

# Contesting Categories, Remapping Boundaries



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*Literary Interventions  
by Tamil Dalits*

By

K. A. Geetha

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Literary Interventions by Tamil Dalits

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*Dedicated to  
My dearest  
Amma, Appa and Shubi*



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## PREFACE

Dalit literature in Tamil is a very recent phenomenon, first beginning in Maharashtra in the 1950s and 60s. It is only since the 1990s that it has become a significant presence in Tamil Nadu. Dalits have reclaimed literary spaces, transforming them into spaces of protest, self-assertion and identity formation.

Literature produced by historically marginalized communities, it has been argued, can function as an important tool for social change. However, much depends on how this literature is received and interpreted. Since the university is a potential site for social change, it is significant to enquire whether Dalit literature has been incorporated into mainstream curricula. It is equally vital to explore how students respond to Dalit literature. This study analyses the literary works of Tamil Dalits and explores how students of Tamil and English literary studies have responded to Tamil Dalit literature and its English translations. This book traces the evolution of Tamil Dalit writings from the early decades of the twentieth century to the present and explores its impact on academia.

The book addresses the following issues: What were the socio-cultural conditions that led to the emergence of contemporary Tamil Dalit literature? What are the dominant themes and trends in contemporary Tamil Dalit literature? Should Dalit Literature necessarily be included in the curriculum? If yes, at what level should it be included? How does the academia respond to the emergence of Tamil Dalit literature? In particular, how do students respond to Dalit literature, a literature which has found a place in both English as well as Tamil literature curricula? How do students interpret the word Dalit? How is reception of Tamil Dalit literature influenced by the location and caste of the student? As a form of literature which possesses an ideological function, how is it received and understood by readers? Finally, this book seeks to find out whether reading Dalit literature can bring about a social change.

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# INTRODUCTION

The social institution of caste is a predominant feature of the Hindu social organization. Manifesting in diverse beliefs and practices, caste is an integral part of the Indian society, culture and politics. The social structure of caste in India is rooted in the *Varna* system which segregates the Hindu society hierarchically into four *Varnas* namely, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. The Panchamars or 'untouchables' (present day Dalits) are placed below the category of Shudras and exist outside the four fold *Varna* system. The caste system attained religious sanction, since the *Vedas* and Hindu scriptures served to perpetuate such stratifications among Hindus. The ideology of the upper castes<sup>1</sup> (who were simultaneously the landowning class) was dominant in the society. The social institutions of religion, law, politics, art and literature reflected the dominant ideology of the upper castes. The castes which were lower in the hierarchy had to comply with the dominant ideology which legitimated their menial status and subjugation in the society.

The ideology of caste is based on the notions of purity and pollution. The Panchamars<sup>2</sup> were considered the lowest in the society and, apart from serving the upper caste landlords, they were assigned common duties like removing dead cattle, cleaning drainage, and played a pivotal role in death and funeral ceremonies. Due to the nature of their work they were considered "untouchables" and lived in the fringes of the village. Denied access to mainstream society, their very sight was believed to cause pollution. "Untouchables" were expected to tie an earthen pot round their neck so that their sputum did not fall to the ground and pollute the atmosphere. They had to tie a broom at their back to erase their foot prints while they were walking. Living a slavish existence outside the village

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<sup>1</sup> Castes which were assigned a high position in the caste system were called upper castes. In recent years, the term upper caste is being substituted with the term Caste Hindus. However, in this book the two are used interchangeably. The term Caste Hindu is used to denote the people who follow the norms of the caste order. The term upper caste is used to denote the power and dominance of castes which were ranked higher in caste system.

<sup>2</sup> The Panchamars or 'untouchable' communities were referred to as 'Depressed classes' during the colonial period. They were also referred to as Harijans, a term coined by Mahatma Gandhi.

they were dependent on the dominant castes for even basic necessities like water (Dangle 235-236).

After centuries of suppression, Bhima Rao Ambedkar, launched a fierce struggle against the caste system and denounced the *Manusmriti*<sup>3</sup> which legitimated caste ideology. He rejected the caste system which relegated a section of the society to a slavish existence. Ambedkar opposed terms such as “Depressed classes” and “Harijans” which were imposed on the untouchable communities. He emphasized that the untouchable castes must identify themselves as “Dalits” which signified both their oppressed state and their rebellion against caste norms and values. In the 1930s, Ambedkar spearheaded a revolutionary movement which denounced the established norms and ideology of the upper castes. The movement interrogated the validity of the caste system based on which Hindus in India were socially stratified.

## Dalit Literature

Dalits articulated their dissent against the dominant ideology not only in social and political platforms but also through literary forms. Literature became an effective tool to express their protest and anguish against the domination of the Caste Hindus. The literature by Dalits exposes the oppression and exploitation that Dalits continue to face in the hands of the upper caste forces. Dalit literature not only reveals the angst of being a Dalit in a caste driven society, it simultaneously registers a revolutionary discourse which challenges the hegemonic caste structures of the society. The burgeoning of Dalit literature began in the 1960s in Maharashtra. The literary movement spread to other languages like Gujarati, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil.

Dalit literature has carved a niche for itself in literary studies and is emerging as an interesting area of study for academic scholars and Dalit intellectuals. A large number of Dalit literary texts are now available in English translations. Many publishing houses like Macmillan, Oxford University Press, Katha, Penguin India and Sahitya Akademi, are increasingly publishing English translations of Dalit literature.

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<sup>3</sup> *Manu smriti* is one of the oldest works on Hindu law and ancient Indian society. Written by Sage Manu, *Manu smriti* gives an account of the norms and principles of the caste system.

## **Dalit Literature in Tamil**

Dalit literature in Tamil is a very recent phenomenon. Dalit literature which began in Maharashtra in the 1950s and 60s took nearly three decades to make an imprint in the literary map of Tamil. Compared to the works available on Marathi, Gujarati, Kannada and Telugu Dalit literature, there is very little study on Tamil Dalit literature. As a literature, which has a very definite social purpose it is essential to study the literary writings of Tamil Dalits and this book is an attempt in that direction. Literature produced by historically marginalized communities like Dalits functions as an important tool for social change. However, a lot depends on how this literature is interpreted and received by readers. Since the university is a site for social changes, it is significant to enquire whether Dalit literature has been incorporated in mainstream curricula. It is equally vital to explore how students respond to Dalit literature. This book analyses the literary works of Tamil Dalits and explores how students of Tamil and English literary studies have responded to Tamil Dalit literature.

## **Organization of the Book**

The main focus of the study is the production and reception of Tamil Dalit literature. This book will address the following issues: What were the socio-cultural conditions that led to the emergence of contemporary Tamil Dalit literature? What are the dominant themes and trends in contemporary Tamil Dalit literature? How has academia responded to the emergence of Tamil Dalit literature? In particular, how do students respond to Dalit literature, which has found its way into both English as well as Tamil literature curricula?

Dalit literature provides a space to articulate the silenced voices of Dalits who are marginalized in society on the basis of their caste. Hence the study of Dalit literature is incomplete without the study of the social structure of caste in India. Manifested in diverse beliefs and practices, caste is an integral part of the Indian society, culture and politics, although there have been conflicting beliefs regarding the origins of the system.

The first chapter enumerates the significant theories regarding caste formation in India. There are anthropologists and sociologists who view caste as a product of religious ideas, which designates certain castes as higher and the others as lower, based on the notions of purity and pollution. Caste is interpreted as an ideological framework to formulate a social order. On the other hand, the materialists interpret caste as a

structured social divide based on the wealth of different social groups. The higher castes are generally wealthier than the lower castes, and the ideology formulated by religion legitimates this social division. This chapter also focuses on the influence of colonial modernity on caste structures and the changing configurations of caste in the urban and rural spaces over the years. The spread of scientific and rational knowledge during the colonial rule led to an interrogation of the social and cultural practices inherent in the caste system. Social and political movements spearheaded by leaders like B.R.Ambedkar and E.V.Ramasami Naicker (Periyar) challenged and opposed the hegemony of the Brahminical beliefs and practices which legitimated caste discrimination.

The second chapter traces the history of Tamil Dalits from the early years of the twentieth century till the 1990s. Decades before Ambedkar's struggle against untouchability, there were distinct voices of protest against caste discrimination in Madras presidency. Pioneering protests against caste hierarchy were organized by a group of Dalit intellectuals during the Madras presidency, in the early decades of the twentieth century. Predominant among them was Iyothee Thass Pandithar who was instrumental in spreading a distinct Dalit sensibility and consciousness in Tamil Nadu. The period witnessed a proliferation of Dalit journals which helped to disseminate a distinct politics and identity among Dalits (then referred to as *Adi Dravidars*). This chapter traces the evolution of Dalit consciousness, which began in the days of Iyothee Thass Pandithar. In particular, the focus will be on Dalit writing, which initially found expression in Iyothee Thass Pandithar's journals. Dalit writing, which began during the colonial rule, evolved into a distinct literary form (as Dalit literature) in the last decades of the twentieth century.

In Tamil Nadu, the three distinct Scheduled castes are the *Pallars*, *Parayars* and the *Arunthathiyars*. Though they have been generally bracketed as Dalits, each caste is distinct and different from each other. The term *Adi Dravidas* was the blanket term which referred to all Scheduled castes in Tamil Nadu during the colonial period. Nevertheless, there were tendencies of fissures and divergences within the community. In spite of their unified caste identity, their trajectories for emancipation and liberation from the early decades of the twentieth century during the colonial rule were distinct. Thus the political and social movements of the *Parayars*, *Pallars* and the *Arunthathiyars* form a separate and distinct history. Against this background the book explores how far the different Scheduled castes in Tamil Nadu have accepted the pan-Indian Dalit identity, which became prevalent among Tamil Dalits in the 1990s.



In addition to these debates regarding the pan-Indian Dalit identity, there are different interpretations of the term 'Dalit'. In the 1960s when this term, meaning "crushed" or "rooted in the soil", became prevalent in Maharashtra, it referred to the oppressed condition of the Scheduled castes, discriminated against as untouchables in the society. In recent years, it is interpreted as referring not to one particular caste, but to any oppressed section of the society, irrespective of caste. However, in academia, Dalit literature exists as a 'literature of Scheduled castes'. The fifth chapter in this book seeks to find out how far these varying interpretations of the term 'Dalit' have influenced the response of Tamil and English literature students towards Tamil Dalit literature

In the midst of these ongoing debates on the interpretation of the term 'Dalit', Tamil Dalit literature is becoming widely prevalent and is inviting global attention. The emergence of Tamil Dalit literature in the 1990s has led to a corpus of novels, short stories, poems and autobiographies. The third chapter discusses the diverse themes and trends prevalent in Tamil Dalit literature. The general impetus in these writings is to expose the agonized and marginalized existence of Dalits. Are Tamil Dalit literary works merely "narratives of suffering"? This chapter argues that Tamil Dalit literature is not merely a literature of lament and frustration, though pain and loss continues to be one of its major themes. The various contexts and heterogeneous experiences of Dalit communities make it a rich source of Dalit culture, tradition and language

Chapter four discusses the relationship between caste and gender and its effect on Dalit women. Dalit women lead a precarious existence, since their problems are compounded not only on the basis of caste and class, but also on the basis of gender. Caste and gender were considered as two different social structures till the late 1980s. The relationship between the two was not explored, until the Mandal commission report recommendations<sup>4</sup> triggered nationwide agitations. The agitations not only brought the politics of caste into the public sphere, but also revealed the contradictory configurations of the feminist movement in India. This

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<sup>4</sup> The Mandal Commission was established in India in 1979 to consider seat reservations for Backward and Scheduled castes and tribes in order to redress caste discrimination. Based on the 1931 census data, the commission estimated that 54% of the total population (excluding Scheduled castes and Tribes) belonged to Other Backward classes (OBC). The Mandal commission report submitted in 1990 recommended a 27% reservation (apart from the existing 22.5% reservation for SC's and ST's) in all admissions to institutions of higher education and all public sector undertakings under the central government. The report released in 1980 triggered nation-wide agitations by the upper castes.

chapter details the reasons for the emergence of Dalit women's movement in India. It focuses in particular, on Tamil Dalit literary works which have foregrounded the double oppression of Dalit women.

The relationship between production and reception of literary works is dialectic and the meaning of a literary work depends on the reader. Since Tamil Dalit literature and its English translations are becoming a part of the Tamil and English literary studies curriculum, a qualitative study was conducted to find out how students have interpreted the word 'Dalit'. The fifth chapter analyses the response of students to Tamil Dalit literature and its English translations. Since Dalit literature has an ideological function in society, the survey examines whether reception of Tamil Dalit literature was influenced by the location and caste of the student. Further, it analyses whether reading Dalit literature can bring about a social change.

# CHAPTER I

## EMERGENCE OF CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA

There have been conflicting beliefs regarding the origins of the caste system in India. This social structure has been a focal point of research for many anthropologists, sociologists and cultural historians. There are anthropologists and sociologists who view caste as a product of religious ideas, which designate certain castes as higher and the others as lower, based on the notions of purity and pollution. Caste is interpreted as an ideological framework to formulate a social order. On the other hand, the materialists interpret caste as a structured social divide based on the wealth of different social groups. The higher castes are generally wealthier than the lower castes, and the ideology formulated by religion legitimates this social division. This chapter enumerates the significant theories regarding caste formation in India. It also focuses on the changing configurations of caste in both urban and rural spaces over the years. It explores the context in which Dalit political and literary movements emerged in India.

### **Earliest Reference to Caste - Rig Veda and Manusmriti**

The Aryan invasion has been considered an important reason for the formation of caste in India. Scholars like Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi consider the Aryan invasion as the basis for the caste system. They argue that pre-Aryan culture was egalitarian and free from caste. The Vedic age culminated with the Aryan invasion, and scholars consider the *Rig Veda*<sup>1</sup> as the earliest available reference to the origin of caste system. The hymns in *Rig Veda* describe the origin of the universe through a ritual performed by the Gods with the sacrifice of a 'cosmic being' called *Purusha*. Four *Varnas* are believed to have emanated from different parts of the body of the *Purusha*. From the mouth of *Purusha* was born the Brahmin, Kshatriya

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<sup>1</sup> The Rig Veda is an ancient Indian sacred collection of Vedic Sanskrit hymns and is counted among the four canonical sacred texts of Hinduism known as the Vedas. It is one of the world's oldest religious texts; its verses are recited at prayers, religious functions and other auspicious occasions.

was born from his two arms, Vaishyas from his thighs and from his feet the Shudra. Manu, a codifier of laws, who presumably lived during the second to first centuries, refers to the hymns in the *Rig Veda* regarding the formation of castes. In his most influential book *Manusmriti* (Law book of Manu), Manu explains that for the sake of the preservation of the entirety of creation, *Purusha*, the sacrificial victim, assigned separate duties to each *Varna*, which had sprung from the various parts of his body. The Brahmins were assigned the tasks of teaching, learning and performing sacrificial rites. The protection of the people, giving away of wealth, and performing sacrificial rites were the duties assigned to the Kshatriyas. The Vaishyas were assigned trade and commerce, agriculture, tending of cattle and performance of sacrificial rites. The Shudras were to be subservient to the other three classes and serve them sincerely. (Klass 37)

### **Caste as a Socio-Economic Phenomenon**

Though Morton Klass accepts the theory that Aryans invaded India, he rejects the theory propounded by Liddle and Joshi that the Aryan invasion was the basis for caste formation in India. In his study of the evolution of caste system in India, Klass argues that, before the stratification of the society, the subcontinent was inhabited by various hunting and gathering societies. Based on different ecosystems, there must have been significant differences among the societies in terms of social organization and ideology. The groups probably spoke distinctive and even mutually unintelligible languages. Klass further argues that they must have been economically and socially independent. Economic exchange must have been limited, reciprocal within smaller groups, and restricted to raw materials. Social exchange in the form of the exchange of marriage partners would have been rare, and if it had occurred, must have been 'within' the community and not 'between' communities. Klass argues that it was this 'pre-caste' Asian system, which consisted to a large extent of endogamous clusters of exogamous, unstratified, stipulated-descent equalitarian "clans" that was later transformed into a stratified socioeconomic system, a system known as "caste" (158).

Klass attributes "absolute surplus" as one of the main reasons for the emergence of the caste system in India. His theory is based largely on Marvin Harris' research paper titled "The Economy Has No Surplus?" which emphasizes that for the occurrence of stratification anywhere, the occurrence of 'absolute surplus' is necessary. The emergence of agriculture as an alternative occupation for livelihood had engineered stratification among hunting and gathering societies. The hunting and gathering

societies favored the new technology of cultivating lands, since it provided a better way of life. The advent of agriculture had resulted in the acquisition of cultivable land. At an earlier stage, land might have been available in plenty, but with increasing number of communities shifting their occupation from hunting to agriculture, cultivable land must have slowly become scarce. With the absence of 'free' land, population pressure becomes a major factor. Klass points out that when population increases in a particular region, it is likely to be divided into three distinct categories: those who own the cultivable lands, those who are willing to establish settlements in some other region, and those who prefer to remain in the known territory and to seek some means of sharing in the harvest. It simultaneously sanctions the emergence of 'land owning groups' and 'landless groups', which are dependent on the former for their survival. Landless groups offered services in exchange for the share of harvest. The services ranged from working in the fields to animal husbandry. Slowly it included menial jobs from clearing night soil to burying the dead (177-179).

The social divide generated between the landowners and landless groups enabled the emergence of "absolute surplus" in cultivation of crops. Despite occasional poor crops and population increase, more food was produced than was required, which over the years, must have slowly contributed to an 'absolute surplus' (Klass 176). Klass argues that 'absolute surplus' coupled with 'equalitarian' 'clan structured societies led to the caste stratified societies, in which the different occupations were subsumed under the notions of *Varna*. Endogamy continued to characterize the social groups, and exogamy characterized the sub-units within each group, which later came to be referred to as *Jati*. Though there was exchange of goods and services in this system, it was based on hierarchy. Thus, an 'unstratified equalitarian hunting and gathering community' was transformed into a complex stratified agricultural production system known as "the caste system" (Klass 181).

Echoing the ideas of Klass, Nesfield's occupational theory holds that caste originated in the division of labor or the specialization of various functions in society. According to Nesfield, the gradations of castes in India correspond to the different levels of civilization, at which these traditional occupations originated. Thus, primitive occupation of hunting would correspond to the lowest castes, since hunting was the earliest occupation of human beings. Next in order were the fishing castes, since their occupation was considered somewhat higher. Above them were the pastoral castes and the agricultural castes above the pastoral castes. At the

top were the Kshatriyas, the ruling class and the Brahmanas, their priest and guru (Sinha 23-24).

Similar to the ideas of Klass and Nesfield is Gail Omvedt's theory on the interconnectedness of caste and class. However, Omvedt's theory is premised on the Marxist theory of economic production. In the base and superstructure theory of Marxism, the base represents the economic aspect, and relations of production are hence analyzed in terms of class. In India, however, along with class, caste plays a crucial factor in determining the relations of social and material production. Omvedt argues that caste has coexisted with different modes of production from the tributary mode through the feudal period to the capitalist colonial and post-colonial nation state. Caste cannot be identified with any single mode of production, though the system of caste relied on the existence of surplus and economic inequality. Omvedt points out that caste is a social phenomenon in which the sub caste or *jati* regulates the social system of kinship. The broader caste or *Varna* was for a long time the basic unit of the social division of labor, which continues to some extent to date (Omvedt "Class, Caste and Land in India" 12-14).

Omvedt argues that Marx himself recognized that it is only with the birth of the capitalist society that the 'economy' comes to existence as a concrete phenomenon, separate from the political, social and other levels of society. Further, it is only with capitalism that classes come into existence as phenomena clearly and apparently, defined first at the level of economic production. In contrast, in pre-capitalist societies, classes were defined not merely in terms of the economic aspect of the relations of production but rather in social, religious, political and other super structural forms. Omvedt hence argues that it is only in a formalistic sense that class can be distinguished from caste. Both caste and class, (one 'social' and the other 'economic') have coexisted in India since the beginning of the generation of a surplus and economic inequality. It is hence difficult to look at the caste-class system as separate concrete phenomena and the two were interwoven, and the Indian feudal system was actually based on caste-feudal mode of production (Omvedt "Class, Caste and Land in India" 12-14).

Omvedt argues that with the beginning of capitalism during the colonial rule, the caste system was separated from the class structure. The colonial government redefined and reshaped caste as a separate social phenomenon (Omvedt "Class, Caste and Land in India" 14). In the feudal society the very structuring of the relations of production were defined in terms of the caste system. During harvest times, the agricultural produce was distributed based on the services performed by different castes.

Members of the different caste or sub-castes who had performed their traditional duties throughout the year claimed as their right, a portion of the grain. Caste was thus a crucial aspect in defining the relations of production (Omvedt "Class, Caste and Land in India" 15-16).

During the colonial rule, Indian feudalism was transformed to suit the needs of the development of capitalism in Britain (Omvedt "Class, Caste and Land in India" 19). The British imposed legal relationships of land ownership and tenancy, which in turn abolished the pre-existing caste based access to land. The British imposition of legal rights of property ownership, produced classes of 'landlords,' 'tenants' and 'laborers', who were now constituted as legal-economic entities formally separate from the caste system. Rights were no longer linked to kinship and sub-caste membership, but were instead appropriated on an individual basis. The separation of the economic and social levels began in India under colonial rule (Omvedt "Class, Caste and Land in India" 20). However, Omvedt argues that caste and class continued to be heavily interlinked in colonial India. The legal rights of property ownership, which was open to individuals and all sections of society, was still heavily dependent on economic power. Omvedt points out that the pre-existing power, wealth and social traditions of the upper castes gave them an advantage in continuing to control the agricultural lands legally, as 'landlords'. The British, for reasons of political stability, allied with the land controlling landlords and merchants, and ensured that the power of the upper castes was maintained at the local level. Further, within the village, production continued to be organized via the *jajmani*<sup>2</sup> system, which continued to subordinate the artisans and untouchable laborers, whose traditional caste duties became part of the unpaid labor extracted by landlords in the feudal society. Thus, the colonial government maintained the pre-capitalist forms of production for stabilizing its power. Though caste was formally separated from class as a separate social phenomenon, Omvedt argues that both continued to be interlinked in colonial and post-colonial India. Omvedt argues that caste and class are not separate but highly interconnected structures and together form the social economic material base in India on which the social, religious and political superstructures are formed (Omvedt "Class, Caste and Land in India" 20).

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<sup>2</sup> Jajmani is a system where the land owning upper castes gives a fixed share of their agricultural produce in exchange for craft and menial services rendered by the landless lower castes.

## **Caste as a Religious Phenomenon**

Contrary to Klass and Nesfield's socio-economic interpretation of the origin of the caste system, the theory proposed by B.R.Ambedkar, A.M.Hocart and Louis Dumont is based on the religious ideology underlying the caste system. Their analysis of caste is based on the Vedic theory, which accurately details the nature of the four *varnas* of the Hindu society - Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and the Sudras. However, there are differences in their analysis of the caste system. Dumont considers 'hierarchy' as the predominant feature of the caste system. Hocart regards 'sacrificial ritual' as the pivotal element of caste system. Ambedkar argues that the basic characteristic of caste system is 'endogamy'.

### **Ambedkar – Endogamy is the Origin of Caste**

According to Ambedkar, the custom of endogamy forms the genesis and mechanism of caste in India. Ambedkar points out that without the practice of endogamy, the caste system cannot survive, and he therefore equates the origin of caste to the origin of the mechanism of endogamy. Though intermarriage or exogamy had been prevalent in ancient India, it had been replaced with the custom of endogamy, which in turn has resulted in the creation of castes. The practice of endogamy enables a caste group in India to remain 'closed units' without any fusion with other castes.

Ancient Hindu society, according to Ambedkar, consisted of four major classes: Brahmins or priestly class, Kshatriyas or military class, the Vaishya or the merchant class and the Shudra or the artisan and menial class. Ambedkar argues that it was essentially a class system, which allowed individuals to change their class, if they were qualified to join other classes. However at some point of time, Brahmins or the priestly class decided to detach themselves from the other classes. They could achieve this only through the custom of endogamy. Thus the custom of endogamy was initially followed by the Brahmins or priestly class, who occupied the highest position in the social hierarchy of Hindu society. Over the years endogamy became a fashion in the Hindu society since it originated from the priestly class, who were venerated and idolized in the scriptures. Ambedkar points out that through "the infection of imitation", endogamy or "closed-door system" spread to the non-Brahmin classes. People who violated this practice by marrying outside their caste were excommunicated. Endogamy was thus practiced by all the classes in the Hindu society, which ultimately resulted in the rigid formation of castes.



Along with endogamy, Brahmins followed the custom of *Sati* and enforced widowhood which later spread to other castes. Ambedkar argues that intermarrying or exogamy will eventually dismantle the caste system (Ambedkar “Castes in India” 5-22).

### **Sacrificial Rituals –Pivotal Element**

Hocart's theory of caste revolves around four concepts: kingship, domination, ritual and pollution. Asserting that the 'Kshatriya Caste' is at the apex of the caste system, Hocart interprets sacrificial function as the pivotal element of the caste system. The king's function is to command rituals, which guarantee the well-being of the community. Each of the four castes has a specific ritual function. The king's function is to offer sacrifices for the well-being of his community. Since performing these rituals brings pollution, the king does not perform these rituals, but instead commands the Brahman priests to perform the rituals and bears the expenses. The second in the hierarchy are hence Brahmins, who perform the rituals for the king. The third caste in order, are the Vaishyas, who support the king and the Brahmins who perform sacrificial rites. The fourth, the Sudras are excluded from the services of the other castes. They perform duties that upper caste priests cannot touch. Since the Brahmins cannot touch dead bodies (as it will cause pollution), Hocart points out that the Sudras are those that deal with dead bodies. Those communities, which were outside the caste society, were untouchables.

Hocart's theory emphasizes that caste is fundamentally about kingship and ritual and that the two are inseparable. Though Hocart's theory is based on religious scriptures, he challenges the idea that members of any caste always follow a particular occupation. He argues that carpenters by caste are not wood workers and farmers by caste need not necessarily be cultivators. Hocart thus saw a disjuncture between castes and occupations, which were to be synonymous in the notion of *varna* (qtd.in Quigley 114-121).

### **Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus***

Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* is one of the most influential contributions to the study of caste in India. Dumont draws a distinction between traditional and modern societies. He asserts that traditional ideology places the highest value on the moral value of the society; whereas modern ideology places the highest value on the idea of the individual. Traditional society is hence holistic and modern society is

individualistic. In an individualistic modern society, hierarchy is perceived in terms of inequality. In the modern west, inequality is perceived in terms of 'exploitation', 'discrimination', or 'segregation'. However, in a traditional society, hierarchy is perceived in terms of holism. Dumont interprets the principle of hierarchy as "the attribution of a rank to each element in relation to the whole" (91). Since the ranking is religious in nature, there is a consensus of values regarding hierarchy in traditional societies. Dumont argues that we need to transcend our modern individualistic ideology, to understand the holistic vision of the traditional society.

Dumont proposes that the principle of hierarchy, as manifested in the caste system in India, is based on the notions of purity and pollution. Celestin Bougle at the beginning of the twentieth century had enumerated three essential features of the caste system - separation, interdependence, and hierarchy. Separation, in matters of marriage and contact; interdependence, since each group is assigned a specific profession and depend on the services of other communities; hierarchy, which ranks the groups as relatively superior or inferior to one another. Dumont insists that these three characteristics are reducible to a 'single true principle' –namely the opposition of pure and impure. Dumont argues that the principle of hierarchy is pivoted on the opposition between purity and pollution, which corresponds to the notions of superiority and inferiority (qtd.in Quigley 25-26).

According to Dumont, the opposition between pure and impure is sustained by the disjunction between the ritual status of the Brahmins and the secular power of the Kshatriyas. He argues that in the ideology of caste, though the kings are politically dominant, their temporal authority is subordinated to the spiritual authority of Brahmins. This disjunction between power and status is implicit in the hierarchical opposition of pure and impure. "Thus in the theory of varnas one finds that status and power are differentiated, just as the general consideration of hierarchy seemed to require" (Dumont 72).

Dumont's theory of caste is an attempt to find reasons behind the monopoly and superior status that Brahmins enjoy in the religious domain. Brahmins enjoyed the privilege of performing sacrificial rites on behalf of the kings and hence guaranteed the spiritual welfare of their political masters. Based on the principle of purity, Brahmins were accorded the highest status in the caste structure. The politically dominant Kshatriyas were ranked next in order. Other ranks in the society were segregated according to the hierarchical principle of purity and impurity. Those who deal professionally with natural, impure substances, like dead bodies and

night soil, were designated the lowest position. Those who were neither specialists of purity nor impurity were ranked along this pure-impure axis where Brahmins formed the apex and the untouchables, the bottom.

Dumont's theory has been criticized as a Brahminic view of caste, which fails to reflect the actual, lived world of caste. Srinivas argues that Dumont had assumed the existence of homology between *varna* and *jati*. Srinivas points out that there are two models of caste system operating in India – *varna* and *jati*, and that there exist certain differences between the two systems. *Varna* is the Vedic classification of the four ranked occupational orders, whereas *jati* refers to ranked hereditary, endogamous and occupational groups separated from each other by the ideas of purity and pollution. In the *jati* model of caste, the function that is performed by the king in the *varna* system is performed by the dominant caste. Dumont asserts that similar to the phenomenon of the Brahmins and the king assuming supremacy in the *varna* system, the Brahmins and the dominant caste assert their supremacy over other castes in the *jati* model.

Srinivas refutes this theory by pointing out that in some areas, the dominant castes are highly Sanskritized, and show respect to Brahmins. However, there are areas where the dominant castes are antagonistic to Brahmins and refuse to consider them as higher caste. Srinivas further argues that at the royal or kingly level, the coronation ceremony was essential to legitimate the powers of the King. The Brahmin priests assumed importance since they had the sole rights to perform the rites. The absence of coronation ceremony for the dominant castes in the *jati* system relegates the importance of the Brahmins (Srinivas "Some reflections" 100-103).

Quigley contends Dumont's claim that Brahmins form the apex of the caste hierarchy because of their purity. He points out that there are varying degrees of purity assigned to different Brahmins. He draws our attention to the fact that priestly activity is a source of degradation and impurity, and that priesthood is the quintessential source of impurity (Quigley 58). The 'purest' Brahmin is the 'renouncer', who does not belong to the ordinary world of social relations. He does not perform any priestly function and does not accept any reward. Next in order, is the Brahman who functions as a spiritual guide, referred to as a *guru purohita*. Among the Brahmins who work as priests, the *purohita* - the family priests, who perform sacrificial rituals for wealthy patrons, are considered the 'highest'. The impurity of the patron is supposed to have been absorbed by the family priests, through the payments he receives for performing the rituals. The temple priests are considered inferior to the family priests, since they absorb the impurity of all and sundry who make offerings to the gods in

the temple. The temple priests are superior to the funeral priests, who absorb the pollution of death. Lowest in the order are those who officiate as funeral priests to lower castes. Quigley argues that to regard Brahmins as the purest in the caste structure is a position fraught with contradictions (67).

## **Caste as a Colonial Construct**

Scholars like Bernard Cohn, Ronald Inden and Nicholas Dirks have argued that caste is a product of colonialist imperial designs to strengthen their power over the native Indians. The colonial government endeavored to gain not only political control but also cultural domination over the Indians, with a hidden agenda, which sought to establish the pernicious beliefs and practices of Indians engendered in the caste system as primitive and barbaric, while simultaneously reinforcing the superiority of western institutions based on equality and rationality. In their efforts to construct the Oriental, 'other', the British in colonial India labeled the beliefs, practices and customs of the native Indians as 'tradition'. Foremost among the belief systems was the social institution of caste, which the British identified as 'traditional' as opposed to the 'western modernity'. Equating western modernity to rationality and equality, colonial administration established cultural superiority over the Indians, in turn legitimating the need for Indians to be governed by western administration (Inden 1986; Cohn 1987; Dirks 2002).

Dirks argues that caste was not a basic tradition or core civilizational value in ancient India. It is a modern phenomenon and became a central symbol of Indian society only during the colonial period. Countering the idea that caste is a fundamental religious and social order, Dirks argues that caste has always been political and has shaped political struggles and processes in pre-colonial India. Social identity was not confined to endogamous caste groups; rather it was multiple and heterogeneous. Caste was not a single logic for categorization and identity. Regional, village, residential and temple communities, territorial groups, lineage segments and occupational groups were other significant units of identification. Social identity was importantly political, and political affiliations decided the way caste was organized in pre-colonial India. (Dirks *Castes of Mind* 13)

Dirks points out that some of the present standardized caste titles and social positions were political markers in the old regime of kingship. To exemplify that present caste titles were political in origin and meaning, Dirks refers to the political milieu of a princely kingdom in Tamil Nadu,

Pudukkottai. In the pre-colonial period, the Tondaiman dynasty of Kallar kings ruled Pudukkottai. Primarily an agricultural society, seventy percent of the cultivable land enjoyed tax-free benefice, while thirty percent of the cultivable land was taxed. Based on archival evidence, Dirks affirms that during the early period of British control, seventy percent of the cultivable land enjoyed tax free benefice or *inam*. This was allotted for military chiefs, palace guards and servants. Twenty five percent was allotted to village officers, artisans, and servants and the remaining forty five was allotted to temples, monasteries and Brahmin priests and pilgrims.

Dirks points out that the structure of the privileged landholdings reflects the structure of political power and social positions in the state and village institutions in pre-colonial India. The chief landholders in Pudukkottai during the Kallar regime were the Kallar *Jagirdars* and *Cervaikarars*. The *Jagirdars*, the collateral relations of the king, had small courts and enjoyed full *inam* grants, including military ones. Just below the *Jagirdars* came the *Cervaikarars* who were the same 'subcaste' as the king and had one or more direct ties with the royal family. These collateral families, *Jagirdars* and *Cervaikarars* were given large grants of land, titles, honors, emblems and military retinues to serve under them. The lesser chiefs were *kuriakarars* who belonged to the Kallar sub caste rather than the royal one. They were given lands lesser than the *Jagirs* and *Cervaikaars*, though they enjoyed more benefits and privileges than the other communities in Pudukkottai. The *Uriyakarars*, who belonged to a separate caste group called *Akampatiyars*, protected the royal family and court. Due to their connection and services to the king, the *Uriyakarars* were given special privileges when compared to the other *Akampatiyars* in the village.

The headman in each village was given lands in recognition of his services. The village headmen or *ampalams* were from the Kallar or Maravar caste, both dominant castes in the state. In certain places, the occupational term *ampalam* was used as a caste title of the village headmen. Similarly, *maniam* or *inam* lands were given by the state to village officers or headman, to priests of small temples or shrines, or to other local personages, for their services in the state and village festivals. Since receiving *maniyam* from the state simultaneously accorded a privileged status and established links with the king, it came to designate a social and caste title (in some areas), namely *Maniyakar*.

The Brahmin priests were granted lands, but Dirks points out that they did not enjoy any special status in the society, other than the respect gained from the kings due to their knowledge. Dirks argues that in the Kallar regime, the kings enjoyed absolute authority and temporal authority

was not subordinated to the spiritual authority (Dirks *Castes of Mind* 65-69). Dirks points out that in the pre-colonial period, social hierarchy was not determined by caste but rather by political hierarchy and the proximity of the communities to the royal family. Politics was fundamental to the processes of hierarchy and the formations of units of identity (Dirks *Castes of Mind* 71-73).

Brahmins were necessary for the ideological maintenance of Hindu kingship, but they neither defined nor provided the principles that organized hierarchy for Indian social order throughout all time. It was only in the colonial period, that the Brahmins assumed importance because of their knowledge of the Vedas and the Hindu religious scriptures. The great rebellion of 1857 stressed the need to consolidate the British sovereignty over Indians. The rebellion provided the ground for the British administration to count and classify Indians based on their social identity. In this context, caste emerged as the fundamental and primary marker of identity, to know and rule India (Dirks *Castes of Mind* 123). The British had to rely on Brahminical knowledge in all religious matters and this simultaneously established the superiority of Brahmins. The Brahminical world-view accorded a privileged status to Brahmins and relegated all other caste as inferior based on the notions of purity and pollution. In the colonial period, with the Brahminical interpretation of the Vedas and religious scriptures, caste emerged as a principle unit of identity and the basis of social hierarchy (Dirks *Castes of Mind* 73)

Caste became a significant marker of identity in the colonial rule, expressed most saliently in the census. The census taken in 1881 and 1931 further consolidated the caste system in India. The British attempted to reduce the complexity by slotting all groups into caste-ordered pigeonholes. Bernard Cohn draws attention to the fact that the principle of organization was to try to place castes in the four *varna* or in categories of outcastes and aborigines. Cohn notes that for the 1881 census, the then lieutenant – Governor ordered that any confusion about a caste’s social position should be resolved by referring to a list drawn up by “the outstanding Indian Sanskrit scholar of the time” (qtd. in Quigley 16). Colonial government, in relying on Brahminical knowledge for comprehending religious and cultural issues, was simultaneously sanctioning the hegemony of Brahminical discourses. Sustaining certain discourses as superior, the British were discreetly constructing categories of high and low religions, or rather Brahmin and non-Brahmin. Dirks points out that the colonial construct and categorization of high and low religion or Brahmin and non-Brahmin survived much longer than the colonial regime and persists till date (Dirks *Castes of Mind* 172). Dirks argues that colonialism made caste what it is