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THE INVENTION OF CASTE:  
CIVIL SOCIETY IN COLONIAL INDIA

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The "invention" of the nation state in eighteenth-century Europe went hand-in-hand with the construction of a new form of civil society. Civil society was to free "individuals" in new and progressive societies from "traditional" modes of social organization and from the myriad constraints of pre-modern and/or feudal polities. Civil society has been constituted by and institutionalized in a range of bodies--the church, education, civic organizations--which represent the interests of a private domain, interests construed now to be autonomous from the state (even as they are simultaneously protected by the state). In the retrospective histories of modern nation states, it was assumed that although the outward reach of the pre-modern state was limited by political, military, and technological constraints, the inward (or downward) reach of the state had been virtually unlimited. The modern state, more powerful than ever before, legitimated itself in part through its claim to free the social from the political intrusion of the past.

In eighteenth century Europe, allegiances came increasingly to be conceptualized in terms of verticalities associated with bounded territoriality and shared pasts; local hierarchies were replaced by what Benedict Anderson has termed "imagined

communities" (Anderson 1983). The sociopolitical realignments leading to the emergence of the nation state as the predominant European social formation were based upon the invention of social technologies, printing and the standardization of languages, nationalizing education, self-regulating and autonomous legal systems, official histories of the state and the people, and the production and celebration of national shrines, symbols, and pilgrimage centers. The legitimizing of the nation state proceeds not only in the public enactment of its self-defined traditions, but by constant reiteration of its power through what have become accepted as natural (rational and normal) state functions, of certifying, counting, reporting, registering, classifying, and identifying. These documentation and certification projects of the state have become naturalized as the fundamental activities and legitimate provenance of the modern state. But these projects did not begin at home. Colonialism did not just provide the wealth for the European nation state, it was an extension of Western state formation itself.

I have argued elsewhere that colonialism in India produced new forms of civil society which have been represented as traditional forms; chief among these is caste itself (1987). The academic study of India has, perhaps unwittingly, furthered a colonial project. And in the case of India, anthropologists and historians, for good and ill, are in it together. Caste continues to be the central social fact for South Asia and social history remains implicated in many of the same theoretical and

methodological problematics as anthropology. The regnant importance of scholars such as Dumont (1980) and Heesterman (1985) suggests that the ghost of colonial sociology still haunts us; anthropologists still write about the need for a sociology of India and historians still borrow what they need to know about Indian society from Weber and Dumont before proceeding to do social history. Anthropologists of India have themselves remained so firmly wedded to a Dumontian position (even in dissent) that India has become marginalized as the land of caste. The definition of culture as shared values or distinctive features has led to a series of peculiar debates, in which each new contestant seems to argue not about the way in which multiple cultural forms are embedded in larger historical, political, or socio-economic contexts, but rather about which cultural key or trope most successfully dissolves the difficulties of previous formulations.

Dumont's general views, and the fact that Dumont has occupied a hegemonic position in the field of Indian anthropology, reveal important aspects of the implication of comparative sociology in colonial structures and legacies. Weber, Marx, Maine, and now Dumont have all held that in India, in marked contrast to China, the state was epiphenomenal. Instead, caste, not the state, was what held society -- with its constituent village republics and communities -- together. In a more general sense, caste is seen as the foundation and core of Indian civilization; it is responsible for the transmission and reproduction of society in India. And caste, like India itself,

has been seen as based on religious rather than political principles.

In a previous study I concentrated on the relationship between Indian state and Indian society in the old regime, and the transformation of this relationship under British colonialism, when the Indian crown became increasingly hollow (1987). But until the emergence of British colonial rule in southern India the crown was not so hollow as it has generally been made out to be in Indian history, anthropology, and comparative sociology in general. Kings were not inferior to Brahmans; the political domain was not encompassed by a religious domain. State forms, while not fully assimilable to western categories of the state, were powerful components in Indian civilization. Indian society, indeed caste itself, was shaped by political struggles and processes. In using the term "political" I am of course conscious of imposing an exogenous analytic term onto a situation where ritual and political forms were often fundamentally the same. However, I stressed the political both to redress the previous emphasis on "religion" and to underscore the social fact that caste structure, ritual form, and political process were all dependent on relations of power. These relations were constituted in and through history; and these relations were culturally constructed. But most recently this cultural construction took place in the context of British colonial rule, in which caste was constructed as the religious basis of Indian society, a cultural form that became viewed as a specifically Indian form of civil society.

Colonialism purposefully preserved many of the forms of the old regime, nowhere more conspicuously than in the indirectly ruled Princely States, of which the little kingdom I studied was the only one in the Tamil country of southern India. But these forms were frozen, and only the appearances of the old regime--without its vitally connected political and social processes--were saved. Colonialism both changed things more and less than has commonly been thought. While introducing new forms of civil society and separating these forms off from the colonial state, colonialism also arrested some of the immediate disruptions of change by preserving many elements of the old regime. But by freezing the wolf in sheep's clothing, it changed things fundamentally. Paradoxically, colonialism seems to have created much of what is now accepted as Indian "tradition," including an autonomous caste structure with the Brahman clearly and unambiguously at the head, village based systems of exchange, isolated ceremonial residues of the old regime state, and fetishistic competition for ritual goods that no longer played a vital role in the political system.

The concerns of comparative sociology are not only the products of a nineteenth century Orientalism but also of the colonial intervention that actively removed the politics from colonial societies. It was not merely convenient for the British to detach caste from politics; it was necessary for them to do so in order to rule an immensely complex society by a variety of indirect means. But caste--now disembodied from its former political contexts--lived on. In this dissociated form it was

appropriated, and reconstructed, by the British. Paradoxically, they were able to change caste only because caste in fact continued to be permeable to political influence.

The study of the history of Orientalism not only reveals clearly the participation of early knowledge about India in the project of conquest and control, it also helps to document some of the most critical aspects of the colonial enterprise in India, an enterprise that was part of the more general documentation and certification project of the nation/colonial state discussed above. This project can be vividly seen in the career of a Scot by the name of Colin Mackenzie (see Mackenzie n.d.) who became, through diligent and prodigious effort, the first Surveyor General of India. Early on noted for his plans and drawings associated with the third and fourth Anglo-Mysore wars, his first contribution was to use his topological knowledge of the Deccan to help devise the final assault on Seringapatnam, stronghold of the tiger of Mysore, Tipu Sultan, arguably the most serious military threat to the British in the late eighteenth century. Through his long career in southern India as cartographer and surveyor (Phillimore 1945; Markham 1878), Mackenzie was obsessed with an interest in collecting narratives and facts to supplement the maps he and his associates made of Hyderabad, Mysore, and other regions of the southern peninsula. On his own initiative and with his own resources he hired and trained a group of Brahman assistants who helped him collect local histories of kingly dynasties, chiefly families, castes, villages, temples, monasteries, as well as other local traditions and religious and



philosophical texts in Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, Tamil, Telegu, Kanarese, Malayalam, and Hindi. He also took rubbings of stone and copper plate inscriptions, collected coins, images, and antiquities, and made extensive plans and drawings wherever he went. When Mackenzie died in 1821 he had amassed a collection of 3000 stone and copper plate inscriptions, 1568 literary manuscripts, 2070 local tracts, and large portfolios and collections of drawings, plans, images, and antiquities (see Taylor 1858, Wilson 1828 & Mahalingam 1972 & 1976).

This collection contains by far the largest set of sources for the study of the early modern historical anthropology of southern India. Nonetheless, when I began to use it a decade ago for its family histories of some of the kingly families I was studying, the collection itself continued to be seen as it was characterized by its first bibliographer, the eminent sanskritist H. H. Wilson, as so miscellaneous and embellished by mythological distortion as to be at best a literary source. Wilson, who went on to become the Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford, was best known for his Sanskrit-English dictionary, and seems to have thought that annotating the Mackenzie collection, which he began shortly after Mackenzie's death in 1821, would further his professional ambition and claims. But even though Wilson made a name for himself in part by expanding the range and types of texts in the Orientalist canon, concentrating on puranas as well as vedas, he soon realized that the Mackenzie material was too derivative, too contaminated by latter day accretions, for his serious consideration. Indeed, after Wilson's 1828 catalogue,

the collection fell into the developing fault lines of Orientalist discourse and concern; on the one hand, the material was too late and peculiar for the classicists, on the other hand, the chronicles and other texts were insufficiently "historical" for those early scholars trying to trace out the chronological contours of India's pre-colonial past. Even Mark Wilks (1817), who used Mackenzie's collections of material extensively in his history of Mysore (the same text with the original statement about independent village republics so beloved by Marx), was doubtful of the historical value of anything but the inscriptions. "The department of history in this country is so deformed by fable and anachronism that it may be considered as an absolute bland in Indian literature." Wilks then went on to suggest what most Indian historians since then have thought, that Indian "historical" texts and chronicles are so sullied by myth and fancy that they would be useful only to trace developments in Indian literature in late medieval and early modern times. Wilks turned, however, to the inscripational record for south India, to which Mackenzie had contributed greatly by making rubbings of thousands of stone and copper plate inscriptions: as Wilks said, "There is but one mode which appears to afford the most distant hope of supplying the important defect. The grants generally of a religious nature inscribed on stone and copper plates which are to be found in every part of the south of India are documents of a singularly curious texture; they almost always fix the chronology and frequently unfold the genealogy and military history of the donor, and his ancestors, with all that is

remarkable in their civil institutions or religious reforms," (1807, in IOL, Board's Collection No. 6426). If history is predicated on chronology, then of course inscriptions are preferable to other texts: inscriptions can be used to date kings, reigns, wars, and other events; whereas texts--loose composites of oral and literary tradition which even if we can know the moment of collection we cannot definitively date or even trust--constitute their own internal set of time referents, events, and structures, and do not easily succumb to historical appropriation and use.

The history of the Mackenzie Collection, both the actual collection and assemblage, and then its uses and disuses, reflects and refracts the peculiar relation of colonial knowledge to the fractured changes in the sociology of knowledge in India during the first century and more of British colonial rule. In a sense, the history of the collection is the history of the construction of an archive, which though first largely an embarrassment to be saluted and yet ignored, and later textualized (and disguised) in the late nineteenth century Gazetteers and administrative handbooks and early twentieth century ethnographic surveys of different regions in India, was once a differentiated slice of the texts and traditions current in late eighteenth century south India. Nonetheless, the concerns of Wilson and Wilks about the historicity and authenticity of the Mackenzie manuscripts are not without justification. The Mackenzie archives does indiscriminately mix published books, hastily finished palm leaf manuscripts, and

locally produced new traditions, sometimes written by one particular caste headman with an agenda of his own, sometimes written up by Mackenzie's Brahman assistants, and sometimes old texts re-written to produce clarity and chronological consistency according to British (or what were perceived as British) notions of history. And while Wilson's and Wilks' suspicion of the non inscriptional material in the collection led to the temporary neglect of the other texts, these texts did surface later on, first in the notebooks of such early antiquarians, philologists, and ethnologists as Walter Elliot (Sewell 1896) and C.P. Brown (Bangorey 1978), then in the footnotes and texts of the District Gazetteers, and finally in the seven volumes produced by Edgar Thurston (1907), curator of the Madras Museum and an avid measurer of skull sizes and types, on the castes and tribes of southern India. By 1907, when these volumes were published, Mackenzie's manuscripts appeared, if not ancient, certainly as early texts that suggested the possible recovery of a pre-colonial sociology of knowledge.

From the letters and diaries of the native agents of Mackenzie, those early research assistants--or "native informants"--of colonial ethnography and historiography, we learn of course that the process of collection was anything but neutral, that the sociology of knowledge might have been early colonial, but was hardly pre-colonial. First, it is clear that these agents, themselves Brahmans, assumed that the only knowledge worth having would necessarily be mediated through Brahmans, even if the object of collection was the history of a

low Sudra caste or a robber Kallar king. Whenever an agent went to a new town, he looked for books by first looking for learned Brahmans. If no text existed for a subject the colonial master was particularly keen about, the local Brahman would find the relevant expert/informant and transcribe an oral account. In fact, many of the rough translations made by Mackenzie's assistants of some of these accounts inscribe such information in the margin--e.g., as told by a headman of such and such caste--but this information has never been passed along with the use of texts. In other instances, pre-existing texts were rectified. Perhaps the most extraordinary example I found of this is seen in the preface of a text titled by Mackenzie, "Mootiah's Chronological and Historical Accounts of the Modern Kings of Madura." It begins like this: "I turned my thoughts towards the Chronological and Historical Accounts of the Gentoo Kings of Madura written upon Palmyra leaves in a vulgar style of the Tamil language which I found to be satisfactory but the same being in a confused order and full of tautologies and repetitions which, if I proceed to translate literally into the English, it would prove absurd in the sight of the learned, I have therefore, in my following version of the said account, omitted the tautological and repeated expressions and set aside prolixity but following laconism, digested the Chronicles into eleven chapters and a preamble prefixed thereto, (IOL, Mackenzie General, vol. 2)." For the textual scholar, of course, this yields indigestion, but the point is that most uses of the texts Mackenzie collected involved several layers of transformation, only the last stages

of which were the translation and ultimate rectification of the texts in the bound volumes that have for most subsequent scholars provided the only known version of the texts. (The vernacular editions were sent at Wilson's instance back to Madras where they lay moldering in the College library until the University of Madras under T. V. Mahalingam decided to catalogue the texts in the 1950s.)

These Brahman research assistants were thus agents of and in a complex social reality; to shift the usual anthropological reading of their status as informants, we can now see them as double agents. On the one hand they constructed and represented a Brahmanic sociology of knowledge, one that has already been well-documented in the construction of legal codes for Indians under colonial institutions, but which also set in motion a wide range of apparatuses which led to the flip side of nationalism in late nineteenth and early twentieth century India--the communalist and sometimes separatist anti-Brahman movements of Tamil Nad, Karnataka, and Maharashtra. On the other hand they were agents of and for the British. There was often considerable and justifiable concern about the implications of handing texts, traditions, knowledge, artifacts, etc. over to these agents. When one Nitala Naina went to collect the family history of the royal family I have written about in my book, it took him several months of wrong leads and frantic misunderstandings to procure the text, which nonetheless seems to have \_contained nothing but panegyrics to and of the British (India Office Library, Mackenzie Unbound, Class XII, vol. 1, no. 3). But some other family

histories had new improved conclusions asserting the loyalty of the little king to the East India Company; and some texts ended with petitions to release from prison some descendant of the royal family who had been interned as a result of the poligar wars and rebellions of the late eighteenth century. And some texts, like the folk ballad about the hero of these wars and rebellions, were kept underground until the late nineteenth century because of concern about their treasonous nature (see Dirks 1987, chapter 3).

Even when the political stakes of knowledge were not so clear, knowledge never passed hands without complex negotiation and the mobilization of much symbolic capital. Often Mackenzie's assistants had to promise that they would arrange a job like their own, or at the very least an interview with the Company Master, i.e. Mackenzie himself. And texts were vaguely promised and then not delivered, or when delivered turned out to be just a local copy of a standard text, in story after story that read much like my own notes and diaries from my fieldwork. Thus texts were transacted and produced in contexts which anticipate by two hundred years Foucault's suggestions about the relations of power and knowledge. But rather than simply seeing these mediations as impediments in our own search for truth, we should also see the active participation of countless local scribes and agents in a continuous sociology of production. To borrow from Bakhtin, there are a lot of voices in Mackenzie's texts.

My point here is not simply that the texts of this kind are not pristine, never authentic versions of some pre-colonial (or

pre-modern) moment, but also that no text is ever neutral, and never intelligible apart from the context of its production, transmission, and use (see Chartier 1985, McGann 1987). In part, of course, I begin with the kind of concern raised by Said in his tremendously important Orientalism (1979), for we can clearly see in the history of colonial collections the appropriation of a dynamic and active process of oral and textual production, the colonial politics of representation. Although Mackenzie himself was saved from the lower circles of an Orientalist's hell in part by his obsessive empiricism--he never stopped his collecting endeavors long enough to prepare, much to the distress of his biographers and the inheritors of his collection, either an annotated catalogue or a distilled historical sociology of his own--the history of the collection graphically tells Said's story. When Mackenzie's chief assistant, Cavelly Venkata Lutchmia, applied to the Madras division of the Asiatic Society to carry on Mackenzie's work of collection and cataloguing after the Master's death, the Society rejected the application on the grounds that no oriental would be able to do the managerial and critical work necessary to oversee such a project. According to the head of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, James Prinsep, "Such an extensive scheme would need the control of a master head, accustomed to generalization, and capable of estimating the value and drift of inscription and literary evidence. The qualifications of Cavelly Venkata for such an office, judging of them by his "abstract," or indeed of any native, could hardly be pronounced equal to such a task, however useful they may prove as



auxillaries in such a train of research." (*italics mine*, Madras Journal of Literature and Science, October 1836, p. 44).

Instead, they hired the Rev. William Taylor, a missionary in Madras and self-professed Orientalist, who can only be judged, even in nineteenth century colonial terms, as at best a poor scholar, and more accurately as an eccentric antiquarian (see Taylor 1835).

Thus textual politics do not take place only in texts, as much post-structuralist writing today seems to imply (see McGann 1987). Rather, the history of the collection demonstrates the hegemonic appropriation of native voices and meanings by colonial forms and logics of knowledge. Even Mackenzie's impressive reticence to gloss and catalogue his own collection became the pretext for the marginalization of the native scholars Mackenzie had himself seen as so instrumental in his own project.

Nonetheless Mackenzie played an important if contradictory role in the rescuing of south India's precolonial historiography. Throughout his career, he consistently advocated the importance of recovering and documenting the precolonial history of southern India, and in this context stressed the significance of local texts. Unlike Wilks and Wilson he did not disparage or dismiss out of hand Indian historical accounts or sensibilities. And unlike the stewards of the Madras Society of Literature and Science and the Royal Asiatic Society he did not condemn the capabilities of his Brahman assistants, waxing eloquent in his praise of C.V. Boria, his first assistant and the older brother

of Lutchmia, whose untimely death in 1803 almost ended Mackenzie's efforts.

Mackenzie's aim was to collect as many different kinds of evidence and documentation as possible. In his instructions to his assistants, as also in his memos to other Company servants who were posted throughout southern India, he communicated a profound and specific appreciation for the various sources of knowledge that might be consulted and collected. He wrote that he was "desirous of obtaining copies or originals of native MS in any language, relating to the ancient government of the Pandeyan and Cholen kings or other dynasties that have ruled in these countries (Box 3, Mackenzie uncatelogued miscellaneous papers, no. 65, IOL)." In his memo he further noted, for example, that "At Madura and other ancient religious establishments, some notices it is supposed are still preserved in the hands of the Bramins, which may throw light on the ancient government. Accounts are also said," he went on, "to be preserved of the religious contentions that took place between the Bramins, Jain, and other sects." In subsequent paragraphs of his memos he became more specific: "Regular historical narrations and tracts are seldom found among the natives, and such notices as exist, are generally preserved in the form of religious legends and popular poems and stories." But rather than consigning such sources and genres to the colonial dustbin of legend, he told his colleagues and assistants to collect them. He also said that there were exceptions, as for example in the cases of "Vumshavelly, or genealogies of the several dynasties and

considerable families; Dunda Cavelly, or chronological registers and records...; Cheritra or histories and Cudha -- frequently applied to tales and popular stories, but sometimes containing correct information of remarkable characters and events approaching to the nature of our memoirs (the Mahratta Bakeers are of the same description he wrote); Rakas; and Calliganums, literally prophecies, but sometimes really conveying under that assumed disguise Historical information with more apparent freedom than could be addressed to Oriental sovereigns; It need scarcely be observed that the recovery of any of these ancient records would be very desirable." As we see, it is not that Mackenzie was less clear than Wilks or Wilson about what constitutes proper historical knowledge, but that he had a much more eclectic and grounded sense of how to accumulate it. Furthermore, rather than immediately despairing over the ahistoricism of the Oriental mind, he assumed that quasi- or non-historical genres, such as prophecies, were less historical than they otherwise might have been in order to disguise their political and dangerous nature.

Nonetheless, Mackenzie neither developed nor deployed a critique of colonial discourse. When writing about local histories of kings and important families in another context, he noted that these histories were "mixed with much fabulous or puerile matter" and that they were important only because "Hindoos... appear to have no regular histories (Box 3, Mackenzie miscellaneous uncatelogued material, no. 73, IOL)." His real interest was in political and revenue history, precisely the

domains of historical inquiry most suited for colonial curiosity. In addition to a number of papers he wrote on the significance of Jainism in the history of southern India, his most important paper, submitted at a meeting of the Royal Asiatic Society in April of 1815. was entitled: "View of the principal Political Events that occurred in the Carnatic, from the dissolution of the Ancient Hindoo Government in 1564 till the Mogul Government was established in 1687, on the Conquest of the Capitals of Beejapoor and Golconda; compiled from various authentic Memoirs and Original MSS., collected chiefly within the last ten years, and referred to in the Notes at the bottom of each page (Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, vol. xiii, 1844, pp.421-463)." And yet, even given the conventionality of his interests, what stands out in this long 19th Century title is the emphasis on sources, and specifically on their authenticity and originality.

In spite of the fact that Mackenzie engaged in many of his antiquarian activities on the side, without direct Company sponsorship and support, he himself saw his life work as a single project. As Surveyor General, he made maps, drawings, and route descriptions; these materials have been housed in the Surveyor General's office, and indeed for a long time I thought I was unable to locate a great deal of material about Mackenzie's project because I never thought to look in these records. Instead, I merely consulted the records that were a part of Mackenzie's private project, the collection of texts, traditions, inscriptions, coins, etc., which were housed in London and

Madras. In reproducing the administrative and archival taxonomy which separated off his public from his private activities, however, I for a long time did not realize that the cartographic project was as Mackenzie himself thought, a vital part of the antiquarian one. For if time and chronology were fundamental to Mackenzie's sense of the value of his historical labors, so too space and topography organized his sense of the importance of, say, his early ethnographic collections. And indeed, it was only when I started looking through Mackenzie's maps that I found his careful delineation of caste groupings and populations for the different regions he mapped in Mysore and in the Ceded Districts. The whole project of mapping the interior portions of the subcontinent that were progressively conquered from the Nawabs of Hyderabad and Arcot and from the Sultans of Mysore was a project in filling out a space that in late seventeenth century maps was both unknown, and, with the compression of unknown spaces as mere interstices for the well-known coastal areas, almost twice as narrow as the satellite picture suggests. These spaces were social as well as cartographic, so it was in this context that castes were listed, ordered, and counted.

In Mackenzie's initial project of collecting representative texts, histories of places and polities predominated. The south Indian landscape was dotted with temples which, due to the tall gopuram towers built over the gateways into structures that often served as centers for marketing and defense in addition to worship, served as convenient reference points for trigonometrical surveying and general route maps. Every temple

had a history which inscribed the significance of its deity and the ground of the deities' worship with a special past of miracle and power. The south Indian landscape had also been controlled by myriad little kingdoms, ranging immensely in size, each with a family history for the chief or king. Thus the set of local tracts collected by Mackenzie contain literally hundreds of accounts of one lineage headman after another who, through a combination of strategies and successes, managed to become a little king.

From the work of David Shulman (1980) on temple histories, and from my previous work on little kings, I was aware of the prevalence of this kind of text. However, when I first turned to the Mackenzie collection as a repository for early ethnographic knowledge about southern India, I was surprised to find very few caste histories. As mentioned above, there were some statistical lists in the map collections, compilations of population breakdowns on caste that had the same indexical function for the map as the delineations of field types and irrigation sources. These lists were highly particularistic and idiosyncratic; though Brahmans were usually at the head the lists were neither highly formalized nor, as David Ludden can tell us in great detail, easy to compare across districts or regions. There were some general texts about castes, as also some curious lists of caste groups which resembled Borges' Chinese encyclopedia more than later ethnographic surveys. But there were only a few specific caste histories. Those that did exist, such as the Kallar and Maravar caste histories I had earlier read and copied from the Tamil,

were clearly of the sort I referred to earlier--hastily put together from the chance concerns and remarks of a set of subcaste headmen. But in all of Mackenzie's obsessive collection, caste as a rubric for textualization was surprisingly uncommon.

And Mackenzie seemed far less interested in caste than I would have expected. Not that he didn't mention it. In one of his memos to fellow East India Company Servants, he listed the need to collect texts concerning and information about caste: "The peculiar customs of certain descriptions of the natives their division into castes and where any different from the established customs (Box 3, Mackenzie Miscellaneous uncatelogued material, no. 73, IOL)." And he noted that "The population of the districts by castes, families, and villages" should be carefully counted and presented by local Public Officials. But apart from the utility of caste for organizing early census counts, it played a small role in Mackenzie's Collection, and at first I felt disappointed that my interest in finding early (and little mediated) texts on caste turned up so little.

But in mid and late nineteenth century collections, for example the extensive manuscript collections of Walter Elliott which drew heavily on the Mackenzie collection, I found that caste histories had begun to predominate. Part of the reason for this had to do with the demise of the little kings; those who had survived at all had done so as zamindars or landlords with little particular claim to histories of their own. Temple histories continued to be important, but were considered to be relevant by

the colonial state only in so far as they could be used to decide disputes over temple control, management, and honors, disputes which were arbitrated by the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Board. But for a variety of reasons caste histories were considered to be particularly important, and caste became increasingly the only relevant social site for the textualization of Indian identity.

One of the first indications of the importance of caste came in an official memo of 1816 recommending support for and publication of a revision of Abbe Dubois' Hindu Manners, Customs, and Ceremonies (1816), the first edition of which was said to contain a large number of errors and omissions. The Board of Control wrote: "There is nothing perhaps of more importance to the Hindoo community than that their distinctions of caste should be well understood by the civil officers of the government in the interior of the country, yet there is no subject at present on which it so difficult to procure correct information, (1814, IOL, Board's Collections no. 541)." In later years, of course, the collection of information about caste structure and customs was justified less in terms of the needs of Hindu community.

But some of the first ethnographic surveys, at least in the south of India, betrayed signs of their uncertain pedigree and recent genre. Perhaps the clearest example of this comes in a book compiled by Lutchmia's younger brother, C.V. Ramaswamy, privately published in 1847. This book was entitled "A Digest of the different castes of the southern division of southern India, with descriptions of their habits, customs, etc." The work was



dedicated to "British public of India," and was clearly intended for a European audience ("that they may receive that gratification and instruction which it is my anxious desire to impart"). The treatise began with an account of the four varnas with their dharmic duties, and then in catalogue fashion listed the castes of the south of India with brief descriptions for each one. The list begins like this: "Butler, Dubash, Cook, Cooks' mate, Ayea, Lamplighter, waterwoman, grasscutter..." and then includes such standard castes as the dog boy, the hammaul, and the agriculturalist. As idiosyncratic as this work clearly is, it reflects the lack of clarity and convention regarding caste as a site for textualization.

But as the nineteenth century progressed, the collection of material about castes and tribes and their customs, and the specification of what kinds of customs, kinship behaviors, ritual forms, etc. were appropriate and necessary for ethnographic description, became increasingly formalized and canonic. Indeed, collection of this kind of information soon became the centerpiece of an official colonial sociology of knowledge. As it was stated in the announcement of the ethnographic survey of India, published in the first issue of Man in 1901:

It is unnecessary to dwell at length upon the obvious advantages to many branches of the administration in this country of an accurate and well-arranged record of the customs and the domestic and social relations of the various castes and tribes. The entire framework of native life in India is made up of groups of this kind, and the status and conduct of individuals are largely determined by the rules of the group to which they belong. For the purposes of legislation, of judicial procedure, of famine relief, of sanitation and dealings with epidemic disease, and of almost every form of executive action, an ethnographic survey of India, and

a record of the customs of the people is as necessary an incident of good administration as a cadastral survey of the land and a record of the rights of its tenants. The census provides the necessary statistics; it remains to bring out and interpret the facts which lie behind the statistics.

Such interpretation often rested in a peculiar set of notions about origins, which themselves had less to do with history than with a set of functional correlates assumed to be demonstrated by the particular origins of any given group and its derivative occupational and social status. These preoccupations were reflected in the kinds of information (texts, traditions, statistics) the colonial state collected, stored, and published, and help explain why only certain parts of Mackenzie's vast storehouse of material was seen to have relevance.

The rise of caste as the single most important trope for colonial Indian society, and the complicity of Indian anthropology in the project of colonial state formation is documented in a great many texts, perhaps nowhere more fully, though complexly, than in H. H. Risley's classic work, The People of India. Risley, who was the Census Commissioner of India for the 1901 Census (the regulations of which greatly influenced the 1911 Census as well), had earlier produced the multi-volume work The Tribes and Castes of Bengal published in 1891. The People of India resulted directly from Risley's work as Census Commissioner, and is an expanded version of the Commissioner's report on the 1901 Census (written with the assistance of E. A. Gait) that, among other things, summarized his views on the origin and classification of the Indian races

based on his historical speculations and his anthropometric research.

Risley has been much criticized by contemporary as well as subsequent writers for overemphasizing the racial basis of caste and stressing anthropometry. W. Crooke argued against Risley with particular vehemence, suggesting that occupational criteria provided much more comprehensive and accurate indices for understanding caste as a system than race. And the anthropometric researches of Thurston in the south and others elsewhere steadily eroded the confidence of the anthropological establishment that racial types in India were anywhere near as pure or clear as Risley had assumed (Thurston 1907). But Risley's general views of caste as a social system and force in India were little challenged. Risley seemed to speak for many in both colonial and academic establishments when he wrote that caste "forms the cement that holds together the myriad units of Indian society... Were its cohesive power withdrawn or its essential ties relaxed, it is difficult to form any idea of the probable consequences. Such a change would be more than a revolution; it would resemble the withdrawal of some elemental force like gravitation or molecular attraction. Order would vanish and chaos would supervene (278)."

Risley's characterization of caste redeploys the standard colonial conception of Indian society, in which caste is the source of all order and the fundamental basis of the social. But in The People of India Risley departs from normal colonial anthropological practice and addresses the question of

nationalism. In one of the two new chapters written for the 1909 publication of the book, Risley assesses the role caste might play in the future of India's political development. And he quotes with approval the words of Sir Henry Cotton, who surmised that "The problem of the future is not to destroy caste, but to modify it, to preserve its distinctive conceptions, and to gradually place them upon a social instead of a supernatural basis (282)." Here Cotton, and Risley, advocate precisely what I have suggested colonialism in India set out to do: the constitution of caste as a necessary complement to social order and governmental authority, as a new kind of civil society for the colonial state.

In Risley's view, caste has an ambivalent status. It is both a religious institution, and a social or civil one. It is anarchic, yet encourages the development of monarchy. It is particularistic, though the necessary and inevitable basis for any unity in the Indian context. On the one hand Risley noted, basing his conclusions largely on the lectures of Sir John Seeley, that "The facts are beyond dispute, and they point to the inevitable conclusion that national sentiment in India can derive no encouragement from the study of Indian history (291)." On the other hand, Risley also wrote that "the caste system itself, with its singularly perfect communal organization, is a machinery admirably fitted for the diffusion of new ideas; that castes may in course of time group themselves into classes representing the different strata of society; and that India may thus attain, by the agency of these indigenous corporations, the results which

have been arrived at elsewhere through the fusion of individual types (293)." These contradictions are interestingly resolved in (and by) the colonial situation. And here we confront the colonial mind in its most liberal guise. For Risley writes that "The factors of nationality in India are two--the common use of the English language for certain purposes and the common employment of Indians in English administration (300)."

Risley thus holds out a kind of limited but realistic hope for national development in India, measured by his sense that caste ideas and institutions will stand in the way, though optimistic that a steady (and English) pragmatism on the part of Indian leaders can sow the seeds of a new mentality. But Risley's liberalism is complicit in the general project of British colonialism, as it supports the notion that caste is simultaneously a barrier to national development and an inevitable reality for Indian society in the foreseeable future. Risley suggests that caste, as he has interpreted it, can be made into a virtue out of its necessity. It can accommodate and shape a gradually developing class society, perhaps even softening its potential conflicts and antagonisms, and it can provide a model (in its idealized varna version) for the articulation of an all-embracing ideology which might work at a general level to confound and even counteract the fissiparous tendencies of caste as a specific social institution. Caste in this sense is the key to the great transition from feudalism to capitalism/democracy. Except that in the colonial situation that transition can never

be fully made. The teleology of self-rule is here, as always, couched in a future which has absolutely no temporal reality.

Nonetheless, the assumption that the colonial state could manipulate and invent Indian tradition at will, creating a new form of caste and reconstituting the social, and that a study of its own writings and discourse is sufficient to argue such a case, is clearly inadequate and largely wrong. Long after I began to study the complex dynamics of colonial intervention in India, the study of what is now called colonial discourse has become rather fashionable (Gates 1986). This is in large part because of the impact of Said's work and the ease with which colonialism falls subject to a post-structuralist critique. But in spite of Said's insistence on a reading of Foucault which situates discursive formations in historical processes of institutional domination and hegemony, much recent critical theory has merely gestured towards history -- no sooner completing the gesture than appropriating history to support a- and even anti-historical readings of texts. The ease with which critical readings of colonial texts and "third world" referents are made in certain literary circles today may indicate the ironic birth of a new Orientalism.

However, any study of colonial discourse which fails to examine the contradictory nature of colonial intervention and the institutional bases of colonial impact must be rejected even if we might accept Foucault's emphasis on the fields of power created by discursive practices. The power of colonial discourse was not that it created whole new fields of meaning

instantaneously, but that it shifted old meanings slowly, sometimes imperceptibly, through the colonial control of a range of new institutions, including those for which the study of caste was judged necessary in the earlier note from the ethnographic survey. Although an emphasis on ideas and discourses reveals that institutional hegemony is not based solely, or even principally, on brute force, discourse does not do it alone. Institutions activate ideological changes most often, and most effectively, when they do so subtly, masking seduction as mutuality and change as continuity. Transformations occurred because of the ways colonial discourse inscribed its peculiar, often masterful, combination of old and new meanings in institutional theatres with major consequences for the colonial subjects. As I have argued elsewhere (1987), this process often involved the paradoxical preservation of old regime forms, creating a shadow theatre in which continuities and changes seemed always to mimic each other.

In the case of caste, we have only begun to examine the complex and contradictory character of colonial change through the lense of colonial collections. I do not have the space here to identify how these were related to other institutional processes in colonial India. Suffice it for the moment to say that they included the politicization of invented forms of caste in the census, in the communally based franchises of early electoral reform, in the development and implementation of legal codes which made formal civil and criminal distinctions on the basis of caste, in the introduction and elaboration of revenue

systems and policies predicated on a colonial sociology of India, as well as in the textualization and professional appropriation and reinterpretation of Indian traditions and social forms. Caste achieved its critical colonial position because the British state was successful in separating caste as a social form from its dependence on pre-colonial political processes. The history of Mackenzie's collection cannot be separated from the history of the British colonial state project in India. But if colonial discourse and the documentation apparatus that provided the evidence and the ground for the colonial caste of mind was not totally and autonomously constitutive, neither was it epiphenomenal. Caste, I have tried to suggest, became a specifically Indian colonial form of civil society, the most critical site for the textualization of social identity, but also for the specification of public and private domains, the rights and responsibilities of the colonial state, the legitimating conceits of social freedom and societal control (by which I mean, for example, the political definition of the social dimensions of property, occupation, labor, and criminality), and the development of the documentation and certification project of the colonial state. To amend Anderson's general terms of argument, it seems clear in the Indian case that the forms of casteism and communalism that continue to work against the imagined community of the nascent nation state have been imagined as well. However, they have been imagined precisely through and within the same historical mechanisms that brought about the very state to which these centrifugal forces appear now to be the supreme threat.



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