urban sanitation. The idea I am advancing is that biopolitics in South Asia cannot be understood absent caste. Whether in pre-modernity or in modernity, whether through Dharma or through democracy, for better or for worse, caste shapes the very bios, the political life of the human collective in India, permeating institutions, driving practices and
giving governmentality the specific form that it has in our part of the world. In its present-day avatar, caste has moved away from its traditional aspects related to religion, ritual, and corporeal practices; it has become, instead, that which provides the grid for the organization of the political life of Indians, Hindus and non-Hindus, giving them a template for politics that shares many features with race as it operates in the West.

**Ambedkar, the Colonial State and Biopolitics**

My principal claim is that caste in all of its meanings today is in the main biopolitical; it is about the organization of the political life of Indian citizens; it is also about the management of populations that exist as political entities, through a complex network of political parties, electoral democracy, identity politics, legal, juridical and legislative enactments, endogamy, group reproduction, and public and private institutions. Furthermore, it was Ambedkar, through his direct or indirect authorship of the Constitution of India, especially in its dimensions that deal with Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, reservations and other sorts of caste-based compensatory justice, who formalized the transformation of caste into biopolitics proper for the modern postcolonial Indian state. Ambedkar of course had no access to either this term or this concept, but rendering caste biopolitical was the principal contribution of his lifelong intervention in the politics and historiography of caste in late colonial as well as early postcolonial India. In my work, I focus on Ambedkar’s study of the meanings of caste in India’s past, and in particular on his book-length engagement with the category of the Sudra through history. For future research, I am interested in what Ambedkar did to change the discourse on caste and to transform the meaning of the categories of inequality, domination and violence from a traditional context of hierarchy and differentiation into the language of modern politics and equal citizenship, and more, biopolitics.

It should be noted, though, that, before Ambedkar’s Constitution, the British in India had ushered the discourse of caste into its first biopolitical moment, linking caste to morbidity, mortality, birth and longevity. They had done so through what Nicholas Dirks has called the ‘ethnographic state’, with all of its apparatuses and disciplines of colonial governmentality, including the census, ethnology, linguistics, military recruitment, population studies, demographic statistics, the history of religion, Indology, and proto-Race Science
This is precisely the kind of biopolitics that Foucault explores in Europe; for Britain, it unfolds in the colonies, first and foremost India. But Ambedkar debunks all of these Orientalist, Indological and pseudo-scientific discourses of caste invented by the colonial state, in his book *Who were the Sudras?* He wrests the idea of caste back from the realm of nature, natural — biological — life, whereby it attaches to people in the shape of their skull, the length of their nose, the colour of their skin and the texture of their hair, and places it squarely back in the realm of culture, cultural — political — life, expressed through higher order relations of hierarchy or equality between people and groups. The Census of India, too, stopped recording caste-related data in any direct fashion after the Census of 1931, a good decade and half before Independence. In time, I hope to flesh out how biopolitics changes, in India, from what it means under colonialism to what it comes to mean, post-Ambedkar, covering the distance from the ethnographic state to the biopolitical state.

If we return to the ‘Purusa Sukta’, the cosmogonic hymn to Purusa in the *Rg Veda* cited earlier, we can see now that the vision of a fourfold hierarchy that is articulated there is also a vision of bios, of collective human life that is always already political, even at the very moment of the creation of the world or of the emergence of the world from the body of the Cosmic Being, Purusa. Society is extruded from Purusa’s supernatural body in its hierarchical form — there is no prior stage, as it were, of the pre-social, or the purely natural life of human beings without any sense of social order and social relations, whether equal or unequal. There they are, at the originary moment, at the beginning of the world as we know it — Brahmin, Ksatriya, Vaisya, Sudra: scholar, warrior, trader and servant. Ambedkar recognized that when the very foundational myths of a culture are about political and not about biological life, that when a culture always, from its earliest texts of cosmogony, presupposes a hierarchical bios, then it is imperative to address inequality, to write into the new text, the foundational text of nationhood, the Constitution of the Republic, the instruments for the acknowledgement and the redress of historical injustice.

**Caste and Necropolitics**

I am also interested in what Giorgio Agamben and Achille Mbembe call ‘necropolitics’ or ‘thanatopolitics’, the politics not of
life but of death (Mbembe 2003). Mbembe defines ‘necropolitics’ as ‘...contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death...’ (Ibid.: 39), and is concerned with forms of sovereignty that are about ‘the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of bodies and populations’ (Ibid.: 13; emphasis in the original). I have begun to think about extreme violence against Dalits in contemporary India as being necropolitical. The violence against Dalits, which very often takes shockingly brutal forms — and I have in mind here what Arjun Appadurai has described as ‘ethnocidal violence’ — is precisely about the ‘instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of bodies and populations...’ (Appadurai 1998; 1997).

Caste violence in India results in news reports about the burning of Dalit homes and villages, the rape of Dalit women, the lynching and murder, sometimes by mobs in full public view, of Dalit men or women who may have tried to, say, marry outside their caste, extra-judicial killings of Dalits, the illegal detention and torture of Dalits in prisons, and other forms of brutality that combine deadly bodily harm to the targeted person with a symbolic message of threat, hate and hostility to the community as a whole. Entire families and villages are punished for what upper-caste aggressors see as the transgressions of Dalit individuals. Middle and upper-caste landowning groups maintain private militias to terrorize Dalit tenant farmers and landless agricultural labour into working under conditions resembling slavery and feudalism. Often, even the so-called Other Backward Castes, the OBCs, former Sudras, turn on Dalits. This kind of extreme to fatal injury wreaked on Dalits is common in states like Bihar and Haryana. India’s infamous ‘caste wars’, especially those we witness nowadays in North India, may be identified as necropolitical.

**Conclusion**

My purpose in this article has been to suggest the importance of developing a robust theory of biopolitics as the proper idiom in which to talk about the inequality, domination and violence we see in the context of caste in India. Whether we are interested in a philology of oppression in South Asian pre-modernity, or in the translation and historicization of necropolitics and biopolitics in contemporary India, caste remains relevant in South Asia before, through and
beyond the colonial moment. Caste is particular to South Asian cultures, and it responds to colonialism in particular ways. It ought to be comparable, then, to distinctive cultural phenomena in other parts of Asia that similarly preceded and survived colonial rule, but only by becoming radically redefined under the conditions of modernity.

**Notes**

1. Versions of this article were presented during invited lectures I gave at the Columbia University South Asia Seminar and the Fordham University Law School Global Law Seminar in New York in January and February 2007. I thank the organizers and audiences of both lectures. In this article I draw on research presented in my doctoral dissertation (Vajpeyi 2004).

2. The work of the legal historian Donald R. Davis, Jr. is instructive in this regard.

3. Reservations are, roughly, affirmative action in US terminology.


5. Dirks builds on the seminal contribution of Bernard Cohn to our understanding of the colonial state in India; Dirks’ colleagues have also touched upon this subject. See especially Appadurai (1993) and Chatterjee (2006).

**Glossary**

**Key Indic Terms**

**Ksatriya (Sanskrit):** Second highest of the four castes of traditional Hindu caste society; the warrior caste; the caste proper to rulers.

**Rajput (All North Indian languages):** Literally, ‘son of a king’; a warrior caste found in many parts of India, but especially in Rajasthan; in medieval times, the caste most likely to constitute the service nobility under the Mughals.

**Sudra (Sanskrit):** The lowest of the four castes of traditional Hindu caste society, the others being, in descending order, Brahmin, Ksatriya and Vaisya.

**Chatra (Sanskrit):** Umbrella; canopy used as royal insignia.

**Chatrapati (Sanskrit):** ‘Lord of the Umbrella’ or ‘Ruler with the Royal Canopy’; royal title of Shivaji and subsequently his descendants in the Maratha dynasties.
Alangir (Persian): Literally, ‘Ruler of the World’; title taken by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (d. 1707).

Dharma (Sanskrit): Law/religion/normative system/totality of natural and social order. Dharma also connotes righteous action.

Mimamsa (Sanskrit): Science of Vedic hermeneutics, a central discipline in Sanskrit knowledge systems.

Mali (Marathi): Cultivator/gardener; name of a Sudra caste in Maharashtra.

Mahar (Marathi): Formerly, Untouchable, now Dalit caste in Maharashtra, a caste to which Ambedkar belonged.

Dalit (Marathi): Literally, ‘ground down’, ‘crushed’, ‘oppressed’; a person below the lowest caste, an outcaste, an Untouchable.

The four castes: Brahmin, Ksatriya, Vaisya, Sudra (in descending order in the social hierarchy).

Untouchable/outcaste: Someone below the lowest of the four castes, or outside the caste system altogether; in modern terminology, Dalit. The constitutional vocabulary is: Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST).

Rg Veda (Sanskrit): The first of four Vedas, the earliest compositions in Sanskrit to be found on the Indian subcontinent, containing hymns, myths, mantras and a variety of other genres of text, conventionally dated to ca. 1500 BCE. The Vedas supposedly have no author.

Purusa (Sanskrit): Cosmic Being; Primordial Man.

Important Dates


Gagabhatta (different dates are available in the literature): 1620–1685/1640–1700.

India’s independence: 15 August 1947; Pakistan’s founding: 14 August 1947.

Jotiba Phule: 1827–1890; Phule’s ballad on the life of Shivaji: 1869.

Shivaji: 1630–1680; Shivaji’s royal consecration: 1674.

References


