



Illustration by BINAY SINHA

# Caste, gene and history wars

*Now there's genetic evidence that the present-day caste system has its origins in ancient India, says DEEPAK LAL*

**I**n my July 2002 column and the preface to the revised and abridged version of my 1988 book, *The Hindu Equilibrium*, I noted the astonishing post-modern turn in Indian history, whose canonical book *Imagining India* by RB Inden claimed that caste was an invention of the colonial British Raj. This ran contrary to the central theme of my book that the caste system arose in ancient India in the Indo Gangetic plain with abundant land, to tie down the scarce labour needed for its labour-intensive agriculture.

Inden's thesis, which was adopted by sundry other historians and anthropologists, is that the early British scholars and administrators who translated the Indian sacred texts and documented Indian customs and practices were bamboozled by the Brahmins. They were the earliest to learn some English, and thus the only intermediaries available to explain Hindu customs to their interlocutors. They presented a self-serving 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.

Examining this astonishing claim which, if true, would put a coach and horses through my thesis, in the preface to the revised edition of *The Hindu Equilibrium* (Oxford, 2005), I cited some personal history to disprove this claim. In the late 1960s, whilst visiting the Padmanabhaswamy temple in Trivandrum, the usual *pandas* accosted me. One came up to me and enquired about my origins: my *jati* and *gotra*. He then rattled off the names of about ten generations of my ancestors. He then asked for the names of the spouses and children of myself and my cousins. He did not ask for any money and was only interested in updating his records. Unless he had imagined my ancestors (and I could check the veracity of at least the last four), this would put my caste-based ancestry into the 15th century! I also pointed out that noted Indian sociologists like MN Srinivas, TN Madan and Veena Das do not subscribe to this post-modern interpretation of caste. The caste data which was used in the

Munshi and Rosenzweig paper discussed in my last column was obtained by I. Natarajan and his co-researchers at the NCAER from these ancient genealogies.

But now there is more concrete evidence that caste is a unique aspect of Indian society, with its origins in ancient India. One of the major by-products of the mapping of the human genome is its use in mapping ancient population movements and their descendants. I had hoped that geneticists would get around to DNA sampling of the Indian population to test for its endogamy — an essential feature of caste — and by tracing back the common ancestry, determine how long the system had been prevalent in India.

**A** recent novel study (Reich et al: "Reconstructing Indian population history", *Nature*, 24 September 2009) by American and Indian geneticists does just that. Though their sample is small — but diversified by language, region and caste — their conclusion on caste seems secure. They conclude: "Six Indo-European and Dravidian-speaking groups have evidence of founder events dating to more than 50 gen-

erations ago, including the Vysya at more than 100 generations ago. Strong endogamy (average gene flow less than 1 in 30 per generation) must have applied since then to prevent the genetic signatures of founder events from being erased by gene flow. Some Indian historians have argued that 'caste' in modern India is an 'invention' of colonialism ... However, our results indicate that many current distinctions among groups are ancient and that strong endogamy must have shaped marriage patterns in India for thousands of years (ps.489=90)". So much for the post-modern turn in Indian history!

Post-modernism is a child of one strand of Enlightenment views that claims that human nature is a "blank slate". The New Enlightenment based on rapid advances in the human sciences is contesting this view and validating the more rounded views of David Hume of the Scottish Enlightenment. But, the scientific settling of historical disputes can be politically and emotionally charged. An example is provided (as I write) in the letters to the *Financial Times* (21/22 Nov.) about a book, *The Invention of the Jewish People*, by Shlomo Sand. This claims that, today's Palestinians are the descendants of the Jews who never left their ancestral lands. They converted first to Christianity and then to Islam. By contrast, European Jews were converts from central Asia and Europe. The political implications of the book were pointed out by a correspondent (Paul Justison) who asks, "Had the United Nations in 1949 been aware that European Jewry were not rooted in Palestine, would it have given them more than half of that now tragic land." This is countered by Jacob Amir, who uses genetic evidence from DNA sampling of diaspora Jews and non-Jewish Middle Eastern populations to "support the notion that modern Jews are descendants of the Jews who lived in the Middle East 1,900 years ago".

The Reich et al study steered clear of sampling the Indian Muslim population (except for a small sample of Pathans). Was this because it might have provided fuel to the supporters of Hindutva, who claim that Indian Muslims are converts from Hinduism, if they were found to have common ancestors with the Hindu population? What if the DNA sampling is extended to Pakistan and finds its population shares common ancestors with the effete Hindus, thereby undermining its unspoken ideology of hereditary superiority? Perhaps we are seeing the beginning of genetic history wars. But, hopefully, unlike the unresolvable political disputes fuelled by the different strands of the first Enlightenment, the New Enlightenment will provide the antidote in its scientific advances.