

Language Politics under Colonialism

Language Politics under Colonialism:
Caste, Class and Language Pedagogy
in Western India

By

Dilip Chavan

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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

This book was conceived over the past decade as I reflected upon the linguistic politics that had accompanied the first few decades of the nineteenth century in Western India. The roots of this book stretch back to when I started writing a tract in 2003 on Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and caste struggle in Indian education for Krantisinh Nana Patil Academy, an organisation of intellectuals and activists that I have been privileged to be part of for long.

Much water has flowed since histories of colonised societies were contrived as mere economic drain. Also, much has changed since the historians of education adopted a somewhat reductionist view of the nationalist ideology of education. Now, it is needless to say that any attempt to understand how unequal power is produced, reproduced, institutionalised and also contested must deal with language and education.

Exploration of the relationship between language and politics in India has been long overdue. This book tries to capture the reconfiguration of pre-modern power structure within colonialism in the specific context of education and linguistic policies implemented by the colonial administration. The interrelationship existing between caste power and dominance and also between colonialism and its cultural implications in terms of caste have been rather ignored subject in the postcolonial theory; analysis of the interplay between primordial power structure like caste and colonial modernity has only currently reflected in some post-colonial writings.

Against this backdrop, the book offers a nuanced understanding of collusive role that the indigenous elites played in working out new ways to preserve their privileges and dominance which also strengthened the hold of colonial regime without fully altering and disturbing the existing modes of dominance.

The attempt is to dispel the thesis that a thorough going eradication of pre-capitalist relation is a pre-requisite to the growth and advancement of modern capitalism. The Indian case points to the contrary. The colonial state could engender its capitalist motives without substantially altering the existing feudal, hierarchical socio-economic and political arrangements.

Drawing upon the theoretical framework of Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser and Jotirao Phule, the text attempts to delineate the relationship between language and power. Keeping at the backdrop the recent upsurge in critical thinking about power and dominance, the book

explicates the rather easy and unproblematic acceptance of hegemonic ideologies and power by the colonial subjects through an analysis of linguistic and educational policies prescribed and implemented in Western India.

It is necessary to usefully draw attention to 'the relative isolation of linguistics' in the postcolonial scholarship from the controversies that have rocked the foundation of other fields including anthropology, history and literary theory. The role of caste in colonial India is another issue that has remained unattended to in the postcolonial scholarship. This relative isolation of caste can be attributed to the stereotyped notion of the East and the West, which was so foundational and integral to Edward Said's book, *Orientalism*.

Said's approach grants absolute power to the dominant systems of representation and minimises or erases the agency of the colonised. While reflecting upon the collusive role that the indigenous elites played in India in the construction of a dominant ideology and colonial rule, many scholars have now begun to criticise the scholarship, which has developed under the Saidian influence. Many postcolonial critics have treated Orientalism as a Western construct only. Contrary to the Saidian perspective, the present study explores the active participation of indigenous social groups in the formation of contemporary cultural discourses. It is an attempt to analyse the colonial policy on language in Western India and the way the traditional elites influenced and shaped it.

The book features three apparently contradictory discourses of Orientalism, Anglicism and Vernacularism. This discussion goes on to show how all these discourses shared certain common tenets of imperialism in the sense that all three found European language (English) as panacea for India's backwardness. Europeanising the Indians was thought as the only solution to the Indian backwardness and lack. The differential language policy of the British *vis-a-vis* different social groupings went into perpetuating existing social hierarchies, despite apparent modifications. Following this, the book demonstrates how the British officialdom showed the inclination and tolerance towards indigenous elites. The book also argues against the popular understanding that English was a colonial imposition; it outlines the aspirations of traditional elites towards acquiring English education much before when Macaulay argued for Anglicism. The exclusivity of elite education was informed by the theory of 'downward filtration' which ignored elementary education through vernacular and instead advocated the education of selected group who would be conduits for diffusion of western learning among the people.

Historians of Indian education have not escaped the prolonged obsession with T. B. Macaulay, who has emerged since 1835 as a towering figure, continuously haunting the collective psyche of the Indian nationalists for long. Quite surprisingly, this has obscured the crucial role played by the albeit less known colonial administrators like Thomas Munro, Mountstuart Elphinstone and John Malcolm, who out of their experiential expediency through long stay in India had devised a policy of appeasement of the traditional caste-elite. Contrary to Macaulay's expectation and will, Sanskrit has continued to dominate the Indian linguistic scenario. In the post-colonial era, Sanskrit was seen the conduit of India's culture and the saviour of the values and life and national consciousness. For example, eclipsing his own socialist credentials, Nehru eulogised the role that Sanskrit played in the past. Continued patronage to and institutionalisation of Sanskrit in post-independent India validate that it was not Macaulay but Munro, Elphinstone and Malcolm who stole the limelight.

Study of Indian languages has been camouflaged under the metanarratives of Sanskrit and also of English. The scholars of Marathi grammar like K. S. Arjunwadkar obstructed the scholarship on Marathi grammar by suggesting that only the one, who is proficient in Sanskrit and well-versed with Sanskrit grammar, is eligible for writing the grammar of Marathi or other Indian language. What reclines at the root of such a position is an assumption that Sanskrit is the *mother* of all Indian languages. However, a few scholars have ventured beyond technical and historical issues to examine the sociological, cultural and ideological contexts of grammar.

The book also deals with the problem of standardisation of Marathi, which was evidently tilted towards certain socio-political and cultural needs of dominant classes. During the early phase of colonial rule, which also happened to be the formative phase of modern Marathi, many varieties of Marathi existed alongside the Pune-based brahminical version of Marathi; however, many early grammarians of Marathi gave no consideration to them. The diversity and plurality of Marathi words, for example, evident in terms of different regions and social groups, were first labelled by the early lexicographers of Marathi as obscene and then systematically erased from the vocabulary. This book is an attempt to show how the early nineteenth-century attempts of writing the grammars of Marathi, which were rooted in predominantly brahminical-colonial culture that was essentially elitist in orientation, can be seen as a prime ideological expression of puritanism.

Inequality was intrinsic in educational distribution and the material benefit that education could potentially promise. Educational institutions

provide distinct mechanism through which power is maintained and contested. The book envisages how the study of Sanskrit Pathshala and Elphinstone Institution gives us an opportunity to problematise the East-West encounter. Selective distribution of Sanskrit and English education contributed to exacerbate the pre-modern institutions and practices.

The book also takes a comparative perspective in order to map the differential language policy aimed at perpetuating socio-cultural hierarchies through prescribing different linguistic practices in colonial Maharashtra. A comparison of two educational institutes—Sanskrit *Pathshala* in Pune and Elphinstone Institute in Mumbai—established in the early phase of colonial rule—is offered as illustration to this exclusivism whereby maintenance of privileges of certain classes and strata among the natives was made possible. English education in Mumbai was a deliberately cultivated policy. The Sanskrit education in Pune was intended to placate the affected upper castes, which suffered severely by the change of government upon the overthrow of the last Peshwa by the British in 1818. English education served the double purpose of consolidation of British power and maintaining existing hierarchies, as it offered specific privileged opportunities to certain segments of Indian population.

The correlation between ideology and curriculum and between ideology and educational argumentation has important implications for the theory of pedagogy. The book also investigates the process of creation of moral textbook in Marathi. Education becomes a disciplinary project with the intent purpose of domesticating the colonised subject. It also tries to trace the colonial legacies in contemporary educational packages in India. Despite apparent official rhetoric to strengthen democracy through education, elitism and hierarchies are barely disturbed.

The present study explores active participation of various indigenous social groups in the formation of contemporary cultural discourses. It attempts social history of Sanskrit and Persian. It discusses how the Orientalism, Anglicism and Vernacularism shared certain tenets of imperialism and differentiated language policy which was to perpetuate social hierarchy. It argues how the caste- origin of the standard Marathi in the nineteenth century explains the ideological difficulties it encountered.

It states how the creation of moral textbooks in Marathi for school children was loaded with the ideological function of domestication. The book also deals with the repercussions of the colonial language policy in the postcolonial era. The book works with the assumption that study of colonialism becomes essential, as colonialism has continued to influence the choices, methods and strategies of development followed in the postcolonial societies. The contemporary issues of various types need to

be understood only with reference to colonialism as the constant historical backdrop. The present study hopes to help the scholars rationalise the present impoverishment of Indian languages.

The process of standardisation of the regional languages has continued in the postcolonial era. This has resulted in the negligence of the regional and social variants of these languages, further stigmatising the use of standard language in the official situations like education. The official policy of using standard language gives way to the predominance of the upper caste-class writers in the language textbooks and marginal incorporation of the lower caste-class writers. This strongly contributes to the growing rate of dropouts at the school level, high rate of failure in the vernaculars in the board examinations and the consequent exclusion of the marginalised groups from the echelons of power.

CHAPTER ONE

THEORETICAL PRELIMINARIES

Shall we resort to the power we possess to destroy their distinctions of castes, and to demolish their idols? Assuredly not. Force, instead of convincing them of their error, would fortify them in the persuasion of their being right; and the use of it, even if it promised happier consequences, would still be altogether unjust.¹

—Charles Grant

Recasting Caste in a Colonial Society

The mode of production prevailing in the pre-colonial Indian society has been a much debated issue among the social scientists. Was the pre-colonial Indian society a caste-based one characterised by endogamy, rigid and closed hierarchical structure and patriarchy; or was it a class-based society, wherein caste was just incidental and functioned only as a garb to class?

Many of the social scientists have failed to distinguish between the sociologically distinct categories, caste and class—and have continued to use them interchangeably.² Karl Marx had prophesised that with the

¹ B. K. Boman-Behram, *Educational Controversies in India: The Cultural Conquest of India under British Imperialism* (Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala Sons and Co. 1943) 4.

² Sharad Patil traces the history of the confusion that surrounds the compound category, caste-class:

They [the terms ‘caste’ and ‘class’] are used meaningfully for the first time by S. V. Ketkar who remarks in 1901 that “classes are converted into castes by becoming endogamous.” This Brahminical hypothesis was later developed into a thesis by B. R. Ambedkar in 1916, which has become an inviolable dogma with the Ambedkarites in India. It assumes, without praising it, that in ancient Indian class formation preceded caste formulation. Traditional Indian Marxists inherited this dogma directly from their co-caste preceptors. E M S Namboodiripad puts it in Marxist terminology thus: “Caste is the main form in which class manifests itself.”

—Sharad Patil. “Should ‘Class’ Be the Basis for Recognising Backwardness.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 25.50 (1990): 2733.

introduction of modern industry in India, hereditary caste distinctions would disappear. Following Marx, many Indian Marxist thinkers held the dogmatic view about the changes that colonialism ushered in in India. However, S. G. Sardesai had to admit in 1979 the futility of this “scientific prophesy” after a quarter of Indian independence and half a century of Indian communist movement. He admitted that the notion of modern bourgeois national state was introduced in India for the first time in its history by the British imperialists; but due to their colonial interests, instead of abolishing the pre-capitalist caste system, they continued its authority:

Without going into other reason, it can be said as a point of fact that the bourgeois state in India due to its colonial nature did not perform its historical function of abolishing the feudal elements as it did in other western societies. What is relevant for us is the continued role of political authority in the caste system even in the British period...³

Gita Ramaswamy’s study of manual scavenging in Andhra Pradesh reveals that both the Moghul rule and the British rule perpetuated the practice of manual scavenging instead of abolishing it.⁴ What is noteworthy is that the British rule, in spite of its avowedly civilisational mission, legitimised and systematised scavenging. They officially created posts of manual scavengers and employed them in army cantonments and municipalities. She writes that the British “intervened specifically to institutionalise” scavenging. They did not use technology “to remove social prejudice.” Instead, the technology of sanitation was “structured to deepen social prejudice in India.”⁵

The mercantile entrepreneurial bourgeoisie of the East India Company, under the auspices of the Company rule and the colonial state, entered into formal protective relationships and political alliances with local feudal groups, such as the extractive high caste, landowning rural gentry and the princely régimes. The colonial power also attempted harnessing the class interests of the indigenous élites to those of the colonial state.

Kumkum Sangari has argued quite pertinently that the colonial power was not interested in bringing about in the colony the kind of fundamental change, which Europe had witnessed. Unlike the transformation, which took place in the European society in the wake of the industrial society,

³ Sardesai quoted in Patil 2733.

⁴ Gita Ramaswamy, *India Stinking: Manual Scavengers in Andhra Pradesh and Their Work* (Pondicherry: Navayan Publishing, 2005) 5-13.

⁵ Ramaswamy 6.

the mercantile entrepreneurial bourgeoisie of the East India Company and the colonial state disowned the responsibility of replicating the transformation of mercantile industrial capital in the colony.⁶

Abhay Shukla also has convincingly argued that, historically, there has hardly been any society characterised by “pure capitalism”. A thorough going eradication of pre-capitalist socio-cultural relations by emergent capitalism is an exception not a rule in capitalist development. In reality, capitalism has often compromised and collaborated with “pre-capitalist” social forms.⁷

It is evident from the histories of various colonised societies that the colonisers, instead of dismantling the earlier feudal structure, fostered the process of formation of new classes, which were to co-exist alongside the feudal structure and be the mediators between themselves and the ruled. Colonialism could not have survived without making use of the pre-colonial hierarchical social structures and further creating ruptures in the colonised societies. One of the imperial strategies of the British was the idea of *divide et impera*. The colonial state saw the fragmentation of the Hindu society into thousands of castes as an explanation for why India could never be united as one nation, or be an effective challenge to foreign rule.

In the view of Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779-1859), who introduced modern English education in Western India, hierarchical system was essential to maintain good relations between the British in India and the indigenous society. His idea was that a mixture of castes would alienate the higher castes from English education. Hence, the way out was to deprive the poor students of English education.⁸ Francis Warden, who was opposed to Elphinstone’s views on the medium of education, enthusiastically agreed with Elphinstone on the issue of caste. In his *Minute* on education, Warden wrote that the government should not be “too forward in taking the education of the natives on itself, nor interfere too much in the institutions that exist in the country, imperfect as they may be.”⁹ James Kerr, the Principal of Presidency College of Calcutta, captured the significance and relevance of caste to the British Empire in 1865 thus:

⁶ Kumkum Sangari, *Politics of the Possible: Essays on Gender, History, Narratives, Colonial English* (New Delhi: Tulika, 1999) 9.

⁷ Abhay Shukla. *Imperialist Globalisation and Communalism*. An unpublished paper presented in the “Samyunkta Khoj” in Nagpur on 8-4-2007.

⁸ For more details of Elphinstone’s discriminatory language policy, refer to chapter 2.

⁹ Francis Warden. “Minute dated 29 December 1823.” *Indian Education in Parliamentary Papers Part – I*. A. N. Basu. Ed. (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1952) 213.

It may be doubted if the existence of caste is on the whole unfavourable to the permanence of our rule. It may even be considered favourable to it, provided we act with prudence and forbearance. Its spirit is opposed to national union.¹⁰

The above British opinions clearly indicate that the pre-colonial hierarchy in the Indian society became a site of manipulation for the colonial rulers. The colonial state, far from being neutral to the pre-colonial hierarchy in the Indian society, was indeed one of its vital constitutive elements. It was colonialism that facilitated incorporation India into world capitalism. The colonialists wanted to restructure the Indian society so as to make it suitable to colonial exploitation. Even, the pre-colonial state had attempted a partial restructuring of the society. For example, Murshid Quli Khan had reorganised the fiscal system of Bengal to substitute it with a solvent and relatively vigorous set of landlords for a bankrupt and effete landed aristocracy.¹¹ Ranajit Guha has shown how the British manipulated the pre-colonial structures in India by infusing new blood for old in the proprietary body by the Permanent Settlement in the east, *ryotwāri* in the south and some permutations of the two in most other parts of the county. He writes:

The outcome of all this was to revitalize a quasi-feudal structure by transferring resources from the older and less effective members of the landlord class to younger and for the régime politically and financially, more dependable ones... the crude medieval type of oppression in the countryside emanating from the arbitrary will of local despots under the previous system was replaced now by the more regulated will of a foreign power...¹²

Distinguishing between the categories, “caste” and “class”, Sharad Patil has convincingly argued that class-relations had not existed in pre-colonial India. According to him, class relations were implanted upon the caste society in the course of colonial encounter when capitalist mode of production was also introduced in India. Thus, Cornwallis’s Act of Permanent Settlement in 1793, which made the *zamindārs* the owners of

¹⁰ Melita Waligora, “What Is Your Caste? The Classification of Indian Society as Part of the British Civilizing Mission.” *Colonialism as Civilizing Mission: Cultural Ideology in British India*. Harold Fischer-Tiné and Michael Mann. Eds. (London: Wimbledon Publishing Company, 2004) 143.

¹¹ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. (1983; New Delhi: Oxford UP [henceforth, Oxford UP], 1994) 7.

¹² Guha 7.

their *rayat*'s land, was an attempt to implant class relationship on the earlier caste relationship. Patil further states that this imposition could not change the *jātī* relationship into class relationship.

Gail Omvedt has also argued that colonialism aimed at restructuring local production processes to facilitate accumulation of surplus. The colonial invasion of India only ensured the continuation of the power of the former feudal lords, brahmins and the increased subordination of the village community to the English-educated bureaucracy. In this process, the traditional structures of caste were used, transformed and in some ways even strengthened.¹³

Karl Marx had hoped that the British rule would have a deep impact on the Asiatic mode of production, which was characterised by a "subsistence economy" of self-sufficient village communities. In his famous article, "The Future Results of the British Rule in India" (1853), Marx referred to the double mission in India:

...one destructive, the other regenerating—the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia.¹⁴

However, the situation in India was much more complex than Marx and Frederick Engels had imagined. As Bharat Patankar and Gail Omvedt point out, the recruitment of the proletarian class in new factories, plantations and mines was more structured and caste feudalism dictated "which groups could have access to certain jobs or which would be willing to take the most arduous employment."¹⁵

The colonial contact resulted in the formation of a new class order; however, this new order was certainly influenced by the earlier caste order. The working class was stratified along caste lines. The most exploited and lowest paid labour required for the factories, plantation, the railways, etc. was provided by the lowest ranks of the caste order, the *dalits* and the *ādivāsīs*. The educated élites were exclusively the upper castes.

¹³ Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (1994, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005) 80-8.

¹⁴ Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence 1857-1859*, (1959; Moscow: Progress Publications, 1978) 29.

¹⁵ Bharat Patankar and Gail Omvedt, *The Dalit Liberation Movement in Colonial Period* (New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2004) 10.

Nevertheless, the British attempted to legislate against some of the vilest practices like *sati* and untouchability and grant equal access to law, irrespective of caste. However, the colonial policy of non-interference in “social and religious customs” helped the upper castes, particularly the brahmins, to continue their dominance on religion and culture. For example, the exclusion of the low castes from temples and the traditional rights of conservative caste elders to discipline rebellious upper-caste “reformers” were generally upheld by the courts on the ground that these were private religious matters.¹⁶

Dumont also has noted that the British Government, by “not meddling in the domain of religion and the traditional social order, while introducing the minimum of reforms and novelties on the politico-economic place”, significantly reduced the extent of change and conflict under colonial rule.¹⁷

There is a general consensus among scholars on the fact that “the colonial system generates new classes.” However, there are disagreements on some crucial issues involved in the complexities created in the traditional feudal societies by the introduction of the relatively advanced capitalist mode of production. The issues are:

- a) Did colonialism replace the earlier feudal structure with new classes?
- b) Did the earlier mode of production, i.e., caste, continue to prevail?
- c) What kind of relationship did exist between the new colonial ruling class and the traditional structures of caste and class?

I. P. Desai has argued that the ascriptive caste or Indian feudal relations of production in the caste-class social set-up have already given way to contractual class or capitalist relations of production. This means that India society is predominantly a class capitalist society. According to him, unlike in the caste system characterised by “*jajmani*”, in which a person had no “free will” to give up his caste occupation, a person in the new capitalist system has the choice to give up his profession. Even if he continues to be in the same profession, his relationship with the employer is based on class rather than caste.¹⁸

¹⁶ Patankar et al. 9.

¹⁷ Nicholas B. Dirks. “Castes of Mind.” *Representations* No. 37, 1992, 57.

¹⁸ I. P. Desai writes:

However, it can be asked how far it is right in assuming that some occupations in preindustrial conditions are the same individuals of the same caste.... though the occupational activity remains the same the person

Indian Marxists, in order to legitimise the applicability of Marxian class-methodology to Indian society, consider the relations of production more important than the inevitability of various castes that are tied to their own traditional professions. The introduction of the bourgeois production relations in the traditional caste system has failed to destroy caste. This enforced inability to accept the profession other than their caste-profession explodes the myth concerning the right to exercise “free will”. Gita Ramaswamy has shown how, in the process of urbanisation, scavenging has entrenched itself into the life of a community over the last two hundred years.¹⁹

Another important issue is the relationship of the modern class categories to the traditional categories like “caste” or “tribe” or race. Caste was the prime basis of social organisation in pre-colonial India. The introduction of the new capitalist economy in the garb of colonialism into the traditional and hitherto unchanged caste system brought in certain changes in the caste-based occupations. However, colonialism was not intended to replace the old hierarchical structure with the new bourgeois economy. Instead, it contrived to employ the earlier structure to assist and aggregate the process of exploitation. Kumari Jayawardena has established that colonial powers deftly made use of traditional caste distinctions for administrative purposes, although they did not publicly approve of caste system. Further, caste hierarchies determined official appointments. This raises important questions:

....does capitalism, as commonly believed, cut across ‘primordial’ identities and create new pluralist classes that act in their class interests leading to a decline of earlier ties and loyalties? Or does capitalism lead to the recasting and restructuring not only of these caste identities, but also of ethnic and religious identities which coexist with class?²⁰

The colonialists had understood the utility of the upper castes in establishing their rule. The Moghal Empire had not succeeded in dismantling the cultural dominance of the upper castes in Indian society. In Western India, Elphinstone was one of the early administrators to

engaged in the activity is a new person. He is a barber by occupation not by caste.

—Patil 2733.

¹⁹ Ramaswami 7.

²⁰ Kumari Jayawardena, *Nobodies to Somebodies: The Rise of the Colonial Bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka* (2000; New Delhi: Leftword, 2001) 161.

understand the potential use of the upper castes in the perpetuation of the colonial rule and framed his policies accordingly.

The British had realised early that they could not stabilise their rule without practising the measures of conciliation. Thus, for instance, the Governor of Bombay had issued his instruction in 1781 to the newly appointed Resident at Kalyan:

You are to conciliate, by every proper means, the minds of the inhabitants to the English Government and to take special care that they are not in any degree injured.²¹

The élites of the old régime were bound to react ambivalently to the new order.

The upper castes were very quick to adapt themselves to new conditions and exhibited great enthusiasm to avail themselves of the advantages of the colonial rule. A section of the Pune-based brahmins frankly communicated to the Collector of Pune as early as April 1818 that their support to Bajirao II did not mean that they had any aversion for the British. The brahmins in Pune had started negotiating with the British even before the fall of the *Peshwa* rule.²²

After the fall of the *Peshwa* rule, a section of the society in Pune was strongly against the British. However, as soon as this section realised that Bajirao II was most unlikely to come back, they began to show their willingness to collaborate with the new government: “some of the most respectable members of the community visited [the British] in the day time instead of as formerly during the night.”²³ The colonialists were looking for the indigenous allies, which would function as a mediating class between themselves and their Indian subjects. The classes that the British considered to be influential were:

1st. – The land-owners and jaghirdars, the representatives of the former feudatories and persons in authority under Native powers, and who may be termed the Soldier class.

2nd. – Those who have acquired wealth in trade or commerce, or the commercial class.

²¹ Arun Joshi. *Renaissance in Western India: Lokhitwadi (1823-1892) Part- I*. Diss. U of Bombay, Bombay. 1976. 4.

²² H. V. Mote, Ed. *Viśrabdha Śārdā Vol.-I 1817-1947*. (Mumbai: H. V. Mote, 1972) 2-4; D. V. Apte and R. V. Oturkar, *Mahārāṣṭrācā Patrarup Itihās* (Pune: V. G. Ketkar, 1941).

²³ Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Social Policy and Social Change in Western India 1817-1830* (1957; London: Oxford UP, 1961) 13.

3rd. – The higher *employees* of Government.

4th. – Brahmins, with whom may be associated, though at long interval, those of the higher caste of writers who live by the pen, such as Parbhush and Shenvis in Bombay, Kayasts in Bengal, provided they acquire a position either in learning or station.²⁴

The superior position of the brahmins in the Indian society and their hold on the rest of the castes seemed useful in establishing colonial domination. The British cleverly exploited the upper caste brahmins' yearning for power.²⁵

Eugene F. Irschick states:

the Brahmins were employed by the British in the subordinate positions, because they had lost their commanding influence and a certain discontent and longing for a return to power naturally remained.²⁶

G. Aloysius has established that the interaction between the British and Indian cultures was not monolithic in form on either side.²⁷ The interaction was deeply uneven in many ways. The colonial policy in India was influenced by the motives and interests of the indigenous, dominant castes, which were to function as the indigenous class of quasi-rulers. For example, the different forms of land settlement—*zamindāri*, *ryotvāri* and *mahālvāri*—were dictated by the local realities of land control and power relations rather than by any ideological considerations.²⁸

²⁴ *Report of the Board of Education from Jan 1, 1850 to April 30 1851. Vol.-IX* (Bombay: Bombay Education Society's Press, 1851) 10.

²⁵ Sumathi Ramaswamy has discussed the case of Tamil brahmins under colonialism:

While Brahmins all across India generally prospered under colonial rule, Tamil speaking Brahmins had especially reaped rich rewards. Barely 3 per cent of the population, they disproportionately dominated the bureaucracy start in English and university education.

—Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1070* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1997) 27.

²⁶ Eugene F. Irschick quoted in Kashinath Karlekar, *Non-Brahmin Movement in Southern India: 1873-1949* (Kolhapur: Shivaji U P, 1979) 23.

²⁷ Aloysius writes:

...on the side of the British, there were several streams of influence—not always acting in unison—the official, the missionary and the civilian; the Indian side, multi-cellular and hierarchical, and responded differentially to the different aspects of external influence.

—G. Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation in India* (1997; New Delhi: Oxford U P, 2005) 33.

²⁸ Aloysius 20-51.

While commenting on the collusive role that the indigenous élites played in India in the construction of a dominant ideology and colonial rule, Braj Ranjan Mani points out that new scholarship, which has developed under Edward Said's influence, treats Orientalism as a Western construct only. He has argued that the Saidean hard-hitting critique may be true in the case of the Islamic world, where Orientalism had become confrontationist:

But in case of India, Orientalism was seductive and collaborative as it took the form of Indo-Europeanism. In the Indian context Said's reading of Orientalism grossly overlooks the collusive role played by the native privileged groups. His theory does not take into account the complicity and culpability of native notables in India who played a crucial role in the making of the Oriental stereotype of Indian culture and civilisation.²⁹

The colonial rule was a joint endeavour of the British and the Indian rulers. Sumit Sarkar has also correctly pointed out that colonial knowledge was not just a Western superimposition. Such an interpretation, he argues, gravely underestimates the extent and significance of the inputs from relatively privileged Indian groups with autonomous interests and inclinations.³⁰

In Western India, Elphinstone had to devise a policy of containment for the upper castes, lest they feel that they were neglected in the new régime. He showed perceptive pragmatism in his decision of reinstating the Maratha King of Satara and continuing the traditional privileges of the brahmins after the *Peshwa* in Pune was dethroned. This differentiated policy was aimed at satiating the maratha and the brahmin élites in Satara and Pune respectively. Elphinstone announced the *Proclamation of Satara* and assured the upper castes that the new régime would not interfere with the social order or the tenets of any religious sect. It was declared that all “*watun*”, “*enam*” lands, established pensions, and annual allowances should be continued.³¹ He had liberally distributed largesse among the brahmins at Nasik, Wai, Satara, Pune immediately after the fall of the *Peshwa* régime.

The fall of the *Peshwa* rule was not followed by any kind of rebellion in Pune. Instead, the upper castes quickly recognised their importance as

²⁹ Braj Ranjan Mani, *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2005) 195.

³⁰ Sarkar quoted in Mani 195-6.

³¹ R. S. Walimbe, *Yekonāvisāvyā Śatakāṭīl Mahārāṣṭracī Sāmājik Punarghaṭanā* (Pune: R. S. Walimbe, 1962) 84.

co-rulers of the British and began to respond to the colonial policies favourably and positively. Particularly, the *citpāvans*, who had occupied feudatory positions during the Peshwa rule, made tremendous efforts to regain their lost ascendancy. They swarmed in every government office and occupied important positions as they had done under the *Peshwa* rule. Many of them showed an overwhelming and unquestioning loyalty to the British *Raj*.

A complex interface of caste (indigenous ruling groups) and class (colonial bourgeoisie) was so deeply penetrated that a queer antagonism developed between the indigenous exploited masses, predominantly coming from lower rungs of caste structure and the newly formed cluster of indigenous and colonial élites. The lower castes, which were doubly oppressed by caste and colonialism, began to give vent to their class-hatred through violent acts and insurgencies.

Ranajit Guha has established that the *Kol* insurrection of 1832 in Chota Nagpur was primarily against the *suds*, which ultimately turned out to be a war against the Company's government itself.³² *Sarkār*, *sāhukār* and *zamindār* were the first to bear the initial brunt of the peasant revolt in any particular instance. This shows that colonialism had penetrated deep into the Indian society and the subaltern masses were keenly aware of its deep contradictions. However, the new cluster of a ruling group, consisting of the upper castes and the colonial ruling class, was bound to influence the educational and language policy in the nineteenth century.

Caste as a Colonial Construct

Caste, which has been the very fundamental issue of and central symbol for India, remained outside the discourse on colonialism and Orientalism for long. The interrelationship between caste and colonialism and its repercussion in the cultural realm have been a poorly attended area. One of the important reasons for the conspicuous absence of caste in the postcolonial discourse is that the postcolonial scholars consider the Oriental societies quasi-homogeneous. Edward Said hardly refers to caste in *Orientalism*. Many postcolonial scholars believe that colonialism did not affect the colonised disproportionately and it was not collusive with the indigenous structures in the colonies.

Recent scholarship on postcolonialism shows that the institution of caste, as we know it today, is largely a modern and specifically colonial invention. Arjun Appadurai and David Ludden have pointed out how the

³² Guha 26.

fluid pre-colonial boundaries of caste and community were fixed and made rigid in certain ways during the colonial period.³³ They argue that the colonial state employed diverse strategies like the census, enumeration, classification, codification and documentation to reinvent and substantiate caste. In Satish Deshpande's words,

The colonial power 'essentialised' caste - thought of it as an essence that defined Indians and Indian culture - and it set out to measure and document this essence. These efforts at measurement brought into existence precisely that which was sought to be measured. From being a fluid, context-dependent variable, caste turned into a fixed, immutable essence. The nexus between colonial power and colonialist forms of knowledge (like anthropology) thus constructed the very version of caste that colonialism needed to cement its own world view.³⁴

Nicholas Dirks's *Castes of Mind* is a seminal work in this regard. He argues that caste, as we know it today, is relatively a modern phenomenon and a product of the encounter between India and the colonial rule:

It is increasingly clear that colonialism in India produced new forms of society that have been taken to be traditional, and that caste itself as we now know it is not a residual survival of ancient India but a specifically colonial form of civil society. As such it justifies and maintains the colonial vision of an India where religion transcends politics, society resists change, and the state awaits its virgin birth in the postcolonial era.³⁵

Dirks disregards the fact that caste had been a very material system of production in pre-colonial India. Numerous scholarly attempts have been made to prove that castes were the building blocks of social structure in the pre-colonial Indian subcontinent. What colonialism did was not to invent caste but, by collaborating with the upper sections of the Indian society, it conveniently used the pre-colonial caste structure by means of negotiation. Sudipta Kaviraj has best summarised the composition of the Indian social structure as characterised by "late, backward, post-colonial

³³ Arjun Appadurai. "Number in the Colonial Imagination." and David Ludden. "Orientalist Empiricism: Transformations of Colonial Knowledge." *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*. Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer. Eds. (New Delhi: Oxford U P, 1994) 314-39 and 250-78 respectively.

³⁴ Satish Deshpande. "Caste Inequality in India Today." *The OBCs and the Ruling Classes in India*. H. S. Verma. Ed. (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2005) 272.

³⁵ Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, (2002; Delhi: Permanent Black, 2006) 59.

capitalism”, which functionally uses various enclaves of pre-capitalist productive forms. This, according to Kaviraj, is contrary to the traditional linear belief that pre-capitalist social structure is in general dysfunctional to capitalist growth and would be liquidated historically.³⁶

Similarly, unlike Said’s proposition, Peter van der Veer has pointed out that Orientalism did not create out of the blue a reality in which the oriental had to live. Orientalism fed on an existing dominant discourse carried out by the brahminical élite. Peter van der Veer further argues that groups of brahmins all over India have, for a very long period, had a major role in Hinduism as intermediaries between the supernatural and the world that is based on their monopoly of certain ritual discourses.³⁷

Postcolonial theorists have attributed to colonialism “every possible sin” that has continued to haunt postcolonial India. The “renascent Rajput consciousness of urban male”, the revitalised caste-conflict on the Mandal Commission and the communal tension that erupted after the demolition of the Bābari Mosque are seen as the “obscure” doings of colonialism. It cannot be denied that colonialism had a role in perpetuating caste by implementing certain conciliatory and exclusivist policies. However, in Mahesh Gavaskar’s words, the argument aimed

to emphasise the colonial authorities ascribing rigidity to caste identities, while overlooking the denial of basic civil rights in pre-colonial times on the basis of those very identities, is lopsided.³⁸

Arguing along the similar line, Dipankar Gupta also views that though it is true that identities, including caste identities, change over time, it would be incorrect to go to the extreme of asserting that caste itself is a colonial creation.³⁹ This colonial-origin-thesis of caste also proves futile in the wake of increasing caste conflict, caste atrocities and the opposition to caste reservation in postcolonial India where castewise census was abandoned long before independence. Another danger in the colonial-origin-thesis is the veneration of everything that was pre-colonial, which,

³⁶ Sudipta Kaviraj. “A Critique of the Passive Revolution.” *State and Politics in India*. Partha Chatterjee. Ed. (New Delhi: Oxford U P 1997) 41.

³⁷ Peter van der Veer, “The Foreign Hand: Orientalist Discourse in Sociology and Communalism,” in Breckenridge et al. 26.

³⁸ Mahesh Gavaskar. “Colonialism within Colonialism: Phule’s Critique of Brahmin Power.” *Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values*. S. M. Michael. Ed. (New Delhi: Vistar Publications, 1999) 83.

³⁹ Dipankar Gupta. “Introduction: The certitudes of caste: When identity trumps hierarchy.” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 38.1 & 2 (2004): vii.

in turn, falls back upon the nationalist lines and can potentially strengthen the present-day nationalism. Finally, knowing that caste is constructed rather than primordial does not help much in understanding its deeper strategies and connotations that are historically rooted.

Marx on Colonialism and the Postcolonial Predicament

According to one estimate, more than three quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism. According to Edward Said, from 185 to 1914 European direct colonial dominion expanded from 35 percent of the earth's surface to about 85 percent of it.⁴⁰ Ania Loomba precisely states that by the 1930s, colonies and ex-colonies covered 84.6 per cent of the land surface of the globe.⁴¹

Until recently, the study of colonialism was confined to its consequences in the political and economic spheres. However, after the rise of postcolonialism, many scholars have begun to assume that the socio-political scenario in the postcolonial societies continued to have considerable influence of the colonial period. The study of colonialism becomes essential, as colonialism has continued to influence the choices, methods and strategies of development followed in the postcolonial societies. The contemporary issues of various types need to be understood "only with reference to colonialism as the constant historical backdrop." Bipan Chandra persuasively writes that development strategies and policies are crucially determined by the historical roots and causes of backwardness, the inherited pattern of development, and the consequent obstacles to development. Colonialism needs to be studied as a distinct phase in the human history and a distinct social structure.⁴²

Was colonialism achieving a clear demarcation from the earlier feudal structures in the colonies or was it maintaining *status quo*? In other words, was it achieving a metamorphosis by converting the pre-capitalist societies into capitalist societies or was it retaining old modes of production, without altering much of the prevailing structure? These are some of the questions being debated today.

Marx treated colonialism as a painful and exploitative but necessary phase in the development of the colonies. Colonialism had become an

⁴⁰ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978; Middlesex: Penguin books, 1995) 41.

⁴¹ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1998; London: Routledge, 1999) 19.

⁴² Bipan Chandra, *Essays on Colonialism* (New Delhi: Orient Longman Ltd. 1999) v.

integral part of imperialism and in its early phase it had to, according to Marx, fuel European capitalism. He regarded colonialism as a brutal condition for liberating the colonies from the hold of feudalism.

Colonialism does not simply preserve the pre-colonial social structure. Colonial rule could not have existed without altering and remodelling the feudal structures of the colonies in the new capitalist mould. However, it is a truism that colonialism did not achieve total transformation in the colony. It tried to make use of the traditional structures of hierarchy by implementing differentiated policies for the subjects. The colonialists looked upon the traditional dominant groups in the colonies as their allies. They were quite aware that it was not possible to appropriate the manifold resources of India without ensuring the involvement of the upper castes.

The early phase of colonial period has remained, perhaps, the most significant period in the development of the colonies. It has attracted the attention of a lot of scholars from a wide range of disciplines from linguistics to cultural anthropology. However, it received a boost from Edward Said's groundbreaking book—*Orientalism*.

Until the publication of *Orientalism*, colonialism was seen as essentially a system of economic exploitation through the forceful domination of one country over the other. However, contemporary thinkers do not disregard the cultural-ideological aspects and consequences of colonialism. They believe that colonialism involved multiple discursive cultural practices and employed diverse strategies of accommodation and manipulation.

By the time Marx started his political career, colonialism had brought under its sway a major portion of the world. Himself a product of the liberal, anti-colonial milieu of the mid-nineteenth century, Marx was one of the early commentators on colonialism. While dealing with Ireland under British dominion, he and Engels were the first to see the impact of colonialism on the colonised. He emphasised the capitalist nature of colonialism in creating conditions of underdevelopment and making the Irish economy dependent on the British. He was perhaps unique among the European social scientists, who perceived in the imperialist trade and plunder the primary source of "primitive accumulation" that enabled capitalist development to begin.⁴³

Colonialism helped capitalist societies to have a violent contact with the pre-capitalist societies. Marx saw colonialism as a reproductive

⁴³ Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non Brahman Movement in Western India: 1873 to 1930* (Bombay: Scientific Socialist Education Trust, 1976) 16.

requirement of the European or American industrial economies in the early phase of industrialisation. He wrote:

The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes, turning, from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked.⁴⁴

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels discuss the significant role colonialism played in the development of modern capitalism:

The discovery of America, the rounding of the Cape, opened up fresh ground for the rising bourgeoisie. The East-Indian and Chinese markets, the colonisation of America, trade with the colonies, the increase in the means of exchange and in commodities generally, gave to commerce, to navigation, to industry, an impulse never before known, and thereby, to the revolutionary element in the tottering feudal society, a rapid development.⁴⁵

According to Robert C. Young, Marx and Engels saw European global expansion as both the cause and effect of the development of capitalism. For them, colonial trade operated as part of the same general conditions for capitalism at home, namely, the need for markets, for raw materials, and for investment.

Marx held that it was through colonialism that the bourgeoisie accumulated the initial surplus that enabled revolutionisation of the capital. While in crisis, any production system revolutionises itself in order to sustain the crisis. Marx argued that it was through colonialism that the European bourgeoisie was achieving a cataclysmic movement, “a disruptive upheaval throughout the world that bursts old feudal relations asunder and turns traditional stasis into a process of transformation.”⁴⁶ Marx and Engels wrote:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society....Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and

⁴⁴ Robert C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001).

⁴⁵ Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels. *Communist Manifesto: Socialist Landmark*. Harold J. Laski. Ed. (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1954) 121.

⁴⁶ Young 102.