

THE ABUSE OF HISTORY I: Denying Caste

By

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There has been a great hue and cry about the attempts by the Sangh Parivar to rewrite Indian history. The latest furore is over the Hindu nationalists rejection of the hitherto accepted view based on the early sacred Hindu texts that, the ancient Hindus did not have an absolute ban on cow slaughter, and that it was not until the later Puranas were written (probably about the fifth and sixth centuries AD) that such a ban became part of the Hindu moral code.(see my “Hindu Equilibrium”, chp.3 for references and further discussion). The trouble with reaching any definitive conclusion on this or any other contested aspect of ancient and medieval Indian history is that, unlike China, there are few historical facts to rely on. There is some archaeological evidence. But, for ancient India the main sources are the notoriously unreliable orally transmitted literary sources going back to the Rigveda (estimated to have been completed about 1500-1300 BC) and the subjective accounts of various foreign travelers, which have survived the ravages of time. Thus what, in particular, passes for the social history of ancient India, as one historian has honestly admitted, “ appears to be a string of conjectures and speculations” (H.Mukhia, Journal of Peasant Studies, 1981). Hence, it is not surprising that the ancient past can be constructed in line with alternative ideological preconceptions. Nowhere is this more evident than in the discussions of caste- that still ubiquitous feature of Indian life. Though here there has been a radical shift in the view of its origins and nature within the so-called “secular” Left school.

When I was writing my “Hindu Equilibrium” in the earl 1980’s, the predominant view on the Left was that the ancient Hindu social system symbolized by caste was just a variant of European feudalism. R.S.Sharma’s “Indian Feudalism” was the canonical work. The late Ashok Rudra , himself a man of the Left but an empiricist, provided the most cogent critique of this view (Economic and Political Weekly, no.52, 1981). Referring to Marc Bloch’s definitive work on European feudalism he summed up the crucial difference between the very different conceptions of the mutual ties between one man and another in the Hindu and European social systems :” ‘Imagine two men face to face ‘ says Marc Bloch while describing the ritual of homage; well, we simply cannot imagine two men face to face in the context of Indian social history”. This is because whereas under European feudalism social ties including those of dominance were between individuals, in Hindu society the relationships were always in terms of groups-castes. Thus, he concluded “the caste system is a characteristic product of Indian genius, just as feudalism was a typical product of the European genius. If it should be considered laughable to write European history in caste terms by the same token applying feudalism in Indian history should be treated as maladroït”. Quite!

But, how could Rudra know, given the paucity of evidence about social life in ancient India that caste then existed. Because ,apart from the unreliable sources noted

above we can see it manifest even today. But, now, recent historians on the Left in India, unlike their predecessors, are questioning this very presumption. A school of self-styled 'Subaltern' historians, and various revisionist anthropologists are now arguing that caste is an invention of the colonial British Raj. It is claimed (see R.B.Inden: "Imagining India") that, the early British scholars and administrators who documented Indian customs and practices and translated the Indian sacred texts were bamboozled by the Brahmins- who were the earliest to learn English and were the only intermediaries available to explain Hindu customs to their foreign interlocutors- into a caste based conception of the Hindu social order. This imaginary conceptual framework was converted into fact when the British Censuses forced Indians to put themselves into these invented categories. Thereafter, caste came to dominate the social and political landscape. Before this the Hindus were no different and as individualistic as the Europeans.

This in brief seems to be the position being maintained in this body of work as far as I can judge from their prolix and impenetrable prose. Even hitherto sensible anthropologists and social historians (eg. Susan Bayley: "Caste, Society and Politics in India") seem to have succumbed to this travesty. Much of the so-called evidence they provide is in terms of contemporary anthropological studies of regions like southern India or parts of medieval central India. But as Bayley states: "the initial premise [of this school] is that even in parts of the Hindu heartland of Gangetic upper India, the institutions and beliefs which are often described as the elements of traditional caste were only taking shape as recently as the early eighteenth century".

I can personally disprove this premise. In the late 1960's while visiting Kerala, I- a Hindu from the Gangetic heartland - went to the Sri Padmanabhaswamy temple in Trivandrum, where the usual 'pandas' accosted me. One came up to me and asked where I came from and my jati and gotra. On learning these he rattled off the names of at least six generations of ancestors, while asking me to fill in the details of whom my cousins and I had married and the names of their children. He did not ask for any money and was only interested in updating his records. Unless he had imagined my ancestors, this would put at least my caste based ancestry to sometime well before the 17th century! It is clearly these contemporary Western scholars and their indigenous acolytes who are imagining India and not Louis Dumont, M.N.Srinivas and the other eminent scholars who have seen 'caste' as the unique aspect of India society whose origins lie in ancient India.

Moreover, as I have argued in both my "Hindu Equilibrium" and "Unintended Consequences", an economic rationale can be provided for the origins of the Indian caste system as it can for European feudalism. All the great Eurasian civilizations being dependent on plough intensive agriculture needed some institutional means to tie labour, which was then scarce, to the land - which was abundant. Serfdom, indenture, slavery and the caste system were all ways to do so. The question these modern revisionists need to answer is: how did ancient Indian princes tie labour down to land if neither feudalism (the old exploded Marxist view) nor caste (the traditional historical view) existed? Even if, *faut mieux*, we are forced to speculate about ancient Indian social life given the paucity of sources we have noted, these speculations must be consistent with the general 'facts' of economic and military life that were common among Eurasian civilizations and which evoked similar though not identical institutional responses.

But, clearly these questions will leave the revisionists unmoved. For, as we shall see in my next column, they are part of the deconstructionist movement which has taken over

the humanities in American and British universities, and which does not believe that there are any 'facts'. But, if that is true then the great intellectual discipline of history, launched more than 2400 years by the Greeks to record the past truthfully instead of the mythical tales that every culture has told to affirm its self-worth, will be dead. Instead, we will be open to all the purported tales of our past, which merely mirror our current hates and loves. There will be no way to distinguish between the mythical tales of the Parivar and the Subalterns.

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